

## Piano Concerto, *Universos infinitos*

### Esteban Benzecry

**B**orn in Lisbon to Argentinian parents, Esteban Benzecry grew up in Argentina, where his family relocated in 1974, and since 1997 has resided in Paris. It is perhaps not surprising that, as a composer, he reaches out to a broad world, drawing inspiration from Latin American traditional sounds as well as the techniques of modern European art music.

He did not lack musical stimuli as a child. His father, Mario Benzecry, was an assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic in 1970–71 and went on to found the National Youth Orchestra of Argentina. “As a little boy,” the composer told the interviewer Christian Baldini, “it was very common for me to come to rehearsals and concerts, so I absorbed a lot of things like a sponge.” Nonetheless, he seemed at first destined for a career in the visual arts, and he earned a degree in painting from the Buenos Aires Superior School of Fine Arts. He said:

My becoming close to music was very intuitive, and something that took place as a necessity. I started writing for orchestra without having received lessons in music theory or orchestration. I loved looking at scores and following them with recordings, and that was a big learning moment for me.

Benzecry’s path as a musician became clearer when he undertook study with the noted Argentine composers Sergio Hualpa and Haydée Gerardi. In 1992 he was named “Young Revelation of the Season” by the Music Critics Association of Argentina, and in 1994 that organization awarded him a prize for “Best Argentinian Work Premiered in the Season” — an honor he secured again in 2006, 2009, and 2017.

He moved to Paris to study with Jacques Charpentier, professor of composition at the

National Conservatoire of the Region of Paris. Two years later he received the Premier prix à l’unanimité (top honors) in composition. In Paris, he also studied composition with Paul Méfano and electro-acoustic techniques with Luis Naón (another Argentine émigré) and composer-and-conductor Laurent Cunio. The French musical establishment proved as supportive as that of Argentina. The Académie des Beaux-Arts de l’Institut de France awarded him the Foundation Delmas Prize in 1999, the Tronchet Prize in 2002, and the Georges Wildenstein Prize in 2006, the last signaling the completion of his two-year term as resident composer at the Casa de Velázquez in Madrid.

In 2008 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship for Music Composition, which provided support for him to compose *Rituales amerindios* for the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra and the International Music Festival of the Canary Islands. He explained the work as being designed to “represent the three great pre-Columbian Latin-American cultures: the Aztec (in Mexico), Maya (in southern Mexico and Central America), and

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### In Short

**Born:** April 13, 1970, in Lisbon, Portugal

**Resides:** in Paris, France

**Work composed:** 2011, on commission from the Los Angeles Philharmonic; dedicated to Sergio Tiempo

**World premiere:** October 10, 2019, at Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gustavo Dudamel, conductor, Sergio Tiempo, soloist

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** these performances, which mark the New York Premiere

**Estimated duration:** ca. 27 minutes

Inca (mostly in Peru).” That work was led in its premiere by Gustavo Dudamel, who has since conducted it in New York, London, Amsterdam, and Los Angeles.

While Benzecry acknowledges that he is in certain ways a musical descendent of Stravinsky and of such Latin American composers as Alberto Ginastera, Heitor Villa-Lobos, and Silvestre Revueltas, they have contributed to, rather than defined, his personal language. In relation to *Universos infinitos* he explained:

This concerto has a title that has to do with humans and their connections with their

internal and external universes, in a world before our civilization, where times were governed by planetary and agricultural cycles.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, tam-tam, suspended cymbal, metal wind chimes, maracas, bass drum, rain stick, cuíca (a friction drum with a wide pitch range), waterphone, vibraphone, five tom-toms, vibraslap, claves, marimba, two congas, five wood blocks, güiro, bamboo wind chimes, water gong, harp, celesta, and strings.

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## The Work at a Glance

Esteban Benzecry’s commentary on his Piano Concerto, *Universos infinitos*, describes the first movement, *Un mundo interior* (*An Interior World*), as attempting to capture a sense of ancestral universes, both cosmic and interior, evoking distinct stages of an individual’s development. It begins with a fanfare whose four-note theme is developed throughout by the piano, personifying the inner universe “with its eternal flux and alternation of situations happy and unhappy.” A second theme, more calm and pleasant in character, is “somewhat dubious or timid, perhaps as in every human lies the contrast or balance of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the feminine and the masculine, etc., expressing the eternal pendulum that is human life.”

*Ñuque Cuyen* (*Madre Luna*), the second movement, is named for the Mother Moon, who directs the flow of waters and the feminine spirit, and acts as protector of dreams and witness to the constant struggles of the Mapuche people from southern Chile and Argentina, who view themselves as being descended from stardust. It begins with quotation of a three-tone Mapuche melody, “which little by little immerses us in a nocturnal ambience, full of star twinkling, with the sneakiness of wandering stars, while the piano sings variations on the Mapuche theme.” Dream-like orchestration utilizes harmonics, multi-phonics, and sonorities evoking native wind instruments. In its central section, the rhythm of the *baguala* (a characteristic Andean song of lamentation) predominates, and at times the piano is converted into a percussion instrument, “as if it were a caja, or indigenous drum.”

*Toccata Willka Kuti*, the third movement, translates as *Return of the Sun*. It alludes to the festival that gathers Aymará and Guaraní ethnic groups from areas of Bolivia, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Peru. The festival coincides with the winter solstice in the southern hemisphere, June 21, marking the new agricultural cycle. “The music evokes a radiant and unbridled celebration through a toccata.” The four-note theme that acts as a fanfare reappears toward the end of this movement, with an orchestration “in which a dancing and percussive sense dominates,” while the piano has virtuoso writing conveying “the ancestral joy of a farming population grateful to their gods for the gifts they have been given.”

