

Bridging a Shamanic Worldview and Electroacoustic Art

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Abstract

Much of my compositional effort over the last ten years has been directed toward creating works that bridge the world of Peruvian shamanism with the world of technological music. These works emerged out of a need to re-conceptualize my musical practice in the face of the personal changes I experienced during years of study with Peruvian shamans. One of my goals when I started this journey was to understand the shaman's use of sound so that I could apply this knowledge in my own compositions, but it is the total shift of my worldview that has come to inform my approach to composition. The single most important thing to know about my shamanic compositional process is that the vast majority of the compositional decisions are made by divination. The divination is performed by holding a small crystal pendulum over my personal collection of sacred objects, a practice that I learned from my very first Peruvian teacher. But then, what is the essential nature of shamanic composition? It is about the impact of the composition in the unseen world including its affect on what we might call the non-physical body of the listener, the energy body.

Introduction

Much of my compositional effort over the last ten years has been directed toward creating works that bridge the world of Peruvian shamanism with the world of technological music. These works have included two sound installations, *Wayda* (wind) and *Unu* (water), and two multi-channel concert works, *Qosqo* and *Ikaro*. All of these works emerged out of a need to re-conceptualize my musical practice in the face of the personal changes I experienced during years of study with Peruvian shamans.

My first contact with the shamanic world occurred in 1990. I had been reading every book I could find on Andean and Amazonian shamanism when one of the authors came to town to give a workshop. Arriving at the workshop, I realized that I was a novice sitting among the many healers and medicine people who had arrived for this event. But it was at this workshop that I had my first unmistakable encounter with the non-physical world, the world of spirit. After that, I pursued shamanism with a total commitment. I began work with a series of Peruvian shamans, some of whom were training me in the traditional way to do what they did and others who were re-fashioning their practices for westerners like me. My experiences thoroughly undermined my old identity and totally reshaped my worldview as I moved deeper and deeper into the shamanic world.

One of my goals when I started this journey was to understand the shaman's use of sound so that I could apply this knowledge in my own compositions. While the shamans with whom I studied limited themselves to singing and to traditional acoustic instruments, I thought that I might be able to capture their healing power with modern technology. High tech shamanism, why not? This challenge has confronted me ever since--how to bridge these two worlds together, this shamanic world of spirit and ceremony and this western world of technological music.

My composition, *Ikaro*, is my most recent effort at bridging these worlds. In the traditional of the indigenous people of the upper Amazon, *Ikaros* are the sacred healing songs sung by medicine people during ritual ceremonies. My piece is based on a collection of *Ikaros* sung by the Amazonian healer don Felipe Collantes Sinakay, a master of the Ayahuasca plant medicine. I became familiar with Don Felipe's songs during numerous all-night ceremonies in which I directly experienced how he used his songs in healing. The particular songs used in this piece were recorded by Mauricio Ardila in the Amazonian jungle in the summer of 2008. In May of 2011, don Felipe left his body. He had produced one privately released CD and numerous field recordings.

All of the shamanic teachers I have worked with come from the Quechua and Aymara speaking peoples of Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador. One of my teachers, an Aymara carrier of plant medicine, explained to me one day that he was not a shaman, that *shaman* was a western concept. It would be more accurate, he said, to call him a priest of the people. He grew up in a truly isolated part of Peru where he learned from the spirit of the San Pedro cactus and later, when living in the jungle, from the spirit of Ayahuasca. During the time that we were together, he was living in the US in order to share traditions with North American Indians, in particular the Lakota Sioux.

The term *shaman* is derived from the word *saman* used in a number of north Asian cultures, especially Siberian. It may be related to the Sanskrit word *saman* that means 'chant'. The most common western notion of the shaman was shaped largely by the writings of Mircea Eliade [1] and many contemporary anthropologists have criticize Eliade's concepts for trying to downplay the true diversity of traditions across the earth [2]. My personal teachers were quite a diverse set and I often had to reconcile one set of practices with another.

My path took a new direction after 2002. While I had been initiated into these indigenous traditions, I had none of the personal and cultural history of an indigenous person. Eventually I elected to expand my studies by working with American healers who shared my cultural heritage. And now, I am an active energetic healer traveling around the globe conducting the ceremonies to which my guides have led me. It seems that I live in a buffer zone created by the encounter of seemingly incompatible worlds.

Shamanic Composition

Magical Composition Practice

The single most important thing to know about the compositional process of my shamanic works is that the vast majority of the compositional decisions were made by divination. The divination was performed by holding a small crystal pendulum over a personal collection of sacred objects. This practice I learned from my very first Peruvian teacher. I frame questions about the composition and the motion of the pendulum gives me the answers. Data of all kinds---start and stop times, which parts of the song recordings to extract, synthesis

parameters, even synthesis techniques---all were determined by asking questions of my spiritual guidance. In my composition *Qosqo*, I had followed guidance very strictly starting at the beginning and proceeding to the end of the composition [3]. In fact, I didn't hear the piece until it was finished. More recently when working on *Ikaro*, I followed guidance only up to a certain point. I worked on the piece in sections and I asserted myself into the process by constantly asking for changes and adjustments. But I did not reshape the form of the piece, not until I asked for an introductory section to be added at the beginning.

During the initial divination of *Ikaro*, I held the intention to just let the music come as it will, but to me it ended up mirroring specific aspects of Andean and Amazonian ceremonial practice just the same. In particular, it mirrors the stages of an Ayahuasca ceremony (which seems totally appropriate given that don Felipe is an Ayahuasquero). One of my teachers had taught me that an Ayahuasca ceremony had three stages. The first was an encounter with the lower world, a world of less refined spirits. For many people this becomes an encounter with their own demons and issues as spiritual entities. The second was an encounter with the middle world, the world that humans inhabit. In this part of the ceremony, which is the shortest, people see themselves with great clarity and receive information about how to improve their lives. In the third part of the ceremony, there is an encounter with the upper world, a world of highly refined energies and spirits. In my own mind, there are key sections in *Ikaro* that I associate with these three stages.

The Shamanic Sound Material

When I composed my two sound installations, *Wayda* and *Unu*, I limited myself to sounds with Shamanic connections: native flutes, the Condor feathers used by Shamans in ceremony, and the sound of the running water that is a constant presence in the Peruvian countryside. These sounds were acquired either as field recordings or produced as part of small ceremonies I performed for the purpose of recording. I treated these recordings as carriers of spiritual energies/magical properties. They were never just sounds; they were the voices of sentient beings and the carriers of healing intent.

In my two concert pieces, *Qosqo* and *Ikaro*, I also incorporated songs from don Felipe. My goal in incorporating these songs was to utilize sound material that I felt embodied the highest intent for spiritual healing. In *Qosqo*, I simply extracted musical data from don Felipe's songs, which are never heard, never recognizable: they are ingested into the body of the work. In *Ikaro* the aural focus is directly on don Felipe's songs, which appear in fragments and in many guises with many personalities. For me, this is a compression of the experience of being in ceremony. Sometimes don Felipe's original voice is recognizable and at other times the songs are seemingly performed by instruments. The divination of synthesis processes often produced sounds that seemly mimic the various kinds of native flutes and the sound of the community brass bands that parade on special holidays.

There are a few other recorded sounds from Peru that make an appearance in *Ikaro*. One of these is the high-frequency sound of insects. When I studied the recordings that Mauricio Ardila had made of don Felipe singing in the jungle, I discovered many layers of pitched material in the background. This included a band of high insect sounds that were organized as the 30th through 40th partials of an unheard fundamental. In listening to don Felipe's songs, it is hard to ignore the fact that they are sung in cooperation with the pitches in the jungles.

What Shamanic Composition Is and Isn't

For me, shamanic composition requires a special attitude toward the composition's materials. For example, *Ikaro* is never about the sound of the shaman's voice. I have avoided fetishizing don Felipe's voice as I have avoided signal processing that would have treated his voice as sound to manipulate. *Ikaro* is not ultimately about *sound* or sound structure. It is not about the songs *per se*. It is not about the soundscape of Peru nor is it a kind of soundscape composition. On a very important level, all these things provide a focus and a tapestry for the mind while something else is happening. But it is ultimately not even about the listener's mental activity. It is about the impact of the composition in the unseen world including its affect on what we might call the non-physical body of the listener, the energy body.

A shaman's songs affect energy in a number of ways. In one sense, they are gifts from the spirit world, and as such they are in harmony with the energies of the upper world and have the power to transform lower energies. They have a healing power that can be focused through the intent of the shaman. The shaman watches and adjusts the songs in response to their effect. In group ceremonies, they shape the energies surrounding and affecting the whole group. When used in an individual healing, they can be used to breakup energetic blockages, to dissolve trauma and many other things. Individual songs gather and focus their own specific energies.

In addition to the songs, some shamans use drums or rattles. The most common explanation for the use of the rattle is to break up dense energies. In don Felipe's tradition, besides the singing, the shaman also makes a vocal sound like "ssSSHUUuuuuu", especially after completing a song. With that sound he directs the energy that he has stored up while singing in support of the ceremony. In *Ikaro* the strategic occurrences of these sounds shift the course of the composition, almost as if it were being directed by the shaman.

All of this points up some major differences between listening to *Ikaro* and being in ceremony with don Felipe. Ceremonies are realtime and a shaman like don Felipe is constantly reshaping his songs to the purposes at hand. Of course, the songs can never be used that way in a pre-recorded piece, but *Ikaro* does reflect the changing affect and character of the shaman's songs in an attempt to touch a wide range of healing energies. Then too, participants come to shamanic ceremonies with the intent to be healed, to reshape their lives and to have direct contact with the spirit world. Such healing transformations also depend on the participant's intent.

What Is Sacred Sound?

I was once sitting with Mauricio Ardila, who made the recording of don Felipe's songs, and we were talking about the essential nature of sacred song. He shared with me an experience he had had in an *Ayahuasca* ceremony. While in the jungle at night, he became conscious of all the different musics he could hear, not just don Felipe's singing but also various kinds of recorded music and radios playing off in the distance. He asked his spirit guides what made certain musics sacred. His guides gradually took him up through many dimensions of perception asking him at each stage what he heard. As his awareness was raised higher, the music in the distance faded away and finally there was a level at which all he could hear was don Felipe's voice. Sacred songs are those that can be heard in the highest dimensions. For me, this is the most inspiring description of what might be achieved with technology in a shamanic composition, and I know that I have a great distance yet to travel down this path.

References

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- [2] KEHOE Alice Beck, *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking*, Long Grove, Waveland Press Inc., 2001.
- [3] KENDALL Gary, "Qosqo: Spirituality, Process and Structure", *Proceedings of the 2005 International Computer Music Conference*, Barcelona, Spain, 2005, pp. 721-724.