'Personal, local, universal – where are we?'

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1. Background

In my paper for EMS08 (Paris), 'Pulse, metre, rhythm in electroacoustic music' (Emmerson 2008), I aimed to raise questions as to whether perceptions of rhythmic working somehow distracted attention - took up valuable 'bandwidth' - away from a purely spectromorphological, instant by instant, perception of the sound objects in the sonic flow. In this paper I wish to focus on three of the composers I cited, all from Latin America, and all of whom used pulse and rhythm as a primary organising principle. In that paper I grouped them together too easily; here I wish to show both similarities and differences in their approaches to rhythm and to add some detail to their apparent critique of 'European modernism', as they saw it. All were PhD students at City University in London in the 1980s where I had the privilege to supervise their work: Alejandro Viñao (Argentina), Javier Alvarez (Mexico), Julio d'Escriván (Venezuela). I argue in fact that their work represented a 'double critique': both against 'post-serial' approaches ('parameterisation' of music, especially electroacoustic), but also developing a 'strange critical distance' from the more puritan strains of the acousmatic tradition, then relatively new in the UK.

2. Clichés of cultural exile

A full critique of generalisations is beyond the scope of this paper, but we must be aware of using the *language of the time*. The term 'Latin American' was one all three of these composers (and others) used freely in this period. I would feel unhappy if I were labeled a 'European' or, worse, an 'Anglo-European' composer. But from what I can gather from personal communication there was a relatively strong solidarity within this diasporic community (not just in the UK but in Europe as a whole), and a self-conscious realism and pride in using the term (see especially the Viñao citations below). All to an extent reflect a 'mirror cliché' in being so 'near and far at once' from their countries of origin (Stravinsky and Joyce come to mind as parallels). Thus – *Latin America>>(gaze)>>Europe* – is complemented by - *Europe>>(nostalgia)>>Latin America.*

This may (or may not) be helpful in our understanding of the 'strange' relationship of this group to the (young) acousmatic tradition in the UK at the time. Rajmil Fischman describes in his article 'Global Village, Local Universe: A Statement of Identity' (Fischman 1999), his family's migration from the Russian-Rumanian border to Peru and his own further moves to the UK via Israel. He distinguishes "two types of processes that lead to the amalgamation of musical traits into a personal language. First, there are traits that one *learns* in a conscious effort to apprehend a particular musical tradition. [...] Second, there are traits that one unconsciously *absorbs* via exposure to a particular musical genre." (p. 56) All the composers discussed here forge a relationship between the learnt and the absorbed traditions – they do not 'mix' them so much as 'multiply' them to form the musical result.

3. Double nature of the sound object

Pierre Schaeffer's ruthless stripping out of source/cause attempted to reduce this to a singularity but sometimes the object stubbornly retains an *embodiment* both within itself and in its relationship to other sounds (becoming pulse and rhythm). It is this 'embodied instrumentality' which often caused additional problems in the relationship with some UK Schaefferians (but not Denis Smalley, it must be said) - the sound *is* a drum stroke, not a surrogate for one. Furthermore, to make matters worse, in 'mixed music' (for instruments and 'tape'), for these composers the tape '*aspired to become instrumental'*; as opposed to the instrument '*aspiring to become acousmatic'* (see further discussion in Emmerson 2007).

Alejandro Viñao eloquently describes this 'double nature' citing first Borges: "Thor was not the god of thunder: he was the thunder and the god." (1989, p. 40) Then citing Boulez famous condemnation in a single paragraph both of sounds with any 'anecdotal connotation' and the use of noises that are not "neutral enough ... to be adapted to each new function which organises them", Viñao goes on: "For the Latin American composer the formulation of such a question is completely foreign. [...] It is precisely in this hierarchical ambiguity that the Latin American composer feels at home." (p. 40) and "The sound object is a tooth in the cog-wheel of musical syntax without ever losing its identity as a meaningful object in

itself."(p. 40).

4. The sound object in time

The sound object articulates a point in time, to greater or lesser precision depending on the clarity of its attack (I discuss possible ambiguity in this in Emmerson (2008)). It is fundamentally *gestural* – all three composers refer to Denis Smalley's basic distinction of *gesture* and *texture* (Smalley 1986 – quite recent material at that time). With some small exceptions, *texture* (in these terms) plays virtually no important part in their discourse. A sequence of such gestural sound objects articulates the flow of time and, if perceptually related to a pulse, a pattern (rhythm) might emerge. The sound object and its articulation in time is subtly different in the (1980s) works of these three composers. Let us make a preliminary examination, one which I hope others will follow up in more detail.

5. Javier Alvarez – rhythmic cell as object

Javier Alvarez seems to hear the sound object articulated around the key ideas of *extension*, *ensemble* and *partner* – never entirely separated. In this music the time scale of the object is at its shortest that of the percussive event and at its longest never beyond that of the breath. Many of his works play overtly with the interaction of the truly live with the 'live' as recorded ('on tape' at the time). The energy of this music lies in a very special kind of polyphony - not only that of simultaneous and interacting streams but often nearer the idea of 'hocket' – fast and perfectly coordinated interlocking exchange. This of course requires a common time base – that is a pulse. This 'imaginary other' is present in much of Alvarez's mixed music from his earliest works until today. *Temazcal* (1984 - maracas and tape), for example, is overtly built upon a typical repertoire of 'Traditional Latin American rhythmic cells' (Figure 1 is from Alvarez 1989, p.215).
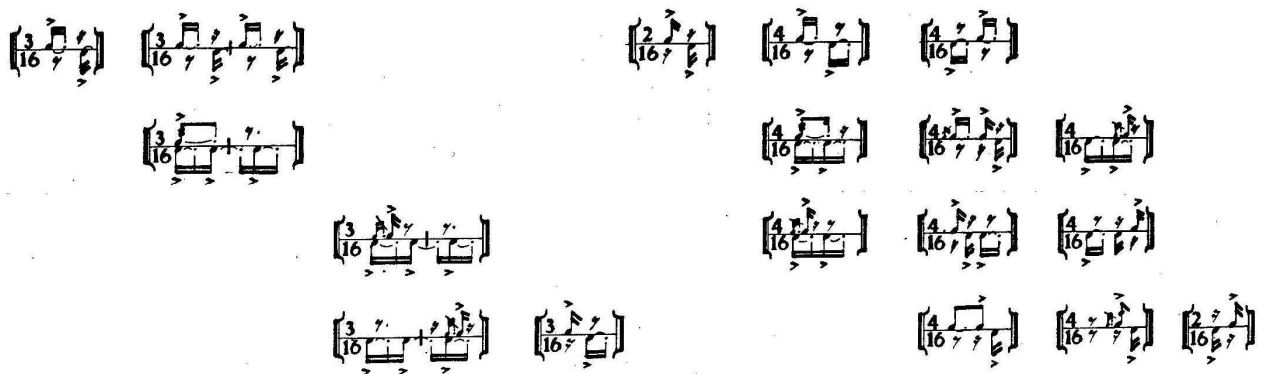

Figure 1: Javier Alvarez – 'Traditional Latin American rhythmic cells' as used in *Temazcal* (Alvarez 1989, p.215)
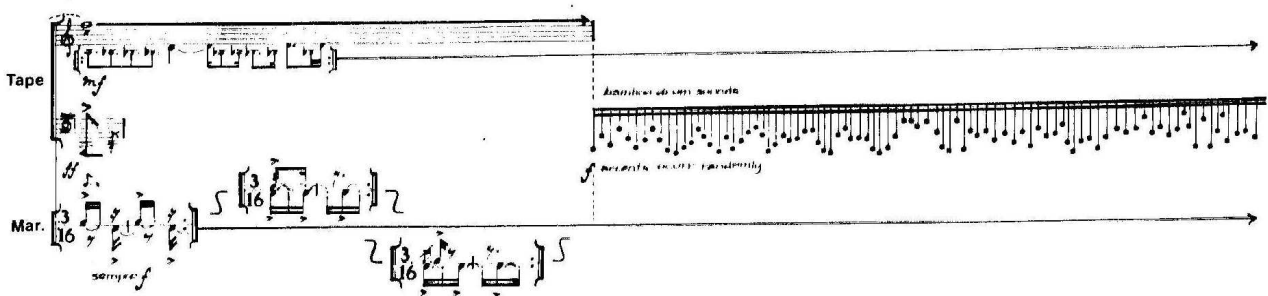

Figure 2: Javier Alvarez – *Temazcal* (from score p.1)

This is the origin of a very sophisticated technique: in *Papalotl* (1987 – piano and tape) such rhythmic cells become the basis for much more extensive transformation. The cells are woven into longer gestures through fragmentation, repetition and reassembly (see details in Alvarez 1989) – but what is interesting is how this works with respect to a kind of improvised (more accurately *devised*) *performance* – worked out first with the aid of the computer-sampler (the Fairlight CMI with its extraordinarily flexible 'Music Composition Language' software) then transcribed to strict notation. This technique is also one reason for its extreme virtuosity. (See Figure 3 - note the cell working, hocket between piano and tape, and the notated

click track between the two).

Figure 3: Javier Alvarez – *Papalotl* (from score p.2)

In the 1980s Alvarez expoited the parallel universes of sampling and FM synthesis. The Yamaha DX and TX series were at the forefront of that company's relative dominance and had the flexibility to be programmed to sound like extended acoustic instruments (albeit with that inescapable 'signature' of the FM algorithms). This formed the basis of several other works of this era that seamlessly hybridise the real and synthesised instrumental sound and gesture (a good example is *Así el Acero* (steel pan and tape – 1988).

6. Alejandro Viñao - against 'time duration', for pulse!

Here Viñao states his basic case against considering duration to be one parameter among others: "For the Latin American electroacoustic composer increasing the precision of controlling sound material means a possibility to reconsider the idea of pulse and rhythm and their formal implications at the micro- and macro-structural level in clear opposition to the idea of 'time duration'." (1989, p. 42) - though it is interesting to note that he received commissions and invitations from both IRCAM and the GRM in Paris in these years! To see the origins of this approach we can return to his seminal work *Go* (tape - 1981). This is a *tour de force* of the analogue studio, involving each phoneme or percussive attack being individually recorded and edited, multiple stereo tape machines being synchronized, with analogue processing and manual spatialisation at the mixing desk to an 8-channel tape sub-master (eventually mixed to a 4-channel master).

Another theme in Viñao's PhD discussion (indeed in its title!) is his suggestion that the phrase 'magic realism' can helpfully be applied to his approach to electroacoustic composition – *Go* sounds close to a live piece but is (of course) *impossible actually to perform* – voices are 'real' yet fly. The lines are often 'block' chorales within which develop melismatic elaboration (much developed in later works) - yet exchange voicing at an 'unreasonable' rate. The word 'go' has not only a semantic meaning but is also the phoneme nearest in sound to a percussion instrument 'attack/resonance' and the composer plays with the entire tradition of percussive vocalisation and its mirror, vocalised percussion (cf. African and North Indian, and of course Cuban and other Latin American traditions).

Transition to computers allowed a true extension of these possibilities. While *Go* predates the introduction of the Fairlight CMI, its techniques were easily transplanted to it. His classic CD for Wergo contains two such works composed using this newer system (*Triple Concerto* (flute, cello, piano, tape - 1984) and *Son Entero* (voices and tape - 1988) which adds extensive Yamaha-based synthesis). And in the contemporary *Toccata del Mago* (strings and tape - 1987) he refers to "an area of ambiguity between pulse and no pulse", exploring the "often paradoxical relationship between rational and irrational rhythms" which "can only be generated by computer" (CD notes).

Figure 4: Alejandro Viñao - *Go* (sketch extracts) (from Viñao 1987)

7. Julio d'Escriván – objects imbued with time

In Julio d'Escriván's work of these years the object and rhythmic time levels cannot be distinguished so easily. His view of the sound object is somewhat different from those of the two composers already discussed. D'Escriván draws on film theory: "[…] in his book '*Sculpting in Time*', [Tarkovsky] comments 'The dominant, all-powerful factor of the film image is rhythm, expressing the course of time within the frame' […], which is to say that the rate at which the different audio-visual images succeed each other gives rise to a 'virtual' time." (1989, p. 198), and "Because we are dealing with *recordings of sound* and not the *sounds themselves,* we find that the basic untreated material is *already imbued with time*." (1989, p. 198) The unit of consideration (object) works differently in this situation: the *microrhythms* are often given by the recorded sample. While it is true that these have been chosen by the composer in a recording session, they come across as 'performed unities' that are then (time) proportionately fixed, so that rhythm tempo and pitch are inextricably related.

Generally speaking in listening to a pulse-based musical discourse, we hear a *sequence of events* from which emerge - that is our perception system constructs - background (*pulse*) plus foreground (*rhythm*). But d'Escriván interpolates an interesting layer open to ambiguity and 'play' – the object *as sample* can in fact be a group of objects *imbued with time* - its own rhythm. The 'time point play' - that is the composer's active construction of the rhythmic field - is therefore articulated at this 'higher level', often creating 'rhythms of rhythms' or at least layers of polyrhythms. D'Escriván worked in the City studios at the time of the final fade of the dinosaur Fairlight and its replacement with the more adaptable (and much cheaper!) mammal, the Macintosh/Akai/Yamaha system of the mid-late 1980s. His works *Sin ti por el alma adentro* (flute and tape – 1987) and *Salto Mortal* (tape – 1989) are products of this time and system. Figures 5 and 6 show d'Escriván's transription of the opening gesture set of *Salto Mortal* (constructed from individual samples) but then the method of layering these sample gestures at a higher (Midi) 'performance' level.
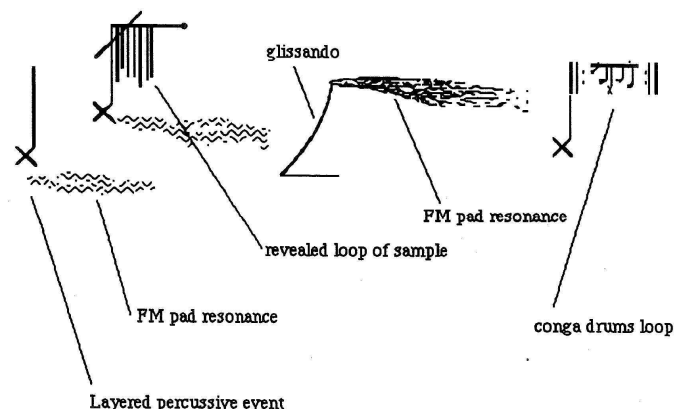
Figure 5: Julio d'Escriván - *Salto Mortal* – initial gesture set (d'Escriván 1991, p.47)
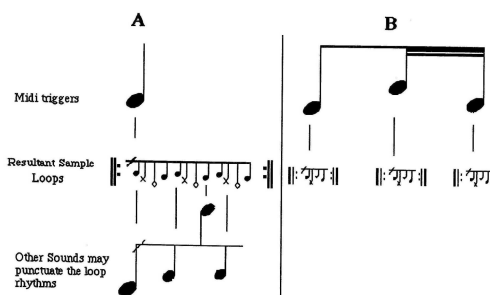

Figure 6: Julio d'Escriván – 'Sample loops and midi trigger pulse' (d'Escriván 1991, p.48)

8. Technology - Psychology

At EMS08 (Paris) (Emmerson 2008) I argued that it was not chance that the duration of a typical Schaefferian 'sound object' and the more popular 'sample length' of the 1980s were of the same order. Schaeffer's *sillon fermé* (a repeated one revolution of a 78rpm disc) would be 0.77s (= 60/78 +/- some varispeed) and the *objet sonore* is conveniently related to this duration but *not* for technical reasons. This repetition rate (pulse) is roughly in the psychological middle of the *metric window*: we perceive regular pulse from (slowest) about one beat every 5 seconds (0.2Hz) to (fastest) about 1 beat every 100ms (10Hz). Thus technology and psychology reinforce – if they had not then the idea and technique would not have survived. It follows that the first generation of samplers (which included the Fairlight CMI) was only feasible when memory capability reached about this duration. The Fairlight CMI (1979) had eight 'voice cards' each with just under 1s storage (at highest quality – longer at lower quality). This was effectively blown away by the likes of the Akai S900 (ca.1987) which had a total of about 20s (at high quality) at less than one twentieth the price! Yet there was no rush to make longer samples – at least by these composers – perhaps for these psychology rooted reasons. Yet there were losses in this transition. The Fairlight had allowed a kind of granular synthesis through the use of a fast 'voice rotation' programmable in the composition language and not emulated by Midi sequencers for many years (if at all). This allowed a *sustain* of the sound objects (heard most beautifully in Viñao's *Triple Concerto* for example). The three composers discussed here quickly adapted to Midi sequencers in an original way - avoiding (usually!) Midi performance gesture clichés.

9. Changing world … where are we now?

What this period taught me was that the 'universal' aspect of modernism was a Eurocentric myth – but a real and powerful one which had profound consequences and which has not disappeared. Modernism tended to a paradoxical exaggeration of both the *personal* and the *universal* while firmly bracketing out the [*local*]. Of course this has steadily been eroded but in subtle and unexpected ways – 'local' (culture) is no longer necessarily a geographical or regional entity. *Significant others* may form a web or a network - not so much a *global village* as a complex city - a *labyrinth* even. This may mix the familiar and unfamiliar in new combinations. "The essence of the Latin American reality was not to be found in the superficial imitation of the long lost traditions of the Aztecs or the Incas which are as exotic to a Latin American city dweller [...] as

they are to a Londoner." (Viñao 1989) This now applies to the other side of the coin: a 'Contemporary European Art Music' to be aspired to, is as alien (or exotic) to the contemporary Londoner as to any Latin American – and to many of my British students for whom any idea of a cannon of classical music (historical or contemporary) has faded.

Thus both sides of our original (1980s) dialectic have somehow evaporated. In the iTunes era the exotic is everywhere (hence 'located' nowhere) and the centrality of Europe is nowhere (but in a sense everywhere). But the baby must not go out with the bathwater – here we are at an EMS Network conference. We *do* share an enormous amount. With the collapse of 'the centre' we have not retreated to becoming an interconnecting group of completely local cells. We have what is more like a 'distributed modernism' - one with some shared values but no single cultural centre. Is this not some new kind of 'universal'? No, but at this conference we have tags that configure the interests we have and bring us together; another set of tags would be another grouping – and another 'locality' within the network.

10. Concluding words

So apposite for the building in which EMS09 took Place (the Centro Cultural Borges, Buenos Aires) - I conclude by citing Alejandro Viñao citing Jorge Luis Borges once again (or has he? perhaps it's Pierre Menard …) - "Luckily we don't owe ourselves to one tradition. We can aspire to all of them." (1989, p.37)

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Viñao, Alejandro, *Magic Realism in Music: four electroacoustic compositions*, PhD, London, City University, 1987.

Viñao, Alejandro, 'An old tradition we have just invented', pp. 33-43, in: *Electro-Acoustic Music (EMAS Journal),* vol. 4(1-2), 1989.

Music examples

Javier Alvarez: *Temazcal*, *Papalotl*, *Así el Acero* (Saydisc CD-SDL 390); see also http://www.temazcal.co.uk/

Julio d'Escriván: *Sin ti por el alma adentro* (Le Chant du Monde LDC 278044/45); *Salto Mortal* (Le Chant du Monde LDC 278049/50); see also http://music.bitbongo.com/

Alejandro Viñao: *Go* (INA/GRM Musidisc 244942); *Triple Concerto, Son Entero* (Wergo WER2019-50); *Toccata del Mago* (Wergo WER2031-2); see also http://www.vinao.com/