



Benet Casablanca (b. 1956) Chamber Music

“It may be a vain hope, but my principal aim is to move people.” Could there be any better introduction to Casablanca’s music than this declaration of intent from the composer himself? For if one thing above all shines through his music it is that desire, that inner need to express himself. Another factor that helps explain the enthusiasm that always greets this enterprising Catalan composer’s music is that it contains a magical, ineffable element, something that goes beyond the rigour and expertise that come from mastering one’s trade. Casablanca has said more than once that this element—poetry, in other words—is the essence of any work of art, since “the means are just the means, instruments that are not important in themselves but have to be made to serve the creative idea”. In analysing these “means”, he is following in the footsteps of some of the “Old Masters” (cf Thomas Bernhard) he so admires, as he combines his creative work with his teaching career—as a teacher, he is passionate about illuminating the inhospitable territory that each pupil has to conquer through self-criticism and perseverance.

As a composer, Casablanca has enormous generosity and extensive experience, but he also firmly believes in the necessity for artists to seek out their independence: “the road you have to travel is solitary...and you must be prepared to pay a high price, but it is essential if you are to find yourself and establish your own voice”. This individual voice speaks through all his works, forging a style which rejects neither the splendours of the past nor the fundamental propositions of contemporary music. Now in his creative maturity, he has a growing interest in the sensuality of sound, giving him an affinity with other composers of his generation such as Benjamin, Lindberg and Knussen. He stands at a musical crossroads and, as Rafael Argullol has noted, is responding to the spirit of the times with enigmatic, *chiaroscuro* music that steals into our hearts to move us profoundly.

Commissioned by the Barcelona Teatre Lliure Chamber Orchestra, *Siete escenas de Hamlet* (Seven Scenes from Hamlet, 1989) is one of the best-known works in Casablanca’s catalogue: a theatrical mosaic of images inspired by the play’s depiction of the world beyond the grave, unbridled passions and the maelstrom of life at court. Why Shakespeare? Because, for

Casablanacas, he is the supreme master of that power to move the emotions: he confronts his audience with the mysteries of human nature. It is "the disquieting atmosphere, the dramatic force" of *Hamlet* that the composer was keen to evoke. Indeed, the opening of the very first scene adopts a phantasmagorical tone and conveys a sense of impending doom with icy playing from the celesta and metallic, shimmering strings. The subsequent explosion shows how violence lurks just beneath the surface at Elsinore. Hamlet's most famous soliloquy is translated into a contrapuntal fabric woven according to complex canonical principles. The fourth movement bathes the audience in a tender lyricism that reflects the emotions experienced by Ophelia, who has done nothing wrong except fall in love with the prince. The play-within-the-play forms the backbone of the fifth scene, a scherzo in which a recurring gigue rhythm is an allusion to *Schoenberg's Suite, Op. 29*, and which later quotes from an Elizabethan dance. A grotesque frivolity is suddenly transformed into a dangerous game with the recreation of the king's murder. From here Casablanacas leads us to the graveyard scene; the reciter's voice is accompanied by unearthly sonorities for the moment when Yorick's skull is found and a sweet despair to mark the entry of Ophelia's lifeless body. The climax of the tragedy is reached in the finale, with its interminable frenetic rhythm against which it appears resistance is useless: resignation arrives with mysterious echoes of the prologue above which can be heard the string quartet's lament—suspended, intimate and distant—"the rest is silence".

The brief, inspired *Epigramas* (1990) is the first of Casablanacas' incursions into the dense, richly contrasted universe of epigrammatic composition, with all its tonal subtleties. It has since been followed by *New Epigrams* (1997) for chamber orchestra, the symphonic *Tres Epigramas* (2001) and, by way of a corollary, the piano suite *Siete Epigramas* (2000–03). All of these are marked by what critics have referred to as "his concern for balancing constructional rigour and expressive strength, dramatic character and whimsical register, in the framework of a discourse in which coexist a progressively luminous harmonic language, rhythmic spirit, a growing timbre differentiation and instrumental virtuosity". So condensed does the music become that its many potential trajectories are no sooner sketched out than they become transformed, creating a fertile whirlwind of sensations, references and surprises. Some of the procedures employed here, as well as aligning themselves stylistically with the Vienna of Wittgenstein so beloved of the composer, anticipate a personal idiom: melodic lines that explore an instrument's entire register and emphasise particular notes over and over again, a tendency to build maximum variety and virtuosity into the individual discourse, *perpetuum mobile*-like episodes and the inclusion of ecstatic passages. The three-part structure is classical in design, two lively outer movements flanking a slow central movement.

Petita música nocturna (1992), an unusual piece, is further proof of the composer's desire to achieve greater formal concision, as well as of his growing interest in wide-ranging harmonies and in employing unconventional tonal resources—multiphonics in the woodwind, the use of drumsticks on harp strings, etc. The dialogue set up between flute and clarinet at the start of the work is gradually covered by all the instruments, frequently creating polyrhythmic textures whose ostinati interrupt,

fleetingly, the temporal flow. These passages trigger moments of fevered activity, rich in independent lines that dazzle and explode before fading into the nocturnal silence from which they appeared to emerge. The delicate agitation in the lower register of the clarinet, the contained outbursts of the piano and the restrained use of the percussion all play a part in immersing the listener in the mysterious, dreamlike atmosphere of this work dedicated to Casablanca's daughter.

Striking a balance between the equal pleasures of the predictable and the unexpected has, throughout musical history, led to forms characterised by a combination of repetition and variation, such as the chaconne, ground or passacaglia. Casablanca touched on the form in the second movement of the *Petita música nocturna* (headed *Quasi Passacaglia*) and later returned to it again in two solo works for violin and cello. In *In modo di Passacaglia* (1993/96) for flute, clarinet (optional bassoon), harp, piano and bass, there unfolds a cycle of forty variations on a twelve-note melodic theme, which fluctuate between agitated virtuosity and tranquil *sotto voce* passages as suggestive as they are refined, hinting at new harmonic colours that have since blossomed in later works.

New Epigrams (1997) is more ambitious than the earlier *Epigramas*, in terms of both the forces involved and the profile of the particular ensemble for which it was commissioned: the London Sinfonietta. Everything stated about that is equally valid here; if anything, *New Epigrams* displays even greater concision and talent. In the words of Jonathan Harvey, "Casablanca writes with a...classic polyphonic clarity that is uncommon these days...The epigram states an idea briefly, punchily, with wit even. It leaves something to be desired, some mystery to do with unpacking its meaning. This is the music of someone who does not wish to labour points: they should be made concisely and then be done with. A musician talking to intelligent, cultured fellows—"old" Europeans. The vitality and energy of his work is well-known—sudden switches of direction within a very short span give a superbly exhilarating and exuberant quality in the fast movements. The slow movements, though...are softer and more veiled; the bright Spanish light is nocturnal and one hears more blend than brilliant blare...Texture is complex rather than multi-polyphonic...One willingly acquiesces in landscapes of the imagination, with birdsong, perhaps." The first movement, intense and vehement, gives the leading role to the brass, while the second is calmer in terms of accentuation but also deeply disquieting. Perhaps the initial string *sforzandi* contribute to this, creating an unreal sound like the impulses of old-fashioned electrical equipment, or maybe it stems from the incredibly rich contrapuntal texture. The work ends with music of playful nature, a scherzo of sudden, explosive accents, where the textures are transformed with surprising naturalness—something at which the composer is a true master—as the music oscillates between passages for the full ensemble and solo interventions, notably on the part of the piano.

Josep Maria Guix

English translation: Susannah Howe