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## Carles Santos Invents Passionate Minimalism

By Tom Johnson

"Romantic minimalism" would seem to be a contradiction in terms. Yet the phrase strikes me as an appropriate label for the work of Carles Santos. This 39-year-old composer is clearly a minimalist. He likes to work with a mere handful of notes or sounds, he frequently uses additive techniques that allow a phrase to change only in extremely gradual increments, and he always ends up with relatively repetitive pieces. Yet his attitude has little to do with the cool-headedness that usually goes along with minimalist techniques. His music seems to emerge out of real feelings, and he performs it quite passionately. Sometimes I even sense flamenco influence, which is not all that unlikely, because the composer has spent most of his life in Spain. Perhaps you would prefer to think of his work as "Spanish minimalism."

Santos is from the Barcelona area, and his native language is Catalan, which explains why he calls himself Carles instead of Carlos. He tours regularly and has been in New York many times, and I had heard fragments of his work before. But it was not until his recent visit here, which included performances at Carnegie Recital Hall and on the Experimental Intermedia series and featured some recent works, that I was able to obtain a broader understanding of his music.

Santos is a formidable pianist, and his own performances of his piano music can be stunning. My favorite Santos piano work is a piece called "Buchalaroz by Night," which I heard at an informal gathering one evening. It begins with a short line played over and over, but soon the line begins to grow. New notes are attached to the beginning of the phrase or the end, or inserted in the middle. Gradually the harmony becomes more lush, the range begins to spread over the whole keyboard, the pianistic style begins to reflect Chopin, or perhaps Rachmaninoff, and even accuracy is occasionally sacrificed in favor of the emotional sweep. Eventually the



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phrase is so long that you can no longer keep track of the additions and changes, and so sensual that you no longer want to.

"Gar y Gos" involves passions of a different sort. This is a theatre piece for flute and piano, which Santos played at Carnegie Recital Hall with flutist Barbara Held, and it's a kind of love story. At this performance, Held sometimes sat on the bench next to the pianist, playing her flute very sweetly while Santos sang to her, and sometimes they were a less blissful couple. At one point they even stomped out angry rhythms at each other with their feet. I sensed that this newly composed work has autobiographical sources. But it captures the essence of such matters in a general way, and it does so in a mere 10 or 15 minutes.

Other Santos pieces could be considered sound poems, and several of these were included on the Experimental Intermedia program on Centre Street. "La boqueta Amplificada" translates as "the amplified little mouth," and that is an appropriate description, for the piece consists solely of mouth sounds. Using a microphone, and no voiced sounds at all, Santos inhales, exhales, breathes, whooshes, kisses, licks, tongues and sputters his way through this remarkably sensual little piece. "To-ca-ti-co-to-ca-ta" takes a more rhythmic direction, with speedy tongue work and lots of energy.

"Avigno 79" and "Cant energetic" are at least as passionate. In these short pieces, Santos works without a microphone, projecting fast sequences of nonverbal sounds quite loudly, while he swings and sways and sweats profusely. Occasionally, however, he stands silently, shifting to a pure movement vocabulary of rhythmic facial twitches, which are sometimes quite amusing.

Several of Santos's short films were shown that same night. "Peca per a quatre pianos" begins quite innocently with Santos sitting at a grand piano playing music that is modal, energetic, and repetitive. Soon, however, the pianist gets up and walks away. Of course, we expect the music to stop, but the sound track continues as if the

piano were playing itself. The camera shifts slightly and we see Santos begin a second part on a second piano. Eventually he sits down at a third piano and a fourth piano, and the four-track music becomes quite dense. The movie ends, drolly, with the pianist walking off the screen. All four pianos continue. Without him.

"Divertimento" involves four musicians on the stage of a large concert hall. They are dressed in tails and are seated at music stands in a string quartet arrangement. But they have no instruments. Instead, they deliver their music in speaking voices. "La re sol fa mi" says one. "Faaaaa sol sol la," shouts another. Their voices are quite rhythmic, and although they are indifferent to pitch, they seem anxious to make the most sensitive dynamic shadings and tempo nuances they can. Gradually you realize they are reading an actual piece of music, and if you are familiar with the score, which happens to be the Mozart Divertimento in D major, it is not too difficult to remember what the strains sound like in their original orchestration.

A third film, which I understand is currently receiving a commercial run in Barcelona, has a long title of musical syllables. These syllables define all 36 pitches of a driving 12-count theme that Santos plays on the piano some 30 or 40 times throughout the film. This music does not change at all, so far as I can tell, but the visual image does. With every new repetition of the musical phrase, the film cuts to show the pianist in yet another costume. Now he is a transvestite, now a Wagnerian character, now a frogman. He sits at the piano the whole time, and the camera angle is as steady as the music. Only the costumes change.

It is not surprising that Santos comes up with different kinds of ideas, depending on whether he is creating instrumental music, sound poetry, or films. Still, I have little trouble finding connections. There is a certain modesty in all of his products, none of which are very long. Everything contains some degree of humor. Regardless of his medium, he limits his materials, repeats a lot, and generally employs minimalist techniques. But most important, most essential, his statements are always passionate in one way or another. If "romantic minimalism" really is a contradiction in terms, it is only because the terms were coined without taking Carles Santos into account.