

ROBERTO SIERRA'S COMPOSITIONS FOR SOLO CLARINET

by

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PREVIEW

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# ROBERTO SIERRA'S COMPOSITIONS FOR SOLO CLARINET

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University of Nebraska, 2008

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The present project focuses on the two compositions for solo clarinet by Roberto Sierra: *Cinco Bocetos* and *Ritmorroto*. Many composers throughout history have often written music for a particular performer. Sierra is no exception. These two clarinet works involve collaboration with some of today's finest clarinet players in varying combinations of commissioning, premiering, and/or recording. Further insight into these works is provided by interviews with the composer and with the prominent clarinetists associated with these works.

The first chapter of this document provides biographical information about Roberto Sierra, his compositional style, and his compositional output involving the clarinet. Chapter two contains an analysis of *Cinco Bocetos* in addition to comments from the composer and the clarinetist involved in the creative process. Consistent with the methodology applied in chapter two, the third chapter explores the second unaccompanied clarinet work, *Ritmorroto*. The concluding chapter summarizes the development of Sierra's compositional style within these selected pieces.

It is hoped that this document will serve as a valuable resource for clarinetists who study, teach, and/or perform these works by Roberto Sierra. Furthermore, this study should facilitate a better understanding of the composer's compositional style for teachers and performers of the clarinet.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

The clarinet has gained great popularity among modern composers writing new music. The variety of articulation, dynamics, and color contrasts that can be produced with the clarinet, along with its wide range and flexibility, makes the instrument an attractive choice for these modern composers. Undoubtedly, Roberto Sierra's music for clarinet captures and makes great use of the rich characteristics the instrument has to offer. The present project will focus on the two compositions for solo clarinet by Roberto Sierra: *Cinco Bocetos* and *Ritmoroto*.

### Biography of Roberto Sierra

Roberto Sierra stands as one of the leading Latin American composers of his generation. He is best known for his instrumental music, especially for his compositions for chamber and orchestral ensembles. Sierra was born on 9 October 1953 in Vega Vaja, Puerto Rico. He pursued early studies (1969-1976) at the Puerto Rico Conservatory of Music, where he was awarded a Bachelor of Music Diploma in Piano and Composition. He also studied at the University of Puerto Rico from 1970 to 1975 and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in the Humanities. After graduation, Sierra went to Europe to further his musical knowledge. He studied at the Royal College of Music in London from 1976 to 1978 and at the Institute for Sonology in Utrecht the following year.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gonzalez, Roberto Juan. "Selected Orchestral Works by Puerto Rican Composers Born Between 1945 and 1956." DMA diss. Ball State University, 1983.

While living in London, Sierra was frequently exposed to new music written by the leading modern composers of the time. As stated in Jose Rivera's dissertation:

According to Sierra, London was a particularly lively place in the contemporary music world at this time: 'I would hear pieces by Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Luciano Berio [...] When a piece gets written, it will inevitably be performed in London within weeks.' In London, Sierra attended many concerts of Boulez's music and frequented the Leviathan Proms Festival at the Royal Albert Hall.<sup>2</sup>

However, it is the advanced work in composition he did at the *Hochschule für Musik* in Hamburg between 1979 and 1982 under renowned composer György Ligeti that greatly influenced his compositional style.<sup>3</sup> Ligeti took particular interest in Sierra's music, as Rivera points out:

According to the Ligeti scholar Richard Toop, the Hamburg classes attracted many talented young composers who were eager to learn from one of the most respected of all living composers. Likewise, some of these curious young composers were also a source of stimulus for Ligeti. For example, Sierra drew Ligeti's attention to the complex polyrhythms of Caribbean and South American music, some of which found their way into Ligeti's works of the 1980's *Piano Concerto*.<sup>4</sup>

When asked about his relationship with Ligeti, Sierra stated:

My relationship with Ligeti was an interesting one, and very significant for me as a composer. In terms of interest in African and Caribbean Music it was me who influenced him by introducing him to this music with which he was not acquainted (this was around the 1980's). This is a well documented fact that Ligeti himself has been quoted about in many writings including his latest biographies.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Rivera, Jose. "Roberto Sierra's Missa Latina: Musical Analysis and Historical Perspectives". PhD. diss. Florida State University, 2006, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Laurie Shulman: 'Sierra, Roberto', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 19 November 2006), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

<sup>4</sup> Rivera, 31.

<sup>5</sup> Roberto Sierra, E-mail correspondence with the author, 16 September 2007.

After his studies with Ligeti, Sierra returned to Puerto Rico to work in the field of arts administration and higher education. In 1985 he became the director of the Cultural Activities Department at the University of Puerto Rico. Later that year, he served as the Dean of Studies and Chancellor of the Puerto Rico Conservatory of Music. During this time, he also sustained a high profile as a composer on the international scene. Sierra was making a name for himself worldwide with compositions such as *Salsa para Vientos* (Salsa for Winds), which gained him first prize at the Budapest Spring Festival in 1983, and *Suite for Harpsichord*, which won first prize in the Alienor Harpsichord Competition the same year. In 1987, the Alienor Harpsichord Competition dedicated an entire concert to Sierra's chamber music compositions, which was recorded and broadcast by the BBC. In that year, Sierra's first orchestral work, *Jubilo*, was performed at New York's Carnegie Hall by the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra.

Roberto Sierra became the Composer-in-Residence of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra in 1989, a position he held for three years. During his residency he contributed greatly to the musical life of Milwaukee with a number of new works that includes pieces for local musicians, chamber, and choral ensembles. Subsequently, in 1992 he became a faculty member at Cornell University. Roberto Sierra's teaching at Cornell focuses mainly on composition at the graduate and undergraduate levels, orchestration, undergraduate theory, music history survey, and seminars on the works of Messiaen and Ligeti. He currently serves as the Director of Undergraduate Studies for Cornell's Department of Music. Since accepting his position at Cornell, Sierra has maintained his interest in working with major orchestras, serving as the Philadelphia Orchestra's

Composer-in-Residence during the 2000-2001 season, and most recently, for the New Mexico Symphony's 2004-2005 season.

Sierra has received commissions from major cultural and educational institutions as well as from major symphony orchestras in the United States and abroad. These include: *Danzas Concertantes*, commissioned by the Orchestra of Castilla y León and premiered in May 2007 with guitar soloist Manuel Barrueco for the opening season of their new Hall in Valladolid, Spain; *The Bacchae*, premiered in November 2006 by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra; *Missa Latina*, commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C and premiered in February 2006; *Borikén*, commissioned by the Casals Festival to commemorate its 50th anniversary and premiered at the Festival in February 2006; *Bongo+*, commissioned by the Juilliard School of Music and premiered in January 2006 by the New Juilliard Ensemble conducted by Joel Sachs; *Songs from the Diaspora*, a new song cycle, commissioned by Music Accord for soprano Heidi Grant Murphy, the St. Lawrence String Quartet and pianist Kevin Murphy (2006); *Sinfonía No. 3*, commissioned by the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra with a grant from the Chicago Joyce Foundation (2004); *Sinfonía No. 2*, commissioned by the University of Miami School of Music's Abraham Frost Commission Series (2004); *Sinfonía No. 1*, commissioned by the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra (2003); *Double Concerto* for violin and viola, commissioned by the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (2002); *Concerto* for saxophone and orchestra, commissioned by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and dedicated to James Carter (2002); *Beyond the Silence of Sorrow*, commissioned by the Seattle Symphony Orchestra (2002); *Kandinsky*, commissioned by the Library of Congress (2001); *Fanfarria, Aria y Movimiento*

*Perpetuo* for violin and piano, commissioned by the Library of Congress to celebrate Copland's centennial (2000); *Fandangos*, commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C (2000); and *Concerto for Orchestra*, commissioned by the Koussevitzky Music Foundation and the Philadelphia Orchestra (1999).<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the list of commissions, Sierra has garnered several awards, including: the Award in Music by the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2003, first prize at the 1983 Budapest Spring Festival for his *Salsa para Vientos* (Salsa for Winds), and first prize for his *Suite for Harpsichord* at the Alienor Harpsichord Competition in 1983. Most recently, the School of Fine & Performing Arts at the State University of New York at New Paltz announced Roberto Sierra as the winner of the 2004 Kenneth Davenport National Competition for Orchestral Music for his *Sinfonia No. 1*. He has achieved a fine reputation as a composer for his numerous compositions, most of which are published by G. Schirmer, Subito Music, Editions Salabert, and Editions Orphée. Roberto Sierra's music may be heard on releases by New World Records, Albany Records, Gasparo, Koch, Newport Classic, New Albion, ADDA, Musical Heritage Society, Koss Classics, CRI, BMG, Fleur de Son, and Dorian Records.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> robertosierra.com <<http://www.robertosierra.com>> (Accessed 24 August 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## Compositional Style

The compositional style of Roberto Sierra combines European modernism with elements of Puerto Rican and Latin American folksong, jazz, salsa, and African rhythms. He also proposes new rhythmic ideas and simulation of polyphony using a single-line instrument, like the clarinet. Although the clarinet is a single-line instrument, Sierra utilizes it as a polyphonic instrument and writes compound melodies, often in different registers, within the solo clarinet line.

Sierra incorporates elements that are representative of his native land into his musical works. The descriptive Spanish phrases of many of his titles appear to indicate the character of the music; however, it is the intricate rhythms and complex textures that reveal the true spirit of his compositional approach.<sup>8</sup> Sierra's roots in Latin America and his affinity for the European tradition of music composition combine to enhance his music. An excellent example of this is found in one of his latest works, *Missa Latina*, commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C and premiered in February 2006. When talking about this work Sierra states:

The title I chose - *Missa Latina* - has a dual meaning. On the one hand it refers to the traditional Latin text, while on the other hand the work is infused with a "Latino" character: It is infused with the "Caribbean gestures" that allude to my personal background, my own Hispanic heritage, and which color so much of my music.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Laurie Shulman: 'Sierra, Roberto', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 19 November 2006), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

<sup>9</sup> The Associated Press. "National Symphony Celebrates Anniversary". 31 Jan. 2006. [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com). <<http://www.washingtonpost.com>> (Accessed 24 August 2007).



In addition to György Ligeti, the two most influential composers on Sierra's compositional style are Igor Stravinsky and Béla Bartók. In Sierra's words:

Stravinsky has been always a composer that is present because of his use of rhythm. My music doesn't sound like his, of course, but I think his rhythmic sense has influenced not only me, but also composers throughout the past century. Bartók's lyricism is important to me, and his use of a vernacular approach has been a profound model as well.<sup>10</sup>

### **Chamber Music Involving the Clarinet – Compositional Output**

Roberto Sierra incorporates the clarinet in many of his chamber music compositions. Many of these works include unique combinations of instruments. The chamber music compositions that utilize the clarinet are:

- *Sonata* – for clarinet and piano (2006)
- *Octeto* - for 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, and 2 horns (2003)
- *Turner* - for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano (2002)
- *Tres Pensamientos* - for bass clarinet and percussion (2000)
- *Cancionero Sefardí* - for soprano (or tenor), flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano (1999)
- *Tema y Variaciones* - for clarinet and piano (1999)
- *Pequeño Concierto* - for guitar, flute, oboe, clarinet, violin, and cello (1998)
- *Tres fantasías* - for clarinet, cello, and piano (1994)
- *Piezas Características* - for bass clarinet, trumpet, piano, violin, cello, and percussion that includes congas and bongos (1991)
- *Con Tres* - for clarinet, bassoon, and piano (1990)
- *Essays* - for wind quintet (1987)
- *Concierto Nocturnal* - for harpsichord, flute, oboe, clarinet, violin, and cello (1985)

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<sup>10</sup> Laurie Shulman, *The New Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 23, p 364-365.

## **Review of the Literature:**

### **Dissertations on Sierra's Life and Compositional Style**

In her dissertation “Music for Unaccompanied Clarinet by Contemporary Latin American Composers” Sallie Diane Price Fukunaga provides a brief biography of Roberto Sierra. Further, she analyzes Sierra's *Cinco Bocetos* along with many other compositions for unaccompanied clarinet by Latin American composers, including twelve-tone compositions, tonal compositions, and compositions in an avant-garde style using new instrumental techniques. This is a valuable source of information that provides an excellent list, compiling twenty-five additional Latin American compositions for unaccompanied clarinet, sixty-five Latin American compositions for clarinet and piano, and twenty Latin American compositions for solo clarinet and orchestra. This dissertation is definitely a starting point for any researcher interested in Latin American composers writing for the clarinet.

Although Roberto Juan Gonzalez's dissertation “Selected Orchestral Works by Puerto Rican Composers Born Between 1945 and 1956” does not discuss any clarinet works by Sierra, he provides information about the composer, including a list of early music awards, and a detailed analysis of Sierra's orchestral work *Polarizaciones*. It is a unique project that focuses on seven Puerto Rican composers, including Roberto Sierra, through the use of a questionnaire and documents provided by the composers. The author presents an insight into some aspects of the composers' compositional style. This document is valuable as it presents seven composers who shared a common bond. They all were the first products of the recently-established system of post-secondary music education on the island of Puerto Rico.

Jose Rivera's dissertation "Roberto Sierra's *Missa Latina*: Musical Analysis and Historical Perspectives" is the latest dissertation written about the life and music of Roberto Sierra. In this 2006 work, Rivera does not discuss Sierra's clarinet pieces in any detail; however, it is a valuable source of information for any researcher interested in the life and works by Roberto Sierra. The document presents an additional scholarly resource devoted to the life, musical output, and achievements of Roberto Sierra; it makes available a detailed analysis of Roberto Sierra's choral work, *Missa Latina*, and provides a historical overview of the choral music tradition of Puerto Rico. It also provides a list of works by Sierra organized by chamber orchestra works (including pieces with soloists), chamber opera works, chamber music works, choral works, orchestral works (including pieces with soloists), solo works, wind ensemble works, and vocal works. The most up-to-date list of Sierra's works can be found in the composer's website:  
<http://www.robertosierra.com>.

## CHAPTER II

### CINCO BOCETOS FOR CLARINET SOLO (1984)

*Cinco Bocetos for Clarinet Solo* (1984) was written on a commission from Pueblo International, Puerto Rico's largest supermarket chain, for Kathleen Jones, principal clarinetist of the Puerto Rican National Symphony Orchestra.<sup>11</sup> The process of getting a sponsor involved in the commission of the work was not an easy one. Jones describes the process:

When I spoke with Roberto about the possibility of writing a piece for solo clarinet that I could play in London at the 1984 International Clarinet Congress he asked for a \$1,000 fee. That was a sizeable amount in 1984, and when I blanched he suggested I find a sponsor. I don't recall now how many businesses I approached, but I was turned down by several and was getting discouraged when Roberto suggested trying Pueblo International, and speaking with one of their vice presidents, Manuel Vallecillo, who was a friend of his. Evidently the two of them had talked it out, because when I wrote my letter, and asked to speak to Mr. Vallecillo, he already knew what the request was. Everything after that flowed smoothly. The published version of the Bocetos omits the information that Pueblo International commissioned the work for me; Roberto says it was a mistake, which will be corrected in future editions.<sup>12</sup>

*Cinco Bocetos* (Five Sketches) is divided into five distinct movements that evoke sounds of the Puerto Rican countryside. The five movements are entitled: "Preludio" (Prelude), "Cancion del Campo" (Song of the Country), "Interludio Nocturno" (Nocturnal Interlude), "Cancion de la Montana" (Song of the Mountain), and "Final con Pajaros" (Finale with Birds). Each movement in the composition explores the different registral, timbre, and virtuosic possibilities of the clarinet.

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<sup>11</sup> Jones, Kathy. "Master Class: Cinco Bocetos for Clarinet Solo (1984) by Roberto Sierra." *The Clarinet* 28 (March 2001) : 4.

<sup>12</sup> Kathleen Jones, E-mail correspondence with the author, 05 October 2007.

The organization and character of the five movements in *Cinco Bocetos* is in an arch form: the first movement is lively, the second movement is folk-like, the third movement is an interlude, the fourth movement is again folk-like, and the fifth movement is lively. *Cinco Bocetos* consists of movements that alternate between thematic and tonal movements; however, Sallie Fukunaga states that the pitch aspects of each movement are also typical of an arch form (thematic/tonal/thematic/tonal/thematic).<sup>13</sup> Sierra combines atonal and tonal harmony in *Cinco Bocetos*. The atonal movements “Preludio”, “Interludio Nocturno”, and “Final con Pajaros” are based on a common theme and motive, while “Cancion del Campo” and “Cancion de la Montana” are tonal and contain a folk-like melody. Nevertheless, the constant use of irregular phrasing, contrasts of wide leaps, and similar rhythms throughout *Bocetos* provides a strong unity among all movements.

Roberto Sierra and Kathleen Jones maintained constant communication during the creative process of *Cinco Bocetos*. Jones states:

Roberto was writing and calling me up to come and try some of the ideas out. The only down-side to that was that Roberto's music is not easy to sight read, and he would show me something and I would stumble around for a couple minutes before I figured out how it should go. Roberto's music always has to have a direction in which you are going. It sounds much better when you find the right tempo, color of sound, length of note and general nuance. As for clarification, I don't recall needing much--the hand-written part I have always played from is very clear, and superior to the computer version, in that it is easier to find the melody in Robert's hand. The layout and spacing in the manuscript part is much nicer to play from than the computer-generated, published edition.<sup>14</sup>

Sierra edited the last movement in *Cinco Bocetos* twice since its premiere, but the revisions were not requested by Jones.<sup>15</sup> In her article, Kathleen Jones states:

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<sup>13</sup> Fukunaga, Sallie Diane Price. “Music for Unaccompanied Clarinet by Contemporary Latin American Composers.” DMA diss. University of Kansas, 1988, 177.

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Jones, E-mail correspondence with the author, 05 October 2007.

The final movement, “Finale with Birds”, is the only sketch that has been revised since the premiere performance of *Cinco Bocetos* on June 27, 1984. Roberto first revised the Final in March of 1987, shortly before I recorded the *Bocetos* for a CD on his own label. He revised it a second time before the work was published by Subito Music in the 1990s. Page 10 of the published version has only a few small differences from the 1987 (second manuscript) version; page 11, however, is a substantial reworking of the 1987 music.<sup>16</sup>

*Cinco Bocetos* is a significant addition to the clarinet solo repertoire. Since its official premiere at the International Clarinet Congress held in London in August 1984, the piece has gained popularity, and was selected as one of the pieces to be played for the International Clarinet Association’s 2001 Young Artist Competition in New Orleans.<sup>17</sup> The very first performance occurred in the Robert Marcellus master class at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois in June of 1984. The work was well-received by the audience and in particular by Marcellus. Jones points out:

... Dr. Marcellus was very impressed with the work and wrote a lovely letter to Roberto, saying he believed the *Bocetos* would become important in the repertoire--how true that has been!<sup>18</sup>

### **Preludio**

The form of the first movement is given in Chart 1. Since the music lacks barlines, the separation of each particular section can be traced by the metric division of the quarter-note. Specifically, the A section extends from beat 1 to beat 22, and the B section from beat 23 to beat 45. The transition section from beat 46 to 58 brings the melodic line back to the chalumeau register of the instrument. The opening motive is clearly presented at beat 58

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Jones, Kathy. “Master Class: Cinco Bocetos for Clarinet Solo (1984) by Roberto Sierra.” *The Clarinet* 28 (March 2001) : 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. , 4.

<sup>18</sup> Kathleen Jones, E-mail correspondence with the author, 05 October 2007.

with the combined restatement of the A+B section. Finally, the Coda begins at beat 73 and contains motivic material from the A section and a direct quote (two octaves higher) of the opening motive. (See Chart 1 and EX. 1a/1b)

Chart 1: “Preludio” Form

A	B	Transition	A+B	Coda
Beats 1-22	Beats 23-45	Beats 46-58	Beats 58-72	Beats 73-end

EX. 1: “Preludio” Form

**a.**

**A Section**

**B Section**

b.

**Transition** →

**A+B Section**

**Coda**      **Quote**

Sierra combines atonal and tonal harmony in *Cinco Bocetos*. The “Preludio” is atonal and based on a common theme and motive. The first seven pitches (D-E-F-G#-A-B flat-B) in the A section form the pitch-class set 7-19 (0123679). (See EX. 2)

EX. 2: “Preludio” Pitch-class Set

**Pitch-class set 7-19 (0123679)**