

Creativity and Style

Music as a language

"The musician who does not have a feeling or an ideology to transmit, is in the wrong profession"

Enrique Bunbury
Singer, Songwriter

Language as a tool, the message as a reason.

Music is an universal language, in which everyone can speak their own way. Like any language, it can be more or less elaborate, depending on the ability of each person. It's used differently in each place, and each one gives a personal touch.

The languages are used to communicate ideas, feelings, facts ... sometimes we need to express new ideas, and sometimes it's possible to explain what we feel with words, or songs that other people created.

Like any language, music would be the way, but now let's talk about content:

How to start a composition

Including your way of seeing the world in music

**"You need a glass mirror to see your face;
you need works of art to see your soul."**

George Bernard Shaw
Writer

In the western countries it's usual to talk about creativity, defining it as method to consider something in a different way from those already known, or making something new from scratch...

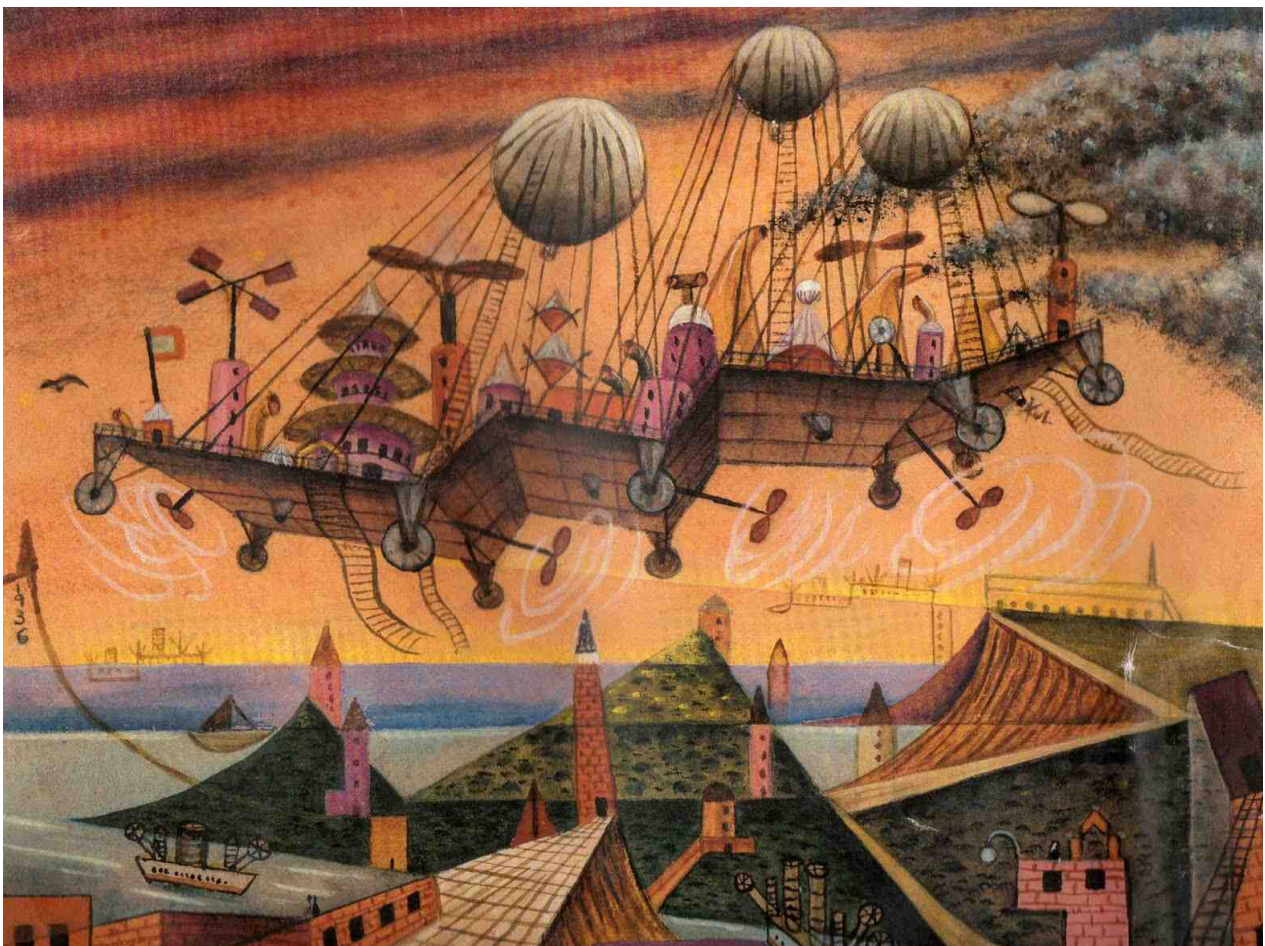
The Hindus say that art is not something getting out from inside of you, but something that is passing *through* you...

Toltec shamanism compares it to a diver swimming into the sea to look for pearls and brought it to the surface making them accessible to the rest ...

Whatever the approach, the first creation, almost intuitive, usually gives the reason for starting a work of art... it's what we call "inspiration". It may come from different areas, according to our interests... we can mix feelings, political views, mathematics, physics, history, psychology, chamanism, anything you want... it all depends on how we see the world ...

For example, **Roger Waters**, and other members of **Pink Floyd**, as students of architecture, drew planes and structures for songwriting, instead of writing scores.

Another great example was **Xul Solar**, an artist, inventor and philosopher born in the late 19th century. He was also creator of languages, games developer, astrologist... its main art was painting, but he also created literature and music.







Among other things, he studied the relation between the frequencies of musical notes and the visible spectrum, finding a correspondence between both, and developed a piano in which each note was represented by the equivalent color.



Some of his paintings were created to be readable as poetry, and some other, on the basis of this equivalence color-sound could be interpreted musically!







How to develop the composition

"Jade needs to be carved to be a gem."

Chinese proverb

So, how we do to take this little idea, and develop this into a song, a simphony, or anything else?

If we only put more, and more things, we usually lose sight of what's important, but if we want to develop the motif, one thing we can do is to analyze its structure: in which scale is the melody and / or harmony? what is the rhythmic pattern? which is the most important thing? is it the melody? or some instrument? maybe a word in the lyrics?

Then, when we decide that, we can decide the instruments to join in the orchestra. At this point we can do two things: compose and arrange thinking "I want a trombone, an oboe, and a shakuhachy flute", and then, when we finish, try to find the musician who plays that instruments; or we can think "well, I have this instrument, this musician..." and then try to adapt the song for them.

In both options, we have to think that we need, at least, a little knowledge about the instruments we are arranging for. In example, if you write for a sitar, you have to note that usually it need a long time to be tuned before you play, and then you don't have the possibility of changing the scale while playing. So, if you know that, you won't write for sitar with changes of key.

You need to know also the musician's skills. In example: you wrote for the sitar in C#, and then you want there a flute... usually the flute players are not so good playing in C#... you'll need a very good one. If you meet him, nice, but if you don't, you have to find another solution.

When deciding the instruments, we have to think what we want to highlight: harmony? rhythm? the virtuosity of one musician?

For example, if we want to highlight the harmony we must give priority to polyphonic instruments (guitar, keyboard, piano...), however, if we want to emphasize the melody, it's also a good option monophonic ones with a wide range, such as flutes, sitar, etc. mainly chosen for their timbre or phrasing possibilities.

Another useful idea is to split the register among the instruments, so they do not overlap, reserving an area for each instrument in each part of song. i.e.. if you mix a double bass with a didgeridu, you won't understand the sound; but it's not always necessary that the bass is played in the lower notes, as it's not necessary that the guitar player goes from the lowest to the highest note in each song.

Too many arrangements makes you lose the objective... if everything is hyper-complex, the saturation won't let you hear clearly: it's more difficult to appreciate a good tune if harmony is overloaded; or, if we make constant syncopation, it's difficult to differentiate between the normal rhythm and the arrangements. It's like when we cook... if you constantly add everything in the food, the taste ends up being always the same. You have to know when to stop.... the sushi does not improve with ketchup!

Another thing that is useful to start developing compositions is changing things in songs that you like. i.e., you can make an arabian version of a song of Deep Purple. Or you can make the same songs you play allways, but with another instruments, so you have a different point of view of that. Or you can take the motif, and repeat this in different levels, like a fractal. You can start, i.e.with a 5/4 measure. Usually the people play the 5/4 with 4 bars phrases. Why not five? Or lines with 5 syllables?

You can develop a lot different things with a very simple idea like that.

Developing your style

“The human, the living creature, the individual who creates, is always more important than any established style or system.”

Bruce Lee
Martial Artist

There are many tricks for music, but not everybody have the same skills to play. In example, there are musicians who want to play faster than anybody else. They are playing hundreds of note each second...

but as you can like Yngwie Maalmsten, or Paul Gilbert, you also can prefer B.B. King, or Peter Green... or you can enjoy all of them.

One is not “better” than the other. You can play fast, and you won’t be Paganninni just because you are playing fast. You can be the fastest, and don’t communicate anithing. Or you can play slow, and you won’t be, only by playing slow, David Gilmour. You need to express...

In another point, sometimes the people have limitations, by different reasons, and they use that for having their own way of playing.

An example: no doubt that having a good ear is very useful for a musician ... but it is relative!

Mozart had a super fine ear, which made him possible to notice if an instrument was out of tune, or to play complex pieces by heart after hearing them only once. Beethoven, in the opposite side, was getting deaf throughout his career, at the point that he could never hear his greatest work, the 9th symphony, because when he composed that one, his deafness was absolute ...

It's impossible to know what Beethoven could have done with an ear like Mozart had; it might have been even bigger, or maybe not ...

Why do I say "maybe not?" because many musicians make a virtue of their lacks that mark style:



Django Reinhardt was a gypsy guitar player from Belgium: In a fire in the caravan where he lived, he was severely injured in the little and ring fingers of his left hand.

However, through ingenuity he devised a system to solve his problem... a system that was part in the originality of his style. He only used these two fingers in the highest strings for harmony, the index and middle for the melodies, and the thumb for the bass...



Tony Iommi, from Black Sabbath, had an accident while he was working in a factory, and he lost part of the fingers in his right hand (as he is left handed, it's the same as if a right handed loses part of his right fingers).

So he made a kind of steel new phalanges, and he tried to play, but the strings were very hard... so he put down 1 ½ step down the tuning, and then he developed a style that sounds very "deep". Now there are lots of guitar players who tune the guitar 1 ½ step down, just to sound like him.



Eddie Van Halen: He started studying classical piano, later drums, and then his brother bought a guitar. He only can take the guitar when his brother were out; it was usually at night, when he went to party.

So he played at night, but he didn't want to make a lot of noise at 3 in the morning. Because of that, he only played with the left hand, and then one day he was thinking "I can do the same with the other hand", and started to play tapping. He didn't invented tapping, as there were another guitar players who made that before, but he made tapping very famous.



Astor Piazzolla. The best bandoneon player ever. He also played other instruments, and when he composed songs, he often didn't use the bandoneon because, as he said, "if I play piano, I make mistakes. When I make a mistake I find something new... then I go in this direction, and do something I can't with the bandoneon". He improvised in piano, and then translated to bandoneon...



There was a guitar player who had a problem for playing. He had very strong and big fingers. Because of that, he didn't can play only one string in the guitar, and he wanted to play solos.

So he found a solution... a new way for playing guitar: double stop. He was Chuck Berry, and revolutionized rock and roll guitar. Now you don't need to have a problem to use his idea.

Lyrics

Recurrent themes and
what we feel

First steps with help



“If I don't sing what I feel, I'm gonna die inside ”

Luis Alberto Spinetta, Musician, Songwriter

Recurrent themes and what we feel

There are lots of people who want to write a song and start saying "I will write about love", "I lost my girlfriend" or "rock and roll is the best way of life" because they are thinking that it's what a song have to say... it's like when somebody ask us to draw a house, what do we usually do? the typical house draw...but, what if I ask you to draw your own house? is it like this? does somebody live in this kind of house?

It doesn't look like our house or the houses we see; we are drawing another one's draw of a house, as we are composing a song based on the way the other people compose songs. You can find your own way to compose, and in your own way maybe you say "this song don't need a solo", or "this song will be irregular" or "this song will have a very strange instrumentation" because you feel that, you want that. That's the way to develop the creativity.

There are lots of great songs that speak about unusual topics, i.e.:

- Smoke on the water: it's about a big casino burnt when Deep Purple were waiting to play, and Frank Zappa lost all his instruments there. It's not a common history in music; only one song speaks about that, and everybody knows that song.
- Another brick in the wall, of Pink Floyd: "we don't need no education, we don't need no mind control"... there are not too much songs speaking about that.
- Lucy in the sky with diamonds: there are people that sais it's about a drug, LSD (Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds), and John Lennon said "I wrote this because my little son was painting and I asked him what it was; and he said it was Lucy in the sky with diamonds".

First steps with help

When we are born, we don't start walking suddenly; we used to be helped by the adults, and then, with the time, we have enough ability to do it by ourselves. So, how can we use this idea to compose? You can take a song, your favourite song, and change something; or say "I like from this song the harmony, and I'll make a new melody" or "I'll take the melody and make a new harmony", or change the rhythm, or the orchestration...

Another thing you can do is an acrostic... you put a word, any word in vertical position, and with the letters you start using each one as the first letter of a phrase, and you speak about this word. It's a very common an easy way to start writing.

Another way is to write with more people; everybody takes a paper and writes an idea, and nobody knows what the others are writing about, and you get all together, mix the ideas, and then you have a new song.

Or you can open a book, by chance, and the first word, or the first phrase you see, you use this for a lyric. While My Guitar Gently Weeps was written this way... George Harrison decided to write a song with the first words he'll see opening a book at random. These words were "gently weeps".

Breaking with conventions

"Without deviating from standard, progress is impossible ".

Frank Zappa, Musician, Songwriter

Sometimes it's necessary to break with convention to express ourselves, and based on it we can open a new branch in the art that ends up creating a style:

The 9th Symphony of Beethoven is the first in history to incorporate the human voice. At the time he was not convinced at all... today is the only musical composition of history declared World Heritage by UNESCO...

There are many examples of music born as marginal, which ends adopted as popular culture:

Tango began as music for cabarets, banned by the military government of Argentina, the Catholic Church, and even the Emperor of Germany in the early 20th century (he prohibited the army to dance tango when they were dressed with the uniform). Today it's also a cultural heritage of mankind.

It was the same with Flamenco. Flamenco was the music of the gypsies, arábians, jews and christians who were living in Andalucia, even in caves (some of them are still living in caves now) who were playing and mixing their music. It mixes arabian melodies with harmony. There are lots of arábians, gypsies, christians and jews all around the world, but that was the only place where the Flamenco was born; why? because they were the people that the government didn't want there; they were living out of the city, they were living together, and they had to mix, even if they didn't want. So, they mixed their cultures and their music, and now it's another heritage for the mankind.

You never have to feel bad because the people don't understand your art. There were lots of visionary artists who were thinking "my art have no value" and they died before being recognized. Vincent Van Gogh, Franz Kafka, Edgar Allan Poe... Mozart died very poor... only 2 or 3 people went to his funeral... and there was a long time since the people realized that they were in the right way, because the people who is looking forward can never be understood by the common people, as they are just looking around.

Fusions: folklore alive

And for conclude, something about the fusion of music.

The word "Folklore" means *folk=people*, and *lore=knowledge*, "knowledge of the people", the common people.

Flamenco was born from the common people, not the people sponsored by someone. Now it's an heritage for the humanity, but they were only playing what they felt.

We usually think now, because they use the word "fusion" for selling some music, that it's a new thing. It's not.

In America we have a mix of european, african and indigenus people, and they also mixed their cultures, but in different ways. USA have Jazz, that is very different to Argentine's Tango, Candombe from Uruguay, Bossa Nova in Brazil, but all of this mixes have the same roots: american, african, european... as you can see, you have lot of possibilities...

Or when here, in Europe, the border between classical and popular music became more blurred with the nationalism of the 19th century. Despite having been more or less at the same time, the results were different in each country. Bela Bartok is very different to Manuel de Falla, or Edwar Grieg, and they were mixing classical music with european folklore. We can think in Modest Mussorgsky, from Russia, and his composition "Pictures at an exhibition". He wrote this for piano. Then Maurice Ravel in France made an adaptation for orchestra. In the 70's the band from England *Emerson, Lake & Palmer* made a rock version. In Japan, Isao Tomita made an electronic version. It's the language adapted to the countries, speaking about the same...

Now the technological possibilities enables us to access information from anywhere in the world without leaving home; international trade allows us to purchase instruments from other cultures, and, most important, we are able to travel and live with people who see the world in different ways, exchanging information, feelings, experiences...

I think folklore is alive because, as we are studying the past folklore, we are making the present one now, we are creating the new folklore... somebody will study this someday, and say "well, you know that one day in Innsbruck there meet a few people who made this, and this, and this..." It's very possible, in the same way that we are studding things that people made in a cave in Andalucia. You only have to develop your art for getting that.

We are mixing now instruments, ideas, thinkings, melodies, harmonies, from all over the world and all the times, and that's why I think that...

Now and here
folklore is alive;
because we are writing it.

European Acoustic Strings Workshop Innsbruck, Austria

Sebastián Griz, 15/05/2011

www.myspace.com/sebastiangriz

sebastiangriz@hotmail.com

