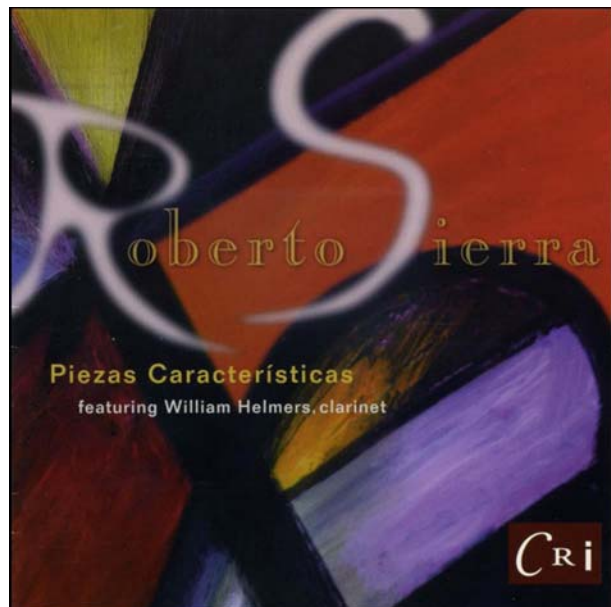


NWCR725

Roberto Sierra

Piezas Características

Featuring William Helmers, clarinet



Piezas Características (1992) (14:37)

1. Segundas Menores: Agresivo y articulado. (2:01)
2. Segundas Mayores: Suave (4:09)
3. Breve Interludio en Cuartas: Rápido (0:32)
4. Terceras Mayores: Sereno (3:41)
5. Terceras Menores: Rítmico (4:14)

William Helmers, bass clarinet; Stefanie Jacob, piano; Scott Tisdell, cello; Catherine Schubilske, violin; Dennis Najoom, trumpet; Thomas Wetzell, percussion; Neal Gittleman, conductor

Ritmorroto (1995) (5:55)

6. 1. Con absoluta precisión rítmica (0:32)
7. 2. Con calma (1:59)
8. 3. Agresivo (3:24)

William Helmers, clarinet

Tres Fantasías (1994) (12:38)

9. I. Montuno: Con gusto (3:34)
10. II. Coral: Espacioso y sereno (5:23)
11. III. Doce: Agresivo y rítmico (3:41)

William Helmers, clarinet; Scott Tisdell, cello; Stefanie Jacob, piano

Cinco Bocetos (1984) (8:02)

12. 1. Preludio (0:55)
13. 2. Canción del campo (1:59)
14. 3. Interludio nocturno (1:57)
15. 4. Canción de la montaña (1:09)
16. 5. Final con pájaros (2:02)

William Helmers, clarinet

Con Tres (1990) (12:58)

17. I. Pasacallejera (3:07)
18. II. Adagio Lírico (5:21)
19. III. Un motivo para establecer algunas diferencias
(A motive to establish some differences) (4:30)

William Helmers, clarinet; Stefanie Jacob, piano; Shawn Mauser, bassoon

Total playing time: 54:10

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Notes

Whether it is the classic *montuno* or contemporary salsa, vibrant or serene, the beat of Roberto Sierra's music is unmistakably Latin American, specifically Puerto Rican. "The *montuno* rhythm is an inevitable inspiration for me," says Sierra. "Because I am Puerto Rican, my music is Puerto Rican. Always. The wealth of images I have in mind refers to that place where I grew up, to the sounds, the colors, the sunshine, the Puerto Rican sky. Even the more abstract music has an accent that points to where I was born. Then again, Puerto Rico is part of the world and, like the rest of the world it eventually merges into something larger. There may be other sources of inspiration for me, of course," he adds, musing on examples of Norway's fjords to Cayuga Lake, New York, "but the integral part would still be Puerto Rico."

This is not to say that Sierra means to either reproduce or emulate local color. Although he has been called the Aaron Copland of Puerto Rico—and like Copland he certainly evokes sylvan pleasure from a most urban point of view—Roberto Sierra remains an original. "I am not a modernist, and I don't want to be a minimalist. Not that there is anything wrong there: an artist has the right to do whatever he or she

wants to do, to belong to a school or to have no school at all. I have no school. None. It's wonderful. I just want to be my own musician, whatever that may be."

The distinctive hand of a single master is palpable in both the 1984 *Cinco Bocetos* for solo clarinet and the propulsive 1995 *Ritmorroto*. But Sierra himself feels that the decade's distance between the two scores is a telling sign of his intellectual journey.

"I think it may be obvious in listening to the two pieces that my music is moving towards more abstraction, even if both scores have in common a vision of the clarinet as a polyphonic instrument." Indeed, both in *Cinco Bocetos* and in the last section of *Ritmorroto* there is a strong first impression of two distinct layers being played at the same time. The effect is not so much that of a mirror image as of an aural kaleidoscope, with each facet reflecting a different aspect of music's rhythmic soul. "But in *Cinco Bocetos*," adds Sierra, "the intention approaches folklore — or at least an impression of folklore. *Ritmorroto*, on the other hand, is more abstract, more concerned with process."

Ritmorroto is an extremely contrapuntal piece; its two layers always relate to each other through imitation or inversion. While not every process is immediately noticeable, the contrapuntal division into voices is always audible. “I believe that music based on a wealth of processes tends to hang together well,” says Sierra. “The listener might not know why, but the unity of thought comes across in performance and makes the sound far from arbitrary. It is very much like a well-made building: You may not be able to tell what an architect did or how, but you feel good when you are in a good structure.”

Ritmorroto and *Cinco Bocetos* also have in common an urbanity. Even in the lush tropical landscapes of the sketches in *Cinco Bocetos*, the overall impression is of hot nights in the city, far from the countryside. The salsa rhythms of the Preludio that opens the work give notice to this, and the evanescent tone painting of the Interludio sets the scene for the faux-naïveté of the twin *Canción del campo* and *Canción de la montaña*. The cycle comes to a close with a subtle tribute to the great cellist Pablo Casals, as Sierra suggests the old Catalan folk tune “Song of the Birds” in his own *Final con pájaros*. Like the American George Gershwin or the Argentinean Alberto Ginastera, Sierra can afford to use popular and folk impulses as ingredients rather than credos. Those ingredients are shaken up into a powerful brew in *Ritmorroto*, where textural stratification works the alchemy of transforming an intrinsically homophonic medium into an appearance of polyphony. The method is fascinating, and Sierra’s new rhythmic language is strikingly original. Two eighth notes of a triplet might be followed by sixteenth notes, for example, leaving the first quarter-note value of what was going to be a triplet incomplete. The resulting music is by turns maddening and refreshing, constantly surprising. The rhythmic cells in the opening and the melodies act independently of each other. The second section explores contrapuntal ideas as different lines in constant imitation that are separated through dynamic shading and articulation. “The last piece is really two different pieces that happen simultaneously,” says Sierra. “One starts in the low register with loud dynamics and aggressive rhythms and the other starts gently in the high register. Gradually the two travel through the register of the instrument in opposite directions, ending in the reverse position from which they began.”

The sultry rhythm that opens *Con Tres* inserts a teasing clarinet into the somehow soothing textures of a nervous bassoon. The 1990 score, with its punning Spanish titles, is tough to explain in any language but is nevertheless among Sierra’s most disarmingly accessible. It opens with a throbbing *Pasacallejera*, the title a saucy neologism that combines the works for “passacaglia,” in Italian and “streetwise,” in Spanish. Sierra’s very contemporary passacaglia, to be sure, is far from any Baroque ideal. The adagio that follows is all about the metamorphosis of the opening melodies into what the composer calls the “vaporized harmonies” of the final bars. *Un motivo para establecer algunas diferencias* (“Motive for establishing certain differences”), the final movement of *Con Tres* is a play on works but also an apt description of Sierra’s method: the initial piano figure is used in several guises, establishing different statements of what is ultimately the same material.

The material is a bit more complex in *Tres Fantasías*, a 1994 score for clarinet, cello and piano that boasts a triple source of

inspiration: a Bach chorale, and austere twelve-tone row and a traditional Afro-Caribbean rhythm called the *montuno*. *Montuno* is also the name of the first of the three musical fantasies, where Sierra’s insistent layering of short and aggressive melodies seems to flirt with minimalism. A simple beat and a hexachord are the basic stuff of “Montuno,” treated independently and recalling the isorhythms of the middle ages. Towards the end of the movement, in the section marked “Un poco más movido,” the clarinet and the cello take over the isorhythmic structure that was first heard in the piano, while a new rhythmic structure in the piano proclaims the harmonies of Bach’s chorale “Es ist genug.” The clarinet and the cello join in a jazzy fusion after a complete reiteration of the hexachordal material. In the following section, “Coral,” Bach’s theme is deconstructed and refined into a new figure that remains intrinsically linked to the original “Es ist genug.” The intermittent violence implied in the instrumental interruptions of the chorale creates the illusion of parallel layers. “Doce” brings the work to an end with a wild exploration of the same tone row that Arnold Schoenberg used in his Suite, Op. 25.

The ambitious *Piezas Características* from 1992 gathers together bongos and congas with bass clarinet, trumpet, percussion, piano, violin and cello. Even if it recalls Amadeo Roldán’s “Rítmicas” experiments of another era, or even Leonard Bernstein’s multicultural accessibility in *Fancy Free*, these five marvelous pieces taken together from perhaps Sierra’s most distinctive chamber work. “I confess that I don’t know Roldán,” says Sierra, “but I suspect that we all draw from the same sources—same with Bernstein. Latin American and especially Caribbean music has been a major force in American concert music as well as in popular music.” Each of the five *Piezas Características* explores a different interval which provides the basic material for the harmonic and melodic structures. The first, *Segundas menores*, deals with minor seconds; the next, *Segundas mayores*, with major seconds *Breve interludio en cuartas* offers a perfect fourth, if briefly, and serves as a breaking point. *Terceras mayores* and *Terceras menores* deal with the major and minor thirds respectively. The augmented fourth is used in all pieces as common denominator. All five have in common Sierra’s gift for capturing the listener’s attention through arrhythmic life that is impossible to ignore.

Roberto Sierra was born in Puerto Rico in 1953. He studied at the Conservatory of Music and the University of Puerto Rico and later traveled to Europe to further his training at the Royal College of Music in London, then at the Institute of Sonology in Utrecht. He completed advanced work in composition at the Hochschule für Musik in Hamburg under György Ligeti. Sierra still counts his mentor Ligeti, alongside Stravinsky as his major model and influence, but Ligeti himself has generously acknowledged the influence of his pupil Sierra in his own recent piano works. Sierra is equally at home with large and small musical forms, and prestigious commissions and premieres have come his way from the National Symphony Orchestra, the Minnesota Orchestra, the Pittsburgh Symphony, the Mendelssohn Choir Club, Radio France, the Casals Festival, the Saarändischer Rundfunk, Continuum and the Bronx Arts Ensemble. Sierra is currently professor of composition at Cornell University.

—Octavio Rocca

Production Notes

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