

**Graciela Paraskevaidis:
The Own and the Other.
The Argentinian Composer Gerardo Gandini ***

I.

A survey on the development of art music in Argentina in the past fifty years shows clearly that, after the outstanding and basically opposed composers Juan Carlos Paz (1897-1972), Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983) and Hilda Dianda (born 1925), Gerardo Gandini has become the internationally most well-known personality of his generation among the composers born and living in Argentina. Some of his contemporaries like Oscar Bazán (1936), Eduardo Bértola (1939) and Eduardo Kusnir (1939) have made important compositional contributions, but are scarcely known beyond Latin American borders. After Gandini, only Mariano Etkin (born 1943) has succeeded in obtaining a truly international name.

Gerardo Gandini was born in Buenos Aires on October 16, 1936 and studied piano with the Argentinians Pía Sebastiani and Roberto Caamaño and afterwards for a short time with Yvonne Loriod, harmony with Carlos Tuxen-Bang, composition with Alberto Ginastera and later also with Goffredo Petrassi at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome.

As a composer he has received innumerable commissions, grants and prizes in Argentina as well as abroad. As a composer and pianist Gandini has participated in many festivals and courses, among them also the ISCM World Music Days in Warsaw (1968), London (1971) and Paris (1975). Much of his music has been published and some of it is available in recordings. In this sense, Gandini's career can be compared to that of a "first-world" composer, a fact seldom to be found in Latin America.

Gandini's musical activity has stretched to different areas in over thirty years: composition, interpretation (as pianist and conductor) and teaching composition. For almost ten years Gandini taught at the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales (Latin American Center for Advanced Music Studies) belonging to the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires, since the very creation of the Institute in 1963 until its closing in 1972, a place where many composers had the chance to come closer to new music.

Alberto Ginastera was not wrong when he decided not only to give the very talented, a little shy young Gandini free composition lessons but also to engage him later on as his assistant at the famous Center of the Instituto Di Tella, of which he was the director and main composition teacher. Gandini, who was particularly responsible for the analysis course, had a great influence on many Latin American composers who had the luck to learn from him essential things on European and North American music of the twentieth century. Certainly several male and female composers on scholarship at this Center, among others Oscar Bazán, César Bolaños, Rafael Aponte-Ledée, Gabriel Brncic, Mariano Etkin, Jacqueline Nova, Joaquín Orellana, Luis Arias, Eduardo Kusnir, Coriún Aharonián, Jorge Antunes, and myself, and outside the Center Eduardo Bértola and later on Marta Lambertini, had the opportunity thanks to Gandini to get a deeper insight into the

main issues of new music, from the Second Viennese School to Bartók and Varèse and to the European and North American avant-garde of the sixties.

Gandini was also a teacher at the Cursos Latinoamericanos de Música Contemporánea held in Buenos Aires in 1976 and 1977, guest professor at the Juilliard School of Music in New York, professor for composition at the School of Music of the University of La Plata (Argentina) and at the Music School of the Catholic University in Buenos Aires. Since 1976 and for several years, Gandini was in charge of the series of concerts and seminars with new music in the framework of the Goethe-Institute in Buenos Aires, also led the workshop for contemporary music of the Fundación San Telmo and taught composition at the Fundación Antorchas; in 1990, he was appointed director of the Centro de Experimentación en Opera y Ballet (Experimental Center for Opera and Ballet) attached to the famous Teatro Colón of Buenos Aires.

As pianist, Gandini is not only the sentient interpreter of his own music but also of a comprehensive repertoire which includes the great masters of the first half of our century and the avantgardists of the fifties and sixties (particularly Gandini's interpretations of Cage and Feldman should be mentioned here), and extends to his contemporary Latin American colleagues and also to jazz and tango. As a pianist he took part in the last sextet founded and led by Astor Piazzolla.

II.

Since 1959 Gandini has composed over ninety works, including two chamber operas, two choral compositions, orchestral pieces with or without soloists, chamber music for different groups, pieces for two instruments, several piano series, solo pieces and compositions for voice and instruments.

His opus 1, the **Tres pequeñas elegías** (Three Small Elegies) of 1959, is a series of extremely short, delicate pieces, which the twenty-three-year-old Argentinian composed under the influence of the Second Viennese School in the soundspace of free atonality.

Many of his later compositions like the **Música Nocturna I**, a night-music piece composed in 1964 for flute, string trio and piano, have influenced younger composers at that time with their originality, their timbre richness and their strong expression.

A key to understanding Gandini's music lies undoubtedly in the titles that not only name and describe his compositions but are also closely linked to their content. A clarifying example: "... e sarà" (1974) hints at Giuseppe Verdi's motto *torniamo all'antico e sarà un progresso*. Here the fragment quoted "... e sarà" is ambiguous: does it really mean a progress to go back to the old? Should it be dialectically though ambiguously understood? What will it actually be? When asked about it, Gandini gave no clear answer, *not wanting to expose myself*. Perhaps *it will be a catastrophe*, Gandini then smiled enigmatically, *to go back to the old*. Here, undoubtedly, lies the essence, the core of his musical-philosophical thinking: A very fascinating double-meaning game between real and unreal, between his own music and someone else's music which then becomes his own, between appropriation and elaboration of music by others assimilated in his own music, in which one no longer knows which borders Gandini oversteps: his own towards the other's

music or the other's music towards his own. Rather one should ask oneself here, if this quality of being "extraneous" is not actually his "own", or if it has not become his "own".

In the above-mentioned piece as well as in many others, Gandini uses materials from the past which are processed in very diverse ways, such as sound rags from Bach's Cello Suites, quotations from Rameau's "L'enharmonique" and from a medieval Troubadour-Lamento in complicated canonic procedures, sounds from Frescobaldi's eighth organ toccata - all of them fragments that have gone through very complex sound, intervallic and quotation filters.

Piagne e sospira composed in 1969 for flute, clarinet, violin and piano, relates to Monteverdi's homonymous madrigal; in the viola concerto composed in 1979, the middle movement - a virtuoso *moto perpetuo* - functions as the axis for dreamy distant quotations; **Arnold strikes again** composed in 1985 speaks humourously about Schoenberg's always strong presence in Gandini's thinking and music; **Imaginary Landscape** of 1988 relates to Cage; the **Mozartvariationen** for chamber orchestra and voice were composed in the Mozart-year 1991; **Espejismos II: La muerte y la doncella** (Mirage II: The Death and the Maiden) of 1987 points to Schubert as a cult figure; the chamber opera of 1978 *La pasión de Buster Keaton* (Buster Keaton's Passion) not only tells us about Gandini's relation to the great filmmaker and filmstar, but also of his experimental pleasure in working with integrative forms in music theatre.

In 1984 Gandini's postmodern romantic trend and his relationship to Robert Schumann's music and thinking became particularly strong. Four compositions show his great interest in this personality: **RSCH: Escenas** (1984) (Robert Schumann: Scenes) for piano and orchestra, **RSCH: Testimonios** (1984) (Robert Schumann: Testimonies) for voice, piano and tape; **Eusebius** (1984) - four Nocturnes for piano; **Eusebius** (1984-1985) - five Nocturnes for an orchestra divided into four groups, and further **RSCH: Elegía** (1986) (Robert Schumann: Elegy) for piano.

For the premiere of **Eusebius** in its orchestral version, Gandini wrote the following programme note:

Schumann's figure, his music and his myths, his different identities became an obsessive presence to me in 1984. And I tried to exorcize his spirit through several pieces written in this year.

In a selfportrait concert in Montevideo on May 16, 1985, Gandini spoke in detail about the creation and compositional technique of his Schumann pieces:

Eusebius is Schumann's contemplative, lyrical personality in opposition to Florestan, his powerful, violent and passionate side. At the beginning the piece was conceived as a study for a composition for piano and orchestra, consisting of a series of numbers in which I tried to use - apart from the references to Schumann's music - the same actors, the same myths of his world: Eusebius, the prophet bird, Florestan, et cetera. This I did in 1984. Thereafter I created some other parallel compositions: "Eusebius" for orchestra and an electroacoustical piece "RSCH: Testimonios", which contains some of the materials from the piano series, along with a remark by Schumann's youngest daughter about the day her father went mad. This started as an exercise, since I was actually looking for material for the other piece and tried to structure it in a similar way as I

have done in the Sarabande and Double from "... e sarà", that is, a piece in which many tones were omitted which could at their turn be substituted by other strange tones. And this I did with one of the pieces from the "Davidsbündlertänze" (the fourteenth), which is called "Eusebius". But there were still some tones left and I thought I could write a second piece with them, which I did. But there were still some other tones left, which I used in the third piece. And then, the tones I still had were no longer interesting, but some of my composition students proposed that I should write a fourth piece. I had to exchange some tones from the three pieces in order to make the fourth one more interesting. And this gave a somewhat peculiar result: There is in the composition a kind of evolution leading to clarity, to a more tonal situation, exactly what I had rejected at the beginning of the composition. This is noticeable in the four pieces. The tones remain there where Schumann put them, but I have made them longer or furnished them with diverse dynamics, or they are to be played in a different way. For all that the piece is called "Eusebius - four Nocturnes for piano" or a "Nocturne" for four pianos; when the piece is played by all four pianos together, then you can hear Schumann's piece. And this is how the orchestral version works, which consists of five Nocturnes: the orchestra is divided in four groups, each one playing one of the Nocturnes; at the end all four Nocturnes and orchestra groups come together, which makes the fifth piece. In the electroacoustical version I did something very similar: working with a digital synthesizer, a Synnclavier, I produced the four pieces in Buenos Aires, which were then overlapped through different types of sound-modulation."

III.

Since 1969, the year in which he composed **Piagne e sospira**, Gerardo Gandini points to a compositional procedure which has become characteristic of his work and which he has consistently applied in his music ever since. He speaks of an *objet trouvé* as the basic idea referring to a starting, already existing material, which is continuously changed through processes of multiplication, de- and re-construction, de- and re-composition, overlapping, editing, association, contrast, blending, becoming unrecognizable and then again recognizable, pulverizing and then putting together in a new way.

To escape from the stereotypes of new music, Gandini tries mainly to produce a sound structure in which the presence, confrontation, inclusion, processing and finally the relationship with the great European tradition become its core and crucial point. Whether this tradition is called Dufay, Lasso, Frescobaldi, Rameau, Bach, Scarlatti, Mozart, Schubert, Schumann or Schoenberg, it is always interwoven in Gandini's music as a looked-for relationship, as a conscious elaboration, as an obstinate incorporation, as a wished for confrontation, as a presence not to be driven out. It is the strange effect of musical processes of a kept-alive past that act deeply in the subconscious and that, through its irresistible power of attraction and fascination invoke Arnold, Eusebius and Florestan, Franz and Wolfgang as fatherly models.

Maybe this is also a closed, no-way-out process which is typical for a country like Argentina and a city like Buenos Aires: a most refined high-levelled music product from the most Europeanized and most European-like Latin American corner, from the metropolis on the Rio de la Plata, which has always been farthest off from its own continent and has turned its back on all other Latin American cities. Every type of cultural avant-garde from

the North quickly takes hold there: the literary, the artistic, the musical. Gandini stands as a great example of a non European synthesis of new European music from the last thirty years: professional skill, experienced metier, inexhaustible sound imagination; a "first-world" music in the sense of a "universal" music language as it is still understood in Europe.

Gandini's quotations have a delusively and fascinatingly "real" effect, the gesture remains associative and closely related to the history of music; humour acts in an evanescent and extremely refined way (for instance, in the piece **A cow in a Mondrian Painting**, a title quoting the Washington Post's music critic, who wrote about Gandini's music that it was as difficult to make sense out of this music as to find a cow in a Mondrian painting), alone with a born nihilism, his technique has achieved masterly refinement. In this sense, Gandini is consciously akin to his countryman Jorge Luis Borges, as the composer himself explains through the example of his piece for piano **Música Ficción** of 1980. The approach to the past and its inclusion in the present creates a fictive, illusory, unreal situation in which the artist leaves language and time to play with each other, a situation in which real quotations from the present and the past give birth to a new, equally fictitious and delusive sound-image, which is faced with a historical burden, as it were out of the ruins of a past brought back to life. Such a reality has the same right to exist as an immediate "more real" reality. The invented reality becomes a real reality in the moment in which both - the invented and the real - step across their own time borders.

Gandini speaks of a *satiation of the near past* which obliges him to seek refuge in the more distant times of the great European music tradition. Perhaps it may also be a flight from the present and from the future. Gandini remains completely alien for any concern on Latin American identity. Such a nostalgic retro-avant-garde prefers to conjure up the eternity of the past, instead of taking upon itself the risk of an uncomfortable present and a dangerously unknown future. In any case, it is also a challenge for music historians and music researchers who have not yet devoted any thorough study to Gandini and his influence on Argentinian music history. May this text serve as an introduction to it.

* In: World New Music Magazine, 3, Koeln, September 1993.