

Folklore in the Modern Concert Hall: Religion, Tradition, and Cultural Mixture in Darwin Aquino's *Cantata para Amansar la Muerte* (*Cantata to Tame Death*).

by Emmanuel Berrido

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this analysis is to explain how Darwin Aquino's work, *Cantata para Amansar la Muerte* (*Cantata to Tame Death*) successfully merges elements from the Afro-Caribbean folk and religious traditions from the Dominican Republic into the realm of contemporary concert music. I mean to establish Aquino's *Cantata* as a solid example of the merging of cultures that Dominican identity embodies, a merger as solid as the one achieved by other styles of popular music and even more: the difference between Afro-Caribbean music and the language of 20th century contemporary concert music is starker than the mixture of elements that gave birth to popular styles such as Merengue, Bachata, or Salsa. While establishing his voice as a composer, Aquino studied the Afro-Caribbean music and rituals as they are practiced today (and have been practiced for hundreds of years) by religious manifestations like the Congos of Villa Mella Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit ("Los Congos de Villa Mella"), transporting these traditions into the orchestral and vocal mediums.

After briefly presenting a few pieces of background information, this analysis will look at the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic contents of *Cantata* as interpretations of Dominican culture brought forth by Aquino within the framework this piece is scored for. To talk about the idea of "coming together," it is worth noting that the Dominican identity is a mixture of Spanish, African, and Native-Caribbean cultures which goes back to colonial times. This 500-plus years old mix saw its onset when Spanish discoverers settled and brought African slaves to La Hispaniola, now the piece of land shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic (Torres-Saillant 126). To think, then, about the identity of the Dominican country, one ought to keep the concept of a mix of different worlds in one's mind.

The same multiplicity is true for the religious life of the country: its official religion is Catholicism, but the African component of this identity also brings about very strong ties to other practices like *Santería* or *Vodú*. University of Florida professor Martha Ellen Davis succinctly captures the meaning of the religious realities of the

nation by pointing out that there is a very spiritual dimension governing the life of Dominicans, this dimension being itself a merger of Catholicism and different “cult-religions” (75). When citing the musics manifested in his compositional output, Aquino mentions a very special connection to the music performed by the Congos de Villa Mella (“toques”), a religious group tracing its roots to African groups who were brought to the new world from ports along the banks of the Zaire river in Eastern Africa (Hernandez Soto and Sánchez 297). In the front matter of his orchestral work, *Congofonía*, Aquino mentions that the rhythms, harmonies, and melodic material he devised for the piece is directly influenced by his interactions with the Congos de Villa Mella – these same rhythmic treatments can be traced in his work throughout the late 2000s and early 2010s, being *Cantata* a part of a list of works concerned with expressing the richness of the Dominican identity through orchestral, chamber, and solo music (Aquino 2).

Knowing this background information will enable the listener of this work to understand the provenance of some of the rhythmic motives used throughout the piece (mainly in the first section and third sections of the piece), arguments for the meaning of elements pertaining to melody and harmony, or orchestration decisions made by the composer.

II. ABOUT *CANTATA PARA AMANSAR LA MUERTE*

Cantata para Amansar la Muerte was commissioned by the Dominican Development Foundation (Fundación Dominicana de Desarrollo) to commemorate its 45th anniversary, and written In Memoriam Carlos Piantini, a celebrated violinist and conductor from the Dominican Republic. Piantini was one of the founding members of the Dominican National Symphony Orchestra (DNSO), professor and founder of the Florida International University Symphony Orchestra, member of the New York Philharmonic under Leonard Bernstein, and principal conductor of the DNSO. Piantini passed away in Santo Domingo on March 26, 2010.

As Aquino writes in the program notes of *Cantata*, the musical inspiration in the form of rhythm and melody of this work came the same year on Good Friday, when religious groups perform the “Santo Entierro” (“Holy Burial”) procession, a religious manifestation which incorporates songs, prayers, marching band, and percussion. Aquino cites a very strong source of inspiration in Bernardo Velado’s *Perdona a Tu Pueblo, Señor – Forgive Your People* (Fig. 1), a staple in Latin American songs in the Catholic tradition (Aquino 3).



Figure

1. Bernardo Velado's "Perdona a Tu Pueblo, Señor." Knowledge of this melody is instrumental in understanding its reference in the second section of Aquino's Cantata.

In displaying this religious duality in Dominican folk and weaving a narrative about the Dominican cultural relationship to death, while at the same time paying tribute to Maestro Piantini, Aquino used texts from Dominican poet León David's *Cincuenta Sonetos para Amansar la Muerte* (*Fifty Sonnets to Tame Death*), written in 2005, and Manuel Rueda's *Congregación del Cuerpo Único* (*Congregation Under One Body*). The virtuoso pianist and director emeritus of the National Conservatory of Music of the Dominican Republic wrote *Congregación* in 1989.

The work is divided in three distinct sections labelled: "Pasacalle (*Passacaglia*)," "Santo Entierro (*Holy Burial*)," and "Espíritu Santo (*Holy Spirit*)," and is scored for Soprano, Tenor, Child voice, SATB chorus, and Orchestra.

It is worth noting that the background of the piece and its conception is already filled with connections to the musical tradition of the country (some by choice, and some by chance) and tributes to Dominican culture and folklore: the piece is written *in memoriam* of one of the most celebrated musical figures of the country, one of the authors of the texts used –Rueda– was director emeritus of the National Conservatory of Music, a position which the composer holds as of September of 2016. Lastly and most importantly, the piece draws melodic inspiration from one of the most well-known religious songs in the country.

Coincidental connections aside, Aquino's choice of harmonic language in the piece is a testimony of his own goal of expressing his compositional voice through merging different musics in this piece. I will break down each of the three larger sections of the work and walk through the elements of melody, harmony, and rhythm. This analysis will feature Schenker-inspired reductive analytical techniques, and for the last part of the work a plot of the musical gestures used. I have chosen this approach not only for the sake of illustrating my arguments about this piece using a flexible framework, but for the listener to gain an understanding of the composition, its content, and its direction by the means of different analytical lenses.

I will be referencing material mainly from the piano/vocal reduction of the score, unless there are noteworthy elements of the orchestration vital to making any arguments about what this piece does. Most bits of information can be observed and analyzed by looking at the reduced score, however I will not make a distinction between “orchestra” and “piano,” referring to musical material that appears in the accompaniment as “orchestra.”

III. MEANING IN THE HARMONIC AND RHYTHMIC LANGUAGE OF *CANTATA PARA AMANSAR LA MUERTE*

a. “PASACALLE” (Andante–Calmo) – Polytonal language against the *clave*

“Si la muerte lo alaba no hay un canto mayor que ese silencio
Un Dios acaso en el ocaso
Me enmuero en vida y me revivo en muerte.”

*If death worships him there is no more significant song than this silence
A God, maybe, at twilight
I die in life, and come back to life in death.*

– Cantata para Amansar la Muerte, text from “Pasacalle”

In the *Pasacalle* section we observe the composer’s choice of a polytonal idea to produce the harmonic and melodic motions occurring in mm. 1–47, and this idea (which is rather commonplace of 20th century western classical tradition) is infused with the Caribbean flare of the *clave* rhythm (3+2 or 2+3) used in popular musics of the islands. There are four musical ideas happening in this introduction, which already brings the concept of merging different sonic worlds into the listener, introducing material that would come into prominence later in the composition.

The first idea occurs at the beginning of the piece with a polymodal ground bass motion in the lower strings: the pitch material consists of the notes B–G–A–B \flat –G–A. These introductory measures give point to either a G major or G minor tonality, alternating the “key” on every measure, and a rhythmic ostinato spanning seven measures. The rhythmic motive in this ostinato is related to the *clave*, a repetitive motive used in Afro-Caribbean rhythms, such as salsa.

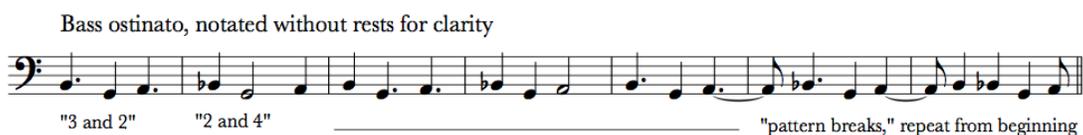


Figure 2. Bass Ostinato starting at m. 1

The second idea enters at the fourth beat of m. 14 features the beginning of another major/minor melodic treatment, and this one centering around an A sonority. I will argue that although being the rightful top voice in the passage, this idea does not contain the most interesting parts of what is happening on mm. 1-47; it serves as a statement of the thematic material that will come into play with the soloists later, and more prominently in the child voice part in m. 159.

Starting on m. 8, we hear the third component of this introduction, and the most unifying of all: a chain of non-stable chords (minor/major/dominant seventh, augmented, diminished) which should, if we were listening to common practice music, create an expectation of resolution – after all, these chords would resolve at some point if it were a Bach passacaglia. However, after being primed with eight measures of poly-modality, it becomes clear that these chords are not a byproduct of a specific harmonic establishment, but rather a byproduct of a melodic treatment that occurs in different voices and is not apparent at the first listen; I would argue the depth of this seemingly simple planing progression is not apparent at first sight, if we were to look at the score. Dissecting these chords (versus treating them as pure accompaniment) reveals the use of other melodic motives that will appear later in the piece.

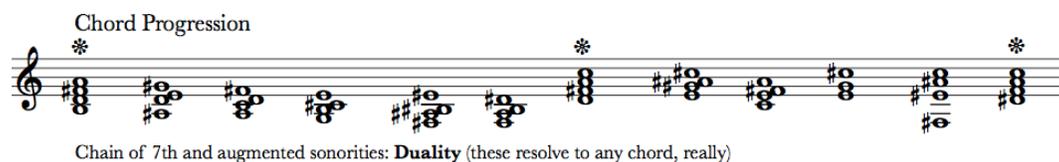


Figure 3. m. 8-21, chord progression

By looking at the top voice of the chain of sonorities starting on m. 8, one could discern the fourth prominent feature of the *Pasacalle*: a countermelody foreshadowing the choral content to come. This melody, albeit living in an F# major/minor world (like the ground bass in G major/minor), tends more towards the *major* side of the polymodal language Aquino is using. For illustration purposes, I have extracted this countermelody

thematic content of the text is about to assert itself, that it receives a prominent accent by the chorus and the orchestra.



Figure 5. “Muerte” (death) motive set to two repeated eight-notes, signaling the transition onto the “Santo Entierro” section. Later, the word “muerte” appears set with two accented quarter notes, signaling an augmentation of this motive.

b. “SANTO ENTIERRO” (Tranquilo–Rítmico–Lento) – Harmonic stability to tame death

“Perdona a tu pueblo Señor
 Un Dios acaso en el ocaso, para amansar la muerte, Amén. [...]
 ¿A dónde vas con tanto afán? Me digo [...]
 ¿No ves acaso que una sombra oscura contigo está, siempre contigo?”

*Forgive your people, O Lord
 A God, maybe, at twilight, to tame death, Amen. [...]
 Where are you headed with such a hurry? I tell myself [...]
 Can you not see that a dark shadow is always next to you?*

– Cantata para Amansar la Muerte, text from “Santo Entierro” (excerpts)

The arrival of death, as it fits the *Holy Burial*, comes at the beginning of the section starting on m. 97; and it is on this section that we hear the soloists for the first time. The “death” motive leads into a fanfare on mm. 98–99 outlining a Gm^7 , which could also be read as a $B\flat$ with an added 6th – this perpetuates Aquino’s tendency to use modal ambiguity in the work, although the textures of chorus, soloists, and orchestra gets more homogeneous moving forward – appearance of specific harmonies are not clouded by the presence of other tonalities, and the chorus and orchestra switch to a supporting role to the soloists. This part of the work is largely divided in two, from m. 97 to 157 where the “death” motive plays a larger role, accompanied by a particularly stable moment in terms of harmony. The second subdivision of this section ranges from m. 158 to 176 where we are brought back to the sonorities used at the beginning of the work (chains of unstable chords) as supporting harmonies. This second subdivision is also lead by the child voice, which is meant to represent the soul after death asking “A God, maybe in the sunset?”

It is particularly convenient that the harmonic interplays in the first half of the *Holy Burial* are lighter, as

there are other questions of meaning to answer about this section of the piece. My main argument is that this section of the work is the most stable one harmonically, as if the hidden message from Aquino is “the only sure thing in life is death.” This is not only supported by the less ambiguous harmonies and consistent use or outline of one sonority (M/m 7th chords), but also by the occurrence of cadences resembling traditional harmony throughout the section. So, we see at m. 104 after the soloists have delineated a motive rooted in a minor-seventh-chord idea, how we achieve a relatively clear half-cadence with the soloists singing a sonority with A–C# (hint of an A-major chord), and the chorus supporting with a C#–F#–A–F# (hinting of F# minor – or A major with an added 6th, which is doubled for orchestration?). However we decide to read these harmonies, it becomes clear that Aquino is transitioning out of the idea of indeterminate harmony into a more stable one, although adding chromatic inflections to reach back into the sound world he explores before, as we can observe in mm. 101–109.

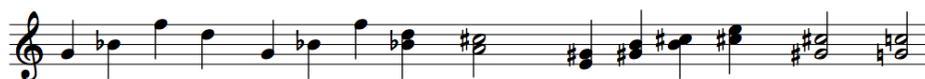


Figure 6. Soprano and Tenor, first melodies, reduced.

The subsequent measures support the idea of stability, and in m. 110 we hear for the first time the insertion of the material inspired by *Perdona a Tu Pueblo* (*Forgive Your People*), but set to the words “para amansar la muerte” (“to tame death”). It is in this passage, and the rest of passages using the *Forgive* theme, that we experience something resembling tonal language – if one is willing to overlook how inversions are working here, an argument can be made about how tonal this passage sounds, and how it is to be interpreted under the words “to tame death” – as if this devotion to spirituality is what guides the composer to write something that death, the dark shadow that is always with us, would find soothing and calming.



Figure 7. m. 110 – “Forgive” theme: last measures are inspired by Bernardo Velado's song.

Cm: i B^b: $\overline{\text{III}}$ | $\overline{\text{IV}}$ V I vi Cm: $\overline{\text{ii}}$ | $\overline{\text{i}}$ i iv7 ii[°]/V V i

Figure 8. Mm. 110–115: "Forgive" theme – Analysis.

Although the composer later confirmed my conclusions for the meaning of this section, we still can observe insertions of the different motives that we have heard before during the work, meaning that the stability I have demonstrated gets challenged occasionally.

Just as the composer did on the *Pasacalle*, there is foreshadowing of future material occurring in the *Holy Burial*, and by now this comes out as a clear compositional technique that Aquino is using to introduce materials and sections organically, and demonstrate continuity between ideas. The main rhythmic motive occurring in the orchestra on m. 127 is a variation of the initial gestures heard in the *Pasacalle*, and the same motive comes back in a violin solo in m. 140, foreshadowing the next major section to come, *Espiritu Santo*.

The second part of the *Holy Burial* begins at m. 158, where the chorus goes back to the chain of sonorities starting with a Bm⁷ chord, but now the polymodal melody around A major/minor takes prominence. Here we look also at the orchestration of the piece: Aquino pairs the child voice with a chorus singing in pianissimo and joined by the strings (minus Double Bases) in the same dynamic. The glassy texture obtained using string harmonics in m. 165 contributes to the uncertain, questioning nature of the text. During these passages, the composer mixes the text with a response from the soloists, singing “Amen” to each of the child’s lines; these responses could also be interpreted as meaningful connections to religion not only because of the direct nature of the response “Amen,” but also because of the melodic setting of the responses.

A small, yet poignant feature of this response is its shocking resemblance to the setting of the word “Amen” in Gregorian chant, specifically in the *Tantum Ergo*, a hymn for the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament; this setting appears on the third and fourth beats of m. 164. When listening to this melody, which could well stem

from a variation of the melodic material of the child, it is difficult to not hear the similarities mentioned before – fig. 8 shows the word “Amen” in the *Tantum Ergo* against the Amen occurring in m. 165 of *Cantata*. Shortly after this, on the next measure, Aquino responds with his own “Amen,” which I have named the “Aquino Amen.”



Figure 9. "Gregorian" Amen in the *Tantum Ergo* versus the first setting of the word “Amen” in Aquino’s work and the “Aquino” Amen in m. 166.

In continuing to create an atmosphere of uncertainty, the composer returns to the use of polymodal melodic treatments, appearing not only in the child’s part, but also in the tenor and soprano parts, as it can be observed in m. 172 and until m. 176. After a moment of unaccompanied singing, the chorus comes in again in full force in m. 176, leading into the next section of the piece with a gesture I have named the “Espíritu Santo Explosion” (“Holy Spirit Explosion”).

c. “ESPIRITU SANTO” (Tempo di Congo) – New life, new meanings

“Alaba al Señor con adufe y salterio [...] Alaba a la música creadora con el pandero y la maraca [...] [...] Si la música es el vencimiento, Si la música es el nacimiento.”

Praise the Lord with tambourine and dulcimer [...] Praise music, our creator, with tambourine and maracas [...] [...] If music is victory, if music is new life.

– Cantata para Amansar la Muerte, text from “Espíritu Santo” (excerpts)

As the third section of the piece arrives, the “Holy Spirit Explosion” appears, being a melody sung in unison by the chorus and the soloists. After the mysterious and introspective nature of the *Holy Burial*, it seems like the composer wants to shake the listener, bringing the conceptual focus of the third section of *Cantata* back to the land of the living, and infusing it a still-spiritual, but celebratory character.

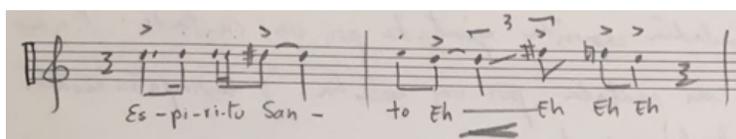


Figure 10. "Holy Spirit Explosion" vocal line only, as observed in Darwin Aquino's early sketches. Used with permission.

The musical material found in *Holy Spirit*, with a tempo/expressive indication of “Tempo di Congo,” is inspired by the rhythmic ostinati and simple melodies that the Congos of Villa Mella perform during the festivities dedicated to their patron saint, the Holy Spirit, and during funeral activities for their faithful members and related individuals who request their music (Hernández Soto and Sánchez 300–302). Hernández Soto and Sánchez explain the basic rhythmic motives found in the “toques,” and by perusing their qualities through notation, one could establish the relationship between the music of the Congos and Aquino’s Congo-inspired rhythmic patterns. Figs. 10 and 11 show a typical rhythmic pattern, as transcribed by Hernández Soto and Sánchez, next to the bass on *Cantata* in m. 177 (308).

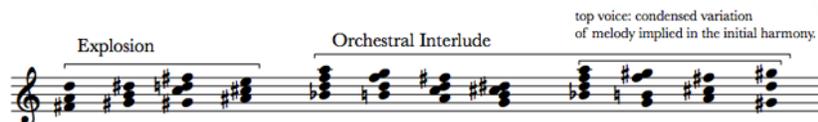


Figure 11. "Canoa" rhythmic pattern



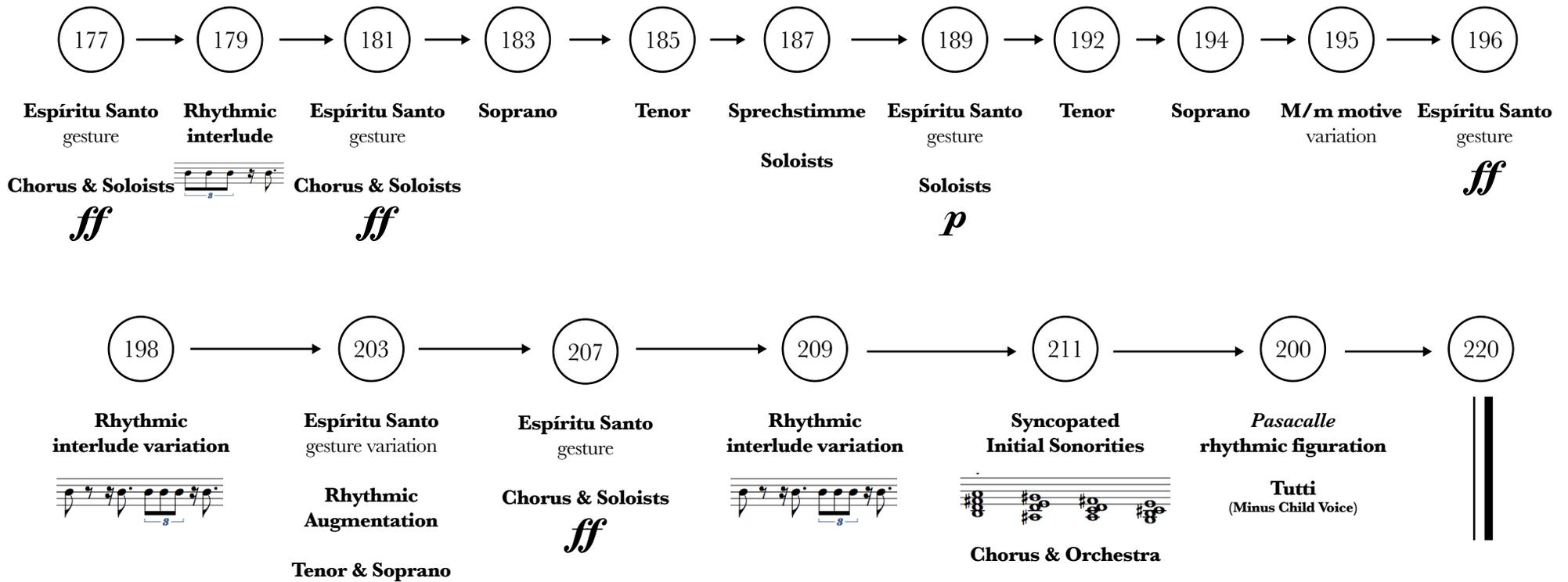
Figure 12. "Espíritu Santo" – Bass line, mm. 177–178.

The main gestures introduced in this section consists of sonorities derived from the initial set of unstable chords, once more hinting at the multi-layered and merged worlds in which Aquino places the Dominican religious traditions.



Darwin Aquino – Cantata Para Amansar la Muerte
“Espiritu Santo” (Holy Spirit)

Events (topics) plot



IV. CONCLUSION

The narrative about the meaning of each section of *Cantata Para Amansar la Muerte* is completed, then. Each part of the composition comes to the listener infused with meaning: the first section of the piece is a reflection about death, with a language that is both a manifestation of musical influences rooted in the 20th century and a Dominican traditional religious musical language. The second section brings the listener into facing the idea of death itself, asking is there is “A God (life, *music*), maybe, in twilight” — basically asking “what is there now?” Right after this trip through nothingness, an explosion of life ensues. This narrative appears supported by harmonic choices rooted in polymodality and polytonality, over a rhythmic bed that reveres cultures and traditions that go back to colonial times. Finally, through its language rooted on extended tonality and the use of polytonality and polymodality, this piece manifests the sense of “being Dominican,” which has relationships to both catholic and cult-religions. It is being Spanish, African, and Native-Caribbean, and through rhythm, Darwin Aquino brings the spirituality and rhythm of these identities to the language of today’s art music.

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