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## AN INTERVIEW WITH CARLOS SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ

By [Deidre Huckabay](#) on December 22, 2010Like 0 Tweet

For me, performing the music of Carlos Sanchez-Gutierrez is risky. To say that his works are touchy is an understatement—in performance, they have the feel, for me, of being held together only on faith. Irregular patterns, unexpected accents, and awkward grace notes give the impression of a mechanism operating near its breaking point. It's no wonder, then, that so many of Sanchez-Gutierrez's works take machines as their inspiration—the concerto for piano and marimba ...*Ex Machina* is based on the delicate moving sculptures of Arthur Ganson, for example. He writes about the piece:

*I think of ...Ex Machina as a sort of eight-movement circus act that reflects on a number of artworks I greatly admire, notably the kinetic sculptures of Arthur Ganson. The piece employs a menagerie of "technological" devices (in the case of my music, these are rhythmic and structurally "imperfect" mechanisms) that, while precisely engineered, also seem to be realized with a high degree of precariousness. These movements are single-minded and multifaceted; simple, yet intricate. Like the best circus acts, they also attempt to be a bit funny. But, most importantly, they try to be very dangerous!*

During the Eastman BroadBand's most recent tour, soloists Michael Burritt and Cristina Valdes brought to the score a tense, scary accuracy in performances in New York City, Guanajuato, and Mexico City. The ensemble also performed *Five Memos* for Pierrot ensemble plus percussion, Sanchez-Gutierrez's newest work and a response to the "values" proposed by Italo Calvino in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. The program notes shed some light on the piece's significance:

*Lightness, speed, visibility, exactness and multiplicity are qualities that have pulled me to appreciate art for as long as I can remember. They are the values that make me listen to Mozart and Donatoni, look at Morandi and Klee, or read Murakami and Potocki.*

*Like Calvino, I prefer art that raises above the weight of the world. I also favor direct, clear, visible gestures that, while mysterious, speak to me with precision and assertiveness. I like the precarious line that separates drama from comedy, and celebrate the fact that an author can make a hat become the main protagonist of a funeral with the magic touch of a sudden gush of wind.*

*I am a somewhat chaotic thinker, and my impatience (which I would hardly describe as a value) makes me gravitate around a narrative that is fast, direct, terse, and to the point, and whose intensity is multifaceted, like the ecstatic anguish felt by a soccer fan before the execution of a penalty kick...*

Sanchez-Gutierrez wrote to me at length about both works, their respective inspirations and styles.



**DH:** Would you consider it perhaps more typical that a particular instrument or performer motivates the composition of a concerto? How does the idea of these delicate machines relate to your ideas about the piano and marimba in ...*Ex Machina*?

**CS-G:** I decided to write for piano and marimba for a very simple reason: Cristina and Makoto Nakura are dear friends and wonderful musicians who, I knew, would take my music very seriously. The older I get, the more it matters to me that I write music for musicians I know personally.

Concerning my having chosen marimba and piano, there is something else that is very hard for me to express, and must be the reason why I constantly gravitate towards those two instruments. I do know, for example, that I pretty much discovered “contemporary music” upon listening to Stravinsky’s Concerto for Two Pianos and Bartok’s Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion. I thought, “This is the kind of music I want to write.” The rest has just been me trying to reach that ideal. The fact that I have this weird interest in the dramatic and narrative power of observing machines that work in strange ways is very much what informs the way in which marimba and piano relate in this piece. They are in conflict as much as they are in agreement. They build as much as they destroy.

**DH:** This point you make about the piano and the marimba as themselves “contemporary” is fascinating—and it helps me to put my finger on a quality I’ve identified in your music before. I find that, in preparing the flute parts in your music, I have to strive for the same accuracy and immediacy that is available to a marimbist or a pianist, a kind of sound that is articulate and clear in every register, at any speed, at any volume. It’s a challenge that is, for me, special to interpreting your music. In your mind, is this quality an intended part of your style? Is it related to the inspiration of Stravinsky’s music or of Ganson’s tiny machines?

**CS-G:** For better or worse, I am afraid I indeed think percussively more often than not, regardless of what instrument I am writing for. It’s just the way I “speak” musically, I guess. I don’t think I have much of a lyrical vein (which probably explains why I have written very little vocal music), and this affects the way I make choices concerning gesture, articulation, and instrumentation. And yes, everything I write somehow carries the imprint of both Stravinsky and Bartók, and is also a projection of my fascination with intricate, yet fragile objects of beauty, such as Ganson’s sculptures or, for that matter, Calvino’s short stories or Klee’s drawings. It’s all there, all the time, somehow.

**DH:** In what other respects is ...*Ex Machina* an unusual concerto?

**CS-G:** I would only call ...*Ex Machina* a concerto in the sense that it brings together two soloists and a large ensemble. But both the structure of the piece and the way in which the instruments are treated are only marginally related to the established “concerto form”. The piece is virtuosic, but doesn’t attempt to showcase that aspect in a particular way. Similarly, the orchestra is hardly an accompanying group and is intensely engaged throughout the piece.

**DH:** In your notes about *Five Memos*, you indicate that the piece follows a “fast, direct, terse” narrative. In what way do the movements of the piece relate to each other narratively? Or don’t they?

**CS-G:** The way in which I used “material” in this piece involves a certain “personal archeology” process. I wanted these movements to begin with a simple, direct gesture that would pretty much single-handedly trigger the entire musical narrative (Calvino talks about this sort of thing when describing the concept of “visibility” in Borges’ short stories, for example.) It had to be a gesture to which I could respond naturally and unselfconsciously, so I thus chose to “rescue” kernels of leftover material from previous pieces of mine. Most of these gestures came from sketches, and some from actual, finished pieces but, regardless of where they came from, it was important that these gestures would be “visible”, in that it should be a tangible—yet unfinished—musical object with a basic “personality” I could feel I understood well. So, I dug up distinct gestures I thought were attractive, and then simply focused on following whatever dormant energy I could detect lying inside them. The different movements, therefore, relate in that all of them were composed following a similar, basic, procedure: to engage the energy of an initial, visible gesture, and to create a dramatic line that made that energy palpable, understandable, and emotionally intense.

**DH:** For the performer, the piece requires incredible agility, not only because it is difficult, but also because it sometimes demands instantaneous shifts in character and sound quality. At one moment, its ultra-fast tempos require a light, effortless approach—and at the next, the score calls for extreme brutality and shrillness. How are these rapid shifts consistent with your reading of the Calvino, the work’s inspiration?

I think these qualities (and challenges!) are as consistent with the way I compose, with my “compositional voice”, as they are with the “qualities” expressed by Calvino in his *Six Memos*: lightness, speed, visibility, exactitude, and multiplicity. However, the reason why I wrote this piece in the first

place has to do precisely with the fact that I am aware that all of my music works pretty much the same way, and naturally emphasizes the very same qualities expressed by Calvino. These are precisely the qualities I have always valued in most of the art that resonates with me, and they are what I have tried to inject into my music for as long as I can remember. But in *Five Memos* the characteristics you mention are perhaps more apparent because I really was trying to write a piece where the most dramatic qualities of the gestures were very salient, in line with what I mentioned earlier concerning my desire to “unleash” the dormant energy of my material.

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*Composer Carlos Sanchez-Gutierrez was born in Mexico City in 1964 and now lives in the New York Tundra, where he teaches at the Eastman School of Music. He studied with Jacob Druckman, Martin Bresnick, Steven Mackey and Henri Dutilleux at Yale, Princeton and Tanglewood, respectively. He has received many of the standard awards in the field (e.g. Barlow, Guggenheim, Fulbright, Koussevitzky, Fromm, American Academy of Arts and Letters.)*

Visit the composer's website for complete information about his work. There, you can [view videos](#) of all of the kinetic sculptures that inspired ...Ex Machina.

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