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# The Focus! Festival's Shamanic Sounds and Crazy Tone Clusters

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI JAN. 20, 2017

Photo



Joel Sachs and the New Juilliard Ensemble rehearsing for Focus!, which runs through Friday. Credit Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

A language class was going on in a rehearsal room at the Juilliard School one recent evening, but not the kind you might assume: Some wind and brass players were practicing speaking Spanish phrases directly into their instruments. A few moments later, these students, members of the [New Juilliard Ensemble](#), performed eerie, bustling riffs of no distinct pitch against a prerecorded backdrop of indigenous South American music.

The players, led by the conductor Joel Sachs, were preparing an experimental new piece by the Argentine composer Alejandro Iglesias Rossi, who has done extensive ethnomusicological research on shamanic music in South America, for the school's 33rd Focus! festival, which runs through Friday. This year the theme is ["Our Southern Neighbors: The Music of Latin America."](#)

Mr. Sachs, who has directed the festival since its beginning, has organized this edition to showcase the striking diversity of music south of the border, as he explained during an interview in his office before the rehearsal. Here are edited excerpts from that conversation.

**The title of the festival implies that we in the United States perhaps make assumptions about the music of our “southern neighbors” because, well, they’re our neighbors. Was that your idea?**

Yes. People don’t even realize the number of indigenous languages spoken in Latin America to begin with.

**The pieces that are mostly played in the United States are those that draw on folkloric elements of Latin American music. Does that color our perceptions?**

That’s a large part of it. What we think of as folkloric elements are basically Spanish or Portuguese elements, by way of Afro-South Americans. But there is this extraordinary culture of indigenous South Americans, and that’s something we never think of because we never hear this music. I was amazed at the number of composers who have a very strong connection to the world of the indigenous South American music.

Even this crazy piece by Caturla [Alejandro García Caturla’s “Primera Suite Cubana,” from 1931] was written after Henry Cowell’s visit to Havana, when he played his crazy tone-cluster piano concerto. Here’s this Cuban piece that’s based on folklore but has these crazy tone clusters and intrusions of poly-temporal writing, and some really dissonant stuff. It’s not at all what you think of as folklore, but it is folklore-based. Caturla, in a way, was the Bartok of Cuban music.

**Is the new Rossi piece you were rehearsing another example?**

Absolutely. It’s not at all what you imagine Latin American music to be. He’s an Argentine. He’s done a lot of research into the music of the indigenous peoples and the construction of their instruments. This is one of the creepiest pieces you’ll ever hear. It feels like you’ve gone back 1,000 years and you’re at this strange ceremony celebrating the connections of the culture to the earth. In South America there is still a very strong shamanic tradition. In fact, in that Rossi piece, the Spanish words whispered by players is a shaman phrase.

**How hard was the winnowing process in putting together this festival?**

I didn't deal much with the many Latinos who live in the United States; many are friends of mine. I decided I wanted to give exposure to people largely living in Latin America. Of course, I knew already that some émigrés left not because they wanted to, but because it was too dangerous to stay. For example, Miguel del Águila went through the awful military years in Uruguay. Others went abroad to study, had success there, and so they stayed. But many retained connections with their countries, which is the nice thing.

**You've been presenting Focus! festivals for more than 30 years. Are there some that stick out for you as especially rewarding?**

One was the 2004 Focus! on Ives, for the 50th anniversary of his death, when we did a huge amount of music. One of the things that struck me as very moving was that Ives never heard most of those pieces. I was particularly attached to ["Alfred Schnittke's World"](#) [the 2014 celebration of that Russian-German 20th-century composer], which got tremendous feedback from people who found the music very moving.

**This festival comes at a time when America just went through a divisive election in which there was much demonization of Latin American immigrants. Is "Our Southern Neighbors" a chance for audiences to hear for themselves the richness and diversity of Latin American cultures?**

Of course, though I didn't make that explicit, because people who aren't going to "get" it probably aren't going to come to hear it. And people who get it, will get it: "Oh, this is Latin American music! Whoever would have thought of this?"