

**Examination of a composition portfolio by Augusto Arias (student no. 24629007), for the degree *Magister Musicae (Composition)* at North-West University, Potchefstroom**

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General commentary on the prescribed assessment criteria:

The portfolio displays a very high degree of coherence (this includes stylistic coherence) and character, and is evidence of a high level of technical fluency. The candidate has achieved what he set out to do: his writing for voice is not only highly idiomatic, but beautiful and lyrical. He has clearly mastered writing for all the instruments included in the ensemble. Mr Arias should be commended for his understanding of the contemporary operatic genre, from structure and instrumentation (especially the combination of electronics with acoustic instrumental and voice parts) to stage presentation and conducting.<sup>1</sup> This approach is sure to make an important contribution to the survival of opera in the current 'art music' climate worldwide. The examiner is grateful for, and impressed by the clear, accurate and detailed notation and performance instructions.

Integrated, more specific commentary on the portfolio:

**Please take note that, as instructed, only the prescribed assessment criteria were examined. Where the examiner refers to other aspects, it is only for the sake of promoting collegial discourse on the candidate's work. Characteristics mentioned above that also apply below are not repeated.**

The variation of orchestral/ensemble textures and colours is good. My biggest issue with the orchestration is that there is an over-reliance on trills, tremolos, glissandos etc. to a very large extent. Longer sections of uninterrupted vocal lines along with a sometimes more flowing orchestral part may have led to a greater variety in the overall 'operatic texture' (if one can put it like that) – I sometimes found it difficult to distinguish between aria, *arioso*, *recitativo* etc. The alternate pushing of vocal ranges with more vocally 'tame' sections makes for a good variety of melodic curves. With regard to the stylistic idiom: Mr Arias has, at least for the moment, found comfort in a type of atonal idiom often built from small sections of chromatic / whole-tone-half-tone / chromatic / whole-tone scales (with all their resulting intervals). This is of course fine. What bothered me a bit is that there is not often enough a bit of repose from this – the ear gets a bit tired after a while. The exception to this is some of the choral sections; where a tonal contrast between these and the other parts can be detected, the effect is very effective. Please take note that at moments where a larger set of instruments was used, the piano was often inaudible (this may however be only on the recording). The music clearly responds to different texts (i.e. events, messages etc.) and successfully conveys character development. The integration of instruments and voice parts is very good. All that remains to be

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<sup>1</sup> Stage presentation and conducting were not examined – the comment serves only to convey my positive impression of the synthesis of all the aspects of the opera.

said about the parts of the opera presented as individual works (that has not been said already) is that they can indeed stand as individual works due to the fact that they individually respond to different texts, have carefully selected, different instrumentations to suit these texts, and have individually spun out themes/motifs.

In summary, Mr Arias has exceeded the requirements for a *Magister Musicae* in Composition degree to a large degree in terms of both scope and quality. I do not often award such a high mark, but in this case it is warranted. No corrections are required. I award a mark of 80% for all three sections of the portfolio.

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## Comments 8 October 2016

### Regarding Au Arias

Consequent musical language

-> relation with neo - impressionism

Dramatically very clear structure (opera)

Solid orchestration

-> effective use of extended techniques

Composition technique is very functional

Attractive harmonic language

Very intense vocal lines

Comment:

everything could be even more daring!

Timing is ok

-> variation between different musical atmospheres

Good use of contemporary notation techniques

Very clear craftsmanship

Good idea to compose the trilogy

Score is graceful, pure and well written

Beautiful performance!

Comment:

for me this is a high distinction 80+

## Portfolio of Compositions towards MMus Degree - Candidate: Au Arias

### General

It is noteworthy and important that this candidate has offered the contents of his Portfolio in two languages – Spanish and English; both in the written commentary as well as English translations on the DVD. The prefacing background notes, annotations, descriptions and lyrics are meticulously presented and in great detail. Because this is work of a very high standard for a Masters degree, I feel obliged to comment that the translations in English need improving proofreading and tighter editing – as charming, personal, chatty and conversational as they are! He also tends to patronize the reader somewhat in explaining certain aspects like characterisation, which are a given. This candidate has chosen to specialise in "vocal-dramatic music and large forms". The idea of a Portfolio of related works (*multi-faceted portfolio*) - 'works within works' in different genres in a holistic sense, succeeds very well indeed. It demonstrates how basic concepts and similar material can be remodeled into different textural designs and genres. It also demonstrates the versatility, technical and musical prowess of the candidate within the realm of a unified concept, though composed for several different forces. Each of the three main compositions in *The Red Book (Libro Rojo)* can be performed individually.

Minor critique: The music example on page 7 should state whether the short example is at Concert pitch or transposed – Also the piano (better harp) part needs to be written more idiomatically not only in that initial example on the 2 staves – but throughout in the piano part to be divided pianistically between the two hands as a pianist would play it.

### The dramatic aspect and orchestration

The candidate expresses his awareness in the Preface of the crucial need to interpret the text and the drama musically in the way that it best reflects the nature, mood and atmosphere of the drama. It can be very challenging to reflect introspective thoughts and dramatic content in a different medium such as music. Of course the text is there to guide one. In a general sense, this young composer uses textures, timbres (like whispering etc), spacings, pacings and registers to great advantage in creating moods and gestures.

Just a comment: in response to the candidate's disappointment about not having a harp to be part of the original orchestration, one can very successfully reproduce a harp on a synthesiser if required. On the whole, in spite of the student's practical restrictions of available instruments for local performances, the candidate's choice of instrumentation regarding idiomatic usage, support for the drama, registers, dynamics and textures has been intelligently executed. The quality and timbre of both the alto flute as well as the bass clarinet are highly suitable to interpret the necessary mysterious and atmospheric quality. With limited forces in the Opera, the composer achieves a highly commendable and very effective result.

**"Gruta De Ninfas": A bucolic Opera in three scenes** (free adaptation on the text, Daphne and Chloe by Longus plus other sacred texts) with coloratura Soprano, Baritone Actresses, Dancers and Female Choir; plus 5 other compositions based on the same text for soloists and large symphony orchestra.

Detailed performance indications are provided throughout – some probably unnecessary as they are within the accepted notation standards. However his meticulous attention to detail in the score is impressive and very professional, leaving very little to chance – other than of course the intentional aleatoric devices and notation. Arias stresses the importance of applying the free and guided aleatoric sections with imagination and sensitivity.

This approach enables the score to privilege the diction, articulation and meaning, which is critical to the drama. The use of extended and experimental vocal and instrumental techniques adds dramatic and interpretive effect to the textures and colours. Arias's inter-weaving of the female voice (Chloe) and the flutes is extremely effective. Although the balance on the recorded DVD is initially not very good in foregrounding the vocal lines (which are sometimes too soft), what is clear is that the composer's sensitivity and competency allows the voices never to be overshadowed by too thick an orchestral texture or too loud a dynamic. The music alternates in being in the foreground and not, as the drama dictates.

It is a pleasure to read notation that is enharmonically well thought-out and generally correct. The score included does not always reflect what one hears on the DVD, but this is not a problem, as much liberty is encouraged anyway by the composer. Beautiful timbral and textural effects are created in Scene II orchestrally. Section VII provides an effective contrast in tempo and mood.

#### **Vocal and choral usage**

The vocal writing is beautifully and very effectively handled, both in terms of the shape of the vocal line as well as register. This candidate understands the voice and displays his mastery of vocal technique and musicality to a very high level. The use of the Three Nymphs Choral ensemble is also very effectively handled and contributes greatly to the dramatic and aesthetic dimensions.

#### **Style and Harmonic usage:**

The composer's response to the drama has resulted in a fluid and somewhat quasi impressionist style, though with inbuilt freedoms. The music does not fit into the *avant garde* experimental mode; this makes it more appropriate for this particular text and for the make-believe setting. The harmonic usage is predominantly freely atonal but also has many elements of whole-tone writing, which are entirely appropriate to the sound-world required for this fantasy-world.

#### **Rhythmic design:**

The rhythm is perceived predominantly in long lines and phrases, though when needed for the dramatic content, the composer does apply more defined and marked rhythmic lines. The note values used and the placement of the words within the rhythmic values appears to be natural, though without a knowledge of Spanish it is difficult for me to comment on the appropriate application of stressed words on the desired parts of the measure.

#### **Melodic design:**

I appreciate the absence of extreme dissonant leaps (which are dated and unidiomatic vocally) and the more stepwise contours, especially in the vocal lines. The use of trills, both fast and slow, even reduced alternations of major and minor seconds in slow tempi lend a coherence and unity to the melodic design and effectiveness. Consistent use of *tremolandi* is used to good effect and glissandi on the strings in the Third section provide a lovely texture which supports the confusion in the drama.

**OVERALL MARK: 82%**