

The Artist As Witness and Seer: A Phenomenological View of Jose Maceda's Music¹

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It is rather ironic, a sad commentary on the level of cultural awareness of our countrymen, that the most celebrated New Music composer in our midst and internationally respected ethnomusicologist, Dr. Jose Maceda, is relatively unknown to most Filipinos.

Too much of musical trivia hog the limelight in the papers. The hollow glamour and cheap glitter of pop music dominate the air lanes and television. An excessive focus on the commercial, entertainment functions of music obscures, if not entirely blots out from the public's consciousness, the more profound aspects of music-making, such as its reflective, expressive, healing, magical, ritual, ideological, perceptual or aesthetic and other psycho-social functions, not to mention its apparent ability to influence the growth of plants or increase the yield of chicken eggs.

Being a thinker by temperament, Maceda has been deeply engaged in philosophizing about music since his earliest exposure in the 1950s to music cultures outside of the Western classical-romantic tradition until the last decade of the 20th and early 21st century, which witnessed the premieres of his works such as *Music for Gongs and Bamboo* (1997), *Colors Without Rhythm* (1998).

Maceda has been chiefly responsible for introducing the Filipinos, at least in the academe, to performances of avant-garde and Asian music. It is mainly due to his efforts and the powerful influence of his incisive thinking about them that a new generation of Filipinos has come to appreciate New Music, especially because of his theoretical writings, lectures and performances of avant-garde and Asian music beginning with a series of concerts he himself has conducted from 1964 to 1968. Since then, he had exposed our audiences to the works of Varese, Boulez and Xenakis and especially to Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, Thai, Philippine kutyapi, kulintang and gangsa music and other types of Asian Music, including his own New Music compositions.

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Thus, Maceda's music is a most fertile ground for the meeting of Eastern and Western thought systems. It is this potential for synthesis that attracts composers of various nationalities to invest their musical talents and creative energies in the direction of New Music.

Common to many New Music composers is the concept of music as "organized sound." This concept may involve serialism (*klangfarbenmelodie*), micropolyphony that creates masses of sound, spatial expansiveness and mobility that evokes a sense of timelessness, absence of dance rhythms, and a lot of repetition as if in a loop. The use of variable sound densities or masses as the dominant generators of form requires a much broader definition of what constitutes a musical sound - not limiting it to sounds with definite pitch but including vocables, noise, and environmental sounds (*musique concret*) and the active role of silence as a structural element; rejection of the idea of music as a linear progression in time from a clear-cut beginning to a foreordained end (that is, of music as thematic development); the use of chance, randomness, indeterminacy, and improvisation as organizing principles; and the technique of musical "collage" (mixing of man-made and environmental sounds or the simultaneity of disparate musical events).

Most of these characteristics are present in Maceda's music. But his deep humanistic concerns and sensitivity to the wisdom of Asian thought, especially that which has emerged from the "timeless village communities" of Southeast Asia, have led him to reject certain aspects of New Music and develop his own ideas about it. A feature of Western New Music that has become almost an obligation or obsession to American composers, but which Maceda has consistently avoided, is the use of electronic means (such as synthesizers) for the generation of sounds. His reason for this choice is the extremely wide variety of sounds, colors and textures already possible with existing Asian instruments and vocal techniques. Another is the intensive capital (or financial) requirements of the electronic media, which tend to concentrate economic and musical power in the hands of a wealthy few, thus, impoverish the majority.

For example, in *Strata* (1998), Maceda uses ten bamboo buzzers (the *balingbing* of the Kalinga), ten pairs of sticks (the *bangibang* of the Ifugao), five Chinese gongs (*tam-tam*) of varying sizes, five six-stringed guitars, five Boehm-type flutes, and five violoncellos. To one fully open and receptive to the possibilities of these instruments, a rich tapestry of new colors, textures, and sonorities in ever-changing permutations provides a veritable aural feast: The bamboo buzzers delight with their characteristic dry, croaky, springy brilliance, fully complementing the hard, wooden but rather liquid clunks of the sticks or *bangibang*. From the Chinese gongs issue veiled but seemingly incandescent throbs whose decays linger long enough to provide a filmy substrate binding together the discrete scattered sound particles of the buzzers and sticks.

Balancing these sounds, whose pitches are relatively unfocused, are those of the guitars, flutes and cellos, whose focused or definite pitches should be more familiar to the Abelardo Hall audience who attended the world premiere of *Strata*. But familiarity with these conventional

instruments of the Western orchestra (the first time Maceda uses them extensively) soon disappeared as they entered one after the other.

For heard within the context of New Music and in association with Asian indigenous instruments, they acquired a new and fresh character. Very memorable and exciting is a passage midway in the composition where the flutes dazzle with their vibrant, fluttering, oscillating, and translucent shafts of sound. The guitars seem to create an ominous, threatening, metallic yet luminous atmosphere. The cellos not only exude much human warmth and intensity but also an unexpected brassiness that conveys strength and dignity.

Further dissociating them from conventional expectations is the way they are tuned. Within each of the three sections (flutes, guitars, and cellos) each one is tuned differently from the other by so many subtle pitch gradations. The intention is to produce a sound mass rather than a linear succession of pitches but at the same time to increase their potentials for new sound structures and melodic combinations. This is actually a deconstruction of the equal temperament of Western classical tradition.

This brings us to the essential compositional technique Maceda imaginatively applies in his major works: a constantly changing number of gradually permutating or varying rhythms and drone-melodies which slowly or rapidly overlap each other, creating layers or strata of varying density, mass, weight, texture, color, sonority, melodic activity, rhythmic complexity and character.

This technique is very evident in *Ugnayan* (1973). This work for 20 radio stations was definitely one of Maceda's most ambitious and provocative. It is a 51-minute long piece and consists of 20 pre-recorded tracks similar in concept to *Cassettes 100* but this time he used real radio stations for sound diffusion. It was broadcast on New Year's Day of 1973, from 6–7 pm and all 20 tracks were started at exactly the same time. 142 Ugnayan Centers were set up all over the Metro Manila, and people were encouraged to go to a center with a transistor radio in their hand and catch one of the radio frequencies. Definitely, much of chance and indeterminacy played a big role in this musical experience, for the masses of sound heard depended on the crowd you were with at any given time. This was also a big participatory event, seemingly uniting people into several "village communities." Maceda's original title for Ugnayan was Atmospheres but it seems that Imelda Marcos wanted to a more Filipino title and the idea of unity. Ugnayan was an excellent embodiment of Maceda's philosophy, espousing village culture as a musical statement.

What can such a creative technique in Strata and Ugnayan possibly signify?

An understanding of music's capacity to probe beneath the world of appearances, its relative freedom from the images of outer reality will help us answer this question. Music can portray the

abstract processes underlying tangible, natural phenomena; the movements of our thoughts and feelings; patterns of social relations; our perception and understanding of the world; ideas of time and space; or the essential structures and dynamics of experience.

The traditional music of the West, particularly of the classical-romantic period, focuses on the single, isolated, completed event. Whether depicting a thought, emotion, experience, system of relations or action, the tendency is to treat it as an individual, self-contained and finite process. One that begins at a certain point, rises toward a climax, falls to a denouement, and ends with finality.

Maceda would have none of this “individualist aesthetics,” which ultimately alienates the artist from his audience and is, therefore, a fitting metaphor for the individualistic system of values and attitudes that is behind much of the modern world’s maladies: The unprincipled capitalist’s unbridled desire for profits, the lust for power that drives nations to overspend for arms but leave very little for good and social services, the uncontrolled use of technology that threatens to destroy the ecology, the wasteful consumption and ruthless competition for scarce resources that lead to chaos and cause untold misery to three-fourths of humanity. All of these are consequences of the perception, indeed the illusion, that an event can be isolated from all other events, that a thing, an individual, or society can live a self-contained life and what one does can have no effect whatsoever on the rest of the humanity and nature.

A different perception of reality is what Maceda offers us in Ugnayan. It is a vision of the interconnectedness of things, of the organic unity of life. His creative technique of layers of sounds: Color-drone melodies or micropolyphony insures that no single melody will be heard alone for any length of time. Soon enough it becomes part of a web of melodies, sounds, screens, or patterns. No one melody acquires prominence. All are of equal importance.

Such a musical design implies co-existence, cooperation, interaction, collective participation and the idea of maximum employment of people through an equal distribution of means, whether in the musical or economic sphere. It can also connote other human or natural phenomena characterized by interpenetrating and interacting layers: the ecological order, social strata, energy levels, the bands of the electromagnetic spectrum, or the luminous strata of the earth’s atmospheric layers, which can be an exhilarating experience. Maceda’s timbres and textures of sound all seem to evoke images of luminosity and radiant energy: translucence, transparency, emanations, incandescence, electrical charges and discharges, even the dazzling brilliance of the sun itself.

Thus, one must not expect to listen for a single melody or tune accompanied by chords in Maceda’s music. The listener cannot hope to find in it the rise and fall of an emotion, dream or desire. Rather, he should imbibe, absorb or steep himself in the mood, quality, character or “atmosphere” of the surrounding space created by the musical “sound environment.” Indeed,

one can actively participate in shaping this environment. The concept of sound environment or “atmospheres” makes it possible for a large number of people to participate in a musical performance. For no matter how small the contribution of each person is, the sound that he makes will have a definite effect on the density or color of the sound atmosphere being created.

A related concept of music is that of the Tiruray agong ensemble (with five agongs) of North Cotabato, the Kalinga gangsa ensemble (with six gangsas), or the Magindanawon kulintang ensemble (with four types of gong and one drum). This similarity to our own music makes Ugnayan essentially Asian in concept. It is thus different from much of Western New Music which produces sound masses or environments not with drone-melodies but with sound particles (highly discrete sounds), consequently creating the impression of considerable chaos and disorder.

Maceda, however, also departs from Asian traditional thinking by increasing the aspects of randomness and chance in his music through the use of a larger number of different instruments with a wider range of sounds and more extensive layering of drone-melodies of highly asymmetrical and complex rhythmic patterns. This integration of the ideas of order and disorder, control and randomness, or design and chance in Strata and Ugnayan suggests the creative technique of Nature herself, where chance; randomness, and indeterminacy play a great role in bringing to existence new structures, mutations, species, hybrids, life forms, and phenomena, as if creating order out of chaos.

The emphasis on chance and randomness in Western New Music, on the other hand, seems to reflect a great deal of the chaos and disorder we experience in modern life: the unrelated movements of the variable masses of people converging on a certain area during rush hour, the simultaneity of widely divergent social and natural events impinging on one’s consciousness (all equally vying for attention) through modern electronics or print media at any time of the day, the plethora of items and goods on display in a giant commercial complex, and the like.

Such experiences where nothing is centrally important anymore to act as a focus are likely to be confusing. The awareness of chaos, randomness and indeterminacy could be very real. It is these aspects which the New Music composers in the west seem to perceive and emphasize in their music and is perhaps the reason why aleatory principles and the mathematics of chance and probability figure highly in their compositional procedures.

Maceda has steered himself clear of the extremes of pure chance and pure determinism. Though humble, and self-effacing as he was, he seem to have achieved the integration of Asian and Western thought systems in his music. The trends in Maceda’s compositions, in a spiraling way—from **Ugma-Ugma** (1963) to **Pagsamba** (1968) and again, from **Cassettes 100** (1971) to **Ugnayan** (1973) -- has been to balance the elements of chance, indeterminacy, and randomness with those of order, purpose and design. Implicit in his works is the recognition of the principle of

polarity, the unity of opposites, the Yin and Yang of Chinese philosophy, the inseparable union of Shiva and Shakti, the organic world view -- very evident in the drone-melody structure of **Udlot-Udlot** (1975). This brings to mind a parallel concept in New Physics, itself deeply influenced by Asian thought -- the realization that light behaves both as a wave and as particle, thus, a wavicle.

Dr. Jose Maceda does not accept the concept of progress or western idea of endless economic and material growth, for this strangles nature and ultimately chokes all of us to death. Thus, his music is without beginning or end, it does not present to us a ready-made philosophy or finished product; it simply flows with the creative process of the cosmos.

By providing us a glimpse into another, deeper and wiser reality, the music of Dr. Jose Maceda can change and broaden our perceptions, for the better.