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**How the Expressionist Monodramatic  
Character's Sense of Alienation Resurges  
in 2014 Monodrama *BUG Trilogy* by  
Arturo Corrales**

(Mauricio Carrasco)

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## **Abstract**

This article explores my collaboration as a performer with Salvadoran/Swiss composer Arturo Corrales, from the gestation and preparation to the premiere of his triptych *BUG*. It observes the development of *BUG* from three separate pieces into a fully fledged mise-en-scène. The guitarist/actor must speak and play a sequence of words and gestures that are designed to break down both semantic meaning in language and ideas of virtuosity and perfection in music. Text and music articulate to create an alienated character that suffers hysterical symptoms, while the other instrumentalists continuously threaten him, remaining frighteningly trapped in the centre of the stage.

## **Zusammenfassung**

Der Artikel untersucht meine kollaborative Zusammenarbeit als Performer mit dem salvadorianisch-schweizerischen Komponisten Arturo Corrales von der Konzeption und Vorbereitung bis zur Premiere des Tritpychosns *BUG*. Aufgezeigt wird die Entwicklung von *BUG*, ausgehend von drei einzelnen Stücken hin zu einer vollständigen und vollwertigen Inszenierung. Der Gitarrist / Akteur muss eine Sequenz von Wörtern und Gesten performen, welche sowohl die semantische Bedeutung als auch die Idee von Virtuosität und Perfektion der Musik negiert. Text und Musik des Akteurs erzeugen einen fremdartigen Charakter, welcher hysterische Symptome des Leidens evoziert. Währenddessen wird der Akteur kontinuierlich von den anderen Instrumentalisten bedroht, so dass er schließlich im Zentrum der Bühne wie ein ängstlicher Gefangener wirkt.

Das Video der Aufführung *BUG Trilogy* finden Sie hier / You find the video of the performance *BUG Trilogy* here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yagOb44DGXY&t=1107s>

“I don’t deny the importance of text”

*Jean-Luc Godard, from Godard & Drug, Sympathy for the Devil*

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*BUG Trilogy* by Salvadoran/Swiss composer Arturo Corrales, a melodrama based on a key protagonist, is a collaborative work that myself as a performer and the composer undertook in the space of three years, from 2006 to 2008. It explores the possibilities of Monodrama as an “experimental product with whom the composer will look to renovate his/her dramatic language”,<sup>1</sup> and it aimed to go against a twentieth century tradition where “composers perpetually designate monodrama as a musical space reserved for the exhibition of female trauma”.<sup>2</sup> My interest in represent trauma and hysteria *au masculin* took me previously to look at examples of soloist works for music theatre where female hysteria has been explored. That’s how I made a transcription and gender inversion of Georges Aperghis’ 1982 work *Fidélité pour harpiste seule regardée par un homme*. Therefore, working with composers on new works where the male performer could impersonate a disturbed character, suffering symptoms historically associated with women in the tradition of Monodrama, seemed as a logical continuation in my artistic research.

*BUG Trilogy* consists of three episodes: *BUG* for guitar and electronics; *Music Box* for guitar, violin, double bass and electronics; and *Re* for guitar, violin, double bass, oboe and percussion. The increasing presence of other performers in each of the sections of the trilogy heightens the sense of threat against the main persona: the alienated guitarist. His neurosis becomes manifest in hysterical symptoms, similar to those described by Freud and Breuer in their *Studies on Hysteria*: clicks of the tongue, nervous breakdowns, unintelligible and incoherent speech.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Produit expérimental avec lequel le compositeur aura cherché à renouveler son langage dramatique”. Translation by the author. Jacqueline Waeber, *En Musique dans le Texte. Le Mélodrame, de Rousseau à Schoenberg*, Paris 2006, p. 411.

<sup>2</sup> Jessica Payette, *Seismographic Screams: ‘Erwartung’'s reverberations through twentieth-century culture*, Ann Arbor 2008, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Many of Freud and Beuer’s patients share with *BUG*’s ‘patient’ similar pathologies: “A more complicated method of conversion is revealed by Frau von N.’s tic-like movements, such as clicking with the tongue and stammering” (p. 67), “she accordingly answered me today without

### tongue clicks

12. <DELAY voice> tongue clicks  
as fast as possible  
13. [HARM. 4]  
ff

Example 1. Arturo Corrales, *BUG* (2006), cue 12–13, self-published score.

### unintelligible speech: “je ne peuple peurle soes oemeuge”

5. <start clock> murmuring  
JE NE PEUPLE PEURLE SOES OEMEUGE  
mf

Example 2. Arturo Corrales, *BUG* (2006), cue 5–6, self-published score.

### incoherent speech: “Db: toc-toc-toc / Vln: oui / Db: il y a quelqu’un? / Vln: non / Db: c’est qui qui parle? / Vln: moi / Db: moi? / Vln: non / Db: quoi? / Vln: personne ne parle? / Db: c’est seulement une voix?”

7. (1) longue P  
Vln oui? non. moi. non. personne ne parle?  
Cb:toc-toc-toc il y a quelqu'un? c'est qui qui parle? moi? quoi? c'est seulement une voix?  
fff

Example 3. Arturo Corrales, *Music Box* (2007), cue 7–8, self-published score.

any further reflection but in great agitation and with spastic impediments to her speech” (p. 41), “its relation to himself or to the main contents of his thoughts - and that is why it remained unintelligible” (p. 208). Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria*, London 2004.

Arturo Corrales composed the work as a concerto where each one of its movements was composed at a different time: *BUG* in 2006, *Music Box* in 2007 and *Re* in 2008. This strategy allowed to obtain the necessary funds for a properly paid commission of the work, an interesting option to build a larger form with limited funding. I have premiered each one of the movements separately, from the first for guitar and electronics to the third for quintet. The overall work spans an arc over which the electronics slowly fade away while the threatening presence of new instruments accentuates the isolation and desolation of the guitarist character, the main character. Once the work was written, we decided to invite French theatre director Christophe Bergon to work on a *mise-en-scène* to build a coherent show out of this trilogy.

Corrales had previously worked with Bergon in other projects. After a couple of Skype meetings between the three main participants: composer, director and guitarist, and having assured the participation of the Ensemble Vortex in the project, a weeklong creative residency followed in 2014 at La Rochelle's *Centre Intermondes*. The subtle work of Bergon and his previous experience directing musicians in music theatre works by French/Polish composer Pierre Jodowski helped to produce the final work presented in festivals in Switzerland and Australia. Bergon accentuates the guitarist's isolation and solitude by confining him to turn in circles trapped by a barrier of music stands. That was also a great scenic solution to the really counterproductive theatrical issue of turning pages, so that everyone moves around the guitarist who is condemned to eternally turn in circles. Bergon also wanted to leave a stamp on the musicians' paths, so he decided to spread as many kilos of white flour as necessary to cover the floor thickly. The musicians' steps superpose one to another leaving an imprint that brings to mind a palimpsest.

*BUG trilogy* could be interpreted as an extension of 'performance art', a term originally conceived to define an actor's or a dancer's solos, but which has been extended in the last decades "into the realm of music with an admixture of language and other vocalisations, the employment of a wide variety of nonverbal sounds, the use of audio and visual media to extend both the voice and physical presence of the performer, and a wide variety of instrumental, prerecorded, or

electronic/computer accompaniments”.<sup>4</sup> There are differences between works like *BUG Trilogy* and those done by “performers like Laurie Anderson, Pamela Z, Diamanda Galás, Kristin Norderval, and Maja Ratke [who] create their own large scale performance pieces, works in simple and direct or extended and exaggerated form, whose subject matter and principal characters are most often themselves”.<sup>5</sup> These differences reside in the collaborative aspect of working with composers as a separate entity from the performer. Here, the performer has the responsibility and rigour of curating the works he/she is participating in, towards the creation of a coherent body of work.

Even before starting the composition of the first of those three works, Corrales had a clear idea that he wanted to create a work based on the figure of the alienated guitarist as a protagonist. Beyond this, he was also interested in exploring the clichéd figure of the songwriter/performer who stands alone with his guitar or sometimes with a little band. Examples of this style of singer/songwriter abound in the Ibero-American popular/folk music contexts of the 1970’s and 1980’s. Their songs often had strong political connotations against the dictatorships that were dominating many of the countries of the continent at that time. They were usually censored and their live presentations forbidden by the different regimes: that’s how songwriters such as Silvio Rodríguez became iconic figures in the Latin American popular music landscape. Nowadays this songwriter figure continues to exist in a post-modern era where the political message is less present or completely absent. Singers such as José González took inspiration from those politically radicalised decades of music to produce a politically indifferent product sung in English instead of the former resistance songs sung in Spanish or Portuguese, depending on the singer’s country of origin.

Inspired by this songwriter image, *BUG* just needs the guitarist, a microphone for the voice and a couple of cheap speakers to produce the ‘dirty’ electronics reminiscent of the poor sound quality of many of the protest singers’ concerts I

<sup>4</sup> Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi, *The new music theatre: Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body*, New York 2008, p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

could attend during the Chilean dictatorship.

Like the songwriter who changes his repertoire from gig to gig, the works of the trilogy have the modular quality of being presented separately or as a whole. Even beyond that, the middle movement (*Music Box*) can also be performed in four different ways: as a solo guitar work, as a solo guitar work with electronics, as a trio for guitar, double bass and electronics, and finally as a quintet where the final instruments of the trilogy – bass clarinet and percussion – start to emerge by improvising towards the middle of the piece, and become fully present in its final movement *RE*.

Corrales' adaptable quality as a composer can also be observed when he had to change the instrumentation of his work: at the time he composed *RE*, Ensemble Vortex (which commissioned the work) included an oboist among its members. Since then the oboist has left the ensemble, and a bass clarinet/recorders performer became the new member. Corrales changed the instrumentation without really rewriting the part, that's why the word 'oboe' still appears on the score.

Once the three works were created, the next step was to make of those three separated pieces an organic performance. This organic aspect was already present in the composition, by the use in *RE* of many of the materials already introduced in the previous movement. For instance in this example, Corrales takes the material from the second bar of *BUG's* K and he plays it again in *RE*, this time with the accompaniment of the rest of the instruments.

The image displays two staves of musical notation. The top staff, labeled with a square 'K', features a guitar part with a 'sample ff' instruction. It includes various rhythmic values such as 5/16, 7/16, 9/16 (with a note value of 2+3+4), and 13/16. The bottom staff, labeled with a square 'L', shows a multi-instrument part with 'rit' and 'tempo' markings, and dynamic markings 'mp' and 'ff'. Both staves are in treble clef and contain complex rhythmic patterns.

Example 4. Arturo Corrales, *BUG* (2006), cue 43, self-published score.

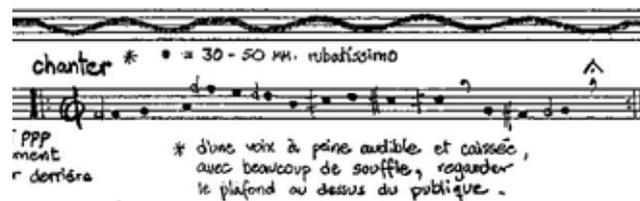


Another example: at the end of RE, the violin plays the melody that serves as the material for Corrales' *Music Box*. It is quite simple, and Corrales twists it by using quarter tones and the bowing *col legno* in an extremely soft dynamic (*ppppp*), resulting in a melody closer to a David Lynch soundtrack than to a typical music box melody.



Example 6. Arturo Corrales, *RE* (2008), cue 184 to the end, self-published score.

Corrales 'reveals' the secret at the end of the work, which constitutes a very filmographic quality. In *Music Box*, the full motif is never presented in its totality, as in this example where the double bassist sings the first 14 notes a second lower:



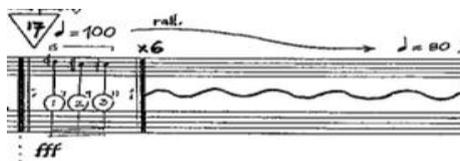
Example 7. Arturo Corrales, *Music Box* (2007), cue 29, self-published score.

At the opening of *Music Box*, the guitar also plays the first five notes of the melody a second lower, altering the first note for a F natural:



Example 8. Arturo Corrales, *Music Box* (2007), beginning, self-published score.

The three consecutive quarter tones in the melody  are used to build a repeated pattern on the guitar, this time a fourth lower:



However, hysteria has been historically shown as a ‘reflet dans un oeil d’homme’ (reflection in a man’s eye), paraphrasing Nancy Huston’s essay on twentieth century photography of women taken by men. Just like Aperghis with *Fidélité*’s female protagonist and Charcot with Augustine, but also Arnold Schoenberg with his monodrama *Erwartung* (which again features the figure of a hysterical woman), it is always from a male perspective that an illness considered intrinsically female until the early twentieth century is showcased. *BUG Trilogy* and other works I have undertaken sought to give a masculine dimension to hysteria. Didi-Huberman points out that: “hysteria in the male is not as rare as is thought, and Charcot’s ‘polyclinics’ were filled with hysterical men, like the famous case of a man by the name of Pin. This was Charcot’s great act of ‘courage,’ his ‘discovery’ of masculine hysteria”.<sup>8</sup> Freud continued Charcot’s studies on male hysteria, presenting in 1886 a paper titled *On Male Hysteria* at the Imperial Society of Physicians of Vienna<sup>9</sup>. Together with Joseph Breuer he published *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), and although it doesn’t include cases studies of male hysteria, the phenomenon is mentioned in its introduction.

### ***BUG Trilogy* as a Monodrama**

While at times historically and conceptually opaque, Monodrama tends to employ spoken word in combination with instrumental music as its principal technique. As with many musical forms that emerged during the Classical period (the first official melodrama being Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Pygmalion* in 1762), the genre crystallised during the nineteenth century.

Originally used to designate forms of melodrama for one character, Monodrama has acquired psychological connotations related to trauma and hysteria by focussing on the interior life of the solo figure. It has been defined as “an experiential mode that seeks to provide the audience with the opportunity to have a ‘co-experience’ with the protagonist,” and one that “attempts to transplant the

<sup>8</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria, Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Sapêtrière*, translated by Alisa Hartz, Cambridge 2003, p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> As referred on Freud’s chronology on Laura Marcus (ed.), *Sigmund Freud’s the Interpretation of Dreams: New Interdisciplinary Essays* Manchester 1999.

audience into the protagonist's psyche" by "exposing the state of mind of a traumatised individual to listeners."<sup>10</sup> That aspect of Monodrama coalesced at the start of the twentieth century, with figures such as Arnold Schoenberg strongly influenced by psychoanalysis and the German cabaret. This style of Monodrama continues to inform subsequent manifestations of the genre, such as Corrales' trilogy.

The term *bug* makes reference to pop culture, as the word bug is present in computers and films. 2006, the year of composition and premiere of the first movement of this trilogy, *BUG*, coincided with the launch of the independent film with the same name by the emblematic director William Friedkin.<sup>11</sup> The main characters of both that film and this monodrama – Michael Shannon and myself – are essentially disturbed, the first suffering from paranoia and the second from neurosis. In computers, a software bug is an error that produces an incorrect result, and in its original definition, a bug is an insect. All these definitions of bug are embraced by Corrales in his work, with the idea of a "*bug* that, though harmless at first, proves to be progressively a destructive force that annihilates each action and movement".<sup>12</sup>

In 2006, Corrales attended the Acanthes Centre's workshop where he met Georges Aperghis. Influenced by Aperghis' unique conception of music theatre, he later composed *BUG*, with the idea of completing a trilogy during the following years. If Aperghis uses his own texts to build the theatricality of *Fidélité*, Corrales uses texts from a diverse set of authors, as well as his own: Jean-Luc Godard for *BUG*, Corrales' own texts for *Music Box*, and his own, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and Blaise Pascal for *RE*. Corrales presents the texts as extracts, declarations of the absurd that fall into the absurd, using the word as a musical effect.

<sup>10</sup> Payette, *Seismographic Screams* (see nt. 2), pp. 138–139.

<sup>11</sup> William Friedkin, *Bug* [Film, DMK Mediafonds International, Inferno Distribution LLC, L.I.F.T Productions, 2006].

<sup>12</sup> "*Bug* qui, inoffensif au début, s'avère progressivement une force destructrice annihilant chaque action et mouvement". Translated by the author. Nemanja Radivojevic, "No Man's Land", *Dissonance Magazine*, vol. 127, September 2014, p. 54.

Jacqueline Waeber qualifies as “‘Troubled strangeness’, the profound and inalterable difference that provokes the melodramatic charm. The word finishes by sucking the blood out of the music (vampiriser la musique)”.<sup>13</sup> In *BUG Trilogy* the music is the vampire: it sucks the blood out of the words that, while more present in *BUG*, become less and less predominant in *Music Box* and *Re*. If words are essentially associated with theatre, and sound with music, Instrumental Theatre refuses this predominance: “Music does not accompany theatrical actions, but it constitutes the theatrical action [...] all that is required is for that inherent theatricality to be lightened”.<sup>14</sup> Under this prism, Corrales’ *BUG Trilogy* gets closer to this notion of theatricality proper – with parallels to Mauricio Kagel’s Instrumental Theatre – than to a notion of music accompanying words as occurs in a traditional theatre situation. As one critic noted of the work: “The guitarist mutters about how words are lost to memory, but actions persist.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Corrales’ comments on minimalism and new complexity**

Repetition in *BUG Trilogy* has little to do with the constant repetition of a pattern to create a certain mood as is often the case in minimal music. Rather it relates to the obsessive, constant repetition of a short pattern that has an obstacle in front of it that prevents it from going further. The impulsion is there, the repetition happens because of a sudden block on the progress of the discourse. It is the effect of the bug that represents that human aspect of music, the mistakes that it generates give life and beauty to the music.

<sup>13</sup> “‘Inquiétante étrangeté’, c’est la profonde et inalterable difference qui suscite le charme melodramatique. La parole fini par vampiriser la musique”. Translation by the author. Waeber, *En Musique dans le Texte* (see nt. 1), p. 309.

<sup>14</sup> Björn Heile, “Mauricio Kagel’s ‘Instrumental Theatre’: Metaxis, Framing and Modes of Presentation – Five Propositions”, in *La Musique et la Scène. L’écriture Musicale et son Expression Scénique au XXème Siècle*, ed. by Giordana Ferrari, Paris 2007, pp. 186–187.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Lorenzon, “BIFEM: Vortex Ensemble, Bug”, in *Partial Durations*; <https://partialdurations.com/2014/09/16/bifem-vortex-ensemble-bug/> (accessed 10 December 2014).





Example 11. Arturo Corrales, *RE* (2008), cue 179–182, self-published score.

In this cadenza the motif starts very simply and increases gradually in complexity and tempo, with the adding of more and more “errors”. These include crossed notes that mean half pressure, imitating the sound of the mistake that happens regularly in guitar when a finger of the left hand doesn’t arrive at its fret at the right time, producing this almost percussive sound with no clear pitch. It constitutes a refined joke at the expense of ‘new complexity’ and its many disciples and apostles, some of whom espouse the attitudes expressed by scholar Frank Cox:

the performer has an absolute responsibility to perform all notes, all rhythms, all dynamics, etc., precisely as notates, and that an absolute one-to-one relationship between notation, responsible realization, and ideal perception is the only acceptable musical situation. Some degree of “human input” is generally allowed, but this may not overstep the strict (and for many, absolute) limits defined by responsible realization of the notated tasks.<sup>16</sup>

It is impossible not to half smile reading such a statement. Being a performer of ‘new complexity’ works myself, I have been able to see from the inside how new

<sup>16</sup> Frank Cox, “Notes Toward a Performance Practice for Complex Music”, in *New Music and Aesthetics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Hofheim 2002, p. 80.

complex scores are prepared, rehearsed and finally performed, and how many arrangements and concessions are frequently done to reach a 'correct' performance of the work. Finding solutions and simplifications of to accommodate what are often impossibly difficult scores is a common practice among 'new complexity' performers.

With its rigidity and lack of theatricality and humour, the school of 'new complexity' ended up triggering opposite responses in composers like Corrales. While the movement had an important influence in Europe and the United States (and even in Australia with ensembles like *Elision*), it has been slowly losing momentum in recent years. By trying to push instrumentalists' capacities to the limit, 'new complexity'

composers deliberately draw attention to the performer's physical limitations by presenting a score that is physically so demanding as to be virtually impossible, leading to theatricality in performance, as well as the production of noises that are ambiguous 'extraneous' to the score.<sup>17</sup>

This somehow unwanted theatricality can be interpreted as a precursor of music theatre, in the same way that Robert Adlington sees the potential of instrumental extended techniques as a medium to highlight theatricality in music:

with extended instrumental and vocal techniques. [...] the theatrical element of all musical performance was thus enhanced as a performer set about his or her instrument in ways that intruded upon and transgressed the 'neutral' codes of the concert ritual.<sup>18</sup>

### **Live electronics**

The aforementioned composer's irony and sarcasm towards new complexity also appears as a comment on some of the institutions that elaborate a hyper-refined electronics language, and in this case Corrales makes a direct allusion to IRCAM. Even if Corrales uses their emblematic software MAX/MSP for his patches, he chooses a rather low-fi technology, privileging 'dirty' sounds produced by cheap speakers to accentuate the idea of the bug. This choice is not only related to the

<sup>17</sup> Naomi Cumming, *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification*, Bloomington 2000, p. 101.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Adlington, "Music theatre since the 1960s", in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera*, Cambridge 2005, p. 226.

means he had access to in order to produce the work, but was mostly a comment on how many works with live electronics privilege the electronic sounds in order to ‘hide’ less interesting instrumental writing, or where the instrumental sounds are completely unrelated to the electronics score. As Naomi Cumming has pointed out:

A rounded, ‘expressive’ sound [...] can be replaced by one that is harsh and guttural, spare and sparse, or electronically modified with a reverberance that is ‘uncanny’ and disorienting, as if the ‘voice’ remained without the normal limits of an embodiment.<sup>19</sup>

Aggressive rhythmical passages or explosions interrupt this rounded sound, used by Corrales in many lyrical passages of *BUG Trilogy*, just as if the neurotic character of *BUG* suddenly reappeared in the remaining movements of the trilogy:



Example 12. The lyrical line is abruptly interrupted by rhythmic elements.  
Arturo Corrales, *Music Box* (2007), cue 14, self-published score.

Also, the ‘rounded, expressive sound’ that Cumming alludes to and that is largely used by Corrales in his trilogy, is continuously accompanied, juxtaposed or interrupted by the rather low-fi, intentionally dirty electronics throughout the piece. This is highlighted by the inexpensive speakers the composer positions under the seat of the guitarist, as a distorted prolongation of his own, ‘dirtying his sonic self’: the bug is here more like to be a constant virus than an insect that can be easily killed. Finally, it is not the words but the bug itself that ‘vampirises’ the music; the *BUG* gobbles up the beauty, the lyricism and the complexity of this trilogy.

<sup>19</sup> Cumming, *The Sonic Self* (see nt. 17), p. 204.