

Faculty of Fine Art, Music and Design  
Master's Programme in Composition  
MUV 316, *Specialized Subject II*  
Supervisor: Dániel Péter Biró  
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# ÁGATA BLANCA, *for soprano, piano and bass clarinet*

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This piece arose as a part of the *Remembering Lost Music* project, where composition students collaborated with singing students and the *Bit20 ensemble*. The creation of this piece has been a long process in which we were asked to choose, as a starting point, a poem by Nelly Sachs (1891-1970). The project has been made up of three compositional stages and some group sessions in which the context of the Swedish-German poet was discussed, addressing issues such as identity, language, and the complexities of creating art after the holocaust. In the first stage, we composed a solo recitation piece, and for the next stage, we added an accompanying instrument (piano, percussion, clarinet, trumpet, or violin), for which I chose the piano. Finally, in the third stage we were asked to add a second instrument (in this case I added the bass clarinet), and we were given the possibility to use pitches for the voice.

## **The Poem As The Source Material**

The poem I chose was a personal Spanish translation of *The Sleepwalker*, which is included in the collection “Flucht und Metamorphose” (*Flight and Metamorphosis*<sup>1</sup>), from 1959.

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<sup>1</sup> Nelly Sachs, Joshua Weiner, and Linda B. Parshall. “Four poems from Flight and Metamorphosis.” *New England Review* 41 vol. 3, (2020): 188-192. doi:10.1353/ner.2020.0098.

| German (original)   | English <sup>2</sup>   | Spanish <sup>3</sup>   |
|---|--|--|
| <i>Der Schlafwandler<br/>kreisend auf seinem Stern<br/>an der weißen Feder des Morgens<br/>erwacht—<br/>der Blutfleck darauf erinnerte ihn— läßt<br/>den Mond<br/>erschrocken fallen—<br/>die Schneebere zerbricht<br/>am schwarzen Achat der Nacht—<br/>traumbesudelt—</i> | <i>The sleepwalker<br/>circling on his star<br/>awakes on the white feather<br/>of the morning —<br/>its bloodstain reminds him —<br/>he drops the moon<br/>in fright —<br/>the snowberry shatters<br/>on the black agate of the night<br/>smeared with dreams —</i> | <i>El sonámbulo<br/>dando vueltas en su estrella<br/>en la pluma blanca de la mañana<br/>se levanta —<br/>la mancha de sangre le recuerda —<br/>deja caer la luna<br/>asustado —<br/>la baya de nieve se rompe<br/>sobre el ágata negra de la noche<br/>manchada de sueños —</i> |
| <i>Kein reines Weiß auf Erden—</i>  | <i>there is no pure white on earth —</i>   | <i>no hay blanco puro en la tierra —</i>   |

For me, the poem is a beautiful chain of metaphors referring to the perspective of reality. The sleepwalker is a person who dreams with a perfect and pure place. But as soon as she wakes up, she realizes that reality is completely different. And the poem narrates this transition of thoughts, emotions, and actions that the character goes through to finally understand that there is nothing pure on earth, and that her reality is not as perfect as her first dream.

### Adaptation Of The Poem In Musical Terms

When I was faced with the composition of this piece, the first thing I did was to divide the poem in four parts, based on the character and the temporal sensation that exists within each of them. That is, the first section begins with a fanciful atmosphere, with a feeling of lightness and purity. Here the temporary sensation is flexible; the time of dreams is dilated, and is very different from the measured time of the "real world". In the second section, the descriptions are much cruder, and the character changes dramatically. The sleepwalker, once awake, remembers his reality through a bloodstain, and the world of dreams within which he floated, suddenly falls (*he drops the moon [...] in fright*). Temporality changes, with the passing of time becoming much faster, moving into the measured time of reality. For the third section these two worlds, that of reality and dreams, mix and stain each other. It is a mixed temporality, in which nothing is clear, and

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Sommer. "The Sleepwalker." *Poems of Nelly Sachs in English*, 2013. <https://nellysachsenglish.wordpress.com>

<sup>3</sup> Personal translation

everything is fragmented. The poem concludes with the fourth section, which is the final phrase; the main theme of the poem, in which Nelly Sachs clarifies that there is nothing pure in this reality.

In this way, the piece is divided into four sections, each with its own character and temporal reality. Simultaneously, in each section there will be small interventions, or "spots" from the other sections, that is, none will be presented in pure form.

Once I created the general structure, I realized that there were several interesting relationships between the nouns in the poem. Some relationships arose between antonyms, and others between nouns that belonged to the same semantic field. So, I started to build the following list of noun relationships:

1. Sonámbulo (*sleepwalker*) - Sueños (*dreams*).
2. Estrella (*star*) - Luna (*moon*) - Baya de nieve (*snowberry*) - Tierra (*earth*)
3. Pluma blanca (*white feather*) - Ágata negra (*black agate*)
4. Mancha de sangre (*bloodstain*) - Blanco puro (*pure white*)
5. Mañana (*morning*) - Noche (*night*)

Later, having defined these five relationships, I composed a musical motive for each relationship, as well as small variants of these, which allowed for gradual evolutions of the motives.

Example 1. Main phrase of the poem, with the five musical motives

Having composed this motivic material, I first decided to create the main theme of the poem ("There is no pure white on earth") with the five musical motives (see example 1), and then distribute it throughout the work. So this phrase is the seed that contains a synthesis of all the material used. This fragment does not appear as such within the piece, and was rather used as a guide or support when composing and distributing the material.

When composing this material, and having the impossibility of using precise pitches, I had to look for specific sounds for the voice that managed to stick to what I was looking for the nouns. So the vocal "effects" (as one might call them) arose as a consequence of the sound-conceptual search, and not as a cause of it.

### **Role of the piano and bass clarinet in the piece**

Once I composed the voice section, I had to consider the role that the piano and the bass clarinet might play within the work, but above all, the relationships they would maintain with the voice part. So, for the piano section, as I did with the voice part, I began to make conceptual relationships within the poem, but now using verbs. In this way the soprano would mention the nouns, and the piano would represent their actions.

Here, the procedure for relating the words was a bit different from that of the soprano, since I not only related verbs to each other, but each verb is related to a noun, which, at the same time, carries this intrinsic relationship with more nouns, defined in the soprano's relationships. So I ended up with just three sets of relationships for the piano, and as I did with the soprano, I composed, in this case, a musical motive for each relationship.

To compose these motives on the piano, I used as a reference two piano pieces by the German composer Helmut Lachenmann: *Guero* (1969)<sup>4</sup>, and *Serynade* (1997)<sup>5</sup>.

From *Guero*, I was interested in the granular textures produced with the glissandi on the keys. But also, I was attracted to the idea of being able to produce a sustained sound "without attack", difficult to achieve in an instrument like the piano, which basically produces percussive sounds. And I needed a long and subtle sound like this, to support specifically the "s" consonants, sung by the soprano.

Analyzing the second piece, *Serynade*, allowed me to rethink the role of the piano in my own piece, and to have a new understanding of the instrument. A perfect example of this is the use of the sustain and sostenuto pedals within the piece, which becomes an important component

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<sup>4</sup> Helmut Lachenmann. *Guero*, for piano. (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> Helmut Lachenmann. *Serynade*, for piano. (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 2002).

of the musical structure itself. This contrasts, of course, with the conventionalized use of piano pedaling as a sustaining or coloring device (see example 2).

The image contains two musical score snippets. The left snippet, labeled 'SERYNADE, Lachenmann', shows a complex piano part with multiple staves. It features dynamic markings like 'ff' and 'mf', and performance instructions like 'Sost.-Rd.' and 'Rd.'. The right snippet, labeled 'ÁGATA BLANCA', shows a bass clarinet part with a 'rall.' dynamic and a 'Sost.-' instruction. Both snippets include measures with sustained notes and pedal markings.

*Example 2. Use of sostenuto and sustain pedal in SERYNADE and ÁGATA BLANCA*

Finally, as the bass clarinet was the last element added to the piece, I chose to immerse it in the already composed material, giving it the function of a bridge between piano and voice. Since the instrument has the ability to emulate some vocal effects, I found it very suitable for this role. On the other hand, having added, in the last stage, some pitches in the soprano, I decided to use the clarinet as support, giving some pitch references to the soprano. With all this in mind, incorporating the clarinet into the piece was organic and relatively easy, because it gave me a mental clarity when looking for sonorities in the instrument. So it is important to mention that the search for all these sounds on the piano and the bass clarinet was always linked to the voice, thinking how these sounds could color the recitation with similar or contrasting sonorities.

### Choice Of Languages

Also, it's important to mention that the decision of using four different languages (Spanish, English, German, and Norwegian) within the piece is related to the identity breakdown suffered by Nelly Sachs during her life. Her native language was German, but even so, she never felt that this, or any other language represented her. And by not having a “mother tongue”, then any language can represent her voice. That is why I decided to use these four languages: German, because it is the language in which the poem was written, English, because it is the common

language that I have used to communicate myself throughout this project, Norwegian, because it is the language of the country where I live, and Spanish, because it is my mother tongue.

These four languages were used just with the main phrase (*there is no pure white on earth*), which is the only one that the audience will understand as such, since, like most of the poem, it is not fragmented, and is presented clearly and recited.

*AGATA BLANCA* was premiered by Maria Myklemyr (soprano), Diego Lucchesi (bass clarinet), and Jarle Lars Rotevatn (piano), the 2nd of May 2022 in St. Markuskirke, Bergen.

Concert recording: <https://youtu.be/kMb3XXxtinw>

Score:  [AGATA BLANCA\\_cl pno sop\\_V6.pdf](#)

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