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A Circus Built with Sound: A Look at Turina's *El Circo*

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Abstract
Circus culture, whose foundations were laid centuries ago, consists of performances carried out jointly by humans and animals. Originally conceived for entertainment, this form of spectacle gradually evolved into an art form and, through its fusion with music, came to occupy a position distinct from its earliest examples. This theme, which has inspired many composers, also found a place in the works of the Spanish composer **Joaquín** Turina. Born in Spain, the composer was trained in Madrid and Paris, studying with figures such as Moszkowski and d'Indy, and shaped his musical style by combining what he learned in these studies with the Andalusian music of his roots. Turina achieved great renown through the compositions he produced under the guidance of his teachers and, later, of Albéniz. The composer's work El Circo is constructed from a variety of motivic patterns symbolizing the circus's different acts and characters.
Keywords: **Joaquín** Turina, El Circo, piano
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1. Introduction

Circus culture is a phenomenon that has existed for centuries. It can be defined as an activity in which music is interwoven with performances carried out jointly by humans and animals. The dangerous and astonishing circus acts staged to hold the audience's attention gradually blended with music over time, taking on the atmosphere of a carnival-style spectacle. This culture, whose foundations were laid centuries ago, began with simple performances and, in later years, grew increasingly striking.

In addition to inspiring numerous performances, circus culture has also served as a source of inspiration for musicians. Regardless of whether they bear the title "circus" outright, there are many classical music works that incorporate the characters or acts associated with the circus. Among the best-known works in this wide-ranging repertoire — spanning from children's pieces to large-scale orchestral works — the following may be cited as examples: *El Circo* (**Joaquín** Turina- 1931), *Circus Polka: For a Young Elephant* (Igor Stravinsky- for piano / orchestra- 1942), *Clowns* (Dmitry Kabalevsky- **24 Pieces for Children, Op. 39** No. 20- for piano-1944), The Circus Band (Charles Ives- Unison Chorus and orchestra/ piano- 1894/1899).

El Circo, written by the Spanish composer Turina with inspiration also drawn from festivals native to his own country, is the only known piano work that both bears the title "circus" and portrays, throughout its entirety, the acts and characters the circus contains. Conceived so that it can be performed not only by adult pianists but also by young performers, this work brings together a great many elements. Beyond the musical satisfaction it provides, El Circo also offers the performer the opportunity to learn about and imagine circus culture. The aim of this study is to identify the analogies drawn for the circus elements depicted in the work, thereby guiding the performer in interpreting its meaning.

2. Joaquín Turina's Life and Music

Joaquín Turina (1882-1949) was a Spanish composer born in Seville. According to Soykan (2015), an accordion given as a gift to Turina — whose father was Italian and whose mother was Andalusian — led to the early development of his improvisational abilities. He took piano and composition lessons from an early age. At the age of 15, he decided to pursue a conservatory education, beginning his studies at the Madrid Conservatory and continuing them in 1905 in Paris at the Schola Cantorum. Although he went to Paris in 1905 and studied with Moszkowski and d'Indy, the more dominant influence on Turina's music came from Debussy (Aktüze, 2004, p. 2446).

After a 1907 concert at which he performed his Piano Quintet, Op. 1, Turina embraced the advice given by Albéniz and de Falla to draw on Spanish music, and pursued this direction after completing his studies at the Schola Cantorum in 1913. This period saw the composition of *La Procesión del Rocío*, performed by the Madrid Symphony Orchestra under the direction of E. F. Arbós, which brought him great renown; the work was also

received with admiration by audiences in Paris. Turina, who returned to his homeland with de Falla in 1914, came to be regarded from that point on as one of Spain's most important composers (Aktüze, 2004, p. 2447). Turina, whose passion for Seville is recounted in every source, heeded the advice he received from Albéniz following his Piano Quintet No. 1 and turned Spanish elements into an abiding passion within his music:

> After the concert, Albeniz invited the two young composers for a drink and a serious conversation at a Café on the Rue Royale. Albeniz assured Turina that he would put all his effort into publishing the Piano Quintet, in exchange for a promise that the young composer would "compose no more French-influenced music of this kind, but rather base his future work on Spanish and Andalusian popular folk songs". Turina defined this moment as "the greatest metamorphosis of his life. (Soykan, 2015, p. 4)

Turina was appointed professor of composition at the Madrid Conservatory in 1930, following his tour of Latin America. The composer's political positioning during the Spanish Civil War proved to be a decisive factor in his career; his stance against the Republican side enabled him to gain standing within the Francoist administration after the war. This process was concretized in 1941 through the senior appointments he assumed within the Spanish Ministry of Education and the Grand Cross award bestowed upon him (Aktüze, 2004, p. 2447).

Turina, who wrote numerous works for opera and orchestra, also composed chamber music and vocal works, as well as guitar pieces. "Because of its strummed chords and rhythmic intensity, the guitar supplies an innate sense of musical feeling for Spanish composers" (Downs, 2010, p. 19-20). The number of works he wrote for piano, however, is considerably greater than his output for other genres. Turina generally preferred to write short, multi-movement pieces for piano. "Turina obviously had a predilection for the descriptive. On the whole, he preferred to express himself musically through intimate, personal evocations, instead of through larger forms" (Powell, 1980, p. 101). "Most of his works' titles correspond to images and themes close to the composer" (Dyniak, 2018, p. 61). According to Dyniak (2018), the sheer number of Turina's piano works is a consequence of his being an accomplished pianist, and he shaped his output by combining his passion for the instrument with its universality and versatility. Powell (1980), for his part, notes that Turina's pianism was of a virtuosic level and that he was praised in his own country for this quality. Turina contributed to the musical world not only through his virtuosic piano performance and compositions, but also through the books and articles he wrote.

Turina, who frequently drew on Andalusian music throughout his output, blended Spanish-Andalusian musical elements — modeled on composers such as Albéniz and Falla — into his works without abandoning the French influences he had absorbed in Paris. For this reason, "his style morphed into what some have called a Franco Andalusian style" (Dade, 2023, p. 17). Albéniz's influence on Turina is attested by the composer's own words: "Our father Albéniz showed us the path we had to follow" (Clark, 2006, as cited in Dade, 2023, p. 18). Turina frequently referred, in his letters and public statements, to the quality of the education he received in France and to its impact on his musical development. In the course of his studies, driven by an intense desire to learn, he made the most active possible use of the academic, cultural, and artistic opportunities that France offered. "Turina came to Paris, the musical environment was, to say the least, stimulating. Debussy had recently composed La Mer, and d'Indy had published an article on Pélleas" (Powell, 1980, p. 97). In such an artistic environment, Turina's artistic success and productivity were inevitable. Regarding his Paris years, which had an immense influence throughout his career, Turina made the following remark: "In Paris I perfected all my composition studies, and afterward, always continuing to study, I came to love more and more a profession in which one is always learning..." (1942)[1].

"In his works, Turina displayed a refined and satirical sensibility distinctive to Seville, yet he never attained the dramatic depth of De Falla, content instead with simplicity and beauty" (Aktüze, 2004, p. 2447). Turina was an influential figure not only within Spanish musical circles but also within the international music scene. Compared to the other composers who exerted a strong influence on him, his compositional style and approach are quite plain. Turina's musical writing combines a simple and comprehensible mode of expression with a subtle and controlled construction of technical difficulties**.** In terms of performance difficulty, Turina's works offer enough variety to belong in the repertoire of musicians at levels ranging from beginner to advanced. Aráez Santiago (2019), reporting a piece of self-criticism by Turina, notes that the composer considered himself inadequate when it came to constructing large-scale works.

> "He was first and foremost a composer of lyrical melodies. This observation is not surprising in light of his allegiance to nationalism, which was characterized to a large extent by exquisite Hispanic melodies. They often possess what the Spaniards call evocación, that is, 'a sense of

[1] https://www.march.es/es/coleccion/archivo-joaquin-turina

poetry or suggestiveness, something which can be felt rather than explained" (Powell, 1980, p. 102).

3. Definition of the Circus

The circus can be defined as a performance space in which a variety of skills and acts are presented before an audience. Throughout history, these performances have encompassed a variety of acts carried out by both humans and animals. "The word "circus" is derived from the Latin word *circus*, meaning "circle" or "ring". The Roman Circus was an open-air venue used for public events, notably chariot races, gladiatorial combat, and other forms of entertainment" (Arndt, 2024, para.2). "Circus spectacle, its architectural concept and its content, has changed throughout the centuries, following social events and cultural frameworks of time periods". (Divac et al., 2022, p. 1).

While the earliest examples of the circus exhibited a more limited and disjointed structure, the transformations it underwent over the centuries turned it, by the twentieth century, into a more systematic and comprehensive form of spectacle. These performances, which staged physical skills and abilities of a kind people would not encounter in everyday life, combined with the production values and technical possibilities of the twentieth century to move the circus into a position distinct from its earliest historical examples. Consequently, the transformation circus culture underwent in the twentieth century was not limited solely to the technical and production-related development of its performances; under the influence of social and cultural changes, it also transformed the circus's modes of representation and aesthetic sensibility.

4. El Circo (The Circus)

El Circo, **Joaquín** Turina is a multi-movement suite for solo piano written in 1931. Cataloged as Op. 68, each movement of this work depicts a different circus act, a feature that allows it to be cited as an example of programmatic music. *El Circo* is, beyond bearing the title "circus," the only piano work that depicts the acts it contains through separate movements. Although Turina was a twentieth-century composer, rather than building this work on an entirely atonal foundation, he, like many of his contemporaries, constructed it by blending tonal and atonal elements. The folkloric elements that occupy an important place in Turina's works are used, in *El Circo*, to a more limited extent compared to his earlier compositions. Lasting approximately ten minutes, the work consists of six movements:

I- Trompeteria (Fanfare)
II- Equilibristas (Jugglers)
III- Amazona (The Bareback Rider)
IV- El perro sabio (The Trained Dog)
V- Payasos (Clowns)
VI- Trapecios volantes (The Aerialists)

Since the English translations of the movement titles printed in the score may not fully reflect their actual meanings, it is more useful, for the purpose of interpreting the depiction, to work from the Spanish titles. For example, *Equilibristas* is a term that more properly describes tightrope walkers, but the English translation *Jugglers* was used instead, since tightrope walkers can also be seen juggling during a performance. This translation, however, may also be interpreted as reflecting the fact that the motifs in the piece point to the objects that jugglers throw and catch. The third movement, Amazona, although written to represent a female rider, is translated into English simply as *The Bareback Rider*. For this reason, when studying the work, the titles in both languages should be examined and researched, so that the intended circus imagery can be visualized in the mind only once the titles have been properly understood.

El Circo, written within the *pp* to *fff* dynamic range, is built on a tonal and atonal foundation and also incorporates such materials as jazz harmony, varied rhythmic structures, hand-crossing, and chromaticism. Owing to these features, and because its degree of technical difficulty is not especially high, the work is well suited for use in piano instruction at the middle-school level.

4.1. Trompeteria

In *Trompeteria*, the first movement of the work, represents the circus's opening announcement. The powerful dynamic and compressed rhythmic structure at the outset depict the trumpeters' entrance music (Figure 1).

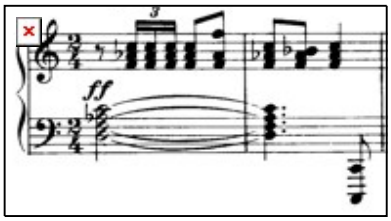


Figure 1. Trompeteria, measures 1-2

The use of the trumpet, or other brass instruments, in entrance music — particularly at court and hunting events — dates back to ancient times. This, in turn, stands as evidence of circus culture's history reaching back to antiquity.

Trompeteria is a 64-measure movement structured around four-measure motivic patterns, making extensive use of repeated thematic material. It opens with a diminished seventh harmony and closes on an F major chord. The tonal language and cadences that the composer favors throughout every movement of the work can be interpreted as reflecting his preference for depicting the circus — itself a traditional value — predominantly through traditional harmony. In this movement, whose dynamic range shifts between *pp* and *ff* , the pulse appears to be intensified from measure 31 onward through an ascending chromatic scale, while measure 43 seems to evoke, through trills, the snare-drum rolls used in circus acts.

4.2. Equilibristas

Equilibristas is a 55-measure movement written in a more naive character, in contrast to the powerful character of the first movement. The composer sought to convey this naivety not only through soft dynamics but also through a plain compositional idiom. *Equilibristas*, which can mean both “tightrope walker” and “juggler,” is built on individually played notes at soft dynamics, reflecting the high degree of concentration and composure that the art of balance requires.

The movement opens with repeated unison notes, once again depicting an excited anticipation. In the second measure, a descending eighth-note scale following a large leap appears to portray a juggler spinning the balls before throwing and then catching them again (Figure 2).

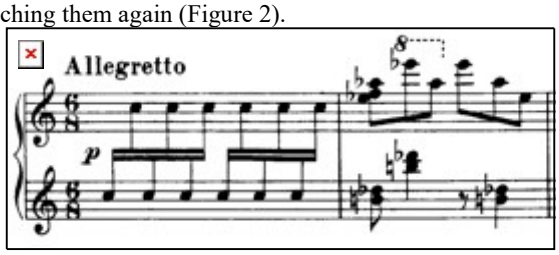


Figure 2. Equilibristas, measures 1-2

The six-note descending scales beginning in measure 21, each starting from a progressively higher note, may depict the balance a tightrope walker attempts to maintain while walking the wire (Figure 3).

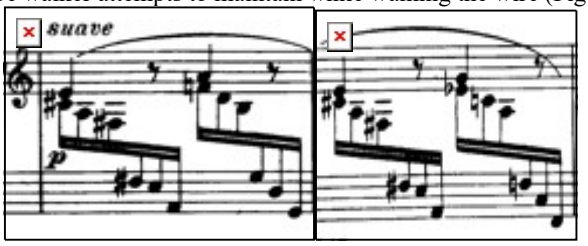


Figure 3. Equilibristas, measures 21-22

The movement, which continues the use of repeated thematic material, is likewise built on four-measure groupings, as in the first movement; the repetitions are not always written identically but are varied through the addition of certain notes, while the rhythmic structure is left unchanged.

4.3. Amazona

In *Amazona*, the third movement of the work, *Trompeteria*'s opening compressed rhythmic structure recurs at the beginning. This time, the fact that the entrance music begins at an even higher dynamic announces a grand spectacle. The octave eighth notes beginning in measure 9 represent the horse walking, placing one foot at a time (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Amazona, measures 9-12

The foundation of the movement is formed by the four-measure motif beginning in measure 13 (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Amazona, measures 13-16

The fact that this motif is used three more times, in different keys and measure counts, attests to the continued use of repeated thematic material in this movement as well. In measure 101, sixteenth-note scales layered over the rhythm of this motif point to the rippling of the horse's mane as it walks or runs. This passage also requires a wide hand span (Figure 6).

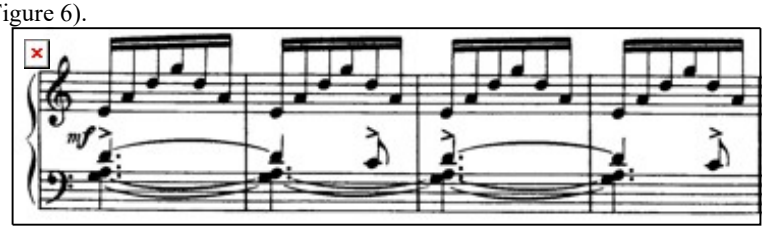


Figure 6. Amazona, measures 101-104

Amazona suggests a forceful character in its title, yet a plain expressive idiom is used in this movement.

4.4. El perro sabio

In this movement, the animal figure commonly found in old-fashioned circuses appears before the listener. *El perro sabio*, translated into English in this edition as The Trained Dog, is the shortest movement of the work in terms of notation. The composer built this movement on angular rhythms at a moderato tempo, depicting the dog's warmth and charm through a dolce character. The upward motion of the angular rhythms, in turn, appears to symbolize the dog jumping (Figure 7).



Figure 7. El perro sabio, measures 1-4

4.5. Payasos

El Circo's movement depicting the clowns is the most animated and entertaining movement of the work. *Payasos* is one of the movements with the most tempo changes and is among the technically most difficult. These entertaining and artistic qualities also carry positive implications for its use in instruction. Turina uses a distinctive technique, the glissando, only in this movement, blending it with the variety found in the work's other parameters. The fact that techniques such as glissando are not generally used in pieces intended for young performers brings this movement further into prominence within the work.

Written in A-B-A form, *Payasos* opens with a cheerful figure at a strong dynamic, in the fast and playful Allegro burlesco tempo (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Payasos, measures 1-4

This cheerful expression is interrupted in measure 20 by a four-measure figure at an Andante tempo. This is also the passage in which the glissando is used. Turina built the B section, beginning in measure 24, on a rhythmic structure he had already used in the first movement, and created the movement's climax through the chords used in part of this theme (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Payasos, measures 24-27

The motif in which these chords are used also contains a passage typical of Spanish music (Figure 10).

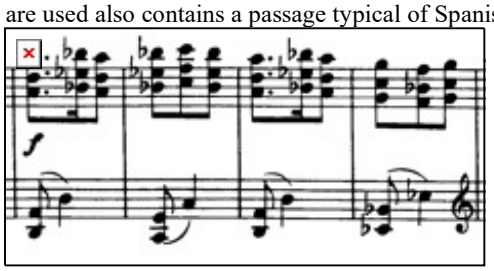


Figure 10. Payasos, measures 32-35

In measure 58, the movement returns to the A theme and, as in the other movements, ends with a tonal cadence.

4.6. Trapecios volantes

Trapecios volantes means “flying trapeze.” In the final movement of the work, *Trapecios volante*s, the piece opens with ascending and descending sixteenth-note scales that plainly depict the swinging of the trapezes (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Trapecios volantes, measures 1-2

This four-measure group of scales is then interrupted by another, two-measure motif, before continuing again with sixteenth-note scales. The small motif interrupting the scale passages can be interpreted as the trapeze artists changing hands or leaping to the other trapeze. In measure 11, the rhythmic structure used in the first and fifth movements is repeated in this movement as well, once again forming one of its principal figures (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Trapecios volantes, measures 19-20

The thirty-second-note scales that Turina uses in measure 33 depict the mounting tension of the act. In terms of the agilité it requires, this passage is technically one of the most difficult in the entire work (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Trapecios volantes, measures 33-34

The ascending motif at the end of the thirty-second-note scales, followed by a sudden silence, can likewise be interpreted as depicting a launch and landing (Figure 14).

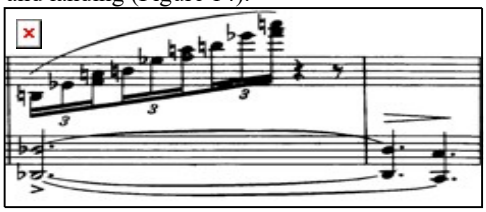


Figure 14. Trapecios volantes, measures 37-38

In measure 52, the work concludes with a return to the themes of the first movement, completing a large-scale cycle through this return to the opening material.

5. Conclusion

El Circo is characterized by a plain approach to musical writing and expression. At the same time, the relative ease of reading its notation and its thematic structure, built on four-measure motifs, can be regarded among the factors that facilitate the process of learning and memorizing the work. This feature stands out as one of the aspects that supports the work's use in piano instruction. It is also thought that this study may contribute to the performer's development of a musical relationship with the work, to the shaping of their own thoughts and interpretations regarding it, and to the development, through the use of imagination, of different interpretive possibilities.

When Turina's El Circo is assessed, the elements it contains can be listed as follows:

-Wide dynamic range
-Use of legato and staccato articulation
-Ease of memorization
-Tempo changes within and between movements
-Combined use of tonal and atonal elements
-Simple notation
-Use of uncomplicated rhythms
-Use of distinctive techniques such as glissando
-Hand-crossing
-Brevity of the movements

In light of these elements, it can be concluded that, through the wide range of musical materials it contains, *El Circo* can also be used in piano instruction. Although the work does not demand an advanced level of virtuosity, it allows different technical and musical skills to be addressed within a single study. In this respect, the work offers a field of study aimed at developing, alongside technical progress, such varied skills as articulation, rhythmic control, dynamics, character, and musical expression.

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