

alcides lanza: Portrait of a Composer. By Pamela Jones. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007. xiv, 266 pp. ISBN 9780773532649. \$85.00

Pamela Jones' new book on the life and music of alcides lanza is a valuable addition to the growing body of research devoted to Canadian composers.¹ It is written by someone whose commitment to the composer is readily apparent throughout. The author has been granted seemingly unrestricted access to lanza's sketches, manuscripts and personal materials. Yet Jones has supplemented this trove with extensive research, producing considerable insight on the composer and his music.

Jones chronicles lanza's life from his early childhood right through to the present day. Born in Argentina in 1929, lanza resided in his home country until 1965. Following a brief period in New York, the composer in 1971 made Montreal his home, where he became linked with McGill University, the institution at which lanza taught until his retirement in 2002. lanza's long and distinguished career at McGill has been notable on two fronts. He directed many of the contemporary music activities as well as the electronic studio, beginning in 1974.

lanza has been one of Canada's most vital and productive composers of the past quarter century. With an output of over 120 compositions, his music embraces many styles and genres, including electronic music, music for live instruments and electronics, and, most notably, musical theatre. The composer has also been the recipient of a variety of awards. One of the more recent was from the Canada Council for the Arts, which in 2003 gave lanza the Victor Martyn Lynch-Staunton Award in recognition of his accomplishments as a composer.

Jones's chronological narrative is in nine chapters. With such a large oeuvre, she does not attempt a comprehensive survey. Rather, the author chooses to discuss only eighteen compositions. Whether these works are lanza's finest is, of course, open for debate. What is important, though, is that Jones picks pieces from different periods in lanza's career that display a variety of media – a wise decision given lanza's eclectic range and compositional interests.

One of the merits of the book is its insights into lanza's texturally conceived and complex music. Jones's analysis is less about the specific details of pitch – although such

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¹ On page x of the Introduction, Jones notes that in 1960 lanza began the practice of using lower case for both his name and titles of compositions. However, the author does not give any reason for this change. I employ this convention in the present review.

moments do occur, mainly in relation to discussing the generous number of musical examples. Rather, her approach is more about engendering a narrative of a work using a broad, engaging prose style. The author's comments about the opening to the choral work, *un mundo imaginario* (159) are representative:

The work begins with the sopranos and altos singing a simple diatonic tune in parallel tritones, set to the words, "mudo imaginario" ... [A musical example is used in association with this passage.] The melody resembles the sort of tune that children sing to themselves while playing.

I find such writing nicely captures the essence of such musical passages. But since terms like tritone and diatonic are used freely without definition, the prose is addressed to an audience at the university music level.

Equally valuable is Jones's attempt to place the composer and his music within the cultural context. For instance, before discussing lanza's early compositional efforts in Canada (chapter 6), Jones provides background to the avant-garde music scene in Quebec during the 1950s and 1960s. She also discusses support for the arts, including governmental support that was available to lanza when he arrived in Montreal in 1971.

Given lanza's long-standing association with McGill, which is also the author's alma mater, it is perhaps not surprising that over fifty percent of the book is devoted to his activities there. Yet, given the richness and diversity of lanza's music as well as the periods he resided in the culturally dynamic centres of Buenos Aires and New York, I feel that this bias is far too skewed. (Fifty-seven compositions (including two lost pieces), which is nearly half lanza's oeuvre, date from 1953-71.) For instance, New York was arguably the most vital centre for contemporary music in North America in the 1960s. Clearly it would have played a seminal role in lanza's development as a composer. Yet, barely thirty pages are devoted to this important period. Further, twenty-seven pages occupy the period from 1953 through 1965, when lanza lived in Buenos Aires, a city that the author writes was "one of the most important cultural centres of the Western Hemisphere" (25).

There are also lapses in judgment that occasionally creep into the book. Valuable space that could have been used to enrich the Buenos Aires and New York chapters is instead apportioned for topics such as the four-and-a-half pages devoted to the domestic life of lanza's first marriage and the unfortunate disability of their first child (19-24). Eight pages are devoted to the challenges lanza faced with the piano faculty and technicians at McGill over the preparation of concert pianos (179-187).

My point is not that such events are unimportant. Clearly an occurrence such as the birth of a handicapped infant is a life-altering matter for anyone. However, in a book of limited size, decisions need to be made about what should or should not be included. Put another way, unless a large, multi-volume tome was written, in which plenty of room was given to the author to expound upon such details, biographical matters should be given

minimal space in the text or relegated to a footnote. (While one may disagree with my point of view, clearly the author's decision to devote a chapter to explaining lanza's notation lends support to the argument that lanza's music is, at least on some level, the book's primary focus.)

I sincerely doubt that lanza could have had a more passionate advocate for this book. Jones has known the composer for over thirty years and conducted extensive research in three countries on two continents. (On page x, she also notes that she had almost weekly meetings with the composer throughout the writing.) Yet, I wonder if the author's long-standing association with lanza may have affected some of the objectivity of this study, as noted above.

The book includes a chronological list of lanza's works, end notes, a bibliography and an index. The production and editorial work is excellent. The quality of the musical examples is particularly impressive, given lanza's diverse and idiosyncratic notation. As a final comment, the hard-cover format contains very good quality paper and sew-in stitch binding.

My concerns aside, Jones's work is an important achievement that should be held as the standard on lanza's music for years to come.

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