

Why “La Resistencia”

by Leo Blanco

For those of us who have art in our lives, not only as a blessing but as a profession, we necessarily learn how to invoke creativity beyond our current mood or circumstances. For me as a composer, that was a very tough challenge to overcome in April 2017.

That year, during one of my frequent visits to Venezuela, I witnessed a dramatic escalation of the already blatant collapse of democratic institutions in Venezuela. An illegal Supreme Court, acting outside the constitution, disqualified the entire congress (representing an opposition majority) from all of its functions. Shortly thereafter, great mass protests began a deadly struggle to restore democracy. This fight, in which a large majority of Venezuelans participated, was led mostly by young people between 17 and 25 years old. These unarmed youngsters never hesitated to stand with great courage on the front lines against a brutal repression forged by the armed forces of their own country.

At that time in mid-2017, as a composer, my mind could not settle into the right zone to start on a commissioned work for marimba and violin. As a Venezuelan, it was extremely upsetting for me to observe how, every day, between two to five young people were killed by the National Guard during these protests.

Even more troublesome for me was the fact that these kids were about the same age as the students I teach at Berklee College of Music. While in Boston, I was meeting daily with students from around the world — sharing the luxury of being surrounded by instruments, making music, and talking about artistic pursuits — while, 2,800 miles south of us, young Venezuelan students were out in the streets fighting a deadly battle, hoping to regain any possibility of their future.

Today, two years later, that resistance resumes in a much more organized, more mature, and internationally recognized struggle. Today, the students’ sacrifice, along with the current renovated protests, gives us a new wave of hope and strength to achieve the end goal of liberating the country from kidnappers, hunger, insecurity and degradation.

It was back during those 2017 events that Nancy Zeltsman and Sharan Leventhal, marimbist and violinist respectively who comprise the duo Marimolin, approached me to write a piece for their duo. I confessed to them that I was not in the best state of mind, mentally and spiritually, to fulfill the commission and thus, I should let pass their offer. Although it never happened to me before, this time I could not concentrate on composing. But these two virtuosi, Boston-based musicians, with the greatest sensibility and belief in civil rights, expressed their solidarity — not only with me, but with Venezuela and their young people. They asked me to write a piece based on what I was living as a Venezuelan. They told me, “Do not hold back in what you want to write.”

The necessary elements to write “La Resistencia” were gathered at that moment. The result is an 18-minute composition divided into two parts (that may also be performed independently from one another). The duo’s instrumentation which, on my own, I never would have thought of, represented something completely new and even challenging for me as a composer.

Both the source of inspiration of “La Resistencia” and the mutual excitement felt by Nancy, Sharan and myself regarding the musical results inspired the three of us to record the work and create a corresponding video. I immediately had the idea to enrich the video project to include other Venezuelan artists for their visions and expressions surrounding the very difficult situation that affected, and still affects, our country.

That is when I contacted Leo Alvarez, a great and well known photojournalist in Venezuela, who captured very moving and significant moments of all the protests in both 2017 and 2019.

In the second and final part of the piece, we also show sculptures by Diana Carvallo, an excellent artist who, by serendipity I guess, I met mid-2018 after a performance I had in New York City attended by Diana and her husband, the great painter Jacobo Borges. The next day, the couple invited my colleagues and I for dinner at their loft in Manhattan. Jacobo was more interested and enthusiastic in showing us the work of his wife than his own. He pulled out of their bookshelf a catalog of her sculptures called "Guardians": a collection of pieces made with clay, inlaid with materials that were used by the young protesters in Caracas to fight and defend themselves from the brutal military repression: bricks, wires, and cloth rags.

Through Part 1 of the piece, the listener may hear that I suggest — yet disguise, through a type of decomposition — the "Glory to the brave people" from the Venezuelan national anthem. In Part 2 we see less diaphanous pictures of the clashes between the young civilians: Guardianes, paramedical personal, and mothers of the young protesters, among others, resisting against the repressing military. We also observe current photos (2019) where we can see a great evolution in what the Venezuelan people have managed to achieve since the resistance of 2017.

This piece is a tribute to those who resist, anywhere in the world, to live in a society without deteriorating civil and human rights.