

# Commission Unites Viñao and J.S.Q. in Passion for Exploration

By RAY LUSTIG

FOR two of this year's prestigious centennial commissions, the presenting ensembles themselves were asked by Juilliard to choose the composer they wished to have commissioned to write for them. When the Juilliard String Quartet was petitioned, its members began an exhaustive search that led to their selection of 45-year-old, Argentine-born composer Ezequiel Viñao, a Juilliard alumnus whose powerful and expressive music has already brought him together with such distinguished performers as pianist Joseph Kalichstein, conductor Dennis Russell Davies, and Kristijan Jarvi's Absolute Ensemble, as well as garnered him second prize in the Kennedy Center's prestigious Friedheim Award competition in 1995 (placing him in the company of Osvaldo Golijov, Bright Sheng, and Charles Wourinen). The new Viñao work—his String Quartet No. 2, *The Loss and the Silence*—will be premiered by the Juilliard String Quartet on October 20 in Alice Tully Hall as the opening of the Daniel Saidenberg Faculty Recital Series. (The other work commissioned for an ensemble, by composer Joan Tower, will receive its premiere by the American Brass Quintet on May 4.)

The search process involved screening through scores, listening, and seeking suggestions from colleagues. Conductor and Juilliard faculty member Joel Sachs, who directs the New Juilliard Ensemble, was particularly helpful, the quartet members recall, in providing scores and recordings of a broad spectrum of living composers. They were familiar with some of Viñao's work at the outset of the search, having heard his 64-minute work *Saga*, for chamber ensemble and soloists, and attended Joseph Kalichstein's 1999 Carnegie Hall

Roger Sessions and Earl Kim, hears the influence of Stravinsky and Varèse. Joel Smirnoff, first violinist adds, "We are very excited about the piece and about the music of Mr. Viñao, which is why we chose him for the centennial. He combines an encyclopedic musical knowledge with a mastery of all the instruments and an eclectic compositional philosophy."

In a recent interview, Viñao said he is extremely pleased to be working with the Juilliard String Quartet, a group he admires tremendously not only for what he calls their "eagerness for the process," but also for the intensity of their commitment to the works of living composers. The group, he emphasizes, approaches new music with all of the seriousness that they give to great classics. "You get the feeling that this is truly important to them," he says. He commends the fresh approach that the Juilliard Quartet, which has premiered more than 60 new works by American composers, takes to each new piece. "There is no 'business as usual' for them."

While Viñao has always considered himself a composer first, it was performance and not composition that brought him to Juilliard, where he completed both his bachelor's and master's degrees in piano. Growing up in Buenos Aires in the 1970s, Viñao had studied both performance and composition. After thorough training in traditional harmony and counterpoint, he moved on to a strict serial idiom—the prevailing current at the time in European-minded Argentina—but grew "restless with the restrictive pitch language. He sought change, and it came in a big way when celebrated pianist Earl Wild heard the young Viñao play and invited him to come to Juilliard as his student, assuring him that his compositional life would also be stimulated in the process. Viñao benefited enormously from Wild's extraordinarily broad musical experience, and while Viñao's seven years at Juilliard (1981-87) actually represented the longest hiatus in his compositional life—the intensity of his piano studies and performance kept him from composing in that time—he did indeed find the environment compositionally enriching. As a composer, he gravitated toward other composers on campus. Conceptually less interested in what he describes as the very traditional music of the student composers at that time, he befriended many on the composition faculty—in particular Milton Babbitt, whose door, Viñao remembers, was

always open to him. To this day Viñao considers Babbitt one of his "major teachers."

Viñao's difficulty at the time in finding a pitch language that would be suitable for what he wished to express yet satisfying to his modernist sensibilities led him to shift his focus toward explorations in rhythm—in particular, large rhythmic cycles like the *talas* of Carnatic Indian music. But in the summer of 1987, after graduating from Juilliard, he was invited to study with the late composer Olivier Messiaen at the Festival d'Avignon. "That branded me more than

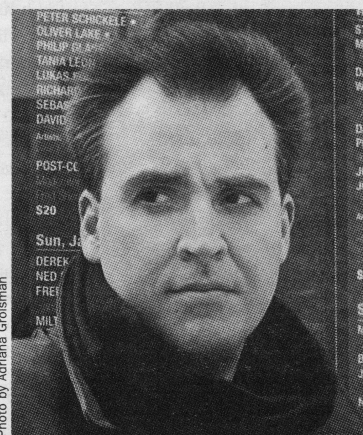
Today Viñao, who still lives in New York, uses a variety of vocabularies in his music. "My works go from very modernist to very post-modernist. They're not all in one univocal direction or style." Yet Viñao is quick to distinguish his musical "postmodernism" from postmodern philosophy. He breaks sharply with post-modern thought in his belief in the existence and importance of "grand narratives," which he defines as overarching subjects that direct the way in which generations think about life, society, and so forth. "In the Middle Ages, there was the dialectics of spirit; later, the emancipation of the individual; and in the 20th century, class struggle." And at the core of postmodern thinking, he feels, is the "disbelief in grand narratives" that he sees as essential for both art and the well-being of society. "An underlying philosophy that says that there cannot be anything in the horizon, any thread throughout our life and our creative process—that can be damaging, and I'm not sure that it's conducive to great accomplishments."

In contrast to Viñao's first string quartet, *La Noche de las Noches* (1987), which like most of his works from that time made use of live and recorded electronic components, the new quartet is purely acoustic. The work's subtitle *The Loss and the Silence*, Viñao explains, comes from a Tolkien story of an immortal maiden who relinquishes her immortality to be with the mortal man she loves, and experiences the pain of mortality. Viñao believes that his String Quartet No.2 draws together his work to date. "It incorporates the four main threads that run through all my music: the structural use of rhythmic cycles; the unfolding of long melismas (spun mainly from Mozarabic chant); the concept of reinterpretation, and an interest in Medieval thought and traditions." And for the first time in any of his works, the composer makes conscious reference to Argentine musical material.

Among his many current and upcoming projects are a recording of his *Arcanum*, featuring Kristijan Jarvi's Absolute Ensemble, to be released in the U.S. this fall; a full-length opera in collaboration with author Caleb Carr; and a large work for vocal ensemble Chanticleer based on an Anglo-Saxon text the composer translated himself.

The Ezequiel Viñao commission is one of 11 of this year's centennial commissions being funded with the support of the Trust of Francis Golet. □

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Ezequiel Viñao's new string quartet will be premiered by the J.S.Q. on October 20.

anything else. What resonated with me was his commitment to the transcendental aspect of music." And while Messiaen shared Viñao's interest in rhythmic cycles, the French composer's influence actually began to resolve Viñao's paralysis with regard to a pitch language. "I saw a way to incorporate consonance into my language without betraying my psychological 'modernist' makeup. Today, if I need to write a tonal passage, I just write it. But I needed an opening for it, and I got it from Messiaen, though I'm sure that's not what he thought he was imparting to me."

He also credits the stylistic plurality of the U.S. with giving him freedom to pursue his individual voice. "America," he says, "and in particular New York, is a very expansive environment in which to work. Everything goes." While he cautions that there is a downside to this, he adds that, for someone trained in so strict a framework, "this was just what the doctor ordered for me. I didn't need any more strictures. I needed to open up." And having left Argentina during the country's Dirty War, when young intellectuals and artists were "disappearing" by the tens of thousands, he was "in no hurry to return."

**Daniel Saidenberg  
Faculty Recital:  
Juilliard String  
Quartet  
Alice Tully Hall  
Thursday, Oct. 20, 8 p.m.**

**Free tickets available Oct. 6 in  
the Juilliard Box Office.**

premiere of Viñao's *Fantasia* for solo piano. They describe Viñao's as a "particularly personal and intimate musical voice," one that is "original yet connected to the larger musical tradition," and in which J.S.Q. violist Samuel Rhodes, who himself studied composition with