

# Five notes on Juan Hidalgo

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## 1. Hidalgo and his ancestors

"My father is John Cage, although my surname is Hidalgo; Marcel Duchamp, my grandfather, although his surname is not Cage; the family friend, Erik Satie, and the friend of friends, Buenaventura Durruti".

Juan Hidalgo

From his serialist phase, Juan Hidalgo has treasured a critical lesson as if it were gold. It is a lesson he has not forgotten in any of his subsequent works, not even in the ones that are most radically removed from this particular form of musical philosophy and practise. It is the lesson of rigour.

For Hidalgo also had a serialist past, in parallel with most of the composers of his age who, like him, are now in their seventies. He was born in 1927 in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, a decade that also saw the birth of Maderna (1920), Nono (1924), Berio (1925), Boulez (1925), Stockhausen (1928)... i.e. the patriarchs of postwebernian serialism. The music he conceived under these premises, beyond being mere youthful exercises through which he searched for a creative personality, had a strong presence. *Ukanga*, for instance, a composition for a large instrumental group divided into five ensembles, did not only enjoy success when it was first presented in the German city of Darmstadt during the famous *XII Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik* festival, the sanctuary of the serial avant-garde, but also became one of the finest Spanish contributions to this historical trend. The same could be said of *Caurga*, also conceived for an instrumental ensemble albeit of smaller proportions, and of several other titles in his catalogue which were written towards the end of the decade of the fifties. Hidalgo had arrived at this particular aesthetics after meeting Bruno Maderna in Milan, a city to which he returned after an educational journey through different European capitals. In Madrid, Barcelona, Paris and Geneva Hidalgo had worked with key figures such as Pablo Garrido –who introduced him to the technique of atonal or twelve-note serial composition–, Xavier Montsalvatge –who was responsible for fostering his creative vocation–, the famous Nadia Boulanger, teacher of teachers, and the Swiss André Marescotti. Thus, by the time he was in his twenties he had already acquired a very complete *orthodox* technical training.

This is why he knew the ground he was treading on when he decided to sniff around the kitchen of the American *avant-garde*. European rigorousness, causality and hyper-precision were replaced with indecisiveness, chance and eventuality in the American school; in the American school of Cage and his cronies, that is. Hidalgo established a close relationship with Cage –as well as with David Tudor, another of the leading figures of that clan– and gave himself over to his particular way of

understanding sound, music, art. Thus, when he claims –not without humour– as he has done on several occasions, that Cage is his “father”, Hidalgo is trying to wipe clean the slate of his past prior to his coming into contact with Cage, especially when he proclaims Marcel Duchamp and Erik Satie –whose influence on Cage are beyond any doubt– close friends of the family. His contribution must be understood from the viewpoint of this universe, although his serial past must not be forgotten. Not only on account of the value of those works, but because all of his output –from the conspicuous Zaj actions that put him in the limelight all the way through to his writings, photographs and other activities– derives from an ordered thinking and an exceedingly rigorous structuring in spite of the viewer’s perception of it as mere improvisation or the product of a simple whim. This, surely, is a reflection of the serial order.

And what does good old Durruti have to do with any of this? Beyond the *boufada*, Hidalgo’s reference to the historical anarchist attempts to emphasise a way of living that is indissolubly linked to a way of understanding the artistic act. This is why, when in 1969 the minister of the Interior of Franco’s regime, General Alonso Vega, prohibited the celebration of Zaj concerts claiming –literally– that they “promoted anarchy”, he showed that, much as he disliked it, he had realised that the proposals of Hidalgo and his colleagues were something more than simple cultural consumer goods. Those shows responded to an art that aspired to become part of life and at the same time derived directly from a very peculiar conception of it, of life.

## **2. A musical-minded multimedia artist**

“All temporal structures are musical. Even gestures produce sounds that do not resound. I call them ‘micro-sounds’.

When I am taking a photograph, or when I am writing a text, perception is more emotional. But when I take photographs in a series, I see the images with different eyes [...]. Then I structure them, as I do with music”.

J.H.

Juan Hidalgo usually defines himself as a multimedia artist, an artist who works on different fronts with different materials. He composes music, writes texts, creates phonetic and visual poems, takes photographs, stages performances... His artistic oeuvre cannot be understood from the viewpoint of the traditional division of art into airtight disciplines. However, no matter what he does, no matter what media he uses to express himself, he always ends up approaching music. Should we then consider his photographs or his literary works as *music*? There is a standpoint from which this is possible, since, even though they do not involve any sounds, they generally derive from a way of thinking that is musical in its origin. And it is now several decades since music has come to be defined, *de facto*, as any outcome of musical thought. Hidalgo, then, has something in him of the wise old men of Antiquity who conceived the world, reality, from a musical stance. In no way is this at odds with his well earned prestige as an ultramodern artist.

Music as an interior experience and as a means of understanding rather than as a simple object of contemplation.

We would not be far wrong if we considered rhythm to be the essence of all his work. Because his complete oeuvre attempts to find a rhythm, and it is this –and not the media of which he avails himself– which lends unity to his activity. A rhythm that is the synthesis, the ultimate end of a process, of a situation, of a structure. The concept of *series*, then, is vital to the understanding of his proposals. It is an essentially temporal concept even though, curiously, it is often applied to realities which, like photography for instance, are spatial by definition. This is where we start to make out the *musicality* contained in any action, any object, any situation: the series as a succession of events that have something in common. Either by virtue of their dialectics, which are in accordance with the principles of repetition and variation –a sound, a gesture, an act, a photograph, a phrase, that takes as its starting point another sound, another gesture, another act, another photograph, another phrase that was produced beforehand– or the simple habit of the commonplace: the logic of life. This succession of events is not a means, but an end in itself, provided it is capable of articulating a rhythm, of finding a temporal structure –a musical *tempo*, in short– that embraces these occurrences under its order. With a view to achieving this, they are perfectly arranged and measured, even if their false banality persists in trying to prove to us that they respond to a whim. Appearances can be deceptive.

No matter what media he uses, through his work Hidalgo looks for the ultimate throb that lies at the core of things, the same throb “that beats in music”, in the words of the classic (San Juan de la Cruz).

### **3. An art interwoven with life**

“All boundaries –including those of art and, consequently, of music– are simply lines that separate us from terror. That is precisely why all boundaries must be crossed.

Art must first be practised as life, and life must then be practised as art.

Art is like being at home on a Sunday morning in sandals, shorts and a T-shirt.

Life is music. I am interested in subverting the scheme of power of music. The unctious with which people must listen to a concert is power, and I am interested in its disappearance”.

J.H.

With the passage of time, as it gradually lost the *practical* function which had once been its *raison d’être*, art –and with it music, naturally– replaced it with a more or less distant kind of respect that pretends to have a transcendental, even religious, or ritual quality about it, i.e. something that, no matter how present it is, always stands out as an exception in our daily lives. The opposite, then, of what we understand as an everyday occurrence. Through his works, as well as through his personal attitudes, Juan Hidalgo has always rebelled against these ideas, fostered by a quick, partial and badly assimilated reading of Romantic ideologies. The key to his poetics is the quotidian, the apparently trivial, life understood as the here

and now denuded of all rhetoric and all affectation. Certain forms of Oriental thought, acquired via John Cage, are behind this. In this way, for instance, Zen Buddhism, to which Cage's work owes so much, extols the life of ordinary man, trivial and frugal in events though it may be, as the repository of authentic truth. In this regard, it should be pointed out that Hidalgo studied with great interest over a period of almost ten years, first in Milan and then in Rome, the culture of the Far East. But he successfully avoided the pseudo-mystical temptation to which so many artists have succumbed and will continue to succumb when they fix their gaze on those traditions.

The example of Erik Satie, with his sense of distance and humour, is partly responsible for this. Certainly not the Satie of the decadent *Gymnopédies* and *Gnossiennes*, but the innovative and incisive author of the unusual "furniture" music, those pieces deliberately composed so as not to be noticed by the potential listener, much as he does not notice the tapestry of the sofa on which he sits or the colour of the cup from which he drinks his coffee in the morning. And also, why not, the example of the Marcel Duchamp of the ready-mades, the innocent objects of everyday life that have been separated from their function, taken out of context, to be contemplated as works of art. Again the Cage-Duchamp-Satie triple alliance, although placed in an Orientalised landscape.

Ordinariness, insignificance, simplicity, a-rhetoric... These are the pillars on which Hidalgo's work has been based since his Zaj stage in the decade of the sixties. It seems unnecessary to stress the way in which this conception of life understood as something that is about to happen is in harmony with music. After all, isn't it, music, in principle, something that is about to happen?

#### **4. Zaj. The adventure of soundless music**

"A Zaj concert is essentially a visual spectacle with an exhibition of changing *mise en scènes*. It uses the element of surprise and humour. Nobody must try to explain or interpret anything. In fact, everything is very simple, and it can be understood by a child as well as an adult. It is the dramatisation of everyday life. We have tried to arrive at a visualisation of music, seeing a concert as if it were a play.

Zaj is like a bar frequented by people who walk in and out, have a drink and leave a tip. By becoming aware of the subtle usefulness of the useless, the public enters into the dominions of art.

In a musical process you can make all the objects resonant, as in a piece of traditional music, and even in a contemporary piece. Or you can change certain resonant objects for objects of a different type that can be visual, colourist, movements. This is the first step. Then the moment comes when you can abolish what would be instrumental and create a temporal and spatial process exclusively with non-resonant objects. These non-resonant objects, however, will always produce a sound, since they will meet the response of a public that is going to be emitting many sounds, to which all the environmental sounds must be added".

J.H.

In a Zaj action entitled *Six minutes for two performers and three positions involving physical contact or three positions and their reverse positions for two women or two men or a man and a woman*, Juan Hidalgo suggested that the two performers to whom the long title refers adopt three positions of any kind, one minute each, with some sort of physical contact. And to repeat them in the same order and for the same duration, but with the performers swapping places.

In another, he specified that the performer should carry a huge flower with him, show it to the public for some time, and then take it away with him. The title says it all, of course: *A flower*.

In *The Japanese circuit*, he instructed the performer to trace out any route of indefinite duration (or a duration freely determined by the performer) parading a single object of his choice before the public, "concealed or revealed, if desired".

These examples have been randomly chosen from among the many, many actions that formed part of Zaj's long trajectory, a group that lived for over three decades from that day in November 1964 when the first historic concert took place, to 1996, when on occasion of the Zaj retrospective exhibition held at the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, the members of the group –Juan Hidalgo, Walter Marchetti, Esther Ferrer– decided to put an end to their common voyage. Behind this innocent acronym –a child's gurgling? Jazz read backwards? a phonetic expression lacking in semantic purpose?– lay concealed one of the most vital experiences of Spanish art of the sixties and seventies (of the twentieth century). But what exactly is Zaj?

Zaj is music because it responds to a musical conception, even though it is not always coupled with sound. In Zaj concerts it is as if music had been stripped of the sounds that usually accompany it and the ensuing gap had been filled with movements, gestures, everyday objects and the noise resulting from these, maintaining at all times an internal pulse, a musical tempo.

Zaj is words because, even though its actions can be genuinely mute, they were previously written until, in many cases, they became un-presentable, being diluted in a play on words and concepts.

Zaj is plastic art because it has a premeditated visual content. And it is related with "grandfather" Duchamp's *ready-mades*. If these were defined as "normal objects of everyday life placed in such a way that their useful meaning disappears when seen from a new viewpoint", Zaj has added acts to objects. Living still lives.

Zaj is theatre because it proposes actions developed on a stage before a public. In this way, the simplest and most trivial acts of our everyday life

attain representative value and, consequently, create a space for meditation.

Zaj is ballet because rhythmically measured gestures form one of its main ingredients. Unlike the Luciano Berio of the *Sequenze* and many others, Zaj does not exploit the gesturing and dramatic qualities that are implicit in every musical act. On the contrary, it aspires to *musicalise* the common gesture.

Zaj is non-intervention ideology because, even if its artistic products are paradoxically called "actions", it does not aspire to *act or have an effect* on things. It simply contemplates them from afar, letting them be. Only thus can it substantiate that they are the way they are but could be different. Zaj, then, is eventuality, not certainty. Letting objects be what they are, and by letting them be what they are, letting them be many other things besides what they are. Zaj does not attempt to express anything or stress anything. It does not intervene.

Zaj, finally, is Juan Hidalgo, in the same way that Juan Hidalgo is Zaj, because in Zaj all the constants of his philosophy converge.

## 5. A radically independent artist

"The lion roars, the cat meows, the dog barks, the donkey brays, and man 'egos'; yes, sir, 'egos', 'ego-s'.

A genius is the product of other people's blindness.

An artist makes a proposal, but it is the spectator who ventures an opinion, endows it with meaning and completes it. The spectator is the one who turns it into a work of art.

It is essential not to be in vogue, not to use opportunistic elements. To continue being radical".

J.H.

Large part of the countless avant-garde and neo-avant-garde trends that succeeded one other during the twentieth century came to light, each in its own way, in the form of rebellion against tradition. Tradition was tantamount to nineteenth-century Romanticism, whose sensitivity continued –and still continues!– governing collective unconsciousness. But in most cases they inadvertently ended up becoming the most polished expression of that ideology. Curious fact? Contradiction? Be it as it may, the fundamental thing is that the main premise of the Romantic ideology, the expression of the ego, reappeared under a new guise, that of originality. And what is originality if not the most extreme assertion of the first person, of a unique and unrepeatable individual? And what, indeed, is the individual if not a deposit of affections?

The art of Juan Hidalgo is an *un-affected* art that never "egos", because it is intertwined with life, as we have seen, and it does not remit to the personality of its author. Consequently, it denies its creator the Romantic condition of a genius, of an exceptional person, of an individual that soars over the heads of his fellow human beings. Far from being an omnipotent

Demiurge, he is a happy mortal who suspects that the fate that drags us all along is, like Ithaca to the poet, a journey to nowhere: what matters is the journey, not the destination. If there is an anti-transcendentalist option in contemporary art, an intransigent attitude to the imposture of the individual, a vindication of futility, it is Hidalgo's. He may have ancestors – nothing can come of nothing– but not servitudes. Neither fashions, nor aesthetic trends, nor doctrines in vogue have ever conditioned his work. He has even managed to rid himself of the last, the most deeply entrenched of all servitudes: that of the first person. A definitely free, radically independent artist.