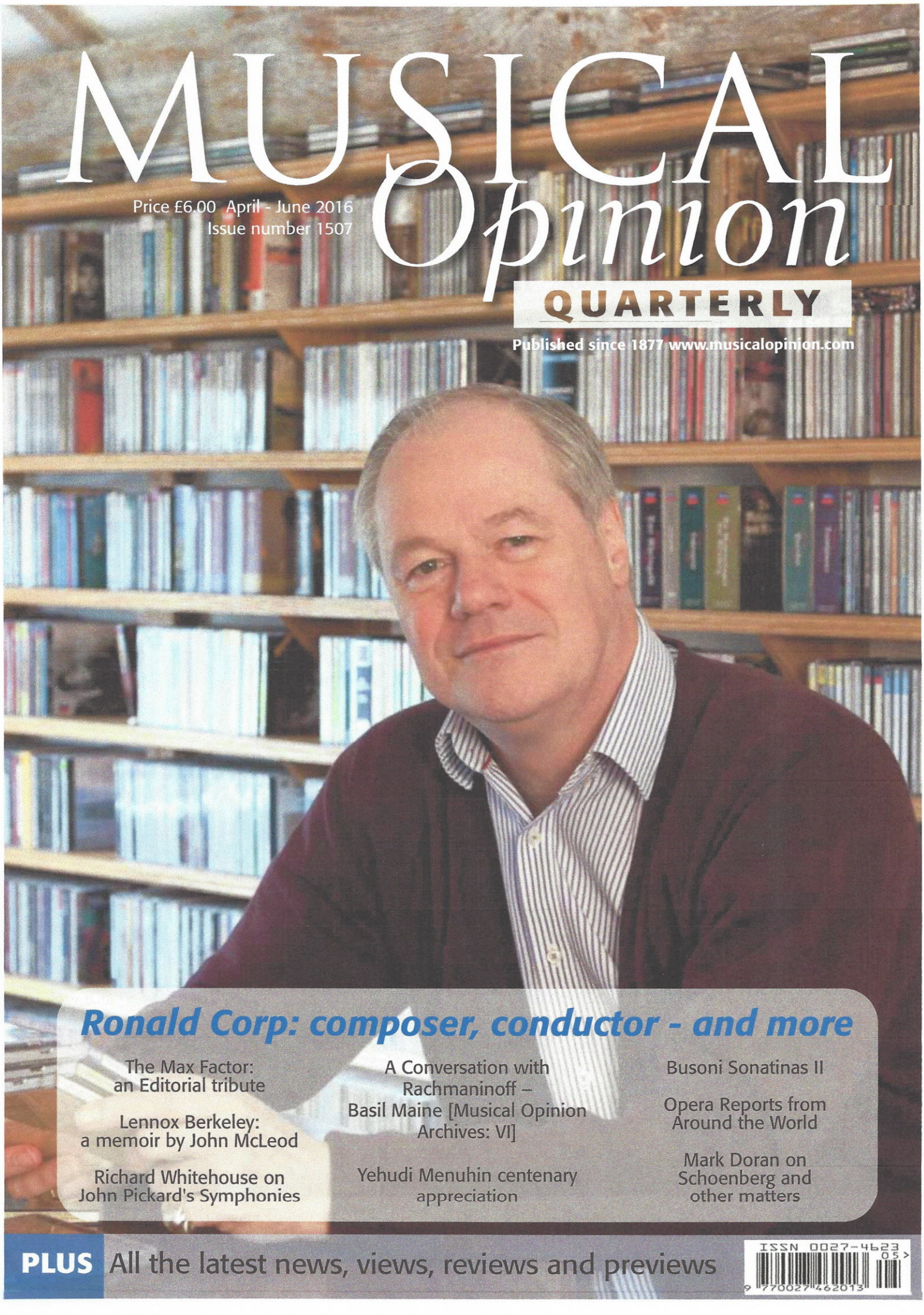

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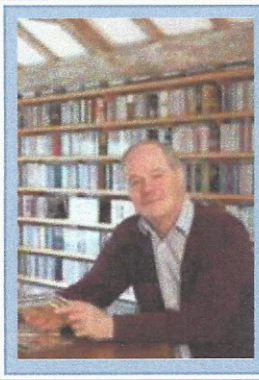

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Remembering Alberto Ginastera – a centenary tribute

Barbara Nissman

It's hard to believe that April 11, 2016 marks the 100th birthday of the Argentine composer, Alberto Ginastera. His music still sounds as young, fresh and joyful as the first time I heard it. I was a freshman university student, and it seemed as if every pianist in the school was learning Ginastera's First Piano Sonata. I was immediately smitten. The infectious Latin American dance rhythms coming from the practice rooms were irresistible. This was pure "gut" music: music that teased the brain, went directly to the heart and was felt strongly in the pit of the stomach. I confess that I was initially drawn to its visceral energy, its brilliant virtuosity and natural pianism, and those strong, driving rhythms. This was fun music— sheer magic— and so well crafted.

Ginastera had an instinctive knowledge of the keyboard. He possessed an uncanny ability to exploit a wide range of its coloristic and rhythmic possibilities, as well as its lyrical and percussive qualities. Similar to Liszt, he always knew what was innately "pianistic," what would work and fit comfortably under the hand. Whether he was writing a string quartet, a concerto for harp, piano or violin, or exploring the possibilities of the human voice in one of his remarkable operas, this talent was always evident. I knew that he had studied the piano, but wondered after hearing his *Harp Concerto* if he had ever studied the harp— what it could do and couldn't do. I asked him, to which he laughed and replied, *"Yes, and the things they said it couldn't — but really could do. That's the creative imagination and also the technique."*

One of his masterpieces, the *Variaciones Concertantes*, featuring twelve members of the orchestra as soloists, perfectly manifests his skillful virtuosity. As he himself said: *"I write as a spiritual necessity ... and above all I want my work to be understood. The music must reach the public through an interpreter, and a successful work, I think, must emerge as a virtuoso piece for the players."*

We hear in all of his music the extraordinary virtuosity of his craft: the brilliance of the orchestration, his affinity for the instrument, the richness of the colour palette, but most importantly, his unique gift to take us on a magical journey within his fertile musical imagination and make us respond emotionally.

My first encounter with Alberto Ginastera was in 1971. He had been invited as the featured composer to the University of Michigan's Contemporary Festival. I had just learned and been invited to perform his First Piano Concerto, written in 1961. The Concerto contained all the elements that initially attracted me to his First Piano Sonata, written nine years earlier: sharp contrasts, sudden accents, syncopations, Latin rhythms, motoric rhythmic energy, and a respect for form and structure, combined with an even wider palette of orchestral colours and fantastic effects. The rock group Emerson, Lake and Palmer also responded to its energy and orchestrated the toccata finale for one of their popular albums, thus bringing Ginastera's music to an even wider audience.

We first met at rehearsal. I remember him sitting alone in the empty hall, listening; he seemed to be enjoying himself. I also recall that he did not look at all as I had imagined. He was impeccably dressed in a well-cut pinstriped suit and could have easily passed for a rich South American banker. The conductor had stopped the rehearsal and was asking him about specific measures in the hard-to-read orchestral parts— what note did he want here, how should it be played? Observing Ginastera as he listened, I realised that this composition, written ten years earlier, was very distant from his memory and consciousness. It was as if he were hearing the work for the first time. And, totally amazed by its wonderful effects, he was thoroughly enjoying the experience. After that performance of the First Concerto, he promised to write a Piano Concerto for me. That was the beginning of our friendship.

Five years later in 1976, we met again when he invited me to perform the First Concerto at his 60th birthday celebration in Geneva. At the first rehearsal, the conductor wanted to rehearse with only the piano soloist, the harp and the percussion section, which was certainly a good idea considering the difficulty of these parts. Ginastera was in the hall listening and every one of us was amazed by what we heard. The Concerto had seemingly morphed into another self-contained composition. It was after that first rehearsal that Alberto said, *"Barbara, the work I write for you will be a concerto for one piano and percussion"* (as opposed to the Bartók concerto for two pianos and percussion). How exciting! As far as we both knew, no one had yet written a work for that medium.

As the years passed we spoke many times about "our concerto," but there were always other commissions awaiting completion. The *Popol Vuh*, his orchestral depiction of the birth of the world according to Mayan texts, a commission from Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, was long overdue. Ginastera was notorious for writing slowly. The birthing process of any new work took many years to come to life. Then sadly, Ginastera become ill with terminal cancer.

Because of these circumstances, my "piano concerto" evolved into the short Third Piano Sonata, Op. 55, written in 1982. Ginastera had intended to write an Adagio introduction, but unfortunately died before it could be realised. The Third Piano Sonata in one movement became his final work.

What I remember most from all of our musical discussions over the years was how important form and structure were to Ginastera's craft. *"A work without form is a work de-formed,"* was one of his favourite sayings. It is not surprising that Ginastera produced three Piano Sonatas based on the classical sonata form — the perfect home for those strong musical contrasts. His sense of structure reaffirms my belief that any performer must start work at the instrument initially with an understanding of the larger design. Then, all the details can follow. Ginastera talked often about contrast within music as a vital element. *"In aesthetics, as in nature, there exists the*

law of contrasts: day and night, the sun and the moon, black and white, allegro and adagio. We must return to contrasts within music."

Always in evidence in everything Ginastera wrote is the knowledge he acquired by studying the piano music of Liszt, Bartók and Prokofiev. His love and respect for these composers and the piano always shines through – quite amazing considering that he was not a virtuoso performer himself. I discovered that fact when I asked him if he played his First Sonata; he nodded his head but with a grin on his face added, *"one chord per second."* Yet, he seemed to know intuitively what would work at the instrument. As with Liszt's piano music, no matter how technically challenging the writing seems at first glance, once its difficulties are overcome, the notes fit under the hand but sound more difficult than actually written.

Ginastera told me about the first time he heard Arthur Rubinstein perform Bartók's *Allegro Barbaro* in Buenos Aires. He said that was the encouragement and freedom he needed to go deeper into the folk music of his native Argentina. Bartók's influence can be prominently heard in the toccata finale of the First Piano Concerto; Bartók uses a similar rhythmic motive in the finale of his Second Piano Concerto. Ginastera's delightful Rondo on Children's Themes, composed for his two children, is reminiscent of the Rondos written by Bartók, and the second movement of Ginastera's Second Piano Sonata clearly had its inspiration in the "Night Music" movement from Bartók's Out of Doors.

The percussive qualities and the motoric energy heard in both Prokofiev's and Bartók's music impacted Ginastera's piano writing. Rhythmic energy creates the momentum and excitement necessary to propel the music forward. The piano writing is filled with strong, shifting syncopated accents, sharp contrasts, typical Latin dance rhythms, possessed of a vitality, passion and energy that constantly build in intensity driving us irresistibly to the last note of the composition. What this man managed to do with rhythmic variants is nothing short of miraculous! However, this music should not feel restricted by the metronome. It needs the freedom to phrase and breathe within a natural rubato, while accommodating its subtle harmonic, melodic and structural marking points.

A solid inner pulse is preferable to a metronomic approach and will provide the flexibility needed for this music to take flight and soar!

It is evident that only a *"man of Latin America,"* as Ginastera liked to call himself could have written this music. He transports the listener to a world of magic and fantasy, filled with unusual colors and effects. It's very similar to the imaginary world described in the books of the Latin American writer Carlos Casteneda. Influenced by what Kodály and Bartók achieved with their use of Hungarian folk-material, Ginastera also creates his own brand of "imaginary folklore." Folk material was the inspiration, the catalyst, the jumping off point for his very personal language. He wrote about what he knew—the sounds of the *pampas* (the Argentinian countryside) are part of Ginastera's color world: the "night" sounds (later in life expanded to include also the primitive cultures of the Mayans, Aztecs and the Incas and the sounds of their ancient instruments and habitats), the Latin dance styles. The gaucho (the Argentine cowboy) becomes a mythical hero. Incidentally, Ginastera might have enjoyed the gauchos in his music, but according to his daughter, Georgina, this city boy from Buenos Aires never liked being around horses – a holdover from his military service when he was assigned to work with horses.

Ginastera's cultural heritage and its folk influences provided the strong foundation of his compositional style and identity. He was able to expand his musical vision from Argentina out to the world in his later works, but at heart he always remained *"a man of Latin America."* (Ginastera moved from Buenos Aires to Geneva in 1970 after his marriage to the cellist, Aurora Nátola and remained there until his death in 1983.)

The guitar is very much linked to Ginastera's Latin-American identity, and its chordal structures and patterns are an essential part of his compositional language. Ginastera uses the open strings of the guitar as his signature, in quite the same way as a painter might sign his canvas. This pattern or a variant of this motif can be found somewhere in practically every composition he wrote. I remember when I first played the First Piano Sonata for Ginastera; the only two words he wrote into my score were *"como guitarra,"* ▶

written in the second movement's *presto misterioso.* He wants this rhythmic figure played as a gesture. The individual notes are of less concern than the total effect of imitating the guitar's sound and strumming effects.

The American composer Aaron Copland on a fact-finding tour of Latin America met Ginastera for the first time in 1941. In a letter that Copland sent back to the States, he called Ginastera the "white hope" of Latin American music. Because of Copland, Ginastera would come to America in 1945 on a Guggenheim grant and also attend Copland's symposium in Tanglewood. The timing could not have been more perfect. Juan Peron had just come to power in Argentina, and in 1945 Ginastera was forced to resign from his teaching post for signing a petition in support of civil liberties. This was the right time for Ginastera and his family to leave the country and get away from the dictatorship government.

Copland and Ginastera maintained a long and lasting friendship. We could very well nickname Ginastera, the Copland of Latin America! In Copland's music, we hear the wide-open expansive spaces of America – the freedom of the landscape. Ginastera makes us hear the Argentinean countryside, the *pampas,* and his music gives us a feeling for the land, its people and its heroes (even though Ginastera always remained a city boy from head to toe.) And years later when Copland would write his ballet *Rodeo*, we would be able to hear Ginastera's influence on his music!

What stands out in my memory from my visits with Ginastera and his late wife, the cellist Aurora Nátola at their gracious home in Geneva, was the sound of laughter. Ginastera had a wonderful sense of humour. He was gifted at making funny, witty remarks, but always with a straight face and a mischievous twinkle in his eye. We can also see this humour in some of his compositions. He liked to drop occasional "quotes" in his music. Quite appropriately, a quote from a Paganini caprice can be heard in his very difficult Violin Concerto, and a quote from Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto is heard in the slow movement of the First Piano Concerto where the pianist is also waging its own war with the orchestra. He carries this practice much further in his Second Piano Concerto that not only includes quotes from Beethoven, but also Stravinsky, Brahms and Chopin.

Also of interest: Ginastera was a great recycler. Sometimes themes would appear and reappear again and again. Recently, I listened to a performance of his *Pampeana* No. 3 for orchestra and in the 2nd movement was surprised to discover the trombone motif from the finale of his First Piano Concerto. It is also used in another orchestral work, *Ollantay*. If Ginastera liked something, he didn't want to discard it. The *Estancia* theme from his popular ballet first appeared in his *Concierto Argentino* for piano written 6 years earlier.

Speaking of the *Concierto Argentino*: on a recent trip to Philadelphia, I was surprised to discover a manuscript copy of this early piano concerto, written by Ginastera in 1935. Ginastera subsequently withdrew the work from publication but later in his life reviewed the manuscript and did have intentions of revising the work but died before he had the time to do so. It is indeed an honour that Aurora Nátola-Ginastera, the widow of the composer, granted me the exclusive right to perform and record this early work along with his First and Second Piano Concertos, thus presenting a historical continuum of Ginastera's special relationship with the piano concerto.

The three Piano Concertos represent different stylistic periods in Ginastera's compositional life. The early *Concerto* contains all the elements found in his early piano music and reminds me of the *Danzas Argentinas.* The piano's entrance in the beautiful slow movement recalls the clarinet opening of *Rhapsody in Blue*; perhaps this is another one of Ginastera's jokes. The work is naïve but still filled with youthful passion and is a real audience-pleaser.

For me, the First Piano Concerto represents the real masterpiece of all the Piano Concertos. This was the first work for the piano that Ginastera returned to after the success of his popular First Sonata, nine years earlier. Essentially, the Concerto is a bigger version of his Sonata, enhanced greatly by the added color resources of the orchestra, especially its percussion section.

The undiscovered masterpiece is the Second Piano Concerto. I remember the first time I heard about this work. I was visiting with Alberto and his wife Aurora at their beautiful apartment in Geneva. They were recently married, and they were both sharing with me a funny story about a pianist who kept calling every day while they were on their honeymoon. The pianist was the late Hilde Somer, nervous about receiving her commissioned piano concerto on time. She did receive the Second Concerto in time for its premiere but as Ginastera told me when he gave me a copy of the score, *"I decided to make this concerto as difficult as I could to say thank you for all those phone calls."* I remember thinking at the time, "that's one of his works that I won't be studying!"

How wrong I was about that because I have just recorded the work. But it is difficult, probably the most difficult work for piano that Ginastera ever wrote. Not only is it pianistically challenging, but more cerebrally conceived than most of his other works with increased emphasis on retrograde, inversion, canon, mirror form, mathematical patterns, polytonality etc. Some of the twelve-tone language is not easy to master. The work pays homage to two musical masters: Beethoven and Chopin. Ginastera begins with one and ends with the other. The Second Concerto is still "undiscovered," but it is a great concerto that deserves to become a staple of the twentieth-century piano literature.

What one realises from studying all of Ginastera's piano works is how passionate he was about the piano and its repertoire. He managed to constantly challenge the performer with his craftsmanship, always expanding the colour possibilities of the instrument. With his joy and passion, he transports us to another world – a world of magic! We can't help but respond emotionally to music that goes straight to the heart. I remember Ginastera telling me that music that begins in the brain can never get to the heart – it must begin with the heart – always. I agree and perhaps that is why Ginastera's music conveys such unbounded joy far more successfully than most music.

The sheer physical act of playing his piano music has a cathartic effect, providing a release of raw, earthy emotions that seem to transcend thought. The driving intensity, the excitement of this exuberant, unrestrained music burst forth to engulf the listener, communicating with a directness that so often eludes many of today's composers. How wonderful to rediscover a composer who can make us feel, who puts us back in touch with our passions and reaches deep inside our soul. He has left a rich legacy that, fortunately, will last much longer than his 100 years. ■