

Cartas para Amores Distantes: interaction among distant musicians

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Abstract

This article introduces artistic research connecting interpretative perspectives and the montage process of integrating a harpist, a classical guitar player and three singers in order to perform a novel composition during the COVID19 pandemic. *Cartas para Amores Distantes* could be understood as an architecture of longing created by the composer and five performers who were never in the same physical space and never played music all together. Thus, to elucidate such experience, the article is organized as a report on this artistic research. The text highlights the personal views and the

challenges shared and faced by the group.

1. Introduction

Following previous works presented at the Generative Arts conference *Descobertas* (2016)¹ and *The Ode to Christus Hypercubus* (2018)² [1], [2], we present here *Cartas para Amores Distantes* (Letters to Distant Lovers) for Harp, Classical Guitar, and Three Voices that was created during the social isolation, from June to November, 2020. It is part of *Cartas@todoCanto* (Portuguese for Letters to Everywhere or Letters to every chant) created by Manzolli also during the pandemic.

Performed by five musicians who did not know each other before the pandemic, the project aimed to break them free of the social isolation. In order to describe this experience, the article is organized as a report on this artistic research, see viewpoints on that approach in [3]. The next sections describe individual and musical motivations in the development of the musical interpretation connecting the composer and the performers' perspectives. Finally, the audio-visual montage is elucidated by presenting technical procedures and aesthetic perspectives.

2. Background

Facing the current social isolation and motivated to carry out artistic research to build an effective paradigm of musical performance, our project was started with

the following questions: How is it possible to play music together while in social isolation? How is it possible while we are many kilometres from one another and separated by our countries' borders? How would we talk about music and find meaning while interpreting a novel piece? How and why would a person write a letter of longing to someone he/she has never met?

Starting with these seeds of an idea, *Cartas para Amores Distantes* was inspired by a photo of the *Ponte dos Laços* (Bridge of Ties) in Aveiro, Portugal (figure 1). This photo was taken during the composer's last visit to Aveiro before the pandemic. The bridge, and the ribbons of various colours tied to it, express lovers and friends' vows of love.

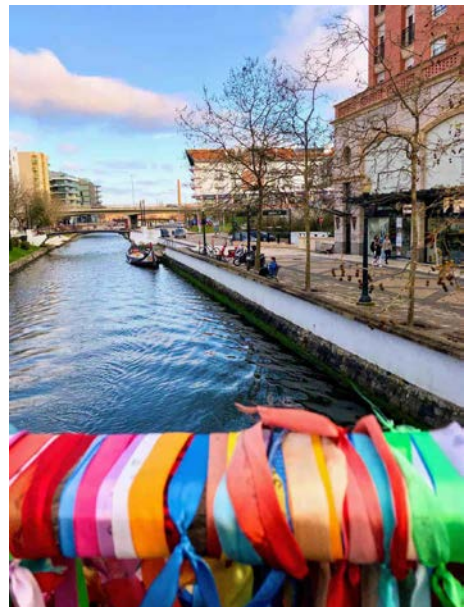


Figure 1: Photo of the Ponte dos Laços (Bridge of Ties) in Aveiro, Portugal.

The connection with the river and the waters that pass under the bridge is

¹ videos of *Descobertas* (2016) :
<https://youtu.be/bTqh313DI-0> (full work),
<https://youtu.be/zCRq9zVPLew> (trailer)

² electronic studio version of the Ode:
<https://youtu.be/Ks3X80TZkMs>

expressed in the composition by four sections of letters: *Desejos Submersos* (Submerged Desires), *Querer a Distância* (Faraway Wish), *Sem Não-palavras* (Without non-words) and *Há poetas na esquina* (There are Still Poets on the Corner).

2. Interpretative Perspectives

Artistic research could be described through its experimentation, exploration and discovery to reveal artistic intentions and processes, underlying art production [3]. Here we have taken this approach to interpret a novel composition and also to reflect about the process itself. Therefore, this section presents the interpreter's individual perspectives and their understanding on creating and interpreting a novel work from distance. These perspectives were also presented in a video report available on the Internet³.

The original poem introducing the first conceptual and inspirational guide is presented in Table 1. Jônatas added to the poem, his aspiration of building an interpretation for *Cartas para Amores Distantes* anchored in a true collaboration from a distance. He said: "I believe that we can experience a very important interpretive process together. As a composer, I never thought the score was enough to describe any musical idea fully. It is a vehicle for mediation between two virtualized and encapsulated domains: the composer's imagination and that of the interpreter." Therefore, the interaction among distant musicians reported here provided directions for capturing those individual mindset

domains during an interpretative and collaborative process.

desejos submersos jônatas manzolli	submerged desires
a saudade nasce nos portões fechados e nas ruas vazias com olhares encalacrados: cadeados pendurados em desejos submersos nas pedras jogadas nas águas.	<i>nostalgia is born on closed gates and empty streets with closed eyes: padlocks hang on submerged desires of stones thrown into the waters.</i>
a saudade vive numa fita amarrada na ponte que liga as duas margens de uma ria.	<i>nostalgia lives on ribbons tied on a bridge connecting two banks of a river.</i>
a saudade navega nos barcos que cruzam as águas com rastros que ferem o rio.	<i>nostalgia sails on boats crossing waters making traces that hurt the river.</i>

Table 1: Manzolli's original poem, the first conceptual guide.

For Angela, there were two major interactions in this process. First, there was the composer-interpreter connection in which it was possible to search for the better harp writing and sonorities to partner with the original musical ideas; second, the communication between both instrumentalists and the singers was focused on getting personally connected to one another. She said: "even from a distance, the process allowed a construction of an authentic and shared interpretation of the music".

Leandro said: "during this pandemic I could actually feel how crucial the human contact and proximity is, specifically in this case, for making music and building an interpretation of a new composition".

³ video documentary on the interpretative process of *Cartas para Amores Distantes*: <https://youtu.be/LQ3Ca8SldPQ>

He was concerned that he would have a difficult time in every aspect of his life, but on the other hand, the project was a unique opportunity to explain how interpreters and composers had taken steps to make themselves feel closer together. Furthermore, Leandro added that “(the virtual meetings) *fulfilled us with refreshing new ideas of what to do, in the sense of how to interpret the music we were dealing with*”.

For Sarah, developing this project during the pandemic was an exercise in creativity and imagination. It was a great challenge, because the group had never heard the composition before, since it was composed especially for the confinement caused by COVID-19. Traditionally, when a musician is singing and performing a work, there are always more people close by who are rehearsing together. Such a performance situation is much different from that of the present project in which everyone needed to imagine each other's musical ideas. But it was very gratifying to go through such experience, even from a distance, whether in a country or a city different from our own.

Complementary to that idea, Sarah also stated: “*it was interesting to see how the surroundings have made my perception of the piece very different from the other interpreters. It was very enriching because I got to know myself more as an interpreter and the others as well. Studying this composition during a difficult time for everyone was special and very important for that moment we are living*”.

As we already mentioned, the work was inspired by a photograph of a specific site in the city of Aveiro called the *Ponte dos Laços*. It is a bridge connecting two

banks of a ria, where couples and friends place ribbons with promises of love and friendship. Coincidentally, the soprano, Ana Beatriz, lived in the city of Aveiro for five years where she received a Bachelor of Music degree. It is also the city where she met her love. Ana Beatriz said “*the origin of this work had great significance for me and at the same time it transmitted one hundred percent of the feelings we have experienced during the pandemic*”.

Laura lives in Florida, U.S. while she hasn't met any of the musicians in person, she was able to meet with everyone via phone calls and video conferencing. As Laura became familiar with the project and got to spend time discussing it with Jônatas, Angela, Leandro, Sarah, and Ana, a beautiful community of friendship was created. Laura, Angela, and Leandro were able to rehearse *Sem Não-palavras* (i.e. the third musical letter) using the low latency music platform, JamKazam. The three of them connected visually using Zoom and recorded the video portion while rehearsing. Laura recorded her sound file with Audacity. Surprisingly, even though Angela and Leandro were more than 6847 km from Laura, the three of them were able to make music together at almost the same time. Occasionally, the internet connection between them fluctuated and the delay increased to 100 milliseconds and affected the sound quality. Even when this happened, however, they were able to adjust because Jônatas's music was so inspiring, they got along so well together, and they were so committed to his goal. Since the latency on Zoom was quite significant, after the rehearsal, Laura removed as much noise as possible from the JamKamzam recording and combined it with the Zoom video so that

the movements and sound would line up together.

Her view is that the project has accomplished the goal of making the members of the group feel connected to one another even though everyone has been isolated during the pandemic. Although they were far away from one another and from different countries. She said: “the way Manzolli’s music came to us has crossed borders and large bodies of water. We are playing together and rehearsing together and now we are all friends! I think that as you listen to this music, you will also feel less alone, more connected to each other, and to us. Also, this music is so extraordinarily beautiful”!

3. Audio-visual Montage

In this section we present how audio and video were recorded during the production of the first letter: *Desejos Submersos* (Portuguese for Submerged Desires). The technical procedures, aesthetic perspectives, and personal views are discussed in the next paragraphs. The video-performance of that first musical letter is available on the Internet⁴ and can be described in four stages as described below and also in figure 2.

- 1) remote rehearsals through video-calls;
- 2) recording of the guitar, harp and voice;
- 3) audio mixing in a digital audio workstation;
- 4) video is added to the audio-track.

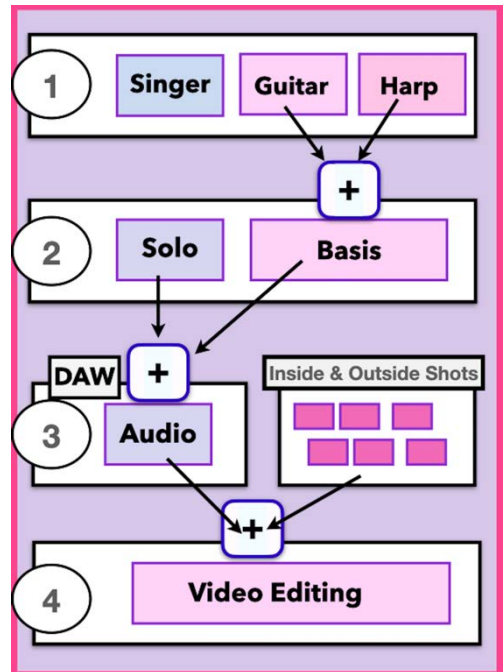


Figure 2: four-stages diagram of the process to produce the musical letters.

The technical process of building a performance from a distance that would be consolidated in an audio-visual media is not very hard to understand. One of the musicians should record first in order to provide a sound guide to the others. Most of time it is started with the bottom line, which would be a rhythmic line, a bass or a harmony. In our project, we recorded the guitar, and then the harp together. After that the recording was sent to the soprano, and she has recorded the solo part while listening to the harp-guitar guide. Finally, a digital mixing and, whenever necessary editing was done in a digital audio workstation.

It is possible to understand that previous experiences with different musical groups and musicians gave us the ability to produce a musical output by distance,

⁴ Video-performance of *Desejos Submersos*: <https://youtu.be/wAvwlsRslwo>

with no rehearsal or personal contact. With only with each person reading individual parts of the score, however that would be somehow, a dry and soulless interpretation of the music.

For this reason, we have developed new ways of communication, in order to know more about each other. It was done using technology to rehearse via the internet and we have developed efforts to reach a satisfactory way to fulfil musical and visual results according to our performative concepts. About that interactions, Leandro said: *“the human connection has been proving to be the most important point of all, even above the technical issues of the music.”*

The soprano solo part of the first letter was performed and recorded by Ana Beatriz alone in her home office, as she said, *“on a beautiful sunny day”*. The recorder was on a shelf in one corner of the room and she stayed in the opposite diagonal corner to avoid audio overblow. After several takes, she found the best recording to convey all of the feeling she wanted. Despite it not being easy to make music from a distance, as there is a lack of communication between the eyes of the musicians, Ana Beatriz, said *“I think, in this case, it has made us even more genuine in our way of expression so that we could register every drop of feeling”*.



Figure 3: video frame of the symbolic bridge that inspired the work.

Ana Beatriz went to the city of Aveiro, the birth place of this work, to capture some images and videos of the most emblematic symbols of the city, with the help of her boyfriend (figure 3). Furthermore, on a weekend when she went to visit her grandparents at the *Poço da Cruz* beach, Mira, she also had the opportunity to shoot the Atlantic Ocean: the very large natural obstacle separating herself from the other musicians (figure 4).



Figure 4: video frame of *Poço da Cruz* beach on the Atlantic Ocean.

The video conception of *Desejos Submersos* was based on the process of mimesis, starting from the significant presence in the lyrics (presented in Table 1) and the intention of creating bonds

even from distant locations. We made use of internal and external takes, from inside our houses and from open areas (such as the bridge, the beach and the window facing the open field), representing the feeling of real isolation at the same time that we felt the connection with each other (see figure 5). Differently from the internal takes, the external scenes show a contemplative body-eye direction towards the horizon (see figure 6).

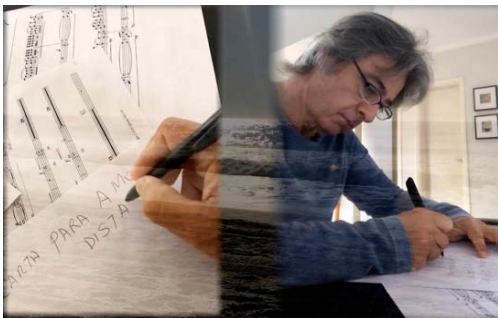


Figure 5: video frame of the composer writing the music letters superimposed over the Ocean.



Figure 6: video frame of the harpist and guitar player's horizon view.

Using superpositions, slow transitions and degrees of transparency, we aimed to give a dream-like imaginative aspect to the video (see figure 7). Continuously involved with the process of creation, the

composer's hand writing merges with the water traces made by the boat on the "ria" being, while simultaneously with the origin of the piece and the carrying of the nostalgia (i.e. *saudade* in Portuguese).



Figure 7: video frame merging takes from the composer and the guitar player.

4. Conclusion

The interpreters exchanged their musical knowledge and individual ways of understanding these musical letters using the Internet and social networks. As time has passed, musical ties have also become personal connections. *Cartas para Amores Distantes* reduced the physical, geographical, and emotional distances between these musicians. The musical message broke them free of the imposed social isolation. As this music is heard all over the world, it will also break through the social isolation that so many others have been experiencing as well.

Therefore, as we have carried out the interpretation of *Cartas para Amores Distantes*, we have projected the imagination of each of us while we have shared particular interpretive visions. Reporting such an experience, we aim to point out the inexorable unfolding

process of connections and shared meanings among composers, interpreters and listeners who constantly rebuild and unveil paths of musical expression, even from a distance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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