

# V Encontro Internacional de Piano Contemporâneo

Lecture-Recital

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## Performing Almeida Prado's *Cartas Celestes*: The Concert Hall as a Planetarium

The genesis of the work *Cartas Celestes*, written in 1974 by the Brazilian composer Almeida Prado, was a commission made by the São Paulo City Hall for a solo piano piece that could serve as sonic background for shows at the Ibirapuera Municipal Planetarium.

Faced with this challenge, the composer found inspiration in the book *Atlas Celeste*, of the Brazilian astronomer Ronaldo Mourão, and created a musical representation of the vision of Brazil's night sky in August and September.

*Cartas Celestes* is therefore a music of the cosmos, a sound illustration of the visible universe, a mystical celestial ritual. But parallelly to this celebration of light, space-time and sound resonance, this is also a work of an eminently representative nature, which draws its artistic inspiration from the real and the scientific. This representational character is felt in a very concrete way through the study of the score and its notation, since each section of the piece is headed by the name of the celestial body represented, be it a galaxy, star, planet, nebula, globular cluster or constellation.

All the pianistic preparation of the piece is therefore based on an astronomical visual imaginary, which the pianist has at each moment present in his/her unconscious and which he/she tries, in proportion to his/her abilities, to recreate musically. However, in my view, a conceptual problem arises when the work is presented in a live concert, since the audience, unaware of the cosmological indications on which the pianist could rely, finds itself deprived of a whole synesthetic imaginary. The public's experience is therefore purely auditory, its understanding exclusively dependent on the musical logic inherent in the writing and resulting from the successive glissandi, clusters and chords present in the piece. And while this is in my view a musically fascinating work, rich and perfectly capable of being played live without the aid of complementary artistic

expressions, it does not seem controversial to me to affirm that there is another celestial dimension, of connections and visual associations, which is lost, largely depriving the listener of the possibility of truly understanding the piece, and thus, the genius of Almeida Prado.

By being confronted with the problem of musical representation in the specific case of the performance of the *Cartas Celestes*, I attempted to find an elegant solution that would be true to the work but simultaneously free and creative, thus adding to the content of the piece. Therefore, I sought in the original intention of the composer and in the genesis of the piece the solution to this problem: to transform the concert hall into a planetarium and to play the *Cartas Celestes* in the environment for which it had been originally conceived.

The recital in which this project was premiered took place in Sala 2 of Casa da Música in Porto, Portugal, on May 22nd, 2018. A video projector was used in this concert, directed at the curtains at the back of the stage, as well as colored LED light strips of adjustable brightness on the side wings and at the back of the hall, with the purpose of immersing the audience in light coming from all directions. A MIDI pedal was also used, placed on the piano and controlled by me during the performance, with the goal of triggering the different scenes and ensuring the correct synchronization of the visible and audible.

To create this journey through the sonic and visual cosmos of the *Cartas Celestes*, a series of original videos was produced, each representing a particular section of the work and therefore a concrete celestial body. It was necessary, however, for the visual experience to be dynamic and reactive, to accompany the musical narrative and development in real time, to convey to the audience the feeling that the sound and visual experiences were one.

For this purpose, certain musical effects were directly equated to visual effects:

- The use of zoom out of certain celestial bodies in decrescendo passages, as well as the contrary, zoom in on crescendo passages;
- The use of different colors in the passages describing nebulae, in a kaleidoscope effect;
- The increase in the brightness of stars, resulting in a scintillating effect, in response to sudden increases in dynamic;
- Progressive changes in the general brightness of the video in response to the gradual accumulation of resonance;
- Superposed photographs of celestial bodies in ultraviolet light and visible light, representing the contrast of fortissimo chords and filigree passages in pianissimo;

In addition to these literal correlations of sound to visual effects, the cinematography of the video also intended to give a temporal and narrative connection to the different sections of the work, as can be seen for example in the transition from the section of the planet Venus to the section of the Milky Way, made through a huge journey through the stars to the outside of the galaxy, where one is finally able to look at it from outside.

The end of the work, which Almeida Prado described as "...solar explosions and their electric waves that expand to thousands of kms in height" is accompanied by a gradual zoom in on the Sun, and a progressive but overwhelming increase in luminosity until reaching total white, leaving the audience immersed in light.

The work then ends as it had begun, using the same motifs in reverse, in a ritual celebration of the nature of the cosmos, which, very much like the earthly one, is made of life, death and regeneration.

Thank you very much