On embracing all your work as one

Composer and multi-instrumentalist Angélica Negrón on supporting herself through her music, how being a teacher nourishes your creativity, and how she decides which projects to prioritize.

March 18, 2021 -

As told to Miriam Garcia, 2436 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Beginnings, Inspiration, Multi-tasking.

You grew up in Puerto Rico, and your career started there. What made you decide to come to New York?

I wanted to study film music and in Puerto Rico there was no school that offered that major, so I decided to come to New York to study at NYU. When I arrived to the city, I realized that I signed up to study composition, not film music! In the end it was a really good decision, even though it was a mistake, since I realized that I wanted to continue pursuing composing and not only for film. I took all my electives in film music so I could still follow that interest, and I continued writing music for the concert hall as well, which is something that is very much a part of what I still do.

As an artist, it's really important to be part of a community of peers. They are the ones that support you, invite you to events and projects, and where you can find collaborators and allies. How was the process of getting into the artistic community of the city?

Since I arrived as a student and was new to New York, I felt like I was very much on my own. Once I finished school, I connected with my friend Andie Springer, who is a fantastic violinist. She was starting an ensemble called *Transit* and she asked me to write a piece for them. Thanks to that piece, a lot of other people heard my music, so other musicians asked me to write pieces for them. After that, it all kind of snowballed into me getting to know other people in the music community, especially people who were working on similar things as me.

In Puerto Rico I was meeting musicians who were exploring and experimenting with different genres. The island has a very vivid DIY scene with a very strong presence from punk, hardcore, and garage, as well as some electronic. But in terms of new music and concert music it's very conservative, or at least it was when I lived there. So, if you went to a concert with instruments from the classical music tradition, you would hear music by dead white men most of the time.

It was really rare for me to have the opportunity to hear a living Puerto Rican composer, even though there are many incredibly talented living composers on the island. In New York it was actually the opposite. There are so many musicians from all around the world, and musicians kind of have to play new music to have other opportunities because there are so many violinists that can play Bach or Mozart or the classics. So there's a lot of hunger for music by living composers. So in a way, it's kind of the perfect place to be for someone like me.

You grew up in a conservatory environment with classical training, and you also create electronic music. Each environment is ruled by certain institutions, and ideas of what success and failure are. They also come with different baggage, even the pressure of what you have to prove is different. What is your process of coping with

all the environments in which you create your work?

For a long time I struggled with precisely that. I had my life in the conservatory, where I played the violin, and I didn't know that composition was even a possibility because we never played music by living composers. If you don't see something, you can't know it's a possibility. I knew that I really loved music and that I loved the violin, but I was also very curious about other instruments. So I started taking harp and cello lessons and I taught myself the accordion. I realized that I was as passionate about other instruments as I was for the violin. After finding out that there was such a thing as composition, everything fell into place and made sense.

I noticed that I was writing music for the conservatory and for the composition seminar that looked interesting on paper and that I could talk about, and that would get discussed in class, but I was not connecting to the music I was writing. I was more excited about the music that I was making with my band Sinestesia. When I moved to New York, I was also writing music for the concert hall that didn't have much to do with what I was doing with my band Balún. For a long time, I kept those two things very separate, but I felt like I was not living my complete truth, and I was struggling every year to feel enthusiastic about writing concert music.

I knew I loved it, but I was not going back to listen to that music, so I took a year off between my masters and my doctorate, and in that year I wrote a piece called "Drawings for Meyoko", that was for a trio called the Janus Trio. For that piece I decided to approach the composition as if I were writing something for my ambient project, or for Balún, and that shift was very key in my development. At that moment everything kind of clicked and I decided not to care as much about those things that come with the baggage of new music or classical music and institutions, and just think, very simply, about writing music that I was excited about, and that I wanted to go back and listen to.

It sounds like a very obvious thing for a composer to do, but for me, it meant being really honest about what I was interested in, sound-wise, and that also meant that my music sometimes looked less complex on paper, and less impressive for academia. I was okay with that. Letting go of that was really liberating, and now I've come to a place where I embrace everything as one, and that feels right for me. That has been really satisfying, to find a place where everything I'm creating is just one thing, it's not for a specific audience, it's just something I'm passionate about.

You have managed to make a living out of being a musician and an artist, it is now your full-time job. Is this something you anticipated? Are there any compromises that you have to make because of this?

This is the first year that I'm composing full time. Before that, I was very lucky to be able to, even if it wasn't composing, still make my living off of being a musician. For a long time, that meant that I was also a teaching artist, which is something I really care about. Education is something I'm very passionate about and that also fuels my art. Even though I transitioned to being a full-time composer, I'm still teaching one class. I can't let go of that—I feel like my art would suffer, as it really feeds my artistry.

One of your students composed a piece related to the recent presidential election in Brazil and the triumph of Bolsonaro. It must have been quite shocking to know that those feelings came up. What is the most important thing to consider when you're teaching young talent to express their own personal experiences and feelings through their art?

I've had students that have written some music about very deep topics, and I try to never get in the way of what they're writing. It can be a song about eating popcorn, a song about the current political climate, or a song about the loss of someone they loved, but for me, it's really important that it's something that connects to them, so I don't get in the way of that. I also avoid, at all costs, putting myself into the music they write. I feel like I'm not teaching them composition, I'm there to guide them through the process of creating. I'm there to help them in putting the music down on paper so that they can communicate that music to a musician that has to play it for other people.

It's really important for me to honor not only their ideas and concepts, but also their choices of notes, orchestration, and instrumentation. The most important thing when I'm mentoring young composers is to treat and

value their creation as if it were written by an adult, just really take it seriously. I never think of it as kids' music. I feel like whenever they delve into those harder topics, there's something very powerful that comes from it because there's an immediacy that a child has to communicate, and it's something that we lose as we get older. When you combine that with an art form, in this case music, it can be really, really powerful.

You are working on *Chimera*, a lip-sync opera for National Sawdust, you're a PhD candidate, your band Balún released an album, you have been touring with them, and you also teach. How do you prioritize your time? What's your daily routine like?

It's really hard to balance things. It's important to compose daily, even if it's something I don't like. To treat it just as if it were an instrument, like playing your scales everyday. For me, it's really important to sit down and create something everyday. That discipline is something that I've been working on for a while and I feel like I'm still not there, but I keep working at it. I work better with deadlines, and I work better with contrasting projects happening at the same time.

There are moments of chaos but I've learned to trust the process and to keep things as organized as I can. I love spreadsheets and I make sure that I have a game plan for how things will get done. Even though it is constantly shifting, having a plan, being very organized, and knowing exactly what my deadlines are really helps me.

You are a multi-instrumentalist, and you make music and sounds out of materials and objects that are not meant to be played. What value do you give to silence? Where do you find quietness?

Quietness is really important for me because a lot of the work I do comes out of that. I love music, but I don't listen to it as much as I could because I need silence to be able to imagine other sounds. So I rarely listen to music at home. I love going to live music shows, but listening to music is more of a rare occasion. Stillness and quietness is kind of my blank canvas for sound, for creating.

You are involved in so many projects, have you ever abandoned one? How do you feel about giving up projects that you don't like?

I'm very much a nerd, so I like to finish the things I start. However, there's one commitment that I have placed on hold because it's just not possible for me to finish at the moment, which is my doctorate and finishing my dissertation. I've felt very guilty for the past couple of years that I've been writing a lot more music than words, when I'm supposed to write words so I can finish this degree. But then I realized that I need to put things into perspective, and what I want to do with my life is write music. And I'm very blessed to be able to get to do that, and to have so many projects going on. So this year I decided that I need to be on a sabbatical from writing my dissertation, because it's a very time-consuming task, and there's so much music I want to write and I don't want to put that on hold.

You also compose music for films including the documentaries *Memories of a Penitent Heart*, *The Feeling of Being Watched* and *Love the Sinner*. All of them deal with really personal stories. What's the process of composing music for films?

I'm a big fan of documentaries, and I really love writing music for different kinds of films, but documentaries are definitely at the top of my list. For me, writing a film score is all about literally digging deep into the sound world the film inhabits. Sometimes it's as literal as taking sounds from that world and repurposing them, recontextualizing and manipulating them so that I can use them in the score. It could also mean that I'm listening very carefully to what's in the film already, maybe subtext, maybe things that are not explicitly said, and finding ways that I can bring those to the surface with the music. It's a balance of what I as a composer and the filmmaker want to bring to the surface.

Most of your projects are really personal to you. Is this a conscious decision? What makes you say yes or no to a project?

I don’t think it’s conscious; it all happened very naturally. But I feel like the more I work, the more I focus on composing as my main livelihood. I’m trying to be more selective in what I do—things have to resonate with me personally and I have to connect with each project. I have to feel that there’s a need for that story to be told or a need for that piece to exist. Writing notes for writing notes’ sake is not interesting to me. There has to be something more there that I feel needs to be expressed, because composing is very time consuming, and very emotionally draining as well. I want to make sure that when I’m working on something, there’s not a second which I’m questioning why I’m doing it.

How do you know when a piece is finished?

My pieces are never done, at least for me. It’s an open-ended inquiry process driven by curiosity. I might have a sense that a piece “is completed” for a premiere, or for a showcase, but there’s always the possibility of going back and revisiting it, and I think leaving it open-ended is also a way for me to keep my sanity.

Angélica Negrón recommends:

Velour: The Drag Magazine
The book *Mundo Cruel: Stories by Luis Negrón*
The podcast *Latinos Who Lunch*
The band Mula
Netflix’s *La Casa de las Flores*

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