



## Juan's World: A Classical Composer's Life

If I meet a man who he tells me he's a classical composer, I don't go running home to check it out on the Internet. It's so distasteful. Googling people. It's like flipping to the back of a book to find out what happens in the end. Cheaters. I prefer to find out who people are organically.

And it doesn't get more organic than bumping into someone at the local coffee shop; even the coffee was organic. The man sitting next to me had a copy of Don Quixote in his lap, and an espresso cup dangling from his finger. He introduced himself as Juan Colomer. I pointed to the enormous book. Light reading? No. Juan is writing an opera for Spain, based on Cervantes's classic.

But he said it like someone would say—I'm taking my car to the shop today. Do you know what time it is?

Intriguing. Such an unassuming manner, this composer had. You just never know who you're going to meet in DTLA. I asked Juan if I could interview him for my first article on MusicUnion to find out more about him. He said yes.

A few days later, as promised, Juan gave me an idea of his life as a composer. If you can call it that. To hear him talk you would assume composing was a job only slightly more tedious than data entry, and why would he want to bore anyone with the details of such a mundane talent?

Typical LA. The ones who don't possess greatness, self-promote the shit out of themselves. The ones who do, downplay. But was Juan downplaying, or was it really as mediocre as he said it was? I looked up at my host, sitting at an angle to me, backlit by the window in his gorgeous corner loft. I suspected the former.

"Would you like something to drink, eat? Soap..." Juan said, grinning mischievously. "I don't know what people offer in these situations."

"Definitely soap," I said. "But only if it's bar soap." We both laughed.

"Ok, ok," Juan said, getting more serious. "Tell me."

I looked at my notes. Ahem. Is it a good time to be a composer right now, I asked?

"By definition, as an industry, composing is always in crisis. Every time you try to get funding, or propose some idea they say—we don't have the money, it's going to be very difficult," Juan said. "When everyone started complaining about the recession I said, welcome to my world!"

Ok, that went sort of well. Next question. This was an easy one. Do you have any favorite pieces of music?

No. Juan hates music. Correction. Composers hate music.

Ok, not so easy. Please explain.

For Juan Colomer, the world is a place full of intrusive noise. Music pulls at him, and suddenly he isn't listening to the person he's talking to, or paying attention to his meal. He's working. The reverb is too loud. This syncopation is...

"We are bombarded with non-classical music all the time, on TV, radio," Juan said. "I try not to get influenced by non-classical music. But unwillingly, we're listening to everything. Everywhere."

So, if you don't listen to music, I asked, where do you get your inspiration?

"Deadlines," he said. "Sorry, but it's true! When I know I have to do it, it gets done."

And so our interview went. Juan served up sardonic quips with a Spanish accent, occasionally apologizing for thoroughly deglamorizing his profession, and I played the straight man. In the land of the conversational elevator pitch in lieu of actual conversation, a humble artist is refreshing. But this was ridiculous. Our friendly banter made me forget the most important part of my interview. On my way home later, halfway down the Harlem Place Alley, I stopped. Juan Colomer had let me walk out the door without playing me any of his music. Are you kidding me?

I called him, and the composer invited me back over for a listening session. Then I gave in. I Googled him.

Wikipedia informed me that Juan Colomer was born in Aziza Spain, studied music since the age of 8, played trumpet, got accepted to Berklee music school in Boston, moved to CA and started writing music for films. He felt stifled by the paint-by-numbers composing style of movie soundtracks, and began focusing on classical composition full time.

Finally I got the scoop on some of his accomplishments. Juan loves working with Placido Domingo, and luckily he gets to do so often. They're last collaboration was a CD that won a Grammy for the Latin music awards. He composes mostly for Spain these days, but, Juan confessed, they hate him there. He does more composing in Spain than the Spanish composers do.

But at least the critics leave him alone now, Juan joked. But he's not sure whether that's a good thing or not. After all, if you're not being judged, you're being ignored.

Juan has a shock of black hair; he wears jeans and fashionable dress shirts. I noticed the L. Ron Hubbard title in his bookshelf; he's a Scientologist. Next to the bookshelf is a window with an immense gargoyle perched outside it, facing Main Street. He's thinking of naming the monster, if only he could remember the name of that cat from Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. Do I remember it?

That would make a great gargoyle name! Oh...it starts with a P, I think...or a B... (The cat's name was Behemoth)

“Play whatever you want for me,” I said, pacing around Juan’s loft for the second time. “Your choice.”

Juan introduced a piece called *The Lascivious Devoute*. Great title, I thought. Sounds like a rock n roll band, or a wicked cocktail. Something with Absinthe in it?

“It has religious overtones, but with inner turmoil,” Juan said. “And torture.” His dark eyes glistened. He hit play, as I sank into the back-cushion of the chair and closed my eyes.

It began with a precession of low and solemn notes that pulsed forward like monks walking slowly with hands folded, chanting, A lulling overlay of strings. Soft notes sneak onto the scene, gain strong footing, then fade. His music was exactly the way he described it, ignoring tonality, while using it. Dissolving forms, without becoming abstract. The music squirms and sneaks around, Finds redemption, inevitably slips, and succumbs. And then it’s over. The two and a half minute clip, I mean.

What a tease. I pushed the dog off my lap. Stay! My phone vibrated; it was a client. As if the whole world had respectfully paused until the music was over, then all at once, jumped to life. I begged Juan to email me the clip. I had to run.

But I was hooked. I went home and listened to *The Lascivious Devoute* over and over. Each time the clip ended, I felt sad. Where was the rest of it? We sat at the café again the next day, sipping our coffee and people watching. Juan informed me that they weren’t done recording the entire thing; it was a full half hour long. But as soon as they did, he’d let me know.

It figured. I’d have to wait.

As I lay in bed that night I emptied out my mental ‘pockets,’ to ruminate on the perfect strangeness of my experiences. So far this week yielded one conversation with a famous composer, two and a half minutes of a missing symphony, and the long lost name of a demonic black cat. I had no idea where it was all going, or what it meant. But I learned that humble packages often hide valuable contents, contradictions make the most interesting song titles, and best of all, even if you can skip to the ending to find out what happens—it’s more fun if you don’t.