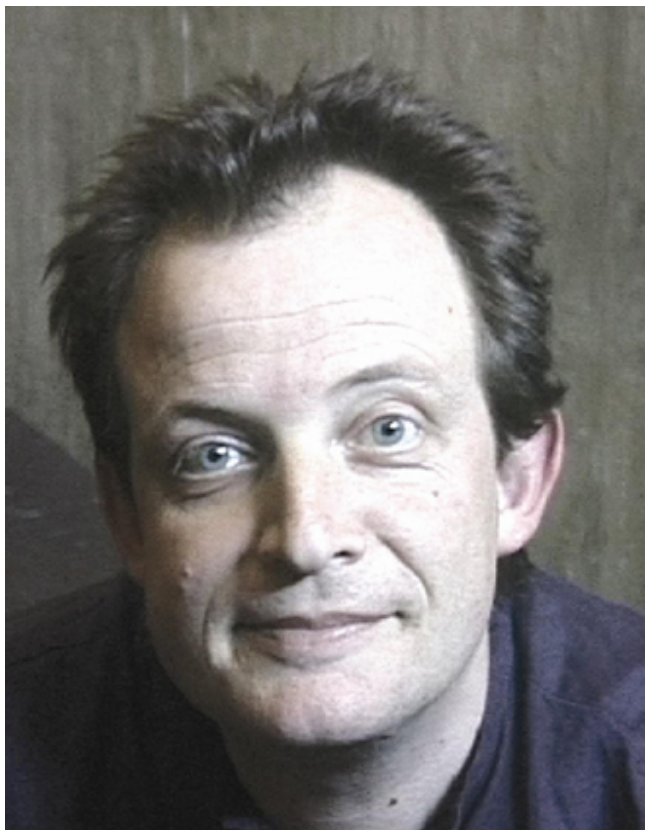


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SOUND TIDE
Conversation with Miguel Azguime¹



Miguel Azguime

In addition to his activity as a composer, poet and percussionist, Miguel Azguime (1960) supports the promotion and diffusion of contemporary music through his role as artistic director and founder of the independent label Miso Records and the Musica Viva International Music Festival. Together with flautist and composer Paula Azguime, he founded the Miso Ensemble in 1985.² This flute and percussion duo is one of the most important Portuguese contemporary music groups. Since 1997 he has developed the first Portuguese Loudspeaker Orchestra and, as a researcher, has been working on

¹ The conversation was held in September 2006 in Parede, Lisbon, in Miguel Azguime's studio.

² The ensemble is named after a traditional Japanese soup.

the development of real-time computer music, giving lectures and courses on the subject. He also spent ten years producing the radio programme *Musica Hoje (Music Today)*, devoted to contemporary music, at Portuguese National Radio, RDP Antena 2.

Working as poet, composer, percussionist, and sound engineer, Miguel Azguime occupies a unique position in the world of art and music in Portugal. One may discover different elements of contemporary music history in his activities. His interdisciplinary strategies led him to new paradigms: the post-Cageian necessity of making poetry, reading it, experimenting with the percussive sound material, and making it impossible to predict the final result, are combined with a post-Varesian kind of percussive structuring of timbre and dramaturgy (*Icons I-VI*, 1992), Boulez-like obsessions with post-serial ways of structuring (*De l'Étant qui le Nie*, 1997-8), a post-Berio need to extend the performing virtuosity of interpretation (*Icons I-VI*), a post-Ligetian treatment of choir parts (*Yuan Zhi Yuan*, 1998, *O Centro do Excêntrico do Centro do Mundo*, 1999-2002) and even a post-minimal re-examination of sound ambience and the perception of music (*Constelações*, 1989, *Determinante-Solar*, 1991).

Azguime's aim of re-examining the relationship with the singing/speaking voice is one of the basic elements of his poetics. Vocal expressiveness plays a central role in several of his works and voices re-examine the tradition of vocalicity in western artistic music.³ His recent multimedia opera *Itinerario do Sal (Salt Itinerary)*, 2006) confirms his intentions of interrogating the present stage of performativity in music and its implications to the [*sic*] music theatre and opera, in connection with highly developed technology. Like some distant and highly deconstructed ballad, this opera tells the poststructuralist fragmented story of authorship, text, writing, form, and sound.

Could you explain the context from which you are coming as a composer, concerning the Portuguese music scene and authors that you were influenced by?

I started [my] music education very early and I had [a] very eclectic education, so to speak. I had classical education to some point, then I started playing rock & roll music and then I was very much interested in jazz music, especially free jazz. I was, until [the] age [of] 24, 25, regularly playing as jazz drummer and leader of several free jazz groups in Portugal. At the same time I was

³ For this introduction I used fragments of my text 'Percussive Silence of Words' written for the Portuguese Music Information center. See: www.mic.pt

studying at the conservatory in Lisbon and then I went to Paris to study with Gaston Sylvestre (percussion). He was quite [an] influential person because what he really likes is music theatre or, as he used to say, percussion theatre. And in fact I was not interested in percussion theatre at all. Although I had to do percussion theatre pieces for the university, at that time, that was of a minor interest to me. Now it is very funny to think about that because I am so much interested in music theatre, not percussion theatre. At that time it was not important.

Then I came back to Portugal and I went to the opera orchestra as a percussionist at the age of 23 and I realized that it is absolutely awful to be in the orchestra. All the dreams I had, of being an artist, were exactly the opposite of being in [an] orchestra. It was frightening, terrible. At six o'clock sharp [the] first violin, or anyone in the orchestra, stands and says 'Maestro, six o'clock, see you tomorrow, bye-bye.' This was [a] very important experience, because at that time, at the age of 23, 24, I decided I will never ever do any orchestra playing. For me it was anti-musician experience, anti-sensitivity experience.

At the same time, because I was studying in a French school, I was very much influenced by French literature and especially French poetry. That had a huge influence on me. Although I was Portuguese I was in French school for political reasons. My father had problems with [the] fascist regime in Portugal. He was sometimes in jail, always for the same reasons, accused for [*sic*] conspiracy against the regime. I and my brothers and sister were put in French school in order to avoid the fascist youth. It was important to me. I was aware of why I was in that school. All that was very important because it gives you [a] certain context of being against the system. My parents traveled a lot [*sic*]. I remember Paris in May '68; I knew about the situation. My parents were there with me and they were telling me about students, De Gaulle, all those things. So, very early I was aware of this situation. Traveling was very important. I had a wish to connect with other cultures. Portugal was at that time [a] terrible country so I really wanted to have other types of experiences and contacts. And as soon as I could, at the age of 17, I left my parents' house. I came to Paris to live there, and I lived there for three and a half years. Being in Paris, all the things and music scene I saw there were very important. That was the time of the beginning of IRCAM.

There were people like Varèse who made [an] influence on me. A kind of opposite one, and again the French one, was Debussy. Not to go from Debussy to Ravel, but to go from Debussy to spectral music, to [the] French School, and a kind of interest to [*sic*] sound, to [*sic*]harmony, and then to Messiaen. Varèse was a kind of rebel for me. I never finished [at the] conservatory. When I

went to the last year of percussion school I got [*sic*] my first child, Agata, and that completely changed my life. We couldn't live in Paris no [*sic*] more and we returned to Portugal. At that time I already had very clear ideas about what I wanted to do. During those years the biggest influence [on me] was Varèse, Debussy and spectral music.

At the same time, especially in my adolescence, the [*sic*] surrealism and people like Breton and poets following the path of surrealism were very important. Surrealism was the first philosophical approach I had. From surrealism I went to Zen Buddhism. Still today I have a feeling that I am pursuing, and looking at, something that was exactly the same when I was 15; metaphysics, society, philosophy, and art, and the responsibility an artist has. All the things were already there. And the problems I was feeling at that time were also more or less the same.

I didn't have any figure for which I could say: this is my model. Stockhausen was often important, although I don't [*sic*] know very well Stockhausen's music. I never analyzed it. In his music there is an appeal towards the sound, and also the fact that for [*sic*] his earliest works, until the '70s, each work was a new work, and I like very much that feeling. All those pieces are different from each other and that is, for me, very interesting. When I start a new piece, usually I don't have any ideas. I like this feeling of the white paper, when everything is possible. What is important is the way you do it. It is what the idea becomes.

That is more or less the context. At some point I decided to turn everything upside down and that gave me quite [an] open, quite [an] eclectic approach to music. I am not very much narrow-minded, I hope, in terms of taste and in aesthetical things. And I really don't think there is one music, there is a lot of music(s).

It is interesting that you didn't mention any Portuguese names?

I had no close relation with the Portuguese scene because I was educated in French school and had my education abroad with [my] spirit against Portugal for political reasons. I only got to know Portuguese music and Portuguese musicians in [the] very late stage [*sic*] of my education. Only when I was about 30, I was more or less formed as a composer. I was in contact with composers that were doing avant-garde things in the middle of the '70s. It was also the time of free Portugal, because [the] revolution [had] already happened. My adolescence was very exciting because of all those things that were happening at that time. I was in touch with people doing things:

like Jorge Peixinho; the Lisbon Contemporary Music Group; Emmanuel Nunes, with whom I studied in terms [*sic*] that I attended seminars that he started to give at that time in Portugal. Me and my colleagues who went to the courses had no knowledge of [the] history of Portuguese music during the first half of the 20th century simply because of the fact that unless [*sic*] for [a] few, there was [*sic*] no scores available, no recordings available. For example, Fernando Lopes Graça, whose centenary we celebrate this year, was *persona non grata* for the regime, and most of the people didn't know about him. There was no possibility to go through the scores of the Portuguese composers of the beginning of the 20th century, those that were living at the same time as Debussy, Schoenberg etc. When I was studying we analyzed Debussy, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, but never Portuguese composers. That is one of the reasons we founded [the] Portuguese Music Information Center. We were the last European country that got [an] MIC. That means that we don't have musical identity, we don't know about ourselves. Although there are other composers like Alexandre Delgado. His grandfather was [a] Portuguese composer at the beginning of the century and he is related to all this music, Luis de Freitas Branco, people from the end of 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. They were not any kind of models for me because I did not have any idea about their work. I knew they exist [*sic*], and I knew some pieces, but that was not enough. In that sense I am an unrooted person in Portugal.

At some point you told me that teaching composition is ridiculous. It is an interesting point of view.

This is, of course, a kind of contradiction to what I just said. When you have [the] opportunity to go to a school to study and to have contacts with other composers to exchange ideas, to have fellow colleagues playing your music, it is useful. In order to evolve [a] composer needs to listen [to] his or her music performances. That is a context, a community that school could offer. It helps to raise [the] average level, that is, much higher than it was before. That still does not make you a good composer. I think nothing really makes you a great composer. You are, or you are not; but I don't think of any divine inspiration or similar. It is a lot of work, and some ideas. I think you can learn technique, but you cannot learn ideas. And art and creation is [*sic*] about ideas. Ideas without technique are useless and technique without ideas is dangerous.

You were influenced by exotic, eastern cultures, for example, in your work, *Yuan Zhi Yuan*. How did you come to that inspiration?

After surrealism that [*sic*] I found a wonderful philosophy related with [the] unknown, with [the] mysterious side of life, and with all those psychoanalytical aspects, even mystical aspects. [An] understanding of [the] non-religious side of Buddhism, especially Japanese Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, were [*sic*] extremely important because it [*sic*] had to do with the [*sic*] certain approach to attitude within the society, with life. This kind of dialectic materialism of Japanese Buddhism was striking for me. I was very much influenced with several concepts, this Japanese side, and traditional, philosophical China: things like Taoism, even Chinese medicine, theory of meridians, understanding that the human being is a flow of energy, etc.

It was also very interesting to read Cage's writings. I met Cage in '82 in Darmstadt, but I was very shy, I was just attending the conference and the classes. I never tried to follow Cage in the sense [of] what he was doing; I was excited by the fact that he was influenced by Zen Buddhism.

When I started [the] Miso ensemble with Paula, playing flute and percussion was very closely related to [an] eastern music approach, although I was never using [the] pentatonic scale or similar. It was more [a] kind of attitude and kind of energy. Flute and percussion are instruments [that are] very strong both in China [*sic*] and Japan[ese] tradition. I remember the first time I was in Japan, in 2001, I went to a gagaku concert and I was crying for half an hour because that music is absolutely extraordinary by [*sic*] the way it is done. And when I looked back after that it was absolutely stupid – what should I do with [the] imperial court music of traditional Japan, absolutely nothing. But the way they are doing things is, for me, very striking and that was a major influence. The consciousness of the body and of the breathing, and presence: all those things for me are directly related to this type of approach. The first Miso ensemble record *1+1=3* is eastern music, and attention to silence, and concentration that you sometimes can't hear, but you can feel. And I know from the very beginning of my activity as a performer that I am [*sic*] very strong as a performer because of this strong influence. In *Yuan Zhi Yuan* I am using [*sic*] some typical techniques and ways of singing of [*sic*] Beijing opera, but in a very loose way.

How exactly did you come to electronic music?

What became very interesting for me as a percussionist at the beginning, before I became [a] specialist for the mallet instruments, were tam tam, huge tam tam, gongs, and spectrally very rich sound. I was building a lot [*sic*] of instruments; I still have several instruments of different kind[s], metal, wood etc. What really interested me as a percussionist was a timbre sound, different colors, more than notes. I always thought that [the] piano is [*sic*] an instrument that I will never compose for, because it was a dead instrument, for the same reason. It was [a] tempered instrument, I don't like tempered music. I was interested in sound with a lot of microtones. That is what I was aiming at. As a percussionist when I was in touch with electronic music, I found out that pure electronic music was very boring, because it was very poor compared to [an] acoustic instrument, especially to the huge pallet of sound that I had at [my] disposal as a percussionist.

It only came in the late '80s when the real time system started to appear with processors that were able to control real time. I was studying with Tristan Murail for more or less one year as a private student. He put me in touch with a lot of things. He also told me that there is [*sic*] a program being made at IRCAM secretly, because it was not an official IRCAM production. That would become Max and is a wonderful program for the [*sic*] real time interaction and time processing. At that time Max was a control protocol to control huge 4X computer[*sic*], the one which Boulez used to do *Répons*. I got [*sic*] the pirate copy of it still with a kind of manuals [*sic*] written by Philippe Manoury with some examples [of] how to use Max. But I was very disappointed because Max was only controlling the midi synthesizer; only at IRCAM Max was controlling a processor. Shortly after that some American companies started making processors that accept a lot of real time controllers through midi. In '91 I started doing some experiments about processing the sound in [an] interactive way, the sound of percussion instruments and flute. It is important to understand that although Miso ensemble started as an instrumental group to interpret other people [*sic*] music it very quickly became a laboratory for my own music. My composer side was bigger than I thought. I am more composer than instrumentalist, although a performing side is an important thing in my activity, because I like to be on stage.

So I started little by little developing programs: I started programming. Only in late '97 MSP appeared. Meanwhile I was doing that by hardware processors. Some of them are still in use.

Among your works is also an interesting radio phonic piece, *Água ou Maré - Nome de Pedra*. In it, there is a completely different usage of electronics. It is also very special in terms of how you look to Portuguese heritage in that piece. It is not the superficial romanticism that most often we would hear when somebody deals with folklore tradition.

There is one thing that is important to understand. The work made within and for the Miso ensemble was always very special in the sense that Paula and I would be the performers. This is an important aspect because sometimes it changes the way you deal with the material because it is for yourself, it is not for the others, so the way you have to communicate is completely different. Although Miso ensemble has been and it [*sic*]still is my main lab for trying things. For electronic [music] it was absolutely fundamental because without this experience probably I would have never made those pieces that I made. The piece *Água ou Maré – Nome de Pedra (Water or Tide – Name of Stone, 1991)* is a piece that was made for a special context, for a special place.

Like *Constelacoes (1989)*, which was done for Palacio de Fronteira, or *Liquidus sonorus luminaris (2005)* for the fountain in Parque das Poetas in Oeiras, *Água ou Maré – Nome de Pedra* is a site specific piece.

But this piece for the tide mill has another aspect that was very interesting; it was not only site specific, but also time specific. Three times we made the piece in the tide mill. This is [an] extraordinary experience because for the time of the concert you need to consult the tide schedule to see when it is possible to do the concert. Probably there are only two or three days a month when you can do the concert, according to the moon and the tide... This is [a] very interesting approach in terms of time. Those things were something that we were doing a lot during the late '80s and the beginning of the '90s. Although it has nothing to do with that, I always think about composers like Alvin Lucier who really deal with the space, and those pieces are absolutely related with the space. Without that space they would have never been composed. So, the story is funny because I came to the tide mill and said that I have the [*sic*] proposal for a concert. And the director there, of the Eco

museum of Seixal, invited me to see the place because he thought that maybe it is not appropriate for the music. They have a concert hall, and I came there to the main room of the first floor of the mill. I said: 'I don't want to do the concert here; I want to do a concert downstairs with the mill grinding flour'. So the director thought I was crazy. I asked: 'Would you commission me the work?' And, in fact, they commissioned the work. Two millers were there controlling two of the stone mills. And during three times in the piece they just opened the mill and the water was flowing and we put the microphones on the water, to catch the water and process its sound, and then they stopped it. And it is unbelievable because it is not only [a] "grnnn, grnnnn" sound. The whole mill vibrates, so it is [a] very strong, very special thing. Because of this context I introduced the miller, and I use fragments of the miller's story about how much the things were [sic] changed. And then I took a wonderful poem of [sic] a Portuguese poet Carlos Oliveira that is called *Finisterra*. It is wonderful poetical prose. It [sic] is a guy who influenced me a lot as a writer; it is funny because he is [a] neorealist, [a] member of the communist party, very committed to the social problems, and he really transcended the neorealism [sic] writing to [an] extraordinary poetry of interrelationships of sound. For me he is like the Portuguese Mallarmé who did similar as [sic] Mallarmé, but one hundred years later.

How would you describe today's music scene in Portugal?

I think it changed a lot, as everywhere. Globalization is everywhere. My generation and people around 40, 50 were the first leaving the country to study abroad, because we had [travelled when we were] 15, 16, 17, when the revolution happened in Portugal. Those [travelers] before, had to [go into] exile. We could, for the first time, go abroad, to study and have contacts, and just return back [sic]. That made a difference. Most of my colleagues came back to have teacher positions. [The] current situation is completely different from those times. Now you get information everywhere, you can go everywhere very easy [sic], you can travel, you can live in different places, so I think the Portuguese scene is, as all scenes around, very much influenced by major imperialist cultures, German and French musical culture, very influential points to which everybody is attracted. Most of the people finishing music school in Portugal goes [sic] abroad, to do a master, or to extend the studies. I think that "the boom" in composition happened in the beginning of the '90s. Composers that have [done this are] now between 30 and 35, [and are a] lot [sic] of young and

talented people. [The] Superior Music School in Portugal started at the beginning of the '90s, so they had [a] different approach, although the infrastructure for music production and for music interpretation didn't catch up. So there is a big gap between what composers are doing and what they want to do, and what the country and several institutions can offer to them.

Miguel Azguime (1960, Lisbon, Portugal), composer, poet, and percussionist.

He founded the Miso Ensemble in 1985, a flute and percussion duo recognised by the public and by the critics as one of the most important Portuguese contemporary music groups. The Miso Ensemble has given numerous concerts in Portugal and abroad, with more than 400 performances to date.

Miguel Azguime has obtained various awards for composition and performance, has composed for diverse formations, instrumental and/or vocal with or without electronics, electroacoustic music, sound poetry, and also music for exhibitions, sound installations, theatre, dance and cinema. He has received commissions from several national and international prestigious institutions*.

Azguime's music has been performed by renowned soloists, ensembles and conductors**, being regularly presented at majors festivals of contemporary and electroacoustic music*** around the world.

The connections between Azguime the composer and Azguime the poet have given birth of a unique text and music relationship that he has named Electroacoustic Theatre and Electroacoustic Opera.

Besides his activity as a composer, poet and percussionist, he remains actively dedicated to the promotion and diffusion of contemporary music, as artistic director of the independent label Miso Records, as artistic director of the Música Viva Festival, as founder of the Miso Studio.

He has developed since 1995 the first Portuguese Loudspeaker Orchestra and as a researcher he has been working in the development of real time computer music, giving lectures and courses on this field.

In 2003 he started, together with Paula Azguime the Portuguese Music Information Center. This same year Miguel Azguime won the 2003 EMS composition prize.

Miguel Azguime has been composer in residence in many electronic studios around the world, namely the Heinrich Stroebel Experimental Studio of the Sudwestfunk – Freiburg, the Electronic Music Studio EMS in Stockholm, the Centre de Recherche et Formations Musicales de Wallonie – Liège, the TU Studio from the Technische Universität Berlin, the International Centre for Composers in Visby, the Sonology Department of the Kunitachi University – Tokyo. In 2006 Miguel Azguime was DAAD composer in residence in Berlin, and since then he lives and works in Berlin and Lisbon.

In 2008 Miguel Azguime won the Music Theatre NOW prize from the International Theatre Institut (UNESCO) for his electroacoustic opera "Salt Itinerary".

* - (Heidelberg Festival, Festival Ars Musica, EMS Stockolm, Japan Society for Contemporary Music, Ensemble Pythagore, éOle, Ensemble Court-Circuit, Commande d'État du Ministère de la Culture (France), Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Oriente Foundation, Casas de Fronteira e Alorna Foundation, Ministry of Culture (Portugal), Centro Cultural de Belém, Europália 1991, Porto 2001, Casa da Música, Teatro Viriato, Seixal Municipality – Ecomuseum, Setúbal Municipality – Michel Giacometti Museum, Oeiras Municipality, Lisbon Municipality, Matosinhos Municipality,...)

** - (Alain Neveux, Jean-Marie Cottet, Alain Damiens, Robert Glassburner, Paula Azguime, Yoshiko Shibuya, Angel Gimeno, Lenka Zupkova, Tsung Yeh, Johannes Kalitzke, Stefan Asbury, Dominique My, Kunitaka Kokaji, Gregory Rose, Rolf Gupta, Peter Rundel, Olivier Cuendet, Titus Engel, Pedro Amaral, Yves Krier, Pascal Galois, Roberto Bollea, Juliane Trémoulet, Smith Quartet, California Ear Unit, Ensemble Recherche, Ensemble Aventure, Remix Ensemble, Ensemble Ébruitez-vous!, OrchestrUtopica, Grupo de Música Contemporânea de Lisboa, Miso Ensemble, Sond'Ar-te Electric Ensemble, Ensemble Antipodes, Gulbenkian Choir, Antifonia Choir, Singcircle, Hua Xia Ensemble, L'Autre Trio, ComeT Ensemble Tokyo, ...)

*** - (ISCM-World Music Days in Luxembourg, Japan, Slovenia, Croatia; Festival Ars Musica, Festival L'Espace du Son, Sonic Arts Annual Conference, Sonorities Festival Belfast, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival; Spring in Havana Festival; Florida Electroacoustic Music Festival, Xornadas de Música Contemporânea de Santiago de Compostela, Festival Escena Contemporânea; Festival Synthèse, Festival Novelum, Festival Mira, Festival Ébruitez-Vous, Festival Itinéraire de Nuit, Festival MUSICA Strasboiurg; Ultraschall Festival , Maerzmusik Festival, Festival Transart; Festival Audio Art; Inventionen Festival, Heidelberg Festival; Encontros de Música Electroacústica de Brasília; Jauna Muzika; Encontros Gulbenkian de Música Contemporânea; Festival Música em Novembro; Festival Música Viva - Portugal; Oxford Contemporary Music Festival; Centro para la Difusion de la Musica Contemporanea; Festival Ensems; ZKM Karlsruhe; Warsaw Autumn Festival; Akousma4; Musicacoustica Beijing;...)

www.misoensemble.com