

Acceptance speech

20 June 2023

Thomas Adès, awardee in the Music and Opera category (15th edition)

I am amazed to be standing here today - I'm wondering how it happened, what are the steps that led here? I don't remember my first steps, nor my first notes on the piano, sitting next to my father. He says now that after he showed me a few tunes I quickly pushed him off the piano stool.

But what I do remember is feeling there was something hidden in the sounds: a garden, a building, mine to look for. I told myself I was too busy with homework, and television, to find this secret place. But one day something changed, everything changed. I was on the sofa in our playroom, watching TV with my brother. We'd probably been there for over an hour. I had a vague feeling of wasting my time and my gifts, when I suddenly felt a fluttering. Was I ill – a heart attack? – I ran to my mother saying there was something wrong with my heart! (There wasn't.) Over ten years later it happened again, in the middle of writing an orchestral piece, *Asyla*. I went to hospital and learned about panic attacks.

Even before that, I sensed this feeling was caused by an obstacle, like a knot in my path, which I could only remove by untying it. It was a tangle of sounds, so dense that it was every sound in a single moment. I soon found that these were pieces of music waiting to be untangled.

I started to unravel them, by making pieces of music. I learned, then, that others also heard them as music, and might be as affected by it as I was. At the same time I discovered the power of music – great as nature, the greatest of all powers – a power I suddenly found in music of the past – in Beethoven, Sibelius, Janáček, Stravinsky, Messiaen, Kate Bush.

I came to find that composing, necessary to my physical survival, as I thought it was, could also give me access to this power. It became my one purpose in life to do whatever I could to release that power into the world.

But how? I played obsessively the masters of the past, to learn their secrets. And I learned that times change, but the problems are the same.

As I worked, I instinctively avoided ideologies. I mistrust theoretical dead-ends. If I have, as this award generously proposes, extended frontiers, it is a result of activities necessary for my survival. I have (more or less laboriously) pursued my inclinations, and ignored voices mandating what music should or should not be, in their opinion.

It is especially pleasing to me that this recognition comes from Spain, land of explorers, country of visionaries. Bilbao was, as it happens, the first place on Earth I laid eyes on beyond Great Britain, the island of my birth. The vision of this place, this horizon, different as it was from the city of today, was an inspiration to the boy on the prow of that ferry in 1976. Since then Spanish art and culture have often been an inspiration to me. From the influence of Spanish music and traditional culture in *Living Toys*, through the conquistadors in *America: A Prophecy*, to Luis Buñuel's film *The Exterminating Angel*, which was the basis for my third opera.

My mother, Dawn Adès, is an expert in Surrealism. So I grew up with Dalí and Buñuel, and the paradoxes of Buñuel's work are part of life. Buñuel called *The Exterminating Angel* his "black pearl." Elegant society is trapped in a house for no reason – it's a philosophical "mise en abîme," a delicious challenge to a composer, forcing one to cut to the bone: why does any character do or sing anything?

So Buñuel, this great figure of Spanish culture – banned from Spain for many years – pushed me, in my efforts to stave off my ever-threatening heart attack, to find a musical "America" of my own – a New World, guided by temperament, but also by something beyond me.

I'm grateful to that mysterious force, to the freedom, but also to the compulsion, it has given me, and to the BBVA Foundation for allowing me to continue on my path.