

'I was never part of the Sistema'

The Venezuelan pianist Gabriela Montero tells Tim Teeman why Hugo Chávez makes her afraid to return home

For the pianist Gabriela Montero, Hugo Chávez's recent re-election to a fourth term as president of Venezuela was the nightmare result. The musician, who played at Barack Obama's inauguration ceremony and is famous for her improvisations that segue from a Justin Bieber tune, say, into a Bach fugue, is a passionate, eloquent campaigner for political change in her home country. She was hopeful that Chávez's challenger, Henrique Capriles, would win. "Chávez's victory means complete decay," she says, adding that her denunciations of Chávez's regime and the violence in Venezuela mean she won't be able to return for "another six years at least". She forecasts "a mass exodus, broken hearts, such depths of violence. There's nowhere to go."

Montero, 42, now lives in Boston, Massachusetts with her two daughters and her partner of two years, the baritone Sam McElroy. Last year she performed her first major work, *ExPatría*, a personal and political lament. In a statement that accompanied it she wrote: "The opening chord is intended to jolt the public from silence and apathy... the French horn

and piano reflect a fleeting recollection of an innocent moment, an ominous calm. The theme is quickly brutalised, corrupted and stolen by an imposing, percussive and militaristic interruption... depicting the daily gunfire to which Venezuelans have grown accustomed."

In a Boston coffee shop Montero, soon to play two concerts in London and Bath with the French cellist Gautier Capuçon, decries "the huge sums of money generated from oil" that profit only the rich and corrupt in Venezuela. "There were 20,000 murders last year, 150,000 over the past 14 years. It has a higher 'corruption index' [rating] than Zimbabwe. Chávez has skilfully created the impression that his government is for the people, but Venezuela has deteriorated horribly under him. The country is at war. I have to give a voice to people who have been completely abandoned."

Montero rounds angrily on the international parading of El Sistema, the Venezuelan musical education programme whose most famous standard-bearer is the conductor Gustavo Dudamel, musical director of the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra and the LA Philharmonic. Montero has "played with them since I was 8, but I was never part of the Sistema. It is a beautiful flower among ruins, a nucleus of brilliant, talented people, used by the government to project an image of equality and social welfare."

As for Dudamel, "I wish he'd speak up, of course I do, but he is in a tough position. He's a figurehead, but if you see brutality you should say something."

Montero declines to speak about her family, worried for their safety, but anticipates "having to get them out" of Venezuela. The last time she was there — in 2010 — she had bodyguards: "It was like being a hostage at home."

Raised in the capital Caracas, she was just a baby when her grandmother



bought Montero a mini-piano for her cot. At night her mother sang her lullabies and the Venezuelan national anthem; within 18 months Montero could play this repertoire. "I have a very good musical memory, I learn fast."

At 3 she overheard piano lessons from an upstairs flat and played back what she heard: the teacher told Montero's mother: "I've seen talent, but this girl has no horizon, no limits." Montero started giving concerts at 5 and, when she was 8, made her debut with an orchestra. One early teacher "castrated"

Montero by forbidding improvisation: it bloomed as her trademark after she decided "not to study theory, harmony, composition and analysis. My nature is to be a composer, my improvisation is just that: me going into this imaginary world to create pieces."

Through her twenties, including a "wonderful" period at London's Royal Academy of Music, "I wondered, 'Who am I?'" Later she felt like "giving up, I loathed music. 'Child prodigy' had been superimposed on to me. I felt like a playing monkey. It took a long time to

“I wish Gustavo Dudamel would speak up”

rid myself of the mediocrity I grew up with."

At 31 Montero improvised for the Argentinian pianist Martha Argerich, "who said, 'You have to share this with the world', giving me the validation I needed". Often in the second half of a concert audience members suggest songs or ringtones which Montero plays, then segues into classical compositions made up on the spot. "I'm in another space, as if something is playing through me, I basically get out of the way," she says. "Classical music is such a bubble, improvisation really connects to younger audiences." She hears music "everywhere, in this coffee shop, people talking, the toucans in Costa Rica where we just were."

If Montero's career has been a "long, winding road", her private life has been "a big soap opera". She has married twice: first a bartender when she was 18 in Caracas, then Jonathan, her 15-year-old daughter Natalia's English father, when she was 26 ("one of the few nice guys in all this"). Ten-year-old Isabella's father walked out when Isabella was almost 1. "Sam has given her so much love, understanding and confidence," Montero says of McElroy.

Being a single mother and international pianist "was tough, a negotiation every day". Montero's mother helped her, but "having a crying three-year-old holding your leg, not letting you leave the house, is heartbreaking," Montero says. "I asked myself: 'Do I want to pay this price and make my children pay it?', but I hope it's shown them a woman as a strong role model." Natalia is "a thinker", Isabella "her own talk show and audience" with a "natural feel" for the cello.

Montero intends to compose more and next year play *ExPatría* with an all-female orchestra in London at the Women of the World Festival at the Southbank Centre in March. She will also return to the World Economic Forum in Davos, where she spoke three years ago, to address powerbrokers about "the hell" in Venezuela. However brilliant she would be, Montero does not want to be a politician, preferring to "help people through music. I always counted on having a home and country to return to," she says, "but now..." She falls silent, then smiles, listening to the "music" all around us.

Gabriela Montero plays the Wigmore Hall, London W1 (020-7935 2141) on Nov 12 and Bath Mozartfest (01225 463362), Nov 13. gabrielamontero.com



Culture notes Beware this restoration tragedy Rachel Campbell-Johnston

On November 1 — All Saints' Day — 500 years ago, the Sistine Chapel ceiling was revealed and the world stared, transfixed. To those first 16th-century watchers and to millions since, Michelangelo's fresco has been regarded as the supreme masterwork of the Italian Renaissance. But its restoration, completed in 1999, stirred up a heated and still fiercely bubbling debate.

Few would argue against preservation, against making the most minimal interventions possible to stabilise works or taking more drastic action when a work is at risk of disappearing completely: when a fresco, for instance, is about to fall off a wall. But there is a clear line between trying to prevent further deterioration and attempting to restore an image to what the artist first intended.

Art restoration, at least as delicate as the surgery to which it is so often compared, carries the same risks. Pictures expire under the scalpel. Think of Rembrandt's *Night Watch*. Details were painted and then deliberately obscured. But this canvas has now been so assiduously cleaned



that it looks more like *Dawn Patrol*. A code of ethics governing the rules of restoration should be drawn up. Extreme restraint should be shown. A principle of reversibility should be applied so that anything added can always be safely removed. Illusionistic in-painting should always be disclosed.

But this code of ethics has never been formalised. Instead, art restoration has flourished into a billion-dollar industry as the restorer turns explorer — an Indiana Jones-style adventurer who, armed with his infra-red camera, rides fearlessly to the rescue of our imperilled treasures. The more spectacular the project, the more attention it gets.

The restorers of the Sistine may have been attempting to uncover the "authentic" version. But authenticity is problematic. Quite apart from the fact that history is always up for debate, that "aura" of originality Walter Benjamin famously described depends not just on the identity of the work but on its context and history. This puts the restorer in a perplexing bind. To try to return a piece to its original state requires that the conservator destroy the evidence of time. On the other hand, to preserve that evidence is to obscure the object's origins and therefore overwrite what the artist intended us to see.

What parts of the Sistine's 500-year-old history should have been preserved? Should the loincloths — the so-called "censorial draperies" — applied in later centuries to its nudes have been removed or preserved? In the end those that had been added

When the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel was restored the loincloths that had been added to nudes after 1750 were erased and the rest kept

after 1750 were erased and the rest kept because they were considered historical documents of real importance to the Counter-Reformation.

We crave authenticity because we want to feel as we gaze at a work that we are somehow communicating with the soul of its maker. But even as we seek to reconnect more immediately through restoration we may in fact be breaking our links with the past. In a postmodern world that seems to prefer playful pastiche to attempts at invention, artworks are increasingly treated like texts, to be re-interpreted according to the changing interests of the passing eras. This can be fine. You can decide to set *Hamlet* in New York City or prove that the *Iliad* is all about gender politics. The play or the poem will still remain intact. But paintings are objects and to reinterpret them we must also destroy them.

The Sistine has been transformed by cleaning into an object for our times. The triumph of the Renaissance was its simulation of the third dimension, a way of seeing that demanded a totally new sort of observation and slowly pervaded every aspect of culture. But we have lost this perspective. Conditioned by Matisse and reared on Pop, on cartoons, advertising and computer screens, we see the world in flattened colour. We turn away from those shadowy dramas that obsessed Michelangelo to peer through a more vibrant contemporary lens.

It's a bit like seeing the corpse of someone we love laid out in the funeral parlour complete with face powder, eye-shadow and lipstick. It may make things feel temporarily more palatable. But it can't hide the fact that in the end nothing lasts, that, in the end, everything that is whole — from watches to the seven wonders of the world — will disintegrate.

Conservationists can — and should — do everything they can to slow down the clock. That's merely the equivalent of a person keeping fit. But to go for the full facelift is merely false. It's to choose Disney over dignity. Decay, after all, is the second half of life's story. It leads to its fulfilment. And who knows, once a work is finally lost might it not in fact come full cycle and return to those divine lands of imagination from which it was first born?

“What parts of the Sistine's history should have been preserved?”

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