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“WHEN THE GROOVE IS THERE, YOU’RE NO LONGER LISTENING WITH YOUR HEAD, BUT WITH YOUR BODY” – ALFREDO OVALLES



Alfredo Ovalles (c) Juergen Knoth

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For [ALFREDO OVALLES](https://www.musicexport.at/artist/alfredo-ovalles/) (<https://www.musicexport.at/artist/alfredo-ovalles/>), the physical aspect in music is the driving elixir. Grown up initially with rock music, the pianist with Venezuelan roots who has been living in Vienna for ten years switches playfully between standard classical repertoire, experimental solo projects as well as highly complex contemporary works of new music. As a member of the [Black Page Orchestra](https://www.musicexport.at/artist/black-page-orchestra/) (<https://www.musicexport.at/artist/black-page-orchestra/>), he will be making multiple appearances at the IMPULS FESTIVAL & ACADEMY in Graz (August 16-28, 2021), while also reaching out for virtuosity there. The official Bösendorfer artist ALFREDO OVALLES tells Ruth Ranacher in an interview why the constant practice of different styles is invaluable to him and why he doesn't believe in a radical break with tradition.

You describe being musically at home in a world where boundaries are dissolving. In terms of approach that sounds quite contemporary. Frank Zappa plays a big role on your road to contemporary music. What was the decisive moment here?

Alfredo Ovalles: Besides Zappa, who was a big influence, there's also *King Crimson* and generally the progressive rock bands of the 1970s. Freddie Mercury was the first person I saw playing the piano and at that time I said to

myself, “I want to do THAT!” I’m a freak and love reading interviews of artists that are important to me. Zappa’s biography describes the moment when Zappa tracked down Edgar Varèse’s phone number and called him in New York. A new world opened up for me. I took a similar path through *King Crimson*. Their guitarist Robert Fripp asked himself what Béla Bartók and Sergei Prokofiev would sound like on the electric guitar and thus described the band’s aesthetic. I did some research, and that’s how I ended up with Bach.

Let’s talk about your first album “Transoceanic” (Hello Stage, 2017). One gets the impression that you wanted to mix styles and eras. Figuratively speaking, creating a big collage, can one put it that way?

Alfredo Ovalles: Yes. I love concept albums! The album contains the milestones that are important to me. You will find Carl Phillip Emmanuel Bach, the Venezuelan composer Federico Ruiz with “Tropical Triptych” and a contemporary piece by Nikolet Burzynska. The latter is dedicated to me and represents the idea of what I might do in the future. Oliver Messiaen is in there too because it’s the greatest piece I played in my student days.

Was the choice of pieces your decision?

Alfredo Ovalles: Yes. This year I’m releasing my second album “Dance! Volume 1 – from Bach to Bernstein”. On it, I’ll bring together in an arrangement for piano everything that can be seen as dance music. For me, this includes the “Partita No. 1” by Johann Sebastian Bach and the symphonic dances from Bernstein’s “West Side Story”. Dance music is very important to me. For labels, however, it’s a concept they have a hard time selling. So I have my own label *Klangbauhaus* and am releasing that stuff there.



Alfredo Ovalles (c) Juergen Knot

In an earlier interview you described concentrating on one genre in order to be marketable as being a big challenge. Would you say the same today or is the label a kind of way out?

Alfredo Ovalles: The label is something of a way out. Franz Zappa or John Zorn also had/have their own labels. When I have a project that doesn’t fit into the concept of other people, I have my outlet with *Klangbauhaus*. In my jazz trio *Zaperoco Conspiracy*, we take our cue from Venezuelan folk music, but play it like contemporary jazz. This project was also sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, maybe we will release it on my label, in addition to Bach and contemporary works.

What is the appeal for you in juggling so many different balls?

Alfredo Ovalles: I'm playing different pieces all the time that I don't even get to the point where I'll sigh and say to myself, "... another Beethoven concerto!" Every day brings in something new. In addition to concerts, I'm preparing projects, such as Gustav Mahler's "Das Lied von der Erde" with *Klangforum Wien* (<https://www.musicexport.at/artist/klangforum-wien/>) for the *Vienna Festival*. In one of my solo projects I'm currently making a recording for the Cultural Forum in Istanbul for the festival *New Music Days İzmir II* – a festival in Izmir with new music for piano. I'm not just playing music from one movement, such as the Darmstadt School, but also pieces from the American minimalists. This is invaluable! I also do believe that it makes me become a better musician. When I'm playing a piece by Liszt, maybe I can take a different perspective because I've internalized everything that came before and after him.

In what way?

Alfredo Ovalles: Let's take Beethoven as an example. When I play Beethoven today, I have a modern piano, which he didn't have. Maybe I can add a new timbre that Beethoven didn't know? Maybe I'll find an impressionistic influence; it sounds pretentious now, but one thing influences the other.

[...] CLASSICAL MUSICIANS DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT GROOVE IS

Such as, for example, playing techniques. In new music, one is working a lot with extended playing techniques ...

Alfredo Ovalles: Yes, or a rhythmic requirement. I always say that classical musicians don't understand what groove is. For me, on the other hand, groove is very important, no matter what the style is. When the groove is there, you aren't listening with your head anymore, but with your body. For me, it's very important to get that physical response. There are pieces from Bach, too, that have a groove. I think that's something you get from being exposed to other genres of music.

Matthias Kranebitter - nihilistic études 4-6 (piano as neurosis)



How did you join the *Black Page Orchestra*?

Alfredo Ovalles: I'm a founding member. When the time there was ripe for a pianist, I joined the initial project of Alessandro Baticci and [Matthias Kranebitter](https://www.musicexport.at/artist/matthias-kranebitter/) (<https://www.musicexport.at/artist/matthias-kranebitter/>). It's an incredible ensemble, a group of the best musicians. They can do everything! Improvise, read crazy stuff prima vista –

and it's very cool to have such partners and play together.

The *Black Page Orchestra* named itself after a piece by Frank Zappa, the score of which is so dense that the page is black, full of notes. In general, how important is the concept behind the work for you?

Alfredo Ovalles: In general, I'm not a friend of empty ideas. Sometimes there's more substance in the accompanying text than in the music. For me, the narrative is important. I'm fascinated by the idea of the artist as a total work of art („*Gesamtkunstwerk*“), the idea of understanding life as an artist in its entirety.

VIRTUOSITY ALSO EXPRESSES ITSELF THROUGH PERFORMANCE

The pieces played by the *Black Page Orchestra* are very dynamic, often very loud. Doesn't that move pretty quickly in the direction of overstraining too? In other words, pushing the intensity until it's no longer possible?

Alfredo Ovalles: Pieces by Hikari Kiyama, one of the composers we've often played, are taking us to the limits of virtuosity. I think that's the tenor with the *Black Page Orchestra*. Virtuosity also expresses itself in performance when the body is added to it. By that I mean the physical aspects of virtuosity, how you use your body. At *Klangspuren*, we played a double concerto by Kiyama five years ago. The instrumentation alone with piano and percussion, accompanied by piccolo and violin, is extraordinary, and then "Lehmanesque" is awfully loud, awfully fast almost all the time, and awfully long. It's a work-out! I think it's interesting, because you're not only pushing the limits musically, but also physically.

At *impuls* in Graz you will be present as a soloist, as a member of the *Black Page Orchestra*, and as a lecturer as well. In your solo concert you will be playing works by Matthias Kranebitter, [Bernhard Lang](https://www.musicexport.at/artist/bernhard-lang/) (<https://www.musicexport.at/artist/bernhard-lang/>) and Margareta Ferek-Petric. Kranebitter deconstructs his material, pursues deconstruction and condensation to the extreme. Lang, who is also known for his remixes of Wagner operas and Mozart, exploits repetition as a compositional principle. The piece "I Repeat Myself When Under Stress" by Ferek-Petric seems to fit the energy concept perfectly, let alone by its title. Are repetition and time pressure also the central theme of the evening?

Alfredo Ovalles: The underlying idea of the concert is tradition, and on several levels: dynamically there's an evolution, it's not just full throttle. Its content is also related to my workshop on virtuosity in the 21st century, but more on that later.

Kranebitter's "Nihilistic Studies 4-6" in which he experiments with Beethoven's "Für Elise" establish a relationship to tradition. He really does everything with it! Bernhard Lang's "Intermezzo No.2" deals with the romantic idea of intermezzi. These are pieces that formally of course are playing with repetition, but Lang exhausts this by repeating very small excerpts to the extreme. In Margareta Ferek-Petric's piece, the middle part contains quite some virtuoso moments for traditional piano playing. Before and after that, however, the whole piano is used as an instrument, not just the keys.

What stands out in the piece is a video that is also aesthetically very well done, with the approach to the piano, switching to color as soon as you sit down at the piano. Before that, you turned off the metronome. Can this be interpreted as time being suspended? When you leave the piano stool, you turn it on again.

Alfredo Ovalles: That can also be an interpretation.

Margareta Ferek-Petric - I Repeat Myself When Under Stress



In works by Matthias Kranebitter, the piano often sounds like the soundtrack of a computer game at high speed. What fascinates you about this sound aesthetic?

Alfredo Ovalles: The former is hard to answer, it's a physical reaction. I love playing this music. It's fun, it's witty, it has so much soul. Kranebitter's personality is in his music, and it's completely genuine. I remember the feeling I had when I first heard "Nihilistic Studies," my physical reaction ...

How did that manifest itself?

Alfredo Ovalles: Hard to say ... Plenty of energy!

And how good does one have to be to be able to play that?

Alfredo Ovalles: Very good, this is highly complex music! Classically trained musicians who have no relation to contemporary music often think there are no phrases, no dynamics in New Music. I say: Yes, there are, you just have to find them! Furthermore, they think everything must be played exactly as it is written down. In contemporary music there is no such thing, because there is no fixed tradition. Today it is our job as musicians to write this tradition.

WHEN YOU PLAY NEW MUSIC, YOU KNOW THAT PAPER CAN'T CONVEY EVERYTHING

Does that mean that as a performer you also need to work out for yourself what a new piece is all about?

Alfredo Ovalles: The greatest compliment is when a composer is telling me that through my playing I have added something new, discovered something that he or she has not yet heard in it. A piece is not finished when the composer has written the last two lines. It also belongs to the performers. Because the piece is written, each interpreter can find new things. That's why I'm always a little disappointed about the uniformity in classical music. When you play New Music, you know that paper can't convey everything. You have to find it out for yourself. Because there are differences between what the composer is hearing and what I'm hearing myself. Fortunately, there are musicians around now who are also making this claim.

I assume a lot of these questions will go into your



workshop for composers at the *impuls* Academy. What do your preparations look like, what can the participants expect?

Alfredo Ovalles: My theme is “21st Century Piano Virtuosity”. Currently I am waiting for the works that are being submitted, then I will make a selection. First and foremost, I am curious about the new pieces and would like to talk to the composers about them. These are our case studies. In any case, the workshop will include a round table where we will talk about virtuosity. I do have some idea of it, and I know what is meant by virtuosity up to the mid-20th century in the tradition of Sergei Rachmaninoff. But what does virtuosity mean today? The question is: How can we transform this kind of virtuosity and carry it into the 21st century? In my workshop I want to talk about ideas, we don't need complete pieces, participants can also send sketches.



Alfredo Ovalles (c) Radek Swiatkowski

Does the suggestion for the theme come from you?

Alfredo Ovalles: Yes. Right now I'm obsessed with the connection between tradition and virtuosity. I think you need to be connected to tradition in the background to go further. I don't think a radical break is possible there.

[...] YOU NEED THESE LABORATORY SITUATIONS WHERE YOU ARE ALLOWED TO EXPERIMENT WITHOUT LIMITS

In your experience, what is the function of festivals for New Music in general and of temporary symposia, academies and residencies in particular?

Alfredo Ovalles: On the one hand, of course, it is the continuation, a new repertoire that encounters an audience. On the other hand, it's an opportunity for everyone interested in New Music and new ways of doing art to meet and discuss. It's nice to have a beer with colleagues after the opening concert of *Wien Modern* and talk about the program. That's important for exchanging about and developing this art form further. At the same time, festivals of New Music also remain isolated, always the same people getting together there. The question is how to break out from these circles and get into the seasonal business of concert halls. But that's another issue. I think you need these laboratory situations where you can experiment without limits.

You also have some international dates in your tour calendar for the summer. How are you looking forward to them, bearing in mind the COVID-19 pandemic that has been going on for some time now?

Alfredo Ovalles: A few concerts are confirmed, a few are not, everything can change until the last minute. I keep my fingers crossed that the situation will be stable again in the fall. Among other things, in September I would like to play a world premiere by Jorge Sánchez-Chiong that should already have taken place in 2020 as the opening concert of the festival *Klangspuren Schwaz* – a double concerto for piano, percussion and orchestra.

In an interview you said that if you don't have any live performances, you feel physically ill. How did you spend the first year of the corona pandemic?

Alfredo Ovalles: It was difficult. With the *Black Page Orchestra* we were able to play a few concerts in the fall with limited size audiences, and I myself was also on the road on my own, for example at the festival *Warsaw Autumn*. These were good impulses. I couldn't play concerts, but I had a lot to do. I'm not a sound engineer, but I built my own studio and learned a lot thanks to great friends who are super sound engineers. I didn't feel physically ill, but the moment after a concert for a livestream, when no one else is in the room except the sound engineer, that's a tough one.

Have you heard a good livestream yourself that has stuck in your memory?

Alfredo Ovalles: Honestly, no. There was the premiere at *Wien Modern* by Matthias Kranebitter, which was great. Recently the *London Symphony Orchestra*, but they are doing that like eating their daily bread. I don't have much desire to follow livestreams, it's better to put on a good record.

Thank you very much for the interview!

Ruth Ranacher

Links:

[Alfredo Ovalles \(http://alfredoovalles.com/\)](http://alfredoovalles.com/)

[Alfredo Ovalles \(music austria Datenbank\) \(https://db.musicaustria.at/node/203007\)](https://db.musicaustria.at/node/203007)

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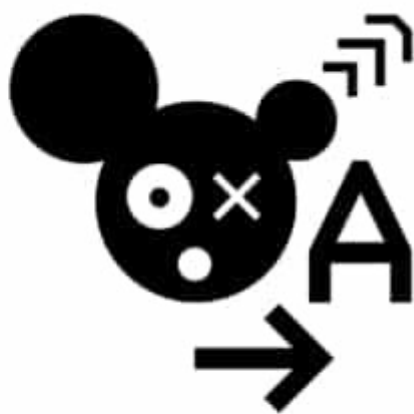
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