

AIR – ARTIST IN RESIDENCE Niederösterreich

PROGRAM REPORT

My name is Sergio Díaz De Rojas and I am a pianist and composer from Lima, Peru. From the 4th of February to the 27th of March, 2022, I was an artist in residence at the AIR Niederösterreich program in Krems an der Donau, Austria, where I crafted an album for felted upright piano and other acoustic instruments, as well as a couple of smaller projects.

THE MAIN PROJECT

During my stay in Krems, I wrote an album based on my interaction with the city and its surroundings. Inspired by its narrow, picturesque streets which I explored during various early mornings, its historical towers, churches and museums, the Wachau Valley and the Danube River from their various perspectives, some cosy antique stores and cafes, and even the Stein Prison right in front of me, this project depicts my experience living in Krems: the excitement and joy of discovering new places, the freedom of being a complete stranger, and the occasional loneliness of feeling like an invisible ghost. There is something magical about freely and peacefully experiencing a place so different and far away from home such as Krems (in comparison to Lima, Peru). It feels like watching a beautiful movie while, simultaneously, being part of it.

Originally, this album was supposed to be for solo piano but, while composing, I felt that these new works could fit very well with other acoustic instruments. That is the reason why I am currently discussing with Trio Ramberget, an ensemble from Sweden, the possibility of working together on the recording of this project. They play the double bass, the trombone, and the bass clarinet – a quite unconventional combination that could provide the album with an interesting sound palette. Regardless of this possible collaboration, I have recorded a solo piano version accompanied by the effect pedals I brought with me from my home studio in Valencia, Spain. The album consists of ten pieces. Some of them are soft and slow paced while others are quite intense and rhythmic. In most cases, the harmony is modal due to the dreamy, floaty – and sometimes unstable – character I intend to transmit, which I also try to reinforce with the use of irregular time signatures such as 5/4 or 7/8 and their continuous exchange with other measures.

→ listen to the first draft of the album (solo piano)

PASSPORT SICKNESS

Besides the album, I developed a smaller project dedicated to Austrian composer Ernst Krenek. I read his novel “The Three Overcoats of Anton K.”, where I found the term of passport sickness quite interesting and relatable. Since I had access to the grand piano and the historic Buchla 100 Series synthesizer that he used to compose his own music with (courtesy of the Ernst Krenek Institute), I thought it would be wonderful to write a piece using both instruments with the intention of exploring our different – but still relatable – experiences as immigrants.

→ listen to a short fragment of this long-form composition

B-SIDES AND OTHER RARITIES

In addition to these projects, I wrote a series of compositions that could be considered the B-sides of the album. It is a collection of ear-friendly pieces that could be released as stand-alone singles or included on compilation projects. I also made a good amount of field recordings around the city of Krems but I will have to detailedly listen to them before deciding how to use them.

→ listen to the first draft of these stand-alone pieces

FEATURES AND EVENTS

- Live performance with AIR colleague Larissa Bertonasco – 24th of February
- Interview for the Ernst Krenek Institute (EN/DE) – 15th of March
- Concert at Salon Krenek for the Kulturplattform Krems meeting – 17th of March

FINAL THOUGHTS (BASED ON THE REPORT'S QUESTIONS)

The residency was a truly wonderful experience from the very beginning with the taxi driver picking me up from the airport to the last days having farewell meetings with the lovely people I met along the way. The AIR program gave me the opportunity to work on various creative projects in a peaceful, inspiring and beautiful environment, and to connect and collaborate with other artists and cultural institutions – all of that while awarding me a significant grant. It is an initiative that genuinely cares about artists and they do their best to demonstrate it.

There is not a single disadvantage I could think of when looking back at my two-month residency in Krems, and there are certainly various advantages besides the ones already mentioned – if by any strange reason they aren't good enough – such as the free access to museums and galleries, the professionally-equipped studio, the comfortable living quarters, and the organisation of activities, concerts and workshops in which we can participate regardless of our artistic discipline or language. I even received a private lesson by the superb musician Gammon, who came all the way from Vienna to teach me how to use Ernst Krenek's Buchla 100 Series synthesizer, and a relaxing yoga session by the lovely Flora Renhardt.

Considering my musical practice, the instruments I use, and my creative process, there are certain suggestions that could be implemented to make AIR experience even more rewarding:

- The studio is not acoustically treated so recording acoustic instruments can be challenging at times. A good solution could be to form a partnership with a recording studio in Krems or any city nearby to record the projects that we compose at the AIR quarters.
- In addition to the beautiful upright piano in the studio, I would include a versatile analog synthesizer (Moog One, Sequential Prophet 6, UDO Audio Super 6, etc) which would not only be a wonderful tool for those of us familiar with these types of instruments, but also an inspiring opportunity for those new to the world of electronic music that wish to learn about them.
- It would also be wonderful to have the opportunity to perform live. Guaranteeing the artists the possibility of playing a small series of concerts or to headline a music festival would be an enormous advantage. Another idea that could be quite attractive for certain types of musicians – myself included – is the collaboration with galleries, museums or any other type of multidisciplinary environment interested in developing and showcasing sound installations.
- Finally, I would recommend hiring a sound engineer to set up a fixed recording/mixing station in one of the studio's desks, where the audio interface, mixer, and studio monitors will be properly placed and ready to use.

Again, these are just suggestions that could make the AIR program even more interesting for certain types of musicians, but it is already quite amazing and it is actually inspiring to see how each artist shapes the studio according to their different creative approaches.

One final advantage of the AIR program that I would like to mention is the possibility of easily exploring some of Austria's landmarks. I spent a few days visiting Salzburg, Vienna, and Hallstatt. As a classically-trained musician, I cannot explain how special and meaningful it was to visit the house where Mozart was born and the cemetery where Beethoven and Brahms are buried, and to attend a concert at the impressive Musikverein Wien. In addition, I visited museums that showcase the original works of some of the my favourite painters, and got mesmerised by some of Austria's most

impressive natural landscapes and buildings. I hold these experiences close to my heart and they have only been possible in such a comfortable and practical way thanks to the AIR program.

SPECIAL THANKS

I don't want to finish my report without thanking the lovely people that made all of this possible. My endless gratitude goes to Paula for selecting me to be one of the artists in residence at AIR, to Klaus and Flora for the superb organisation and constant support, to Alethea and the entire Ernst Krenek Institute for the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of working with Krenek's instruments and for organising a live performance for me at Salon Krenek, and to Gammon for teaching me how to use one of the world's first synthesizers. Lots of love to you, to the AIR program, and to this wonderful country that I miss so much already. I hope we will meet again.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. J. J.', with a long horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the signature.