



Photos courtesy of the artist

BEYOND THEIR BORDERS

By Benjamin Pomerance

A HARP, a six-pack of beer and a blur of thoughts — Sergio Alonso could feel his life tilting, whirling out of control, and yet he did not care.

At one time, he had possessed potential in droves: enough brains to get into college and enough motivation to keep him there, backed by a family unit that felt robust and reliable. Now, however, the stable family had cracked. His parents had separated, and his father had decamped for life in another state. His brother had taken charge of the family's affairs, making the calls about what was done and what was not.

And one of those calls had been to conceal what had happened from Sergio, letting him drift in his bubble at the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA), studying physiological science and planning on going to medical school and playing mariachi music on the side. There were reasons, of course, from everyone who felt that this secrecy was best. Sergio was a family man, enough so

that news of the separation would cause him to quit school, come home and get a job. This everyone knew, and this was incentive enough to keep the news off of Sergio's plate.

Yet Sergio found out anyway. After he did, he felt like a dog whose owner had kicked him twice. Then he did something unexpected. He did not pack up and come home. Instead, he stayed where he was. He tried to study but couldn't. He attempted to socialize but couldn't. On some days, simply getting up in the morning felt like a strain.

There was one exception. When Alonso ran his fingers over the strings of his harp, the instrument that he will play in the next virtual concert on the Piano By Nature series on Feb. 12, the universe came into some semblance of focus. "I would get a six-pack of beer to drink," he remembers, "and play music by myself for hours." He sighs. "It was almost as if I could pick up the harp and vanish to another place."

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In those hours, so many places beckoned. Back to the San Fernando Valley, to begin with, back to the place where this whole crazy journey had started. In the home, Spanish was the language of conversation, presided over by two parents who were born and raised in Mexico, a mother and a father who shared a love for the cultural heritage of their homeland. One day, a man came into that household and offered to teach Sergio, a child of elementary school age, how to play the guitar. "Sure," Sergio responded.

But it was the schoolhouse where the music truly took hold. His older brother played in the school band, and after Sergio had completed his first year of junior high school, the band director demanded to know why Sergio didn't play an instrument like his brother. Under the influence of his teacher's firm urging, he decided that he would learn to play something. "There were still some trumpets hanging around," he recalls, having struck out in his attempt to get a saxophone, his first instrument of choice. "So, I said, 'Okay, give me one of those.'"

Much later, he would define that moment as the time when he received something far more than a trumpet. "I am the result of music in schools," he states. "When I began playing in junior high school, it was a day that changed my life." Instrument in hand, he began thinking of himself as a musician, playing classical music and jazz in school ensembles, then branching out into the Burbank Lancers, a popular community marching band.

The only thing that was missing, it seemed, was mariachi. He had heard the music since birth, a mainstay of community gatherings and family parties, treasured by his parents and anyone else who wanted to retain traditions of their past lives in Mexico even as they adapted to new lives in the United States. "Perhaps there was too much of it for me to appreciate it," Alonso speculates. "As a kid in a Latino-dominant community, I might have taken mariachi for granted."

Then he walked onto the UCLA campus and looked at a world that he had never seen before. For the first time in his existence, he was a minority. Everything else that had felt so basic, so normal, inside that community in the San Fernando Valley was anything but normal here. He was different, he realized, a sensation that he had never felt before. And as he thought about this difference, he began searching for a way to find something that felt the same.

There were two sides of the UCLA campus, Alonso quickly learned. On the south side were the physical science classrooms, the natural habitat for a student who sought a career in medicine. Yet as the months passed, he found that he was gravitating toward the north side, the area of the campus where the social science majors held court. Here was music, more types of music than he had ever heard. Soon, he was dashing over there daily, finding new venues for playing his trumpet, even performing in the Rose Bowl in the college's marching band.

And here, amid this cornucopia of sounds, Alonso found mariachi. Away from the community where it had been ubiquitous, the music felt new — and yet old at the same

time, transporting him back to the familiarity of home. The school had first taught a mariachi class in 1964, spurred by a graduate student and two professors who were deeply devoted to the art form. By the late-1980s, the school's mariachi scene had gained enough credence to attract Nati Cano, founder of the Grammy Award-winning ensemble Mariachi Los Camperos, to join their ranks.

Into this picture stepped Alonso. "In Mexico, you usually learn mariachi as soon as you can walk," he laughs. "I was kind of an old man when I started playing in my late teens." He pauses. "But for me, all of this happened in my life exactly when it needed to."

Still, even the greatest clairvoyant couldn't have predicted that the trumpet player would wind up with a harp. It wouldn't have made sense, for the harp in those days always wound up playing second fiddle in a mariachi ensemble. "A casual glissando here, an enhancing chord there," Alonso explains. "The trumpets and violins always took center stage melodically. The vihuela [a string instrument shaped like a guitar but tuned like a lute] and guitarron [a large, six-stringed bass guitar] always were the rhythm section. The harp was just the icing on the cake."

Historically, he continues, the harp's subjugation in mariachi music made sense. "The instrument doesn't lend itself to an urban ensemble that is very mobile," he points out. "Can you imagine harpists in Mexico City in the 1920s or '30s going from bar to bar, city to city, trying to navigate a big old harp between the crowded tables in the cantinas? It just wouldn't work."

But something started to work when one of Alonso's friends at UCLA who played the harp offered to sell an old harp to him and to throw some initial lessons into the bargain. And when the news that his parents had separated dropped like an anvil, compounded with the fact that his family had tried to keep these gut-wrenching events from him, the harp abruptly became the only thing that mattered. "I lost all motivation for everything else," he remembers. "But the harp was something I could really play as a solo instrument, alone in my room, all by myself."

Six months passed in isolation and inaccessibility, a private and improvised ritual of mourning. Then came the day when Alonso awoke and felt a fresh wind of reality rushing at him. "All of a sudden, it was kind of like, 'Hey, I can really play this thing,'" he recalls. "After playing for all those hours, I had gotten pretty good. And then it was like, 'Okay, what next?'"

He rushed to Amoeba Records in Hollywood and bought every harp album that he could find. When that failed to satiate him, he packed his bags and headed southward, ready to soak up anything that the master harp players in the Mexican state of Veracruz would teach him. "There were no YouTube videos back then," he notes. "If you wanted to find the primary practitioners, you actually had to travel to be with them. You physically had to be there to see their techniques, how they were moving their hands, how they interacted with the instrument."

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And as the clock flipped to the later half of the 1990s, the legends started to realize that a new virtuoso had joined their party. Back at UCLA, Nati Cano sent his former trumpet-playing student an invitation to join Mariachi Los Camperos on the harp. Alonso accepted and almost immediately began bush-whacking his own trail. “I did not want to be known as a harpist who was not doing too much, like other mariachi harpists,” he explains. “So, I started giving Nati lots of new ideas, like the techniques I learned from the Veracruz harpists, to see what he would do.”

What Cano did was accept virtually everything that Alonso presented and encourage him to come up with even more novel concepts. A few years later, the bonds that Mariachi Los Camperos had formed with Smithsonian Folkways Recordings paid dividends, with the label asking Alonso to create a mariachi record featuring his instrument. “I remembered how much I wished that there were mariachi harp albums back when I was first looking for things to listen to,” he says. “What I tried to do was create the type of recordings I wish had existed back then.”

His voice softens, speaking almost to himself. “Make one record,” he says, “and you somehow become a part of history, I guess.”

Indeed, throughout the last decade-and-a-half, history has happened here. Today, the harp is far more than mere mariachi flavoring. Instead, someone can hear this music and sense the same degree of artistic flair coming from the



harp that Alonso once had to make a pilgrimage to Veracruz to find. Back then, he recalls, the Veracruz harpists doubted that their skill set would ever find a home in the mariachi realm. “Now,” he proclaims, “some of those same Veracruz harpists who judged mariachi harp harshly years ago are deeply involved in mariachi projects.”

He has kept the pedal down to the floor, still promoting the harp’s advancement with the zeal of that upstart who presented his genre-shaking ideas to Cano years ago. He still performs regularly with Los Camperos, as he will do for the upcoming Piano By Nature concert and with other top groups. He chairs the music department at San Fernando High School. He serves as a guest artist for everyone from The Chieftains to the New York City

Opera. Recently, he signed a deal with a new mariachi publishing house to create a series of harp method books.

Every so often, he thinks back to the way things were. He remembers days when he took things for granted, times when he ignored mariachi and looked past his ethnic heritage and thought music was only a casual pastime. He recollects the dark periods, too, the despondent college kid alone in his room unintentionally becoming an ace on his new instrument. Then he moves away from these things to speak with pride about culture and music and identity, knowing how all of these things can transform a life.

“I’m going to keep on exploring this,” he declares. “This is fertile ground. I know that there is a lot more to be discovered here.” Already, it has helped him discover himself. The rest of the world now awaits. In that world, traditions and innovations; youth and

maturity; Mexico and the U.S.; and so much more lives closer together than any observer might initially believe to be possible. With the voices of the ages, this music resounds, helping the nations and the people in them discover that if they get beyond their borders, something special can occur.

Presented by Piano By Nature, Sergio Alonso and Mariachi Los Camperos will perform a virtual concert on Feb. 12 at 7 p.m. Admission is free, but donations are gratefully accepted. To receive the link for this live program or for more information, email pianobynature@gmail.com or visit pianobynature.org.

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