

Recall This Book  
Episode 106  
Francisco del Pino (JP)  
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John Plotz: Hello from Brandeis University and welcome to Recall this Book collaboration edition. I'm John Plotz, and along with our recent conversation with journalists, Steve Fainaru and Mark Fainaru-Wada, today's conversation with the celebrated Argentinian composer Francisco del Pino asks among other things, what it is like for musicians and poets to make work together. Recall this Book considers itself very lucky to have the conversation with Francisco who's a guitarist and a frequent musical collaborator from his youth as well as a composer. You may already know his debut album *Decir* if not stay tuned to hear a little bit and then check out the show notes too and more. And you may also have heard his work featured at one of many worldwide festivals, among them MATA, ISCM World Music Days, St John's Smith Square (London), Summartónar (Faroe Islands), Druskomanija (Lithuania). In any case, it's a joy to have him with us for this conversation today.

And here we go. How did you become a composer? Like, did it, was it a musical pathway for you? Was it something that started in childhood?

Francisco del Pino: Yeah, long story!

John Plotz: That's ok, we have a long time.

Francisco del Pino: Sometimes, I feel like I really don't know. I don't come from a musical family as you might call it, although my mother, who didn't have a formal musical training, knew a bit of everything: she had studied piano, she knew a bit of music theory... So I think she was my first music teacher in a very informal setting. But this was, I was already, I think 14 maybe. I was, you know—older.

John Plotz:                      Nowadays I feel like they give people violins when they're five years old.

Francisco del Pino:        Yeah, exactly. But that wasn't really the type of environment in which I grew up in. My father was a professor of Economics and I think I got a tendency to think in numbers from him which, of course, helps a lot in my composing endeavors. But it really wasn't a "musical" home. So, why did I get the curiosity to start? I don't know, but I mean, we had a couple of instruments lying around, and I guess at some point I felt curious and started asking questions...

What is interesting, and a potential answer to how I became a composer, is that we had a couple things lying around (a guitar, some keyboard, etc), but I became immediately interested in knowing music theory even before I knew how to play a couple of chords on the guitar. Yeah, I started... You see, my mom knew music theory; she knew how to read music. So I would start asking questions about how things worked. So, I think that's kind of, you know, that says something for me. I didn't even know what that was at the time. Yeah, I kind of became interested in knowing how music works even before being able to play, which is, you know...

John Plotz:                      You mentioned numbers. Can I ask, ask about math? Like, are you a mathematical person?

Francisco del Pino:        I wouldn't call myself, I mean, if I think about my colleagues, I think I'm one of those who has a certain inclination to think about process, numeric relationships between musical stuff, you know... there are many ways in which you can really formalize certain parts of your process through numbers, and I like that approach. Which, of course, I try to balance that with also being really sensitive to what I hear, to what makes sense to me intuitively. That's why I said I could trace those, you know, tendencies back to both my parents—but it's funny because none of them were actually musicians.

John Plotz: But can we, can we follow the, you used an interesting word “formalized” to talk about math as opposed to being sensitive to what you hear. And I wanted to ask and this is somebody who I feel like I have some mathematical intuitions and no musical intuitions. But I've sometimes heard people describe music as feeling like intuitively like math to them. I mean, I suppose that's the “Bach” side of things or something that you... Is that, is that what you're describing or you're describing something a little different? You're describing math as more like the rigorous side, not the intuitive side?

Francisco del Pino: Yeah, I think they are connected... the rigorous side... I mean, what we call the “Bach” side—I could relate that to rigor in music composition but also, you know, rigor applied to a music that always wants to sound beautiful and moving, which is for me what Bach represents: beauty, basically. But also a certain relation to something that is... I don't know, I don't want to sound super mystical but, it always sounds like it belongs to a place which is human but not *only* human, you know?... like this constant question about God... I think you can also trace that within that tendency towards symbolism and structure that is very, very easy to detect, especially in the later works, like in The Art of Fugue, for instance, or the Musical Offering... These huge pieces that are like gifts, musical gifts... But they are pieces of music which, for instance, they are not written for any special instruments. They are, they just exist on paper and they are there, we have so many different versions of those pieces because he wasn't thinking about a specific instrument. He wasn't thinking about *sound* in that way. They are more like, you know, like abstract propositions in a way. So, yeah, I think maybe I am referring to math in that sense, but also in a more direct way, you know, I like to, when I write a piece of music, sometimes I will be surrounded by charts which take account of how many notes I am using in this moment of the piece, and to what amount I want to actually arrive at a certain time later... I will try to find ways to formalize those processes through numeric operations.

John Plotz:                   Wow. So, well, there's so much in that answer. And first of all, I'm just completely fascinated at the notion that we have these pieces that Bach was composing without necessarily a particular instrument in mind as a way of thinking about abstraction. It also makes me want to ask you about other ways of thinking about the nonhuman and music. Like I hope we get back and talk about whale songs and whether you're interested in them. But can I just ask, turn the question, the Bach question to you, then have you ever composed music that doesn't have an instrument in mind? It's more like a proposition or an abstract music?

Francisco del Pino:           Interesting... Not like that... But I think that certain pieces, and perhaps especially those which come more from a, let's say, abstract way of thinking, these pieces have different potential realizations and maybe I started by one of them, but there are others that could be explored... You know, I think if a piece was written for these four instruments, OK, but maybe it could be potentially realized through other mediums. But I don't think I've consciously composed a piece of music that has no instrumentation.

John Plotz:                   So that also sort of brings me the question sticking with the question of the human and the nonhuman and this is where I think maybe the fact that I'm an English professor is relevant because I think in words and maybe not just even in words but also in narratives. And so for me, when I piece of music occupies a certain amount of time, I see it as having sequence and structure and that as it happens, the piece of yours that I heard had extremely beautiful singing in it and words that I could respond to because they seemed to be telling a story to some extent. Do you wanna just talk about how you think about that, how you think about the voice as one instrument among others or how you think of what happens when words enter into a piece of music?

Francisco del Pino:           Well, yeah, do we have that much time? (laughs)

John Plotz: (laughs) ...And then we have the whales to talk about afterwards. So, I don't know.

Francisco del Pino: So, when I was starting out my first... Since I didn't come from, like I said, from a "musical" family... So, I was interested in music theory but it's not like I was surrounded by classical music and, you know, that type of learning environment. I started playing guitar through playing in bands. I learned a lot from songwriters that I related to, and with whom I worked during my teens and early twenties. So I would say that my formal composition training came much later. And even when, again, I was interested in music theory and all that from the beginning, I was basically working in what we might call a "popular music" environment: bands, etc, and learning from songwriters and arranging stuff through my instrument, which is the guitar, especially the electric guitar. So, I come from that world—say rock, or pop. That's my initial background.

So, I would say that when you live there, you are mostly playing *songs*. And songs have a melody, which intends to be beautiful and touching; and you also have words—you need to have words, which is not the case for so much other music. So, I think that stayed with me, always. And it's probably, you know, part of my, my core, my musical core for, for, you know, forever. So, I think that when I finally started studying composition in a more formal, structured way, and when I got more into classical music and contemporary music, then the abstraction became really a thing. And I think that part of what I've been trying to do is to merge those musical sides: the abstract and the physical, the abstract and the lyrical... And that's especially true I think in recent years, because I've been working a lot on vocal music. And actually the piece we were just mentioning, *The sea*, this is actually the third collaboration with Victoria Cocco who is a poet and friend with whom we've been working together for the last 3 or 4 years.

John Plotz: So, were you guys in a rock band together back in the day?

Francisco del Pino: No. So in 2019, I was invited to a commission that came from an Argentinian opera theater. They were doing joint commissions pairing writers and musicians. So we met around that time, we knew some of each other's work from before but when we actually met was in that year, 2019. And we created together this piece called *Decir*, which is the Spanish for "To say", or "To tell". It was kind of a recital of songs and poetry, a 50 minute-long show. We had music that I composed on Victoria's texts, but she was also on-stage reciting. And there was also a sort of a visual design which also was portraying some of her poetry. That was our first collaboration.

John Plotz: Could we listen to maybe the first one of these together? Is that OK? Because I love them. OK, fantastic. So we are going to hear *Decir: N<sup>o</sup> 1, La puerta*.

### *Music Plays*

John Plotz: Ok, I'm just gonna read it out.

#### *The Door*

*One letter over another, over another over another, a black stain, a strike.*

*No. One stain over another over a letter now, a green door, a strike.*

*No. A melody of the blow and through the skin. A letter over.*

*No.*

John Plotz: Sounds beautiful in English too.

Francisco del Pino: Actually, the translator [Rebekah Smith] is the same that made the whole translation of *The Sea*. They have been collaborating together for a while now.

I have the feeling that Victoria's words sound like they can be translated into English in a very successful way, because somehow the rhythm of her writing, which is very synthetic, usually based on short sentences... Maybe for some reason it sounds to me like it works in English too.

John Plotz: So, yeah, that's something interesting. Can we just back up to thinking about listening to this together? Which, thank you for doing that with me, especially in a compressed form. But what do you want the listener to hear in a piece like that? Like what are you aware of when you're composing it? I know that's a huge question. I mean, again, maybe this comes back to me being an English professor and how drawn I am to the words. So, it was actually good to sit here silently with you listening to it because it made me listen to the other instruments besides voice. But when I'm listening to something like that, the voice is so strong, you know?

Francisco del Pino: Yeah, and, I mean, I want that to be that way... I want to have the words at the front in a case like this. I am thinking of these pieces as songs, or at least I refer to them as songs—even if they might not follow the verse/chorus pattern. And when I think of a song, I think of a piece of music that has a leading voice that is singing some text, and that establishes a relation with the listener in which the distance is as close as possible. You know, a song for me is something that really wants to touch the listener in a very... Which sometimes is not the case if you listen to an orchestra piece, right? At least to me.

So, that's one intention... And of course that has the problem, or the challenge, of translating the poetry to music, which is not only “setting the words to music” like, OK, so this word, we have this vowel and we write this melody for this sentence... It's more like I have to decide how these words are going to be *sung* by the singer. So, how do I make that translation? But, there's also the whole challenge of building a sonic space for those words. What would that sonic space sound like? Which in the end is a sort of a sonic echo of those words.

So, it's really, I mean, to me, it's both fascinating and terrifying, especially with poetry, because [poets] already have decided about things like rhythm and pace, you know... And then you step in and you add a layer on top of that, another set of decisions. It's terrifying. But It's such a beautiful challenge.

John Plotz:                    So do you and Victoria or another collaborator ever compose simultaneously where the words and the music come up together or?

Francisco del Pino:            Kind of, yeah. Not like Lennon-McCartney who apparently would sit in front of each other completing each other's sentences, or something like that... But yeah, I mean: this is a very long text, I think she wrote like 15 pages or something. And we were working together in the sense that she was writing and I was writing the music and we had, you know, agreed on what were the things we wanted to write about and what was our common ground... I wouldn't say themes, but there were certain ideas that were important for both of us that would be present in both the words and the music. So, then we were working together.

John Plotz:                    Can you give an example? Just sorry to interrupt but just know it's fascinating because again, to come back to how words are representative and then when I listen to music, it feels intimate or emotional or moving, but I can't identify what it's about. So I'd love to hear what are things that it?

Francisco del Pino:        Well, there's always this impossibility of really saying what music is about. Anyway, I don't know if this is the most interesting example, but the idea of echo, or loop, the idea of something that keeps coming back and that is seen through a different light... Especially in longer works when you actually have time to make ideas come back, you know, with time to digest them, how a word comes back, a word or a short sentence comes back in a different context and how the musical form plays with that. You can always do that with music—you can recall something that sounded 10 minutes ago and then it comes back within a different context. And that's, that's one thing that was important for us as some sort of a technical device.

John Plotz:                    I've always loved that word. I don't know if it's the same in Spanish, but the word *refrain* in English because it also has this sense of the verb refrain to like, hold back, you know. So, it's something amazing



about that quality of repetition or not. Yeah, that it reiterates, it goes away and then comes back.

Francisco del Pino: Well, the idea of repetition is another one. And actually, the cover of the album is a pattern. It's a glacier that is made of patterns. And that was a huge thing for both of us. Yeah, to come back to your questions. So, we were writing at the same time and meeting often to exchange ideas, you know, and to check in where each of us was at a given time.

John Plotz: You mentioned also that you have been thinking about these video installations for a while now too because with *Decir*, you had that as well. Do you see those as... How do you see that question of like composing with some kind of visual accompaniment?

Francisco del Pino: It's a tricky one I would say. So first, I should say that for *The sea*—and it's funny because they sound so similar, *The sea* and *Decir*; and loving patterns, as we do, we were enjoying that accident very much [laughs]. So, for the album, *Decir*, we got a couple of kind of media clips that were originally part of the live presentation and then another Argentinian artist [Maximiliano Bellmann] made another video for two of the songs, which are available on the internet. And in the case of *The sea*, this recent work, Charlotte Mundy, who is the singer of the piece, has created the video, it's 100% her creation and it really shows how much she embodied the text and my musical ideas.

About having video as part of a live performance of music... I sometimes have a conflictive relationship with that because I think that video image and music work in such different time-scales that they can either work together to build a really great impression of what's going on, or they can completely mess up the whole performance, you know,... I really think that we perceive those times very differently. I probably would say that the way I enjoy that crossing of mediums is when they—and this is very personal, it's probably different for everyone—what I enjoy is when I can see those things working together as

one force, and that has a lot to do with time, the time of the image and its tension with the time of the music.

John Plotz:                    So, OK, you can totally refuse to answer this if you want. But since I do 19th century, when I think about that question of the conflict or the confluence of the image and text, I think about composers like Wagner and the aspiration to the *gesamtkunstwerk*, you know, like the notion of totality. It sounds to me like you're, you're kind of an anti-Wagner?

Francisco del Pino:        I wouldn't say that. It's just that I find it very tricky to achieve a really, 100% positive experience in which every layer of the work is really helping the poem come across, you know. And, it's not because of me, but because of the different minds that were collaborating for this presentation that you just attended of this piece, *The sea*— I think that that turned out really, really great actually... how the text and the music and the video interacted together. And also the light design, which was very minimal. But I think what we tried to do was to have everything working towards an experience of time, to really give time for the listener to be immersed in that “sea” that we were creating. I've had bad experiences trying to, you know, to make different mediums collide. It can go wrong. Because there's always a way the risk to, you know, to having too much information, or the risk of one of those mediums becoming sort of a background for the other and not really saying something important.

John Plotz:                    So, yeah, so we live in this world where everybody walks around with their music and their ears, right? How does that, does that relate to how you think about composition? I mean, you talked earlier about the intimacy of the lyric impulse versus like orchestral command or dynamic remoteness or something. But if you, you know, do you think about the fact that people are getting it, you know, right up inside their heads or?

Francisco del Pino:        Yeah, I use my headphones all the time to listen to Spotify, which I hate. So, two different answers. One is that sometimes you do what you *do*, which is different than the things that you do as a consumer,

right? Like, you know, you don't necessarily write a piece of music thinking how you yourself will listen to that piece with your headphones or from your cell phone. But I am of course aware of how things are, how the listening experience usually takes place. I sometimes think that it's just very sad because a lot of the detail that goes into a recording for instance, is lost. And I think that just happens, and it is a bit sad and like—ok, so, for instance, we were just listening through your cell phone and there is a bass drum in that song whose frequency is super low, and headphones don't reproduce those frequencies in an accurate manner. So we are losing a lot of the body of that sound.

On the other hand, having access to so many musics, maybe this is not really your question but the amount of access to music that we have now, and the portability and diversity is positive enough in so many ways... so we cannot only complain about music and cellphones. But yeah, it's like a lost opportunity when you listen to a piece and we've had a lot of care when it was recorded and then all those details are not really there in many instances.

John Plotz:                    So Francisco, I have one final question for you, which is just where do you see your own composition practice headed? I mean, do you have a vision of sorts of things you want to do in the short term, medium long term?

Francisco del Pino:            I don't know. I do know that, like I said, I've been writing a lot for voice recently. So that means thinking a lot about text, thinking a lot about poetry, thinking how those mediums differ, and to what extent they are similar, and the translation from one to the other... That along with a certain type of collaborative work, a type of collaboration work in which, you know, like in this case there was a poet present and it could be a visual artist present, but that's a world in which I'd like to live, probably more than just writing a piece in complete isolation in my studio. But you know, of course I do that and I will probably keep doing that. But being immersed in a composition project that involves more people, different ideas on how to deal with time, sound image. It's a space that I love. So, I will probably love to explore more of that.

John Plotz: So is it fair to say your teenage years as a rock-and-roller left a mark on you?

Francisco del Pino: Absolutely. And the other day, I was chatting with a colleague in the Department. We said the same thing, like, you became a musician because you love the feelings that music gives you; but you are also wanting to spend more time with these dudes, these friends, not only because of how they were as musicians but also because of who they were as a person. And it's like "maybe we can figure out the music later, but for now we want to spend more time together". And in a funny way, 20-30 years later, that comes back as a will to spend more time doing things that are not only "your own" but more like a complex body with different minds involved.

John Plotz: I actually think that's a beautiful personal connection to end on because I, I said that I don't know anything about music and it's true. But in college the most important thing I did was I was on the radio station and I was on the rock and roll/punk rock Record Hospital, it was called and it's what you just described of like wanting to spend time with that bunch of guys and girls, you know, just like that was my group, that was my community and now for, you know, whatever it is 30 at least 30 years later, probably 40 if I calculated it out. But let's say 30 let's say 30. You know, 30 years later is that I like spending time with other people talking about poems and talking about novels in the same way that we used to talk about songs. So, music, talking about music, like explaining why we loved or arguing about what we loved and why we loved it probably is what gave me the vocabulary for what I do now, which is, you know, the same thing with art, artwork. So, that's nice to think about, you know, that way in which the things that we do when we're say 15 to 25 every one of those years hits us so deeply we just don't know how, you know, it's clearly forming us, but it might take two decades to figure out what the formation is.

Francisco del Pino: And you never know at that moment, you always know by looking back. But, I mean, I don't know, I am enjoying

realizing that that happens... In a way it makes the universe make more sense, right? And of course, those formative years are also your history, your family's history, and whatever it is that you are doing or creating these days, finding that that has a connection to those roots to me it's moving and it's an influence, and it's also a way of thinking forward because it's like: if this is really important to me, then I have to pay attention and listen and do something with this.

John Plotz:                      Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me. It's a great pleasure for me. Recall this book was founded by Elizabeth Ferry and me, John Plotz. It is sponsored by Brandeis and the Mandel Humanities Center. Sound editing is by Naomi Cohen, website design and social media by Miranda Peery of the English Department. We're eager to hear your comments, criticisms and thoughts. If you like what you hear, please subscribe, rate and review us on Apple podcasts or wherever you get your podcast from all of us here at RTB, thanks for listening.