ALBERTO GRAU: THE COMPOSER, SELECTED WORKS, AND INFLUENCE UPON
THE VENEZUELAN AND INTERNATIONAL CHORAL COMMUNITY

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Alberto Grau is arguably one of the most influential contemporary Venezuelan choral composers and conductors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This thesis explores the synthesis of Venezuelan nationalism with global internationalism found within his works.

As a student of the nationalistic generation of composers (Vicente Emilio Sojo, Juan Bautista Plaza, and Ángel Sauce) Grau’s works display the distinct characteristics found in Venezuelan music. His output also exhibits international influences, using texts associated with social and environmental events and concerns including literary and musical influences of other nations and cultures.

The first section of the thesis traces the lineage of Venezuelan choral composers beginning with the colonial period and the Escuela de Chacao to the nationalistic composers from the Santa Capilla generation.

The second section describes Alberto Grau’s compositional style as exemplified in his work Kasar mie la gaji (The Earth is Tired).

The final section of the document comprises interviews with Alberto Grau and his wife, the Venezuelan choral conductor, María Guinand. Guinand studied piano and conducting with Alberto Grau and was his assistant at the Orfeón Universitario Simón Bolívar and the Schola Cantorum de Caracas. She is the founding conductor of the Cantoría Alberto Grau and the editor of the Latin American division of Earthsongs Music. Through interviews and analysis this project informs the reader about the life and compositions of Venezuelan choral composer and conductor Alberto Grau.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Through interviews and analysis this project will inform the reader regarding the life and compositions of Venezuelan choral composer and conductor Alberto Grau (b. 1937). Alberto Grau is arguably the most influential contemporary Venezuelan choral composer and one of the most significant Venezuelan choral conductors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Also interviewed and referenced in the project is his wife, the Venezuelan choral conductor, María Guinand. Guinand studied piano and conducting with Alberto Grau and was his assistant at the Orfeón Universitario Simón Bolívar and the Schola Cantorum de Caracas. She is the founding conductor of the Cantoría Alberto Grau and the editor of the Latin American division of Earthsongs Music.

Alberto Grau

Grau studied with some of the most respected music educators and performers in South America. Born in Barcelona, Spain, his early studies were done at the José Ángel Lamas National Conservatory of Music (previously known as the Escuela Nacional de Música y Declamación) and the Juan Manuel Olivaress School of Music in Caracas, Venezuela. Along with advanced lessons in piano, he pursued advanced studies in theory with Ángel Sauce, composition with Vicente Emilio Sojo, history and aesthetics with Juan Bautista Plaza, and orchestral conducting with Evencio Castellanos. He also studied with American choral conductor Robert Fountain and British orchestral conductor Bernard Keeffe.

Grau’s work as a choral composer has received critical acclaim and has earned him awards including the José Angel Montero Venezuelan National Competition Award in 1967, 1983, and 1987; the first prize in the International Day for Choral Singing competition in
Barcelona, Spain (1978); the Prize of Composition from the Comunidad Autónoma de Canarias, Spain (1999); and highest honors at the Oregon Bach Festival’s “Waging Peace through Singing” Composers Symposium (2002). He is the recipient of numerous commissions from choruses including the University of Pennsylvania, the San Francisco Girls’ Chorus, and the Singapore Youth Choir. He has also received commissions from international music organizations including the Sixth World Symposium on Choral Music and the 2002 Songbridge Festival in Finland.

Grau has served as guest conductor, lecturer and adjudicator throughout North and South America, Europe and Asia. He served as the founding director and conductor of the Schola Cantorum of Caracas, which won the International Guido d'Arezzo Prize in polyphonic singing in 1974. He was also founding director of the choruses of Orfeón Universitario Simón Bolívar and Movimiento Coral Cantemos. He was vice president of the International Federation of Choral Music (IFCM) and professor and choral conducting faculty head at the Instituto Universitario de Estudios Musicales (IUDEM) and Universidad Simón Bolívar. Grau has been named honorary director of the following choirs: Coral Escuela Nacional de Enfermeras, Schola Cantorum de Caracas, Orfeón Escuela Naval de Venezuela, Escuela de Música Juan Manuel Olivares and Coral Electricidad de Caracas. He also led the Choral Project of the Andean Corporation in Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela.

Grau’s compositional style reflects international diversity, as does his work as a conductor and lecturer. Although most of his compositions include works directly paraphrasing or inspired by Venezuelan and South American folk music, he also employs traditional European and Western compositional idioms. The global message evident in Grau’s compositions is what makes his works distinctive. Sometimes the works offer a social commentary on the condition of
the environment (*Kasar Mie La Gaji, Mi Patria es el Mundo; Ojo Globo*), the force of nature (*Bin-nam-ma*), and the power of birth and death in the circle of human life (*Canciones de Cuna, La Flor de la Meil, Stabat Mater*). He employs a variety of texts and languages including sacred Latin, traditional Spanish and Afro-Asiatic (Arabic and Hausa). His compositions are often influenced directly by world events including the birth of his son, the shooting of a Palestinian man crossing the Israeli border and floods in Venezuela killing 25,000 people.

Many of his works are complex in their structure and texture, making them more suited for performance by advanced choirs. He writes specifically for children’s and beginning choruses as well. Many of his compositions include choreography intended to enhance the social message within the works. He also employs non-traditional singing sounds such as clapping, sighing, moaning, whispering, stomping, humming, choral chanting and shouting in many of his works.

He has arranged many South American melodies for chorus. Some of these arrangements include traditional folk tunes (*El Barquito, La Cucaracha*) while others incorporate melodic features from original compositions (*Dale Como Es* by Adalberto Alvarez).
CHAPTER 2
HISTORY OF VENEZUELAN CHORAL MUSIC
Composers of the Colonial Period

Juan Bautista Plaza states, “Previous to 1770 no musical movement worthy of mention had taken place in what was then called the Captaincy General of Venezuela. Our country, in contrast to the Viceroyalties of Mexico and Peru, was one of the poorest and most neglected colonies of the American continents during the Spanish domination. Under these conditions, the flourishing of the arts was difficult, and only an extraordinary chain of circumstances could have brought about their unexpected development.” Plaza further states that a “chain of circumstances” brought about the development of music in Venezuela, beginning with the work of Don Pedro Palacios y Sojo (1739-1799). Venezuelan poet Don Andres Bello called Sojo “the founder of music in Venezuela” due to his influence.

Sojo was a member of a wealthy Venezuelan family who was ordained a priest in 1762 after studying at the Caracas Seminary. He used his personal wealth to promote the development of music in Caracas. He traveled to Rome and Madrid in 1769-1771 to make arrangements for the founding of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri in Caracas. This became one of the most influential schools of music in the colonies. When he returned to Venezuela, he brought with him musical instruments and scores of sacred works of famous European composers. Sojo shared these scores and interpretations of continental music with his friends and students. In 1786 two Austrian naturalists presented Sojo with a gift comprised of musical instruments and scores by Haydn, Mozart and Pleyel.

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2 Ibid., 201.
The school’s most famous teacher was Juan Manuel Olivares (1760–1797), a musician of Spanish and African descent. Sojo appointed Olivares as the director of the Oratory. The Oratory was the training ground for most of the major colonial composers of the late eighteenth century including Cayetano Carreño, Lino Gallardo, José Ángel Lamas, and Juan José Landaeta. This group of students was known as the “Escuela de Chacao.”\(^3\) The name was derived from the meetings held at Sojo’s coffee plantation home in the Chacao municipality where the students studied and performed music.

Students of the Chacao School studied the sacred European musical repertoire of the eighteenth century. Their lessons included compositional exercises in sacred and secular forms, as well as specific Spanish thematic genres used to celebrate various special occasions and religious festivals.

The vast majority of the compositional output of the first and second generations of Venezuelan colonial composers was sacred music. There were many masses, salves\(^4\), pésames\(^5\), tonos (Latin motets) and villancicos. The choral and orchestral works reflected European influences within a rudimentary framework. Most choral writing was homorhythmic, and the harmonic language of these composers was simple: limited to the use of triads with occasional modulations to closely related keys. The orchestra used by these musicians resembled the Mannheim orchestra: strings in four parts (sometimes with the addition of contrabass), two oboes (or flutes or clarinets) and two horns.


\(^4\) Salves are sacred songs honoring the Virgin Mary.

\(^5\) Pésames are compositions using Spanish text that depict the sorrows of the Virgin Mary during the suffering and death of Christ similar to the French complaintes.
The second generation of colonial composers existed in a shifting political climate.

Until 1810, Venezuela was a peaceful province of the Spanish empire, with the status of Capitania General (Captaincy General). In that same year, the most important and successful movement towards independence from Spain began to develop in Caracas. On July 5, 1811, a new Venezuelan Congress signed its own Declaration of Independence, and a new sovereign nation was born. Simón Bolivar (1783-1830), El Liberator (The Liberator), led a revolution which gave birth to five independent countries: Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú and Bolivia.6

Some musicians chose to use their performance and composing as a means of self-expression of their level of political involvement. Such musicians included many prominent musical figures including José Ángel Lamas, Cayetano Carreño, Juan José Landaeta, and Lino Gallardo.

Among other merits, these composers had that of knowing how to assimilate the spirit of contemporary European music, the greatest exponents of which were then Gluck, Haydn, and Mozart. More significant, however, is the fact that they not only assimilated the delicate and simple quality of the masterworks they adopted as models, but, being original, they succeeded in creating a personal style, so that their music is the expression of the most exquisite nuances of the Venezuelan colonial soul, or, at least, of its mystical essence.7

José Ángel Lamas (1775-1814) was a composer and bassoon player in the Cathedral of Caracas. Lamas remained dedicated to music and specifically to his work for the church during the war for independence. His works include Ave Maris Stella, Benedicta et Venerabilis, Miserere, Popule Meus, En Premio a tus Virtudes, Sepulto Domino, Lamentations for the Dead, Mass in D and many settings of salves and motets dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Alejandro Planchart, a Venezuelan-American musicologist states:


7 Plaza, “Music in Caracas,” 203.
Lamas's works are religious compositions in the style of the Classical motets of the late 18th century. He normally employed two oboes, two horns, strings and a chorus of three or four voices. His choral writing is largely homophonic with little or no imitation. In the three-voice works the bass is invariably provided by the orchestra… Choral sections are contrasted with short solos for one or another of the voices. In these passages the instrumental writing colla parte increases considerably. Although Lamas's music is simple, it shows delicate melodic sensibility and a good sense of formal balance. The Popule Meus is his best-known work; the Mass in D, Miserere and Ave maris stella in D minor are also notable.  

Don Cayetano Carreño (1774-1836) was a highly respected musician during his time. He was chapel master at the Cathedral of Caracas for forty-two years, a post held by two uncles before him. Almost all of his children were musicians, and his grand daughter was the world-famous pianist of the nineteenth century, Teresa Carreño. He was well trained and an influential teacher. He wrote both sacred works including In Monte Oliveti, Tristis est anima mea, a Requiem Mass and a Salve. He also wrote secular works including patriotic songs. Sharon Girard comments on Carreño’s works:

It may be said that Carreño’s compositional style is rhythmically volatile, progressing from sixteenth-note figures to triplets. Melodic embellishment is almost rococo within an already lyrical melismatic line. Trills and grace-note flourishes abound. Carreño also knew how to carve his phrases in musical relief... Sensitivity to the text is exhibited by harmonic shifts... In addition to these techniques, parallel harmonic shifts, together with careful vocal and orchestral textures, enhance the text. Meanwhile, modal instability predominates.

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Unlike Lamas, he was involved in the political events of the time and supported the movement for independence and liberty.

Juan José Landaeta (1780-1814) is attributed with the composition of the national anthem of Venezuela, *Gloria al Bravo Pueblo* (“Glory to the Brave Town”). Landaeta was a violinist and music director at various churches in Caracas. The anthem is one of his few surviving secular works. Most of his surviving works are sacred including the *Pésame a la Virgen*. He was persecuted during the War of Independence and executed in 1814.

Lino Gallardo (1773-1837) was a singer, teacher, composer and a string player. He was a member of the Patriotic Society and was heavily involved with the political events of the time. He was jailed for his public patriotic musical performances. After the founding of the loyalist regime he founded the Philharmonic Society of Caracas, which functioned both as a school and as a concert society. In 1824 Gallardo was named principal professor of music of Caracas.
Early 20th Century Venezuelan Composers

and the Santa Capilla School

Musical nationalism pervaded Venezuela in the twentieth century. This was a response to similar movements in Europe, as well as an expression of desire for independence from European influences. Musical leaders concentrated on pedagogy to create a new generation of native musicians and teachers. They turned to Venezuelan composers to create new works that employed national traditions and folk influences. A stabilizing social and political climate saw the establishment of national choruses, orchestras and chamber groups. A new generation of composers emerged, including Vicente Emilio Sojo, Juan Bautista Plaza, and Ángel Sauce. These composers, with conductor Gonzalo Castellanos, were the teachers and mentors of composer and conductor, Alberto Grau.

Grau studied composition with Vicente Emilio Sojo (1887-1974). Sojo was a composer, educator and musicologist. He was director of the Escuela Nacional de Música y Declamación and taught and influenced almost all of the composers who attended the school from 1930-1960. Phillip Huscher, program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, states,

Vicente Emilio Sojo … is regarded as one of the founding members of modern Venezuelan music. Sojo almost single-handedly renewed musical life in Caracas.10

He was also influential in founding many of the first musical organizations in Venezuela. These included the Venezuelan Symphony Orchestra and the Orfeón Lamas, one of the first official Venezuelan choral organizations. The Venezuelan Symphony Orchestra performed major works

with the Orfeón Lamas. He was the chief conductor for the ensemble for nearly two decades. Sojo compiled and arranged more than two hundred Venezuelan folk and popular songs for the choir to perform. His compositions include a mass for men’s choir, *Misa Cromática, Palabras de Cristo en Calvario, Requiem in Memoriam Patris Patriae*, a Misa Breve, a mass for four voices, *Hodie nos Fulgebìt Lux*, and a mass for St. Cecilia. He was awarded the National Prize in Music in 1951. He was also active in domestic politics, founding the Acción Democrática Party in 1941.

Alberto Grau studied aesthetics with Juan Bautista Plaza (1898-1965) at the Escuela Nacional de Música y Declamación. By the age of sixteen Plaza was directing the choir at the Caracas French School. He studied law, medicine and music and attended the Scuola Superiore di Musica Sacra in Rome, where he earned a Masters degree in Sacred Composition. When he returned to Venezuela he was appointed choirmaster of the Caracas Cathedral and professor of aesthetics, harmony, and history at the Escuela Nacional de Música y Declamación. Plaza performed as an organist and conducted for the Venezuelan Symphony Orchestra. Plaza catalogued and studied a vast amount of Venezuelan music that eventually was published in a 12 volume collection titled *Archivo de Música Colonial Venezolana*. He also served as the Director of Culture in the Ministry of Education and was the founder of the Escuela Preparatoria de Música. He wrote many articles for newspapers and journals to educate lay people about music. His works include a misa breve and masses for men’s chorus, *Misa en Honor de S Inés, Misa en Honor de Santiago Apóstol*, a Requiem for unison voices, a Requiem for men’s chorus, *Misa Popule Meus, Misa en Honor de S Juan de la Cruz, Misa Litúrgica de la Esperanza, Las Horas, Zapatero a Tus Zapatos*, motets, psalms and offertories.

The most productive period of Plaza's life coincided with his tenure as cathedral choirmaster. After 1947 he wrote less, and the
later works show an increasing abandonment of traditional tonality and a tendency towards introspection. . . . The principal influences on his early music were those of Puccini and Perosi; later pieces show his interests in Impressionism and in Stravinsky's music.\textsuperscript{11}

Alberto Grau studied theory with Ángel Sauce (1911-1995). Sauce was a composition student of Vicente Emilio Sojo at the Escuela de Música where he also studied violin and piano. He also studied at Columbia University (NY). He was associate conductor of the Venezuelan Symphony Orchestra and founder of Coral Venezuela and the Conservatorio Juan José Landaeta. His choral compositions include \textit{Jehová Reina, Cecilia Mujica, Himno a Andrés Bello,} and \textit{Pater Noster.}

Alberto Grau studied conducting with Evencio Castellanos (1915-1984). Castellanos attended the Escuela Nacional de Música y Declamación where he studied music history with Juan Bautista Plaza and composition and harmony with Vicente Emilio Sojo. Upon graduation Castellanos became a professor at the school where he taught piano, composition, directed the university choir, and eventually served as the director of the school. After studying piano at the Dalcroze School of Music in New York in1944, he began his conducting career. He was founding director of the Collegium Musicum de Caracas and also directed the Experimental Orchestra of the Symphony Orchestra Venezuela. Castellanos also composed works for piano, orchestra and chamber ensembles. His choral compositions include a Mass \textit{Ave Maris Stella, El tirano Aguirre}, which is an oratorio that is almost two hours in length, \textit{Misa solemne Jesu Corona Virginum,} madrigals and other various choral works.

CHAPTER 3

ALBERTO GRAU’S COMPOSITIONAL STYLE AND
AN EXAMINATION OF KASAR MIE LA GAJI

Alberto Grau composed for the voice and specifically for chorus. From his cycle for solo singer based on texts by poet Jesús Rosas Marcano to the full production ballet, *La Doncella* as set for mixed chorus and chamber orchestra, each of Grau’s compositions contains the element of the human voice. Grau’s personal singing experience coupled with his professional career as a choral conductor made him most comfortable with the medium. He comments:

I was first a choral conductor, with desire to compose. The fact that I knew so well so much a cappella repertoire, and was always very eager to discover new composers and works, has helped me enormously in my career as a choral composer. Today I can say the choir is my instrument that I know really well.\(^\text{12}\)

He has composed and arranged more than one hundred works for solo voice and chorus.

As a student of the nationalistic generation of composers (Sojo, Plaza, Sauce), Latin American and Spanish influence are present in the language, melody, rhythm, choreography, and style of most of Grau’s compositions and arrangements. He uses Spanish most, followed by Latin, then other languages such as African Sahel (*Kasar mie la Gaji*) and Catalan (*Bin-nam-ma*). Traditional folksongs (*La Cucaracha, El Barquito*) and popular Latin American songs (*Dale Como Es*) are the foundation of many of his works. Son\(^\text{13}\), rumba, salsa, funk, jazz and other rhythms are present representing styles from the Caribbean, South American and African


\(^{13}\) The *son* is a generic term applied to various types of Hispano-American folk music. The *son* that Grau uses specifically in his work, *Dale Como Es*, is the Cuban *son*. Their origins are of African and Hispanic influences. They are based on simple harmonic patterns, are usually in duple meter, and alternate between verse and chorus. Like most Cuban music, the *son* would be performed with a repeating *clave* rhythm.
influences. There is a pervasive use of syncopation, polyrhythm, and percussive elements in these compositions.

Grau arranged more than twenty-five aguinaldos, a Venezuelan folk genre, for three and four part mixed chorus. Examples of his aguinaldo compositions are *A ti te cantamos, Estrella de mar, Si acaso algún vecino, Dichosos mortales*, and *Cantemos, cantemos*. The aguinaldo is a generic term used to describe sacred and secular Christmas songs. “Aguinaldo” can also be used as a term to mean a singing “Christmas gift.” Musicians would move from house to house to perform a song in return for a gift. Aguinaldos would usually be performed with percussion ensembles comprised of tambourines, drums, scrapers, rattles, an assortment of guitars of various sizes and other instruments such as the violin, clarinet or accordion. William Gradante describes aguinaldos as having “syncopated melodies and vocal harmonizations in either parallel thirds or contrapuntal style.”

Grau often adds an element of choreography to his works, sometimes giving precise instructions ("Point at the audience as if you had a can of insect spray in your hand [aerosol can] – La Cucaracha") or calling for free choreography and dancing. He sometimes also gives specific instruction regarding vocal color and production, insisting on such things as a nasal quality, the use of chest voice, speaking, whispering, shouting, sliding and screaming. Consonants not only provide a vehicle for conveying meaning, but they serve as another color and instrument that can enhance the performance. Liquid consonants such as [l, m, n], fricative and percussive consonants all have a specific role.

Whether notated or not, the use of instruments, percussion, clapping and moving is suggested in many of these works. Although a piece may be written for unaccompanied choir,
upon listening to recordings of it by Grau or María Guinand, one would notice the addition of piano, guitar, and a variety of percussion instruments added to the performance.

A predominant objective of most of Grau’s works is the careful fusion of text and music. His study with Sojo, Plaza, Sauce and Castellanos was the foundation that defined this aspect of his compositional process. In an interview with Grau he states,

I think that especially the knowledge of compositional techniques mainly in dealing with texts and correct accentuation, in handling counterpoint and also the humor and wit were the most influential aspects from my masters.14

Grau starts the composition process by selecting specific texts from specific sources. Many of his works are written either for a specific performer/ensemble or dedicated to a specific person/occasion.

Grau favors texts of certain writers and poets, and many of them are from Latin American countries. He is drawn to texts by Gabriela Mistral, who was the first female Latin American poet to win a Nobel Prize for Literature. He states that her themes in her poetry are “always motherhood, love, nature, and death.”15 He used her poems in a setting of two lullabies dedicated to Rocío Asuaje, who was the first member of his Schola Cantorum to have a child. A fragment of the poem “To Margarita Debayle” by Rubén Dario is used as the basis for Como Tu. The text of Venezuelan poet Manuel Felipe Rugeles is used in La Flor de la Miel, a lullaby that was composed to celebrate the birth of Grau’s son. It was written for the Cantoria Alberto Grau, which was founded and directed by Grau’s wife, María Guinand. Mi Patria es el Mundo; Ojo Globo is a setting of texts by the Roman philosopher Séneca and by the political and spiritual leader of India, Mahatma Ghandi.

14 Alberto Grau, interview.

15 Ibid.
When asked if his works could be categorized into periods, Grau replied that his works could be classified into three.

My early works, for voice and piano were very melodic. With the ballet La Doncella I started a new period of incorporating already more rhythmical formulas and body movements and eurhythmics. This could be considered as a second period. A third period could be seen in the more difficult pieces for mixed choirs and in all the pedagogical compositions for children’s choirs. His early compositions such as Duérmete apegado a mí (1965) and Canción de Cuna (1966) represent the first period (melodic predominance) with the melody and the text in the soprano voice with the three lower voices providing harmony. The works are tonal, and dissonances occur sometimes but are not prevalent.

In the second period there is a shift away from conventional tonality, strictness of rhythm and time, and formality. He began to expand the number of voices that were used and experimented with different mediums (Epilogo (1981) a ballet performed to tape).

The third period saw a shift toward globalization. Grau and his wife, conductor María Guinand, were actively involved in founding or belonging to organizations calling for music education reform or growth in Venezuela and became respected leaders in the global choral community. They sought to make music accessible to all children of any socio-economic status. They witnessed a tremendous growth in the Venezuelan choral system. Grau states,

When I started the Schola Cantorum de Caracas back in 1967, there were approximately 30 choirs in the country. There was no academic program to train choral conductors, there were no choral organizations working to produce festivals and workshops. Choral symphonic music was very limited. Today we have more than 2000 choirs in the country, undergraduate and graduate programs in 4 universities of choral conducting, many national festivals and national organizations working for the development of choral

\[16\] Ibid.
music, especially as a tool of social development - different choral programs in the region that work toward the same goals.  

Grau not only began to use texts associated with social and environmental events and concerns but also included literary and musical influences of other nations and cultures. *Bin-nam-ma* (*Lluvia Larga – Endless Rain, 1999*) was composed in response to a flood that occurred in Venezuela on December 15, 1999 that killed more than 25,000 people and left more than 400,000 homeless. The language is Catalan (a language resembling Castilian Spanish and Provençal), and the opening melody is a Catalan children’s song. Grau has said that the work reveals influences of African and Indian expressions, Tibetan monk songs, and Buddhist mantras. *Confitemini Domino* was the result of a commission by the Sixth World Symposium on Choral Music in 2001. Guinand states that in this piece,

> The musical style combines the Gregorian recitative with a contemporary musical language that incorporates a variety of rhythmic and harmonic elements which give strength and color to this work . . . The structure of the piece is like a colorful mosaic, in which sections are built using various combinations of the text in styles which are influenced by the music of the minimalists as well as the tango of the Argentinean Astor Piazzola.

In regard to his role as a composer, Grau explains,

> I feel very committed to write music that touches upon aspects of our contemporary life and problems.

These issues include unavoidable events, such as dealing with death, and also rectifiable situations, such as the destruction of the environment. Grau provides the following commentary regarding the *Stabat Mater* on its origins and the inevitability of death.

17 Ibid.
19 Alberto Grau, interview.
Belén. November 1997. A young man named Jimmy Kanawati was killed by a policeman. The news of his death was broadcast internationally, including scenes of his mother crying desperately and suffering greatly from this tragedy. These scenes made a sudden impact on my mind, and I recalled the image of Jesus hanging on the Cross and his suffering Mother standing beside him.

Two ideas are expressed in this composition: the ongoing history of mothers losing their children and the consequent suffering that results from this unnatural fact of life. The music combines plaintive melodies with whispers, dense harmonies and clusters, all organized in a triptych structure. To this, a choreographic element is added which is reminiscent of the idea of an ancient Greek chorus.

The composition is dedicated to José Antonio Abreu, my lifelong friend, as a token of my admiration for his being the creator and instigator of the unique revolutionary Movement of Children and Youth Orchestras in Venezuela. This program is a very important example of the combination of music education and social work bringing together many young people of poor socio-economic backgrounds for the purpose of making music and art.  

One of the greatest contemporary problems that Grau specifically writes about is the destruction of the environment. Grau provides a commentary on the work *Kasar mie la gaji*.

For an international mobilization to save THE EARTH and a conscientious effort regarding the problems of the environment. The inhabitants of the African Sahel say: “Kasar mie la gaji” (“The earth is tired.”)

He captures the aridity of the African desert through the hissing sounds of the text, the weariness of the earth through plaintive glissandos, and the frustration of the world through intensification of dynamics, texture and dissonance.

Some of Grau’s most difficult and most simple compositions were written in his third period. Grau attributes this to the choirs for which he was writing. Many of these choirs were ensembles which could handle the difficulty and sophistication of a technically difficult

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composition. These included his own choirs that he directed and those conducted by his wife. In contrast, he also composed pedagogical works for children’s choruses, incorporating familiar melodies and devices such as ostinato and variation.

Repetition is a common element in Grau’s compositions. He comments,

I think that other aspects that are part of my style of composition are the use of formulas that repeat, in a certain way inspired in the minimalistic technique.22

This can be observed in a recurring melodic motive, rhythm, or textual motif that serves as the foundation of a work such as those in Kasar mie la gaji and Bin-nam-ma.

A common musical device present in Grau’s compositions is the use of the interval of a second (or the ninth or sixteenth). This is used as a cluster effect often found at the end of major sections of the work or the final ending itself.

Example 1: Kasar mie la Gaji measure 46

22 Alberto Grau, interview.
Example 2: *Kasar mie la Gaji* measures 90-91

Example 3: *Confitemini Domino* measures 129-130
Example 4: *Stabat Mater* measures 80-81

The interval of a second is the basic building block of his harmonic structure.

Example 1: *Kasar mie la Gaji* measure 8
Example 2: *Como compongo poco* m. 11-12

Example 3: *Confitemini Domino* m. 126-127
Example 4: *Como Tu* p. 3
Grau explains that the harmonic structures are usually a result “of the use of dissonances that are built from the melodic lines.” This linear composing method supports the careful relationship between text and melody.
Kasar mie la Gaji

*Kasar mie la Gaji* is Alberto Grau’s call for environmental awareness and responsiveness. This work was selected for review because it reflects Grau’s compositional techniques within a compact and concentrated form. It is composed for unaccompanied mixed chorus. “Kasar mie la Gaji” (“The Earth is Tired) is a phrase said by inhabitants of the African Sahel (shore), which is in the southern area of the Sahara desert. The desperation and weariness of the message is characterized by the repeating of only this text. The work is designed on repetition. It is an example of the quasi-minimalism that Alberto Grau mentions in his interview. There is a steady reiteration of text, melody, and various rhythmic devices.

The tenor and bass introduce the main melodic motif.

*Kasar mie la Gaji* measure 1

![Musical notation of the Kasar mie la Gaji measure 1](image)

Two elements make this small motif effective in its design: the dissonance created by the interval of a second and the short glissando at the end of the phrase. Grau explains in the score that the glissando expresses weariness. From the very first measure these two elements portray the destruction to the environment and its response of exhaustion.
The melody is presented in various rhythm patterns in different meters, which constitute the main divisions of the piece.

I. measures 1-14

\[ \text{8} \text{ 4} \ \text{3} \text{2} \text{1} \text{4} \]
Ka-sar mie la ga-ji

II. measures 15-30

\[ \text{c} \text{3} \text{2} \text{1} \text{4} \]
Ka-sar mie la ga-ji

III. measures 31-45

\[ \text{c} \text{3} \text{2} \text{1} \text{4} \]
Ka-sar mie la ga-ji

IV. measures 47-61

\[ \text{7} \text{4} \text{3} \text{2} \text{1} \text{4} \]
Ka-sar mie ka-sar la ga-ji ka-sar mie la ga-ji

V. measures 64-67

\[ \text{8} \text{3} \text{2} \text{1} \text{4} \]
Ka-sar mie ka-sar la ga-ji ka-sar

VI. measures 68-75

\[ \text{8} \text{3} \text{2} \text{1} \text{4} \]
Ka-sar mie la ga-ji.
VII. measures 76-83

There is no single tonal center on which the piece is built. The main unifying structure is the repetition of the text, rhythm and melodic motif. Measures 1-14 can be labeled as an introduction. The melody is set slowly in d minor which is the second most occurring tonal area (18 times). As the piece gains momentum in measure 15 and changes the rhythm pattern, the melody is set in a variety of different tonal areas: g, d, a, e, and f. The most frequently used melodic tone is b (measures 31-46; 68-71; 78-87; 89). The melody shifts usually up or down by a fourth or a third to its next tonal area.

The form of the work can also be divided by the choral texture. Often soprano and alto are paired and tenor and bass are paired.

I. measures 1-14: two voices sing the motif while the other two voices moan a secondary lament
Kasar mie la Gaji measures 7-8

II. measures 15-30: all voices move homorhythmically with soprano and alto moving in contrasting motion and tenor and bass doing the same

Kasar mie la Gaji measures 27-30
III. measures 31-42: tenor and bass sing an ostinato pattern while soprano and alto sing a melodic duet that is offset a measure from one another

\textit{Kasar mie la Gaji} measures 35-38

IV. measures 47-63: the melody is not clearly evident; the slowness of the harmonic rhythm gives the illusion that the parts are wandering

\textit{Kasar mie la Gaji} measures 54-55
V. measures 64-75: tenor and bass sing the motif while soprano and alto speak text (or vice versa)

*Kasar mie la Gaji* measures 64-70
VI. measures 76-87: soprano and alto sing the motif while tenor and bass sing a dissonant secondary chant

*Kasar mie la Gaji* measures 78-81

Grau is very specific about the tempo, dynamic and articulation markings that he provides. The minutest details are provided for the way each motif and repetition should be sung. Special care is given specifically to accent and stress markings. He provides detailed program notes as to how certain sounds should be made (singing and non-singing). These extra musical items are examples of identifiable aspects of Grau’s compositional style. Singers perform hisses, glissandos, clapping, stomping, whispering and shouting. One of the most evocative elements of this piece is the whispering, speaking or shouting of the text. Grau states that the “s” of the word “kasar” should “imitate the sound of the wind blowing through a desolate landscape.” The text is whispered or spoken in the following forms, which create a powerful effect.
Perhaps the most effective element of *Kasar mie la Gaji* is the expressiveness of the text and musical setting. The earth’s weariness resulting from persistent abuse is portrayed by the repetitive quality of the text and motif. The layering or subtracting of voices is used as a device to create the texture representing the intensity of each section. In part one, section one (measures 1-14) the motif is presented slowly in 8/4 meter. The piece begins with the tenor and bass with a plaintive duet of the melody, and the texture builds slowly by adding layers of the alto then soprano moaning “uh”. The building of the texture from bass upward suggests the moaning of the earth from the ground up to the skies. There is intensification in measure 9 as spoken text is introduced and the motif is compressed in the bass.

*Kasar mie la Gaji* measure 9
In measure 15 there is an abrupt change in character as the motif becomes compacted within a 4/4 meter. The compressing of the motif’s rhythm and time signature in which it is set is another method of creating intensity. The soprano and alto sing the melody, which starts a fourth higher beginning on d. It is different from the initial motif by the end of the phrase. The opening motif concludes with a crescendo to the syllable “ji” of “gaji” followed by a falling glissando and decrescendo. This creates a wavelike moaning effect.

Kasar mie la Gaji measure 1

In section two (measures 15-30) the motif at measure 15 also concludes with a crescendo but does not have a diminuendo following it: instead, the repeated phrases grow in agitation. The melody is now in the upper voices creating sharper dissonances at the higher pitches. The upper voices begin clapping at measure 23 on the first and third beat, with the lower voices following two measures later.
The incorporation of body percussion creates a primitive quality, especially with the simplicity of the rhythm. Part two begins mezzo piano and steadily builds in dynamic to its highest point on fortissimo.

There is a sudden change in dynamic in part three (measures 31-46). The lower voices suddenly drop to piano and introduce a new rhythmic pattern:

Kasar mie la Gaji measure 31
This rhythm divides the 4/4 meter in a 3+3+2 pattern for the lower voices while the upper voices have quarter-note divisions. Grau’s expressive marking for this section indicates “poco piú mosso mysterioso.” The mysterious nature of this section is based on a mantra-like motif in the lower voices below a haunting melody in the upper voices. Like the previous sections, there is a steady crescendo to the end of the section. This time Grau adds an accelerando with the crescendo heightening the intensity to the culminating dissonant chord on measure 46. This spot is the exact midpoint of the work. This is the first indication of an outburst of the earth serving as a warning to its inhabitants.

Part two (measures 47-91) commences with a new time signature in 7/4 and serves as the development of the piece. Each 7/4 measure is divided into 3+4.

*Kasar mie la Gaji* measure 47

This is the most dissonant section in the entire piece, yet the dissonance does not imply intensity as much as it does sadness. Grau’s tempo marking indicates *lamentoso*. The piece slows down greatly in this section due to the tempo, time signature and the motif extending over two measures.
The wailing/moaning effect is present in this section through crescendo and decrescendo markings that Grau writes in the score. The tenor and bass continue the wailing when they sing on “oh” in measure 51. Grau instructs them to sing “sempre legato col portamento.” There is a heightening of intensity as shorter notes are used, “kasar mie la gaji” is rapidly whispered, and the dynamics grow to fortissimo. The section calms in measure 60 and there is a dominant seventh chord for a moment that implies hope followed by a single sustained note by the tenor in measure 62-63. The listener is left in suspense as to what will follow.

The last section begins with the introduction of a 7/8 time signature. This asymmetrical meter reflects the unsettled nature of this section. The earth’s inhabitants have not heeded the
warnings and the conclusion of the piece is a building to destruction. The motif returns with fragmented rhythm and the introduction of the ascending tritone in the melody by the lower voices.

\textit{Kasar mie la Gaji} measure 64

The upper voices hiss the text and add to the sizzling effect of the devastation. This intensifies in frequency, dynamics, tempo and body percussion through the commencing of stomping as well as clapping until it reaches a climax in measure 89. Finally the earth explodes in a final unison scream of “kasar” with stomping and clapping signifying the termination of the world. The slow destruction of the earth is evident in this piece. It begins with a simple statement that eventually evolves into a desperate cry. It demonstrates the evolution of the earth from its simplest to most complex. The first warning has been issued and Grau reveals what will be the result if caution is not heeded.
Conclusion

In 1990, Alberto Grau proposed to the International Federation for Choral Music that an annual event be established that would “extol the values of solidarity, peace and understanding.” He said the following,

The world is living through severe and continuous crisis of self destruction. There are no possible reasons that can justify these actions. The majority of the human race wants to live in peace with dignity. It is time to show, with more power and strength, that our choral family contributes, through music to break down the artificial barriers product of politics, different ideologies, religious differences, and racial hatred that separate human beings. We must be able to show that MUSIC, the divine art, is more than the mere search of formal perfection and interpretative beauty, music should serve to extol the values of solidarity, peace, and understanding. We cannot work isolated, we have to make all possible efforts to have our voices heard and to let music work its own paths of communication.23

This led to the establishment of the International Day of Choral Singing. In 2005 more than a million singers participated in the event all over the world. The following proclamation is read before each annual concert.

Sing Choirs of the World!
May your voices take springs there where fire burns.
May your songs put roses there where battlefields lay.
Open furrow and sow love to harvest fruits of hope.
Sing to liberty where despot is,
Sing to equality where poverty nests,
Sing to brotherhood where hate prevails.
May your singing direct the world
so that peace takes over wars,
so that men cherishes earth,
so that all race or color discrimination is banished
so that we will be fraternal
so that this planet rejoices with your voices.

Alberto Grau is a celebrated conductor who has earned honors through his performance, a respected composer whose works are performed by choirs all over the world, and a dedicated family member. He is also an individual who believes in the ability to improve the world through the education of the youth, the life-long pursuit of musical study and performance, and communication of important ideas through his compositions and performances. He represents a new form of nationalism, which is globalism, working to unify the world in peace through music.
The following interviews were conducted simultaneously with Alberto Grau and María Guinand May 15-18, 2007. María Guinand also served as translator.

JY: Julie Yu

AG: Alberto Grau

MG: María Guinand

JY: Was there a significant moment or event that defined you as a composer?

AG: My contacts and studies with great masters such as Vicente Emilio Sojo and Evencio Castellanos. They were very definitive influences.

JY: How did you begin your journey in becoming the musician that you are today?

AG: This interest in music I had since I was a child. I remember many occasions in my early days when I asked my mother to sing a tune once and I would whistle it [back to her]. This is why I always say that my two first instruments were [the] piano and whistle.

JY: How do you see yourself in the lineage of Venezuelan choral composers?

AG: I feel I have followed in one hand the academia, meaning the teaching of Sojo [and] Castellanos, especially in the interest for setting Hispano-American poetry. But also I have had
since my youth great interest in the Latin-American popular rhythms and traditions. I feel that my works combine both elements as well as other innovative trends of the contemporary choral language.

JY: Are your compositions defined by your culture and heritage? If so, how and to what extent?
AG: Yes. As I explained before, my culture and heritage are mainly from this part of the world and it reflects in my music. Rhythm is a very important element. However, from my native Cataluña, I have taken many melodies and lyrical inspirations.

JY: What are some of the misconceptions choral conductors have about Venezuelan music or your compositions?
AG: I think that misconceptions come from lack of understanding of cultural backgrounds, styles, rhythms and also from lack of conducting and rehearsal techniques to approach them.

JY: You have studied with some of the greatest Venezuelan composers, conductors and teachers including Vicente Emilio Sojo, Ángel Sauce and Juan Bautista Plaza. How has each of these men influenced your career and composition style?
AG: I think that especially the knowledge of compositional techniques mainly in dealing with texts and correct accentuation, in handling counterpoint and also the humor and wit were the most influential aspects from my masters.
JY: Some of your texts deal with the world in which we live (Kasar Mie La Gaji, Sing, and Choirs of the World). Are these pieces a personal commentary on the condition of today’s society?

AG: Yes, of course. I feel very committed to write music that touches upon aspects of our contemporary life and problems.

JY: In an interview during the Sixth World Symposium on Choral Music, you mentioned experimenting with consonants, like percussion. Other than the percussive nature of some of your works, what are other qualities of your compositions that might be standard or recognizable?

AG: I think that other aspects that are part of my style of composition are the use of formulas that repeat, in a certain way inspired in the minimalistic technique; also the use of dissonances that are built from the melodic lines and the detailed dynamics and articulation markings. All these elements are part of my palette as a composer. On the other hand, the difficulty of the compositions relate to the choirs to which the works are dedicated.

JY: You also spoke of how you begin with the poem or text in composing a work. Which of your pieces stands out in your mind as the best synthesis of textual underlay and musical structure? How so? Why?

AG: It is difficult for me to choose one or two, but I could point out from the interpretation of the text the Pater Noster, from the sacred repertoire, and my children compositions from the popular repertoire. The Pater Noster because I understand this prayer in a very personal way, and give
more emphasis to certain phrases. The children repertoire because most of the poems I have chose come from a very good and creative poet.

JY: Are there any specific poets whose texts you particularly enjoy setting?  
AG: Yes, Jesús Rosas Marcano, the poet of the children.

JY: Also in the interview during the Sixth World Symposium on Choral Music you said that you were thinking of ways of how you could, “Hit the audience in your next composition.” What was the composition, and what was the technique in which you hit the audience?  
AG: The composition was Confitemini Domino and this piece is especially contrasted in textures, tempi, virtuosity in interpreting dynamics and articulations, and the use of ‘sounding’ consonants like ‘m’, ‘n’ and ‘l’.

JY: You have said that the work of a composer should evolve as the human being does. How have your works evolved; and similarly, how have you evolved?  
AG: When I hear my works performed by the choirs to whom I have written for, or by other choirs and they demonstrate levels of high artistry, this helps me to find other paths and create in new ways.

JY: Does your music fall into certain style periods?  
AG: To a certain extent yes. My early works for voice and piano were very melodic. With the ballet La Doncella I started a new period of incorporating already more rhythmical formulas and body movements and eurhythmics. This could be considered as a second period. A third period
could be seen in the more difficult pieces for mixed choirs and in all the pedagogical compositions for children’s choirs.

JY: You stated that a conductor should be critical of oneself. When do you stop being critical of a work?
AG: Never. I think that to be self-critical is essential. Of course this cannot paralyze your creative work.

JY: Many of your works are for unaccompanied chorus. Is this a preference? Other than commissions, do you have a specific ensemble in mind when composing?
AG: I prefer the ‘a cappella’ choir because this is my instrument. I always write with an ensemble in mind, and if these ensembles are close to me, I like to challenge them with difficulties.

JY: Who have you influenced?
AG: I have had many pupils during my life as a teacher and I am sure I have influenced them.

JY: What is your proudest or happiest moment as a composer?
AG: The moment when my works are premiered.

JY: As a conductor?
AG: The ‘Guido D’Arezzo’ competition I won with the Schola Cantorum in 1974. This was a very special occasion.
JY: Your wife, María Guinand, is an internationally respected choral conductor and teacher. How do you work together as a team?

AG: We have worked together for more than 30 years. We have built many choral projects in Venezuela, she has premiered many of my works, we have cooperated in many international projects, editorial projects, and we share a life of music and wonderful family.

JY: Is she ever involved in the compositional process?

AG: She always hears about my ideas and process and makes suggestions especially when I have already the first version. In the rehearsals, she also intervenes and discusses aspects of interpretation.

JY: When her choirs perform your compositions, what is the level of interaction with the composer?

AG: Very, very close.

JY: You stated in an interview, “Sometimes if something is extremely difficult, you as a composer should make it easier, if you see that the performer is not able to do it. But sometimes for respect of the institution, you have to do things harder, because the choir that is going to sing this deserves such an amount of difficulty.” What makes compositions today difficult? Do you feel composers feel pressure to produce works that are more and more technically and musically demanding? If so, which works would you put in this category? How are they difficult?

AG: Rather than listing difficult compositions, I would say that a composition is difficult depending on the musical and artistic level of the choir and especially the conductor. There may
be technical difficulties related to range, use of dissonances, complex rhythms, fast articulation or long legato phrases, use of choreographic elements, etc… The versatility and musical preparation of the choir and the conductor are essential to overcome the difficulties of new repertoires.

JY: How has being a composer influenced you as a conductor and vice versa?

AG: I was first a choral conductor, with desire to compose. The fact that I knew so well so much a cappella repertoire, and was always very eager to discover new composers and works, has helped me enormously in my career as a choral composer. Today I can say the choir is my instrument that I know really well.

JY: You and your wife have been advocates of the development of choral music in your country. What was the condition of music education and choral music in the country and where is it now?

AG: When I started the Schola Cantorum de Caracas back in 1967, there were approximately 30 choirs in the country. There was no academic program to train choral conductors, there were no choral organizations working to produce festivals and workshops. Choral symphonic music was very limited. Today we have more than 2000 choirs in the country, undergraduate and graduate programs in 4 universities of choral conducting, many national festivals and national organizations working for the development of choral music, especially as a tool of social development. Different choral programs in the region that work toward the same goals. We have been the site of the vice presidency of IFCM for Latin America for 4 periods (24 years).
JY: You travel and interact with choirs all over the world. What is your view of the status of choral music in this ever-changing world?

AG: I think that Music Education in what concerns choral music has not advanced substantially enough in the past years, especially in the training of children and young singers. Choral music should be a compulsory subject in all schools and high schools, because it is the basis of general musicianship and many values that relate to tolerance, discipline, teamwork, and search of perfection.
Interview with Maria Guinand

JY: This subject of this project is conductor and composer, Professor Alberto Grau, who is also your husband. How would you describe him to those who have not met him? What is your professional relationship with Professor Grau?

MG: As a person, Alberto is a very generous man, full of solidarity and good will, a very good husband and a loving father. [He is] very exigent and disciplined and with clear values and opinions. As a professional, Alberto is a hard worker, responsible, sensitive, very critical of himself and others, and very ambitious as an artist and musician. I was his pupil for many years, first as a piano student and then as a conductor. During many years I was his assistant conductor in the Schola Cantorum and The University Choir, and then I became principal conductor of both organizations when he retired. However we collaborate in many different projects.

JY: What fundamental principles did Professor Grau instill in you as a conducting student?

MG: Hard work, critical, good musicianship, discipline, punctuality, precision

JY: Where do Professor Grau and his works fall in the lineage of Venezuelan choral composers and compositions?

MG: He followed the basic teachings of his masters, but I consider that Alberto’s catalogue of choral works and his contribution not only to the Venezuelan repertoire but also to the Latin American contemporary literature has been enormous.

JY: What are the challenges of learning and performing his music?
MG: One must understand his style, his challenges for the conductor first, who has to be the clear master to organize rehearsals and convey enthusiasm to the singers for all the new effects, choreographical elements. Conducting Alberto’s music is always challenging but it has been a great school of conducting for me.

JY: How do you describe Professor Grau’s compositional style?
MG: Challenging, unique, versatile, creative, difficult.

JY: How do you approach the study of his works?
MG: Depending on the piece, I will start by understanding the whole structure and the meaning of the work. Usually, if there are choreographic elements, I leave this to be learned once the music has been mastered, however one can start working rhythmically also the choreographic elements. Alberto’s music should be approached also sectionally.

JY: How much creative input does he give you on performing his works?
MG: He is always very critical and open to discussions. Sometimes, he changes many things in the process of a premiere.

JY: How much creative input do you give him on composing his works?
MG: If he asks for it I am always prepared to do this.

JY: How do the two personalities of conductor and composer mesh in Professor Grau?
MG: In perfect harmony.
JY: What changes have you witnessed in the evolution of Professor Grau’s compositions?

MG: His style has become more precise and focused to the choirs to whom he dedicates his music. His choreographic elements are sometimes more complex and others freer.

JY: What is your role in the International Federation for Choral Music for Latin America? What projects have you and your organizations developed in the quest for the development of global choral music, music performance and music education?

MG: Currently I am in the EXCOM of IFCM. For IFCM we have developed the Andean Project of Social Action through Music with the sponsoring of the Andean Development Bank in Venezuela, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador. Through this project we are developing conductors, choral teachers, children and youth choirs in poor areas, building networks, etc. We have contributed to strengthen the America Cantat Festival, already we had the fifth edition in Cuba. We have proposed and organized the International Day of Choral Singing during more than 18 years. We translate into Spanish the ICB (International Choral Bulletin).

JY: What challenges have you faced as a female conductor? Specifically, have there been challenges as a female conductor in Venezuela?

MG: I face the challenges of all conductors who want to do a good work, you have to be organized, know about management, teaching, music, and also if you have a family you have to find time and energy to put together all these things.

JY: You are the editor and have arranged many works for Earthsongs. How did that project begin?
MG: It began 16 year ago in Portland, during a project I was doing with the Portland Singers. Ron Jeffers [former Director of Choral Activities at Oregon State University] approached me and asked me if I would be willing to start a series with him and I said YES. Ever since we have had a wonderful relationship.

JY: What do you forecast for the future of multicultural choral music?
MG: I think it is very promising.

JY: What do you forecast for the future of choral music?
MG: I think choral music will continue to develop and to grow as an art if it continues to be an important part of the educational process of all children and youth in the early ages. It can become a very strong tool of social development and social cohesion, integrating different social strata, religious beliefs and uniting humanity.
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