

Symphonia Inconclusa

A life in *song*

Gabriel Ignacio Alonso
M.Photog.Cr., CPP
F-TPPA

Overture:

I am an immigrant and the son of an immigrant who was the son of an immigrant. My origins go back to Northern Spain, Province of Asturias, and the Cangas de Onis Valley with its heavy Celtic roots. With all the country's beauty, it was plagued by naughty winter weather. After World War II and the Spanish Civil War, culminating with the rise of the fascist regime of dictator Francisco Franco, my ancestor's winter visits to Mexico became a permanent move. My paternal grandfather settled in the Valle de Santiago in Mexico, but still maintained a residence in Oviedo, Asturias in Spain. My father stayed behind while he finished his education. After graduating from the Jesuit College in Infiesto, Asturias, he immigrated with his family to Mexico City to seek his own fortune.

Blessed with two beautiful loving parents, I was the seventh of eight children. Growing up in a large Roman Catholic family meant there was never a dull moment. My older siblings often playfully picked on me. I spent my formative years in Mexico City. During the 1950s and 60's the city was delightful, but over time it became a challenging place to live with terrible air pollution and a large population that grew to over 20 million.

My father was a successful businessman with great influence; he was an executive with the leading high-end retail stores in Mexico. I spent many of my summer and Christmas school breaks working in the store with him. He had me perform lowly chores like cleaning the stock rooms, sweeping the floors and dusting. I hated it but it taught me humility, which was exactly what I needed to learn. He often told me that, in order for me to run a business, I had to understand the jobs of all the employees starting from the very lowest.

He had a great passion for photography and enjoyed the finer things in life. Evidence of this was his Leica M3 and his 16 mm Bolex movie camera that he used at every opportunity. I became his "meter boy", a position that I truly enjoyed and helped me to learn exposure and camera operation. We had our family portrait made at a downtown studio every year. These black and white images are among my most precious possessions. My mom, understanding the value of professional portraits, took us in to the studio often to get individual portraits made.

First Act

Allegro:

For as long as I can remember, music has danced inside my head creating moods and environments for my soul to dwell in. It has been my constant companion in the good as well as the bad moments of my existence. It was at an early age that I discovered that I was granted the gift (and the curse) of perfect pitch and an innate ability to enjoy and perform music. I was engaged in musical performance since grade school. I taught

myself to play the guitar and the piano. I can hear a song and identify the key that it is in and then, on most cases; I can sit down and play it. I can also detect when people sing off-key. That is the equivalent of Chinese torture to me.

As a child, I often listened to classical music records and the music would send me off into dream-like fantasies. I would see imaginary characters interacting to the music. I composed music constantly creating little silly tunes that I still remember.

My parents recognized this gift and enrolled me in private piano lessons. I quickly grew bored because I already knew how to play by ear the pieces they were trying to teach me. The lessons ended abruptly because I knew the music but the teacher insisted on doing it the proper way. Heads butted and it was over. We tried again with two other teachers with the same results. Regrettably, I never learned to read and write music.

As a grade school student, I participated in choir and some fretted instrument ensembles. I always felt like I didn't fit anywhere except in these musical activities. I was often the target of the school bullies and found myself engaging involuntarily in fistfights, making me a frequent visitor to detention.

Alongside music, scouting was also a safe place for me. I was a Cub Scout as well as a Boy Scout. I really enjoyed going on day treks and camping out in the mountains. The lessons and skills that I learned while scouting, such as tying knots, are still present with me and are used frequently.

By my teenage years, I had become a member of multiple rock bands. During the week I worked as a session musician, including the performance of incidental music for the Mexican motion picture industry. The weekends found me playing band gigs at concerts, private events, parties and wedding receptions. Working as a successful musician made finishing high school a struggle. After graduation, music became my full time profession and untamed passion. One career highlight was having being the opening act for the rock band *The Doors* in June of 1969, for four nights and eight shows. Far out, dude!

Second Act

Adagio:

I always felt that I was groomed to become an American. During the 50's and early 60's a lot of the Mexican television programming originated from the US; the only difference was that it was dubbed into Spanish. I grew up exposed to many of the same shows as my contemporaries in the United States. I learned to love the culture.

It was during my late teen years that I met my former wife Molly who was from Texas and was attending boarding school in Cuernavaca, just south of Mexico City. Her parents were retired and lived in Acapulco, Mexico. We dated on and off for seven years and got married in 1976. We decided that we would have better opportunities if we were to move to the United States. We arrived in Houston, Texas on 31 October of the bi-centennial year. Within a year, my in-laws followed us there.

Under the inexorable pressure of my in-laws, I was persuaded to renounce my musical career and get “A Real Job”. I agreed without realizing that in essence, I was agreeing to become somebody who I was not. A recipe for disaster. It is unfortunate that young people tend to place expectations on others in a relationship, instead of accepting people as they are. Youth is wasted on the young!

In order to get a job in my new country, I pulled from my early experiences working for my father in the retail merchandizing industry and I landed my first job at Neiman Marcus. I was hired as a salesman in the men’s One-Up shop, which focused on trendy clothing, imports and fashion. Working my way through the ranks, I became a men’s clothing buyer for the Houston retail firm Sakowitz, which operated 16 stores in three states at that time. I was enrolled in their leadership-training program and got to experience frequent buying trips to New York City and extensive travel to support the operation of the stores. That was a rewarding experience, but it was not art.

All the while, music lived inside me, in exile. I continued to compose original songs that remained solely in my soul. I bought an acoustic guitar and an electronic keyboard and started to practice again, often dreaming of forming a band some day.

Third Act

Andante:

By this time, my artistic creativity had been repressed until it became impossible to keep it capped any longer, that’s when I rediscovered photography. I remember driving home at the end of the day and seeing the beautiful evening light reflecting on the glass buildings, it was gorgeous; it sang to me! My creative spirit erupted and I found my new expression platform in photography.

After realizing that the small neighborhood labs like Fox Photo were not the ideal place to have film processed, I started to use the services of a local professional lab. Looking at the prints displayed on their walls only fueled my passion further. On one of my visits to this lab, I noticed a brochure on the sales counter from the Houston Community College’s photography department. It read: “Photography 101, come learn from the experts”. I went to visit the college and immediately signed up for the semester, as it was available on evenings and Saturdays. I could do this without affecting my retail job.

This is where the magic happened when I witnessed the proverbial image appear on the photo paper in the developer. I never looked back!

I began a quest for my place in the industry and studied the available avenues. I called and made appointments to visit just about every studio in town, commercial and portrait alike. One of the places that caught my attention was the Gittings Portrait Studio located in the prestigious Houston Galleria, next to Neiman Marcus. It was the most amazing studio that I had ever seen. It was a “carriage trade” business decorated with the finest furnishings that displayed gorgeous wall portraits of celebrities, movie stars, civic leaders and the like.

I was terrified to go in there, as I almost felt not worthy. Eventually, I built my courage and asked for an interview. That’s when I met Arthur Heitzman, Director of Photography who would eventually become my mentor. He was an elegant and refined gentleman. Mr. Heitzman showed me to his office and, after I stated my interest, he reviewed my portfolio with an emotionless expression. He then proceeded to tell me that I had “an eye” for the craft but then dropped the bomb that they never hired photographers who didn’t have a formal education, preferably a Brooks Institute degree. He encouraged me to continue to pursue my dream and invited me to return whenever I had a new portfolio. I took him at his word and came back to visit at the end of each college semester. We established a great relationship.

I continued to work at the retail store while attended HCC on evenings and Saturdays. It was then that I became aware of the fascinating history of photography and the many areas of specialty in the industry: commercial, industrial, wedding and portrait as well as fine art. I discovered the amazing worlds of George Hurrell, Arnold Newman, Yosuf Karsh, and Ansel Adams. This is when I fell in love with portraiture and became totally immersed in the study of these iconic artists. Particularly inspiring to me were Newman and Karsh. Their revolutionary images reveal an extraordinary ability to create portraits, primarily in Black and White, that usually reflect the subject’s own environment. What a brilliant way to tell a person’s story. You will see examples of their style’s influence in my portfolio.

The college also exposed me to the Photo Secession and it’s protagonists: Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Clarence White and Gertrude Käsebier to name a few. My passion for art history grew and my desire to learn and discover became insatiable. This secessionist impressed me as they had struggled to gain respect from the art world that regarded photography as an inferior media to create art. Their determination to fight for photography as an art form was inspiring.

I was particularly impressed with the fact that Stieglitz introduced unknown painters and sculptors to America such as Pablo Picasso and Auguste Rodin, who had their first show at his gallery on Fifth Avenue in New York City. I identified with this movement because, like in my case, their photography was a point of departure towards the

transformed manipulated final image. This movement was unlike landscape artists such as Ansel Adams that created images using straight photography rendering the subject faithfully.

Monochromatic Photography has been present throughout my career from the very beginning and remains my favorite media for photographic expression. During my early college days, I used a small guest bathroom at home as a makeshift darkroom. The kitchen was my “wet” area where film and prints were processed. I maintained a darkroom in my studio until the turn of the century, when the digital revolution made it practically obsolete. Inkjet printing has filled that void brilliantly. I believe that if Ansel Adams were alive today, he would embrace digital technology enthusiastically.

Having studied the Zone System in college and learning to translate color tonal values into the corresponding shades of gray was an enjoyable pursuit. I often find myself engaged in evaluating scenes and visualizing how they would translate to Zone values. The Black and White medium is ideal for artistic expression that is free from prejudice based on color. I find it stimulating and liberating. The monochromatic environment creates a neutral environment for the image content to exist without the influence of color bias, thus making it pure. I am now rediscovering some of my old favorite processes such as Platinum Palladium printing, producing digital negatives from digitally captured images using the inkjet printer.

Fourth Act

Vivace:

My path changed again in 1986 when I received a call from Arthur Heitzman offering me a position at Gittings. However, it was not as a photographer but as manager of the downtown Houston studio that specialized in executive portraiture. They offered this job based on my experience in the retail industry. Mr. Heitzman convinced me by simply stating that it would “put my foot in the camera room”. I accepted this job without hesitation. This event would mark my tenth anniversary in the United States.

The position came with a considerably smaller paycheck than what I was earning in retail, so in order to pacify my spouse and justify the career change, I was compelled to work two jobs and continue to go to school all at the same time. I was working at Gittings full time, at Sakowitz part time and attending the college on evenings and Saturdays. I was a man on a mission.

A valuable lesson for me was when I approached Mr. Heitzman with my desire to photograph weddings for the studio. He told me that for him to agree, I had to prove that I could perform this task to his satisfaction. He asked me to make a list of the twenty-four most important things that take place at a wedding. After reading the list, he handed

me two rolls of 120 film and sent me to go shadow the Gittings photographer at the next wedding. My instructions were to take the pictures and bring the film back to him. I shot that film using a Rolleiflex twin lens camera with a Zeiss f3.5 Tessar lens. I still own that camera.

The process that I went through to come up with that list, combined with having a single frame for each capture without allowing room for error was challenging. Mr. Heitzman did not give me a critique of the images. I believe that the lesson was based on the concept that careful planning must take place before engaging on a project and then, the plan needs to be executed with discipline. It was all about the process.

These twenty-four images became the foundation of my future wedding work. I built my albums featuring these twenty-four images as the core with the rest of the photos made at the wedding completing the story.

Another important lesson learned from working at Gittings was that the shutter is never released to capture the image until all the elements are in place and the expression is evoked, as emotion is of the utmost importance. This method produces fewer images but results in a higher quality image. To this day it remains my *modus operandi*.

Gittings used a chart with each session type that dictated how many and what poses were to be made. No more than one capture was allowed per pose. Discipline was paramount as each exposure cost money.

Having had the gift of working with all the great portrait artists at Gittings, made me aware of the work of other living portraitist. Such artists as Al Gilbert, William McIntosh, Frank Cricchio and Jay Stock also had a major influence in my work as a portraitist.

I was under the employ of Gittings during the transfer of ownership from the Gittings family to Paul Skipworth, who became my new employer. I also benefited greatly from his fine mentorship. A fun memory of working with Paul was when we went together to photograph a large family group that included adults and young children. I watched Paul put his shoe on his head and let it drop repeatedly to amuse the children and adults alike thus getting the expression that he wanted. I still use that technique today, except that instead of my shoe I use a stuffed pink kitten.

One of the most memorable days of my life was on 10 September 1984 when I became a naturalized citizen of the United States. I stood proudly in front of the Federal Judge and recited the pledge of allegiance for the first time, the greatest privilege on planet earth!

I finished all the courses needed to graduate from the Houston Community College and graduated with Honors on the Sixteenth day of May 1987 with an Associate of Applied Science in Photographic Technology degree.

Soon after the birth of my daughter Alexandra in 1988, I found myself in the position to become self-employed, so I opened my own studio in Houston, specializing in portraiture and wedding photography. Having my own business meant that I was able to freely pursue the style that was truly mine instead of having to conform to established molds. I opened Photography by Gabriel in an office park setting located in the middle of my target clientele. My focus was on portraiture but most of my work was shooting weddings. I was frustrated as wedding work is very demanding and has great liability. It also stole some of the time that I could have spent with my baby daughter.

My wife and in-laws were never supportive of my pursuit and the despair grew stronger. I was so focused with the pursuit of the American Dream that it enabled me to temporarily bear my marital strife until it became impossible. The creative monster inside me wanted to burst out through my chest like the alien in the movie. My first marriage lasted for 22 years ending in divorce in 1998. It was very painful to get separated from my daughter whom I adored.

Soon after, I met my wife Amy while photographing her sister's wedding. She was the prettiest maid of honor I have ever seen. She was twelve years younger than me and never married. She had never found the right guy, until she met me that is. We were best friends from the start and it soon became clear that we were made for each other. It seemed as if our previous experiences prepared us for the life that we were about to share together. We got married in Acapulco, Mexico on 25 March 1999 at my sister's home that was right on the beach. It was a small storybook wedding with fireworks at the end.

Arthur Heitzman approached me again, this time regarding joining a newly formed company named Wyndham-Leigh Portraiture. They had landed a business agreement with Neiman Marcus to open a series of studios in select Neiman Marcus Stores with the pilot studio to be located in McLean in Virginia, a suburb of Washington, DC where Neiman Marcus has its leading store. Among the company's members were Arthur Heitzman, Jim Deaver (Mr. Deaver was the former president of the Gittings Portrait Studios) and Andy Foster (Former Executive Director of PPA) as advisors. William McIntosh was to be the Leading Portrait Artist. My role was to be the studio's portrait artist in residence while Mr. McIntosh would be making appearances from time to time to photograph dignitaries and celebrities. It was such an exciting prospect.

I lifted my twenty-three year old roots from Texas and moved with my wife Amy to Northern Virginia. We arrived just in time for the Millennium celebration. Excitement was in the air.

By the middle of 2002 it became evident that Wyndham-Leigh Portraiture was fracturing and would not last long, so my wife and I decided to return to Texas. We chose to move to Fort Worth in North Texas where we now have our home that we thoroughly enjoy. I

then realized that I was presented with the unusual opportunity to start over with the benefit of two decades of experience in a new market where nobody knew me.

This time I put into practice the lessons learned through the decades and I hired a professional marketing team to aid me in creating a brand. It involved creating a logo, a slogan, a mission statement and a website to support it. A marketing plan was created and so Gabriel Portraiture was born. Since then, I have operated as a home based studio specializing in classical portraiture and children's heirloom portraits. After thirteen blessed years, I couldn't be more grateful.

By request of my clients, I learned to appreciate pet portraiture. You know pets are people too! Many folks regard their pets as family. I love the challenge to create a classical portrait of a dog or a cat. I have included an example of each in my portfolio to show this facet of my business.

My journey in photography has taken me from film and the darkroom to digital capture and printing. During the film years, I was fortunate to have been able to learn and use large, medium and small format cameras. Once digital arrived, I was an early implementer with the Foveon Digital Camera in 1999. I lived through the battles in the trenches during the evolution of digital cameras and feel relieved that they are now as good, if not better than the film cameras of yore. I consider myself very fortunate to be able to use medium format equipment again. There is something about the format that just "draws" the image differently that the smaller format digital cameras. Size matters!

In photography as well as in music, I am inspired by gear. I consider cameras and guitars to have something in common. There are songs and great images trapped inside them just waiting to be let out and I really enjoy being the catalyst to make that happen.

I have studied portrait painters from Leonardo DaVinci forward and have incorporated bits and pieces from many of them into own work. Thomas Gainsborough is my primary resource for arm and hand posing. Gainsborough's color palette is extraordinary and reflects in many of the backgrounds that I use in my own work. His contemporaries, Joshua Reynolds and Henry Raeburn totally rock my world. I am constantly studying these masters for knowledge and inspiration that never seems to get old. This new appreciation drove me into the research of the great portrait painters of the 18th and 19th centuries. I am particularly fond of John Singer Sargent and his contemporaries Joaquin Sorolla y Bastida and Valentin Serov.

Among the portrait artists that had a profound effect on me were Phillip Stewart Charis and his protégés Art McWhirter and William Branson. They were instrumental in my falling in love with classical portraiture and inspiring my quest for the source. In more recent times, other great influences have been Joyce Wilson, Tim Kelly, David Peters, Tim Walden, Gary Silber, Sam Gray, Gregory Daniel and Audrey Wancket.

The study of the old masters along with the fellowship of living portrait artist have inspired me to learn how to use the fine digital painting techniques available today to enhance my photographic portraits further into the realm of art. The benefit of having studied these artists is that my images look like classic portrait paintings right out of the camera. My current painting style is very subtle.

My portfolio contains images that were captured using both film and digital cameras. Including large, medium and small format and feature images that span over two decades. It reflects the influence of the artists that have impacted me through my career as a portrait artist.

Another factor that played an important role in my journey was becoming an International Juror with the PPA. Participating in image competition was an invaluable tool, as it became a vehicle to awareness of the latest trends as well as a source of inspiration. Making priceless friendships was a fringe benefit from participating in this activity.

Interlude:

On 29 May of 2010, while installing software in my daughter's laptop, I heard a swoosh-swoosh, felt dizzy and passed out. Fortunately my wife and daughter were home and rushed me to the emergency room.

After an evaluation, we were informed that I had suffered a cerebral hemorrhage due to a ruptured aneurysm located in the carotid artery right behind my right ear. It was a miracle that I was alive as the odds were not on my side. I spent sixteen days in the Neurology Intensive Care Unit before I could go home. I underwent five brain interventions to bring this condition under control during an eighteen-month period. Fortunately, I don't appear to have any neurological deficits.

One souvenir that I brought home with me from the ICU was a sign that the nurses manufactured for me out of computer print-out paper that read: "You are at Harris Hospital in Fort Worth, you have an aneurysm... that was coiled today". Apparently, I kept waking up and asking where I was as I walked into the hallway.

As a result of this event, I completely revised my priorities. I was given a new chance at life. This made me realize how important it is to live each day as if it were my last and to dismiss the small stuff altogether. It fueled my passion for what I do and for the people that I love even more. All I can tell you is that, if every morning when I get up and look at my reflection in the mirror and remember who I am, I know that it's going to be a good day.

Finale:

My motivation to become a fellow of ASP, stems from my desire to honor the memory of Paul Linwood Gittings who was instrumental in the creation of the degree. Since I knew him personally and worked at his company for several years, his legacy has played an immense roll on forging who I am as a person and an artist.

One of the greatest gifts that I enjoy is my relationship with my loving wife Amy, who fully accepts and embraces who I am. She encourages and supports my art, both music and portraiture. I am now able to enjoy recording my compositions and perform music live again. It is ironic that the band that I play with is populated with professional portrait artists, just like me.

My goal as a portrait artist is to create images for my clients that posses a timeless quality that never goes out of style. I use photography, Photoshop and Corel Painter techniques to create my work. Through the careful planning in advance of the session, I am able to educate and guide the patron in order to create heirloom images that will hopefully transcend my brief existence in this planet.

I see myself not as a talented person but as the steward and keeper of this talent. It is my responsibility to maintain and nourish this talent until it is time to pass it on to the next host. I believe that it is not about me, it is much bigger than that. You can't learn talent, but you can learn skills to allow it to thrive. If I've achieved any greatness it's simply because I have been standing on the shoulders of giants.

In my future I hope to see opportunities to educate and convey the knowledge I've acquired to the next generation of photographic artists. If I am granted the ability to retain my mind, I hope to be able to work and produce art for as long as I am able.

Ultimately, it is all about the will of the almighty director in the heavens.

Respectfully submitted,

Gabriel Ignacio Alonso
M.Photog.Cr., CPP, F-TPPA

Biography

Offering a vast breadth of experience and skill, Gabriel Ignacio Alonso is one of today's premier portrait artists. His talent and expertise combined with his immense insight, exceptional artistic composition and heightened sensitivity to the client's desires allow him to capture their essence in images to cherish for generations.

Credentials & Experience:

- Holds the Master of Photography and Photographic Craftsman degrees and is a Certified Professional Photographer with the Professional Photographers of America.
- Serves as a member of the Board of Governors of the American Society of Photographers.
- Served as a Qualified International Image Juror with the Professional Photographers of America.
- Has Lectured at National, Regional, State and Local conventions as well as for other International Professional Associations.
- Former Manager and Portrait Artist at both Gittings Texas and Gittings West Studios.
- Former Regional manager and Portrait Artist for McWhirter Portrait Studios at Neiman Marcus in Houston, TX.
- Former Portrait Artist for Wyndham-Leigh Portraiture in Washington, DC, Fort Worth and Dallas, TX.

His exceptional work has been selected for the Masters Loan Collection of the Professional Photographers of America and has been exhibited at the Eastman Kodak pavilion of Disney's Epcot Center. But more importantly, his images grace the walls of satisfied clients throughout the world.

Service

1997 - President, Photographic Artist of Texas Guild

2007 - President, Metroplex Professional Photographers Guild

2009 - Member, Photographic Exhibitions Committee, PPA

2010 - Member, Photographic Exhibitions Committee, PPA

2011 to present - Member, Board of Governors, Current President elect, ASP

2014 - President, Rotary Club of Fort Worth Southwest

Accomplishments

Associate of Applied Science in Photographic Technology degree. Houston Community College.

PPA Master of Photography

PPA Photographic Craftsman

PPA Certified Professional Photographer

PPA Councilor Since 2008

PPA Approved International Juror from 1997 through 2017

Five PPA Loan Collection Images

Sixty-Two PPA Exhibition Merits

One-Hundred-Eighty-One PPA Speaker Merits

Two-Hundred-Eighteen PPA Service Merits

Four-Time PPA Photographer of the Year

Kodak Epcot Pavilion Display Selectee

TPPA Fellowship

ASP State Elite Award