Cuban musical culture in five fertile decades (1959-2010)

JESÚS GÓMEZ CAIRO

HE TRIUMPHANT Revolution of 1959 unleashed a series of transcendental transformations in every sphere of the country's political, economic, social and cultural life - in the broadest sense of the term -, which radically and progressively reshaped the foundation and development of the Cuban nation and society in the last five decades. These processes were not without contradictions and even antagonisms arising from the emergence of the new system, which gradually rebuilt the State, economic structures and social relations, and reformulated its presence in culture, which until then relied on neo-colonial classist bases established and dominated by U.S. imperialism.

The fact that the establishment of a new society without classes or essential inequalities in Cuba was unprecedented in Latin America, prompted a permanent and growing aggressive reaction by imperialism that continues to this day. Therefore, reversing this scenario has been, from the beginning, a requirement for survival. To that end, the revolutionary State enacted and implemented numerous new laws of all sorts, but the main ideological and cultural instrument used by the Revolution in its strategy was the Literacy Campaign (1961), along with the creation of a new type of educational system focused on expanding the scope of general education and of the vocational, technical, scientific, ideological and cultural development of the people. This included, among other things, preparing, in different spheres, the new artists the nation needed for its development. At the same time, from its early days the revolutionary State has been interested in assisting, organizing, stimulating and disseminating art and its producers, in all its forms of expression, including amateur artists; a logistics scheme has been established for their creations and performances, together with the essential support for their dissemination among the masses. Thus, between periods of dialectic reaffirmation, reformulations and corrections, options were brought about between stages of upheaval and stability, which in culture have always been marked by a sign and eagerness on the part of cultural institutions, and especially of intellectuals and artists, to overcome obstacles.

Culture is perhaps the field in which the effects that boost the set of revolutionary changes are more clearly multilaterally expressed, since culture, for

its very broad nature, somehow involves virtually all tasks (endeavors, management, investments, financial expenses, and material and technological resources) of economic and social life, by virtue of intellectual creation, production and cultural and artistic services, its dissemination among the people either directly or through the mass media, and its participatory worship in (and by) the masses. Culture is also the most comprehensive expression of the identity and diversity of human endogenous and exogenous links and exchanges of society and the nation observed in their contexts, as well as of its contrasting ideologies. Culture in general, and Cuban culture in particular, also operates as a self-regulating factor that ensures the indispensable good practices and periods of stability in the hectic dynamics of development.

It should be clear that the concept of cultural I'm using so far is not at all limited to the field of artistic and literary culture. In fact, since the early 1990s the Cuban cultural policy has included among its purposes and actions, a vision that has given a new dimension to the notion of culture, which is contained in many official programmatic documents of mass organizations. However, the logical space limitations imposed by this article force me to focus my thoughts on the concrete field of artistic and literary culture, and within it particularly the one I shall refer to as Cuban musical culture.

And why not simply Cuban music? Because then we would be addressing only the strictly artistic aspects, which are actually a result of a much broader set of cultural phenomena that condition art itself, including the teaching of music, the organization and performance of musical and artistic ensembles, the dissemination of their activities, their relationship with the audiences, the development and extension of musical media (record production, music editions, instruments, teams, facilities typical of paramusical logistics, the incorporation of information and communication technologies, etc.), the preservation and dissemination of the musical heritage (for which the national Music Museum was created in 1971), the development of musicological research (for which the Center for Research and Development of Cuban Music was established in 1979), among others. Thus, the concept of musical culture that uses here is clearly polysemic, although it contains, in its foundation and core, musical creation as human production, the genesis of the musical art in all its forms of expression. That is how it has been understood and treated in theory and practice over the past 51 years.

In 1959 Cuban music had reached a remarkable stage of development in its artistic aspects in all spheres of creation: music and dance folklore, professional popular music and the so-called scholarly or academic composition. All these forms had experienced, since the mid-eighteenth century, important creative processes that shaped central works, genres and styles which, in the mid-twentieth century identified in the whole continent, and with strong evidence in other regions of the world, a young and receptive, syncretic although conspicuous

Cuban music with strong identity features and at the same time influential in other latitudes, due to the strong communicative vocation of its artists and the cosmopolitan projections of its dissemination. What happened in 1959 and in later years established, however, an imaginary axis that determined a before and an after, in whose interrelation the distinctive factor has been that, for the first time ever, considering the entire history of the nation, the revolutionary State has assumed the status of main manager and promoter of the bases for the development of this musical creation, without interfering with the quality, which is, in essence, spontaneous, natural and not "programmable" in its content or its expression, but only in the logistics of its organization, dissemination and extension.

An incipient symphonic movement emerged in the first half of the twentieth century, based on the (short-lived) symphony orchestras of Havana and the Havana Philharmonic, both underpinned by the principle of bourgeois "patronage", which in Cuba was little generous with artists and, at the same time, very demanding with regard to their responsibilities. However, both entities, within their possibilities, achieved results of remarkable significance thanks to the tireless endeavor and professionalism of their musicians, and despite the patronage which ultimately favored only the Philharmonic and was not conducive to the rise of national composers, although they occasionally had to accept it by demand in view of the imperative of directors, performers and a certain sector of the public.

Since the effective foundation in 1960 of the National Symphony Orchestra (by a 1959 decree) and the official creation of the Symphony Orchestras of Matanzas, in Santiago de Cuba, Camagüey, in Villa Clara and in Holguin (the latest), and the Symphony Orchestra of the Opera and Ballet among the first (today of the Great Theatre of Havana, with similar functions), and of Radio and Television, the country has witnessed a thriving and outstanding movement, which is strengthened by orchestras of this type formed by students, as part of the training program, in permanent activity in the Higher Art Institute and other schools and music conservatories in the capital and other provinces.

The Cuban choral movement now has 21 professional choirs of proven quality, among which the most important are: the National Choir of Cuba, the Inter Voices, the Orfeón Santiago, the Ex Audi, the Schola Cantorum Coralina, the Leo Vocal, and the Sine Nomine Vocal Ensemble, among others. All these choirs have achieved great success in the most demanding international stages, an unprecedented phenomenon in any stage prior to 1959. The same happened with chamber music, which today has 68 permanent ensembles in various formats, such as: Romeu Ensemble, Soloists of Havana, Ars Longa Eternal Music (specializing in music of the past),³ and many others besides the occasional ensembles that organize and perform specifically in concerts and festivals duly subsidized by cultural entities, and those active in teaching centers. The Ha-



The virtuoso African-Cuban jazz pianist and composer Chucho Valdés

vana Choral (1931-1947), conceived and maintained by the conductor Maria Muñoz de Quevedo (1886-1947), a naturalized Cuban of Galician origin, and the Havana Chamber Orchestra (1934-1952), created and directed by the eminent composer and professor José Ardévol (1911-1981), a naturalized Cuban of Catalan origin and one of the main names in the Cuban musical context of his time, were the most distinguished and almost single expressions of a previous choral and chamber music movement, developed virtually from personal efforts not less praiseworthy in their artistic results.

Today there are over 15,000 professional musicians in Cuba, performing in various genres and formats of popular music and the so-called academic composition, including opera.

Musical composition, musicology and orchestra and chorus conducting entail a high-level of preparation and degrees in music teaching centers, besides the development of instrumentalists and singers throughout the Island.

The network and system of vocational and professional music teaching in Cuba cover the entire Island and comprise all specialties of this art, including some not exactly artistic technological, i.e., paramusical specialties.



The Cuban singer and dancer Omara Portuondo.

Before 1959 there was a group of private music conservatories, in many of which the name "conservatory" was almost an understatement, although some of them stood out for the quality of certain members of the courses and graduates, who eventually achieved high artistic and pedagogical recognition both nationally and internationally. Among these conservatories is the Hubert de Blanck National Conservatory, which operated from 1885 to 1961.

The only music teaching center with state subsidy was, from 1903 to 1935, the so-called Municipal Academy of Music, later renamed (until 1959) Municipal Conservatory of Havana, and since then has been known as Amadeo Roldán Conservatory, in honor of this great composer, violinist, orchestra conductor and teacher, who was also one of the most distinguished directors of the conservatory.

The national system of artistic education, formalized with the creation of the National Art School in 1962, today has 22 music schools and conservatories throughout the country at the beginner and intermediate levels, plus the Music Faculty of the Higher Art Institute, founded in 1976.

Many high-level popular musicians and ensembles, which were already recognized by the people long before 1959, thereafter achieved official recognition and a higher status based on the principle of respect for the quality of their productions and socio-cultural signature. They were taken on by cultural organizations and projected to society, in which they stood out with all respect and commitment owed to their creations and prominent names, in the capacity of carriers of the best expressions of popular music as a cultural heritage of the nation. That put an end to the indifference with which some of these forms of artistic expression had been handled by purely commercial interests, which considered them simple means of "entertainment", and occasionally as soundtrack to trivial and even unconstructive activities. Thus, popular musical creations and their creators were seen by society as an essential expression of the nation's cultural identity.

Many of these distinguished musicians from several generations made it to 1959 and continued even more strongly their brilliant careers, some in fact to this day, at a respectable age, and enjoying maximum social and institutional recognition. Such were the cases, in popular music, of: Sindo Garay, Miguel Matamoros, Benny Moré, Barbarito Diez, Esther Borja, Adolfo Guzmán, Elena Burke, Tito Gómez, Francisco Repilado (Compay Segundo), Omara Portuondo and many others not less distinguished, including those who, besides the last two, reestablished in the 1990s the legendary Buena Vista Social Club. Also ensembles like the Siglo XX, Aragón (which is still an icon of its kind in Cuba), Enrique Jorrín and Riverside orchestras; the Havana and National Septets; the Casino and Rumba Havana ensembles; the Las d'Aida quartet, the Papines; singers and composers such as César Portillo de la Luz, José Antonio Méndez, Niño Rivera, Carlos Puebla, and Marta Valdés; artists in the music scene like Rosita Fornés and Luis Carbonell; instrumentalists/composers such as Ignacio Villa (Bola de Nieve) and Nico Rojas, among dozens of other musicians acclaimed by their fans and by public institutions.

Composers of concert popular music like Gonzalo Roig and Rodrigo Prats; in academic composition, César Pérez Sentenat, Harold Gramatges, Félix Gurrero, Edgardo Martín, Hilario González, Gisela Hernández, Argeliers Leon, Alfredo Dieznieto and other prominent creators. Musical composition has already produced powerful names that have stood out since 1969, such as Leo Brouwer (also a brilliant guitarist), Juan Blanco and Carlos Fariñas among others, who created magnificent symphonic, chamber and choral music scores in the best Cuban, Latin American and universal repertoire. They, in turn, have trained illustrious disciples and directed very important musical institutions founded in these five decades. It should be taken into consideration that the Tomás Luis de Victoria Iberian-American Music Award (which compares with the Cervantes Prize for Literature) was awarded in its first (1996) and last (2010) editions to the conductors Harold Gramtges and Leo Brouwer, respectively. Names like Roberto Valera, Calixto Álvarez, José Loyola, Juan Piñera, Jorge López Marín, Tulio Parema and important contemporary musicians have distinguish classical music creation from those 50 years to our days; to them we should add their disciples of remarkable interest. Blanco and Fariñas introduced in Cuba the electro-acoustic concert music and music composition with computers, planting the seed of a school that has achieved international recognition.

Some remarkable performers stood out in classical piano in the first half of the twentieth century, particularly the magnificent composer and performer Ernesto Lecuona, a fundamental reference for later pianists. Since 1959 we have seen the emergence of high-level performers like Huberal Herrera, Ñola Saig and Rosario Franco, among others. The work of these pianists was continued by Cecilio Tieles (also a professor and notable researcher), Frank Fernandez (of great versatility and a favorite of the public), Jorge Luis Prats, Victor Rodriguez, Ulises Hernández, José María Vitier (composer and performer with a unique style), and other artists from both generations who nurtured the younger pianists with undeniable success.

Many are the solo and ensemble violinists who filled those years with remarkable performances and disseminated relevant repertoires. Among the most significant are: Evelio Tieles and Alfredo Muñoz, as well as outstanding professors like the Bulgarian Radosvet Bojadiev and the Cuban Armando Toledo, the latter being the author of valuable studies on the history of music for violin in Cuba. To them we must add a host of violin, viola, cello and double bass players, in remarkable chamber music ensembles like the Pro Music duet, comprised by Alfredo Muñoz and Maria Victoria del Collado (violin and piano), and both with the cellist Amparo del Riego in the White Trio, plus the Havana String Quartet, conducted by the violinist Jorge Hernández, and the Soloists of Havana Orchestra, directed by the bassist Ivan Valiente. An interesting case, since it moves very successfully through various facets of music, is that of the violinist Ilmar López-Gavilán. The young musician Fernando Muñoz del Collado already boasts successes in concerts and recordings. There is also a notable presence of musicians who excel in woodwind and percussion instruments, boasting their talent in orchestras and concert bands.

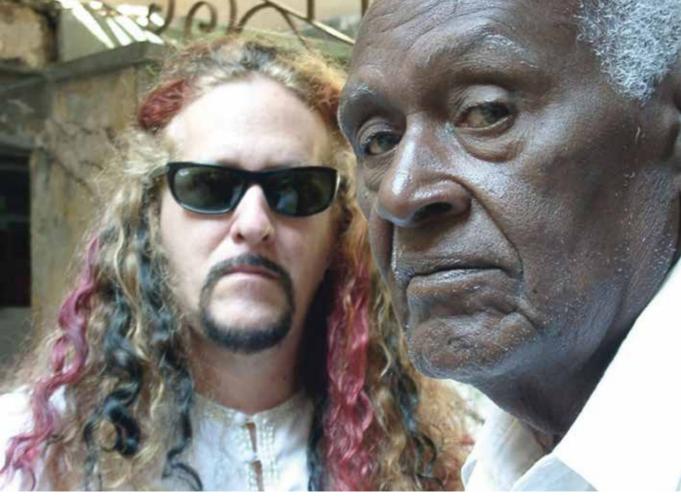
Since 1959, orchestra direction has relied on high pillars like Enrique González Mántici and Manuel Duchesne Cuzán, founders of the National Symphony Orchestra. Especially Duchesne Cuzán, who worked hard until his death in 2005 and succeeded in bringing together numerous orchestras from the country and the world, from which he disseminated a large repertoire of Cuban and international contemporary music, in addition to classics; he trained his disciples. Félix Guerrero Sánchez Ferrer and José Ramón Urbay have also been references since 1959. They took on the lyric theater with remarkable effects. More current names such as Guido López-Gavilán, Jorge López Marín, Iván del Prado, Enrique Pérez Mesa (current director of the National Symphony Orchestra) and the young and talented José A. Méndez are representative and recognized musicians, as well as Elena Herrera, Maria Elena Mendiola and especially Zenaida Romeu, among other prominent women. Zenaida Romeu develops on her own initiative her best efforts ahead of the Romeu Ensemble, formed by female musicians.



Juan Formell is the conductor of the Los Van Van orchestra, as well as a composer, arranger and bassist.

Classical guitar, since the teachings of Isaac Nicola and especially with Leo Brouwer, a composer and performer of international renown, as well as Jesús Ortega, is an expressive instrument of a host of very important performers and composers, whose names and actions are known in several circuits. The International Guitar Contest-Festival of Havana has had numerous editions since 1982 (currently, unfortunately, in recess) and promoted talents of undisputed subsequent impact that illustrate much of Cuban and international composition for guitar; among them are: Joaquim Clerch, Aldo Rodríguez, Rosa Matos, and the Argentine-Cuban Víctor Pellegrini. Sergio Vitier is also a composer and guitarist with a long career, whose creations combine in a relevant way the technical and expressive resources of academic composition with the most indigenous popular music.

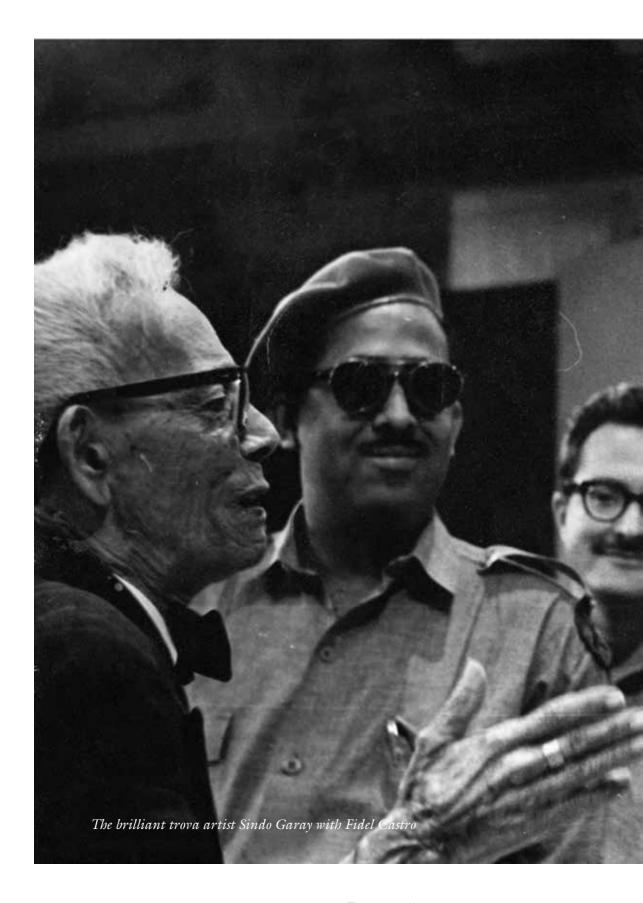
The Cuban patriotic and romantic songs from around 1865, which are part of the Cuban independence movement against the Spanish colonial rule, nurtured fundamental traditions from the traditional ballad in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the so-called *filin* from the 1940s, a cultural mix that gave rise to a poetic-musical creation that is one of the deepest rooted, most prolific and well-crafted sources of Cuban musical culture.

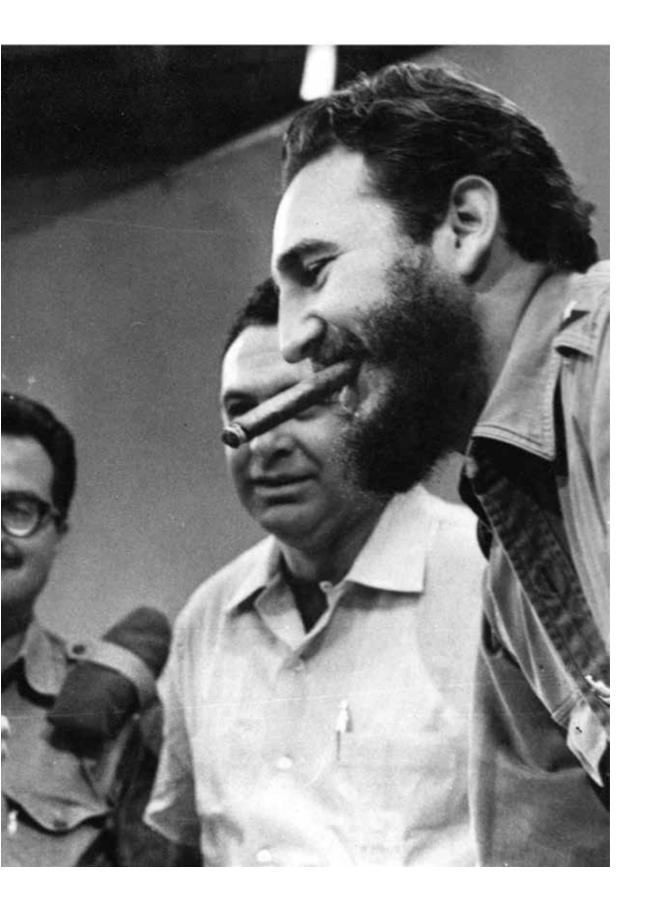


The Cuban pop artist Edesio Alejandro and the legendary salsa singer Adriano Rodriguez.

The Nueva Trova Movement, which emerged as a legacy of those processes, has expanded since the 1970s with unusual creative nature and a profound impact on the entire population and youth of our continent, identified as akin to the so-called new Latin American Song, but with an authenticity and nature of its own.

An institution born from the very womb of the Revolution, Casa de las Americas is a sponsor this movement, which it followed over all those decades, together with the most progressive trends and creations in continental art and literature in all their forms of expression. With regard to music, some of the many promotion and dissemination actions include: the longstanding and fruitful *Boletín Música* issued by Casa de las Américas and the Casa de las Américas International Musicology Award and Colloquium, both of enormous prestige among musical artists and researchers on the continent.





Outstanding names in the Nueva Trova movement include Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés, with an extraordinary work whose value enjoys extensive and deep global recognition. With them, or after them, we have the creations of Vicente Feliú, Noel Nicola, Sara González, Eduardo Ramos, Amaury Pérez, the extraordinary singer Miriam Ramos, Augusto Blanca, Santiago Feliú, Gerardo Alfonso, Liuba Havia, Samuel Águila, Raúl Torres, and a host of new artists, even the most recent ones, who have found in Pablo de la Torriente Brau Center (a beautiful and generous cultural institution) a highly significant space. A long-time trova artist of great popularity among all age groups for having dedicated her work to children is Teresita Fernández, whose songs and texts are rethought and sung every day in the minds and hearts of thousands of people who grew up with them.

Other names in the Nueva Trova movement include high level musical ensembles such as Mangüaré, Moncada, Mayohuacán, Nuestra America, Síntesis, the latter in contact with rock n' roll and emphatically incorporating the languages of African folklore.

Music associated with dance is one of the key motivations of Cubans. Nengón, son, bolero, changüí, rumba, conga, danzón and the ancestral African-Cuban dances from which they stem, from palomonte, arará, iyessá, yoruba, lucumí and carabalí, mixed with elements of the "transcultured" flamenco and ballroom dances of European origin and other American and Caribbean dancing forms of expression (including jazz), make up on the Island a musical and dance culture that is an essential part of life in the most diverse layers of the population, to the point that Cubans have become not only passionate dancers but also spontaneous choreographers, although we do not know whether they incorporate their daily unique gestures into the dance or vice versa.

The aforementioned musical creations and dances were already famous in Cuba and widely disseminated worldwide, together with mambo and cha-cha-cha, to which we should add, from the 1960s onwards, pachanga, pilón, paca, mozambique, dengue and more recently casino and timba cubana.

This has led to the production of music for these dances, and specific orchestra formats were created for many of them and for others, which were "versatile" enough to combine them.

Leading composers of great relevance with their orchestras in different areas include, among others: Elio Revé, Juan Formell and Los Van Van (the most explosive and popular musical dance group in Cuba in the last 41 years), and Pupy y los que Son Son. All of them, from *changüí-shake* to *timba*, each with its own peculiarities and style, incorporated several generic variants; Adalberto Álvarez, a *sonero* (i.e., in the Cuban *son* style) of deeply rooted tradition and renewing creativity; David Calzado and José Luis Cortés, enthusiasts of *timba* and other forms of expression, although Cortés was clearly influenced by jazz (he is an outstanding jazz musician and a flute virtuoso); Pachy Naranjo and

his original Manzanillo orchestra, with the special cadence of the *son* from that particularly fertile eastern region of the Island, where Candido Fabre is also an important name, among other composers, performers and orchestras of great value, which are followed by many admirers among the huge dancing public. They were succeeded by new rap groups that have influenced other composers: Obsesión, Anónimo Consejo, and Doble Filo. And also *Reguetón*, with Baby Lores, Gente de Zona, among other prominent musicians, but curiously attached to Cuban musical traditions, although under a new guise.

Jazz, which was gestated and crystallized in the United States, of deep Caribbean roots, has from early on relied on the presence of Cuban musicians, who are among the first musicians documented in New Orleans since the late nineteenth century. During the first half of the twentieth century, jazz experienced an upward development in Cuba, while the presence of Cuban artists in American groups increased. In 1959 jazz was already a musical genre of remarkable success in Cuba, featuring outstanding Cuban enthusiasts in the country and in the United States.

In 1959 names like Armando Romeu, Felipe Dulzaides, Frank Flynn, Luis Escalante, Guillermo Barreto already stood out as part of a larger legion of songwriters, directors, arrangers, musicians, etc. Of course in jazz the frontier between creation and performance is not always strict; first because composers are often the performers of their own music and the music of others, but also because the non-composer performer, by improvising on the composition somehow "completes" the work.

A historical landmark was the creation of the Cuban Orchestra of Modern Music by Armando Romeu and Rafael Somavilla in 1967, from which sprang a group of soloists that soon achieved prominent positions inside and outside Cuba. Also the international repertoire of the orchestra and the Cuban creations it promoted served as reference for the young musicians who were starting their careers at that time.

The foundation of the Irakere group by the musician Jesús *Chucho* Valdés in 1973 is another historical landmark, as is his composition *Misa negra*, which determined a before and a after in the jazz movement in Cuba. It was after Chucho Valdés, although long before new styles called *Latin jazz* and *Afro-Cuban jazz* had emerged and taken shape on the Island that a Cuban jazz creation with a strong identity and originality emerged in the country, while introducing itself in international currents, which it progressively influenced and in which it held prominent places. The contribution of the Plaza Jazz Festival, which has been held since 1980, was central in achieving this prominence.

Groups such as Afro-Cuba, Fervert Opus, Hilario Durán's Perspective, with Jorge Reyes among others, Opus 13, Proyecto Group, Pedro "Peruchín" Jústiz's Quintet, Orlando "Maraca" Valle's Otra Visión, and Bellita y Jazz Tumbatá are some of the significant groups, each with its own style and contributions, which are impossible to be described in a just a few lines.

Names in the wider instrumental and vocal field of those years include Bobby Cascassés, *Changuito* Quintana, Carlos Emilio Morales, Emiliano Salvador, Enrique Pla, Javier Zalva, Mayra Caridad Valdés, Pucho López, Miguel Núñez, Germán Velazco, César López, and Chicoy, as well as the younger ones: Robertico Fonseca, Elmer Ferrer, Néstor del Prado, Alexander Brown, Yasek Manzano, and Yaroldy Abreu, among others. A prominent name for his creation and as a jazz and classical pianist is Ernán Lopez-Nussa. A ubiquitous presence in these musical processes is the composer, pianist and conductor of greatest transcendence in Cuban and international jazz: Jesús *Chucho* Valdés. The scope of his work and sublime scenic performances exceed all boundaries and place him among the best in the world, according to the most demanding and specialized critics. The numerous prizes (including several Grammy awards in the best album category), decorations and titles he has been awarded in Cuba and other countries are a reflection of the extraordinary importance of this internationally renowned artist.

The Jo-Jazz competitions held in the country over the last decade have promoted young artists of unique quality in all instrumental and songwriting areas.

Cuban musicology, born in the last decade of the nineteenth century, relied in the first half of the twentieth century on notable songwriters, among them Fernando Ortiz and Alejo Carpentier, with works of universal value. Argeliers León (1918-1991) was the crystallizer of these processes, a researcher and creator of a seminal work, a professor who established Musicology as a university discipline in the country, incorporating it in 1976 to the courses of the Higher Art Institute. As well as other valuable theorists like Odilio Urfé and Maria Teresa Linares, besides composers and artists who have also left their legacy in this area. Argeliers has been a paradigm for the generations that followed him. His disciples are now aplenty in institutions and teaching centers in Cuba and several countries in the Americas and Europe; these disciples, who are carriers of a significant scientific and pedagogical work, include: Olavo Alén, Victoria Eli, Zoila Gómez, Grizel Hernández, María E. Vinueza; and then their own disciples and those of others. For example, Leonardo Acosta and Danilo Orozco are musicologists of fundamental relevance today, and although they are not directly related to Argeliers' leadership, they are part of the large Cuban musicological heritage.

The significant qualities and the brilliant results of Cuban lyrical art would be sufficient reason for writing an article. Great composers, extraordinary singers, both men and women (some already mentioned), theater companies and a vast repertoire which cannot be mentioned in this restricted summary, speak of a musical theater born in the mid-nineteenth century, which gained international prominence in the twentieth century with outstanding moments for our opera, especially and decidedly the *zarzuela cubana*, a Spanish-American jewel in its genre, which in the last 50 years has also boasted a remarkable presence.

Many are the topics and names that were left out of my focus. It could not be otherwise as I refer to one of the richest musical cultures of America today. Nevertheless, I have taken on the challenge. So be it.

Notes

- 1 See, as the first among many others that followed, Fidel Castro Ruz's Words to the Intellectuals.
- 2 The literature on these topics is so broad and diverse that mentioning it would require many more pages than those permitted in this article.
- 3 The Música Eterna Ars Longa ensemble contributed remarkably to rescuing a vast international and Cuban repertoire of this musical genre. The ensemble highlights the work of the first Cuban composer, Esteban Salas (1725-1803), disseminated in concerts and albums, which were published in seven volumes during the first decade of the twenty-first century by the Historian of Havana Workshop and the University of Valladolid, in Spain, under review, study and transcription by the musicologist Miriam Escudero.

Abstract – The triumphant Revolution of 1959 unleashed a series of transcendental transformations in every sphere of the country's political, economic, social and cultural life. A strategy of fostering the professional, technical, scientific, ideological and cultural development of the people was adopted, in addition to preparing the large number of new artists that the nation needed. This article attempts to examine briefly every music genre found in Cuba and to provide a historical panoramic overview of the most prominent musicians, composers, singers, arrangers, educators, conductors and other players of the vast universe of music, from folk songs to scholarly or academic compositions. The overview also covers the influences of Afro-Cuban music, jazz and the most modern musical repertoire.

Keywords: Revolution, Musical culture, Art education, Academic music, Folk music, Nueva trova, Casa de las Americas.

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The original in Spanish – "La cultura musical cubana en cinco décadas fecundas (1959-2010)" – is available to readers for reference at the IEA-USP.

Received on 8 February 2011 and accepted on 12 March 2011.