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ERNESTO LECUONA: THE CHOPIN OF THE TROPICS

It could have been an artfully contrived scene from one of the 1940s-era Hollywood films for which he wrote music scores, but in the fascinating, real-life world of Ernesto Lecuona, it was just one more memorable incident that would become part of the legend of the man widely recognized as Cuba's greatest composer.

On a trip to New York City to introduce his compositions to music publisher Edward B. Marks, the always curious native of Havana could not resist sitting down at a piano in the publisher's office and playing a hand-written manuscript he happened to see nearby. Soon, the door to an adjoining room flung open, and the impressed composer of the new work emerged to exclaim, "I just had to see who was playing it. My God, you play it better than I!"

The surprised composer was none other than George Gershwin, the piece the soon-to-be-famous "Rhapsody in Blue," and, in true Hollywood fashion, the chance encounter led to an ongoing friendship between two giants of twentieth-century music whose diverse talents and similar interest in classical, popular, and folk idioms made their careers and contributions to global culture so profoundly influential and long lasting.

The occasion of the centennial observance of Lecuona's birth has been accompanied by a flurry of concerts, recordings, essays, and lectures that are providing contemporary audiences with opportunities to explore fully the many facets of Lecuona's remarkable artistry.

Lecuona is known for the enduring melodic beauty of his most famous works and his pioneering role in bringing West Africa-derived rhythms from the barrio to the concert hall, yet the totality of his legacy is nothing less than astounding in its depth and variety. In addition to such revered masterpieces as "Malaguena," "Siboney," "Siempre en mi corazon," and the "Andalucia Suite," from which the popular "The Breeze and I" originates, by some accounts Lecuona produced over 1,000 compositions, including 176 pieces for solo piano, 37 orchestral works, an opera, and 11 zarzuelas (operettas).

His eleven film scores, done in the 1930s and 1940s for such major studios as Warner Brothers and MGM, include the 1942 Academy Award-nominated theme for the movie Always in My Heart and the 1947 hit Carnival in Costa Rica, in which he played an orchestra leader alongside stars Cesar Romero and Celeste Holm. Lecuona was also responsible for the creation of the trend-setting rumba show band that bore his name, the phenomenally popular Lecuona Cuban Boys, which toured throughout the 1930s from Havana and Rio to Cairo and Monaco and helped set the stage for the advent of Latin jazz and salsa. As prolific and influential as he was prodigious, the Cuban maestro's unique contributions continue to inspire awe among a growing legion of admirers.

"He was able to translate the Afro-Cuban rhythms and put them in tails," says Dominican pianist Michel Camilo, who recently performed Lecuona's "La Comparsa" in his Carnegie Hall debut and recorded a duet version of

the beloved theme with French concert pianist Katia Labeque on the classical star's current album Little Girl Blue (Dreyfus 36186-2). "Technically, he was very advanced, in the tradition of Ignacio Cervantes, another Cuban pianist and composer who came before him. But Lecuona's left hand is a direct link to someone like Chopin, with the ability to translate the African syncopations."

"He had a gift for melody second to none," states Thomas Tirino, the concert pianist responsible for three critically acclaimed albums of the composer's piano music. "He was a genius of composition -- music just flowed out of him. His music crossed all international barriers and cultures. As a composer, he was really one of the greats of the twentieth century."

While his Cuban passport records the birth of Ernesto Sixto de la Asuncion Lecuona y Casado as August 6, 1895, in the Havana suburb of Guanabacoa, his tombstone in Hawthorn, New York, declares the date as August 7, 1896, the birthday he observed throughout his sixty-seven years, as do his descendants to this day. In any event, it took only a few years before, guided by his classically trained pianist sister, Ernestina, the child prodigy was well on his way to becoming a virtuoso concert pianist and composer of promise.

He attended Cuba's National Conservatory, graduating with a gold medal in performance. A pianist of renowned technical and interpretive skills, Lecuona was an immediate hit on the international concert circuit, scoring one critical triumph after another in the most prestigious venues in Europe and the Americas. "He played Chopin, Bach, and Mozart," recalls Marco Rizo, a fellow Cuban and Lecuona disciple who once toured Spain and Italy with his mentor and his sister, performing piano duo and trio concerts. "But in time he came to realize that he would be remembered more as a composer and interpreter of his own music."

Rizo, who became a pianist with the Havana Philharmonic Orchestra through Lecuona's efforts and later studied with Igor Stravinsky, gained fame in the U.S. for his work on the 1950s "I Love Lucy" television program as Desi Arnaz's pianist and orchestrator. Today, preoccupied by completing an anthology of Cuban music of the past two hundred years, the seventy-six-year-old Rizo remains impressed by Lecuona's versatility. "It was incredible, really," he remembers. "In the 1940s, he would be in concert at Carnegie Hall with a symphonic orchestra one night and be booked to perform at the La Conga cabaret with popular, jazz-leaning Latin bands like those of Machito and Jose Curbelo the very next evening! He could do it all!"

And perhaps it was because of his propensity to participate as a composer and interpreter in such a broad array of classical and popular idioms that Lecuona's cachet as a serious artist began to ebb in the 1940s. "The fact that he excelled in the popular music forms and idioms of his day may have had a tendency to overshadow his more serious compositions," comments pianist Tirino, who is planning three additional albums of the composer's piano music on Sweden's BIS label.

"That may have contributed to the lack of scholarly attention that his considerable achievements do merit," notes Tirino. "His music does have a popular appeal, because of the beautiful melodies and shortness of the pieces, but the works themselves are very challenging, if you perform them in the way Lecuona intended. I believe the danger has been to stress the popular element to his music, and with his serious compositions, not to fully realize what they are and the genius behind them."

Tirino's view is born out by the outpouring of popular recordings that have kept Lecuona's name alive through the decades. In the 1940s, such popular hit makers as big-band leader Guy Lombardo and Latino heartthrob Arnaz scored with Lecuona songs, while in the 1960s such dissimilar interpreters as Latin jazz stalwart Willie Bobo and Las Vegas-based mood music maestro Rene Touzet were attracted to the composer's standard fare. Currently, Cuban saxophonist Paquito D'Rivera, who, as a child in Havana, knew his famed countryman, has

included Lecuona's little-known "Como arrullo de palmas" on his just-released album *Portraits of Cuba* (Chesky JD-145).

Today, thanks to recent recordings by such interpreters as Tirino and Rizo, the full scope of Lecuona's genius can be finally explored. "Many who don't know may believe he is Spanish and not Cuban," observes Camilo, who sees the more classical side of the composer's work as being an extension of the prominent school of Spanish composers that includes Albeniz and Granados. "And there are pieces of his in the tradition of the great romantic composers," adds Tirino. "There's simply more to Lecuona than the Cuban or Spanish side of his writing."

In the end, the music of the man Tirino calls the tropical Chopin is as fresh and compelling today as at any time during his life. "His music has a lot of soul, a lot of passion," observes Tirino. "It covers the whole panorama of human emotions and communicates directly to the heart. And that, after all, is what music is -- communication."

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Ernesto Lecuona

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Cuban actress and singer Esther Borja, right, in 1943, en route to Hollywood, where she starred in a film for which Lecuona composed the score

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): On a stop in New York City, in 1945, Lecuona congratulates composer-conductor Paul Lavalle, left, on his award from the Colombian government for promoting inter-American cultural exchanges

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Lecuona Interpreta a Lecuona (BMG/INT 1055-2-RL9) Ernesto Lecuona: A Musical Legacy (Brio BRCC 101) Solo piano interpretations of well-known Lecuona repertoire by Marco Rizo.

Lecuona: The Complete Piano Music, Vols. 1, 2, 3 (BIS 754, 774, 794) Pianist Thomas Tirino and the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra

Maria la O: Zarzuela Cubana (Montilla CDFM 73) Noted Lecuona operetta, interpreted by the Orquesta de Camara de Madrid

Lecuona Cuban Boys, Vols. 1-6 (Harlequin) Thirties-era show band recordings by the famed group that bore his name

Editor's note: These and other Lecuona-related recordings are available through the mail-order Latin music service Descarga (800-377-2647).

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By Mark Holston

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