



Danilo Orozco

# What Palimpsesto is about

Few musicians – much less the public – can imagine the underlying legacy in certain musical expressions of the 19th century, which is the case with the *contradanzas* and pianistic *danzas* of the Cuban context that have arrived in our times in all their representativeness, validity and widely interlaced across several genres. Except for some important conventional studies, this music has come to be interpreted and enjoyed with little or no attention to its background. What does it really consist of?

Since this CD contains some of this music and other compositions for the piano, an effort will be made here to at least provide a brief outline of how the fundamental leading threads are interwoven:

When the composers of the Cuban island, of the Caribbean and surrounding region began to write for the piano, especially in the first decades of the 19th century, near-imitations or adaptations (more or less successful per incident) were frequent, following European models like the fantasies, preludes, interludes and such, but it was the *músicas dancísticas* (dance-based music) that gained the most prominence in the sense of effectuating ideas and musical traits related to the context.

There are precedents in the 18th century of certain salon dances being played besides the minuet, backed up by a discreet instrumental format (bass, horns, percussion). This was music of Anglo-Franco Hispanic origin, whereby rhythms, accentuations, twists and peculiar expressive traits were restructured through the interpretation of mulatto and black musicians and the quoted sources were mixed with African extractions, especially those of Bantu-dahomeyan ancestry.

A process would be established that circulated and recirculated through the Caribbean and the nearby areas and even curved back, along several detours, to Viennese classicism; an important reciprocal action – only recently studied – that contradicts the belief heretofore of there being a precedent there and an eternal, more or less passive adaptation here. The reciprocal flow includes elements of the French Caribbean (not just Haiti) and also Louisiana – through commercial traffic

or the exchange of individualities – and established the basis for far-reaching historical occurrences, also in several genres and styles of the area that later became universal.

All of this would come together with more definition towards the first decades of the 19th century and favors the presence of compatible expressive elements in piano music, where relevant figures like Manuel Saumell and subsequently Ignacio Cervantes play their role; prominent *dancísticos* among various outstanding ones of the era.

Saumell has always been considered as the ‘father of Cuban nationalism’ in piano music, although he really is a first synthesis and sediment, a crystallizing factor of the time, with a balance between classical reminiscences and the *dancismo* that had taken shape, but Ignacio Cervantes is the mature sedimentation, the ingenious recreation of what is *dancístico*, with a very personal view of romantic pianism, expressed through astute rhythmical-melodical, harmonic and contrasting structures that together allow for subjective-emotional, oscillating and typifying qualities. In the 20th century Lecuona would already represent the awakening and Cuban-universal explosion of that pianism, with a certain commercial slant.

While the individualities of creative relevance in the 19th century produced and inserted their works in this panorama, the development continued on several levels in the popular scene; from the more tangible and visible manifestations to those almost occult, submitted to profound processes that in the long run would have enormous repercussions.

This 19th century unfolding is revealed in the shrouded connection between street celebrations and what is *dancístico*, or in the relations between singable elements and expressions and the danceable melodies for the salon or for the theatrical comedies. In that sense it so happened that not a few salon musicians – especially negroes and mulattoes – participated equally in providing music for theatrical representations, for churches, even for popular street or carnival parties, where *dancístico* fragments were contrived (for example, the *contradanzas*), with added chorus, blending with the music of the *comparsas*.

More so, differing per zone and location, multi-ethnic and multi-traditional family members – from the country and from the city – would converge in said festivities, so the presence of instruments and singing of the *sones* and their relatives was not strange next to the derivations and fragmentations of the *dancístico* pieces.

These were exceptional occurrences – practically unknown for a long time – that would have large consequences, so that between the salon music (and its stylized varieties) and the profound, popular level of the *sones* and their relatives; singable elements, rhythmical-accentual patterns (and their counterparts) can be observed linking together, coupled with certain contrasts *sui generis*, mingling under certain specific conditions. This unusual musical reality crystallizes and becomes more visible at certain crucial moments in both centuries, like when Alejandro G. Caturla composed the simple and very ingenious piece *Berceuse campesina* and through other pieces worthy of mention, including by Cervantes and even by the early Saumell, not to mention the *danzas-comparsas-sones* of the famous Ernesto Lecuona.

This occurrence of interlinking, in the long run, would help define expressive ways, styles, subjective-emotional oscillating characteristics that express the ingenious grace, the sarcasm and even the dismantling of social-cultural and established musical values in either the *música dancística* or the other types of music.

Given the fact that this *música dancística* (and its stylized versions, clashes and entwining with so many others of the context) emerges from the flow of elements of those wide-ranging and connecting processes from the beginning; it is not at all strange that in the background of one or other visible element – perhaps a bass, a rhythmical pattern, types of accentuation, of insinuation and dilutions – the intertwining of processes that condition it is passively present beneath it, overlaid with other surfaces and realizations as if it **were a palimpsest of medieval parchment**; here on occasion inter-lecture, (musical) inter-texts would be possible and – more than intertextuality – in some cases **the dialogue** would prevail in the sense of the conflict within the process, the genres or the styles; resolved in one or another direction in accordance with the musical, agglutinating factor. Assimilated in this way, it can maximize the musical interpretation, given the right approach from any direction.

This CD illustrates palimpsestic interlinking: Through Cervantes' almost-joking manipulation of his *Tres Golpes*, where *danza*-like, *bolero*-like and *son*-like components are interlaced with troubadourian lyricism, or the profound melancholy and the Chopin-like nuance of some of his other anthological pieces. Lecuona's pianism with his ritual references in his stylized *dancístico* pieces, or his interlinking of *danza-comparsa-sones*. Alejandro G. Caturla, axis of the Afro-Negro musical nationalism of the twenties and thirties with an allusion to the ritual, created with more aggressive harmonic, sonorous and rhythmical-articulatory tension than in Lecuona, except for Lecuona's paraphrase of the *comparsas* from the suburbs full of tensions and dissonances. The consecrated Fariñas, contributing to the code of the established *sones* (peculiar architextuality). The novel Keyla Orozco, in an interlinking of tense points that are intersected to dissolve in the 'textuality' of a motive or a chord with insinuating blues notes, or the consecrated H. Gramatges in an interplay of contrasts and abstractions.

It is up to the young and promising pianist Gustavo Corrales to apply acuteness and interpretative penetration in function of the interwoven musical 'texts', for the full enjoyment of the public.

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Havana, 10 July 2001

Translation by KyG

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