

ONCE UPON A TIME IN HAVANA



*Executive Committee SODAMC, 1997. Recent pictures of:
Ailem Carvajal Gómez, Fernando Rodríguez Alpizar (Archi), Gustavo Corrales Romero, Jacqueline Hechavarría Carbonell*

What mysteries cause an event to materialize? What invisible forces converge so that this event is unique and unrepeatable, and takes place at one specific moment, with certain specific protagonists? As I think today, almost 25 years later, of the circumstances in which **SODAMC** was born, I cannot help but stand in amazement and awe.

It was the last years of the 20th century. Havana was a stinking city that was falling apart. A capital where people lived badly, between hunger, heat and despair. Moral degradation bordered on barbarism, in a country where people were murdered for a pair of shoes or a bicycle. Where people died trampled by the desperate mob, to get on a bus. Where theft, fraud, bribery, and corruption were the norm, and decency, *rara avis*, was criticized. Where the correct, the worthy, and the honorable were ignored and ridiculed. Where sandwiches were sold with mopping cloth for meat and a taxi driver earned much more than a doctor.

In the midst of that rotteness, in 1997, four young people championed a systematic space for erudite music. We created the **Association for the Development of Musical Contemporary Art** (SODAMC), an oasis of excellence that became a cultural happening in the city, with such repercussion that musicological studies were dedicated to it.

We were three youngsters who had recently graduated from the University of the Arts: **Ailem Carvajal**, **Jacqueline Hechavarría** and me. **Fernando Rodríguez** (Archi), who completed the quartet, was a bit older than us and had been a teacher for a while. We had known each other since adolescence, when we began to cultivate a friendship that grew ever stronger and that lasts until today. On the surface of that palimpsest that every human is, we were two composers, a musicologist and a pianist. On other levels we alloyed strength, audacity, determination, diligence, responsibility, prudence, discipline, excellence and maturity. And underneath that flowed intertwining affection, respect and admiration.

Once graduated, the *Angel of the Jiribilla* – that animates the soul of every Cuban – began to flap. We felt the need to do something, to invent, to poke lethargy, to break the drowsiness. The common passion was contemporary music and in Cuba there was only one annual festival dedicated to it, so there we saw the channel through which to flow.

We met at Archi's place and there we conceived and defined the project. We decided that we would organize a monthly concert. That was enough to keep us constantly busy, but since youth is fearless, it occurred to us that between concerts, we would also organize lectures, public music listening sessions, talks and whatever we could think of to educate and promote the music of our 20th century. There would therefore be events twice a month.

We established the objectives of the project and asked **Douglas Pérez**, a visual artist friend of ours, to create the logo. Once the inaugural program was conceived, we set about spreading the news. Ailem, our tireless amazon, moved heaven and earth to achieve it. We toured Havana in whatever appeared for transportation (bus, bicycle, taxi, hitchhike). We knocked on all possible doors, relentlessly, insistently, and managed to announce the concert on every radio station that received us. We got the cultural section of a national newspaper to publish the event. We went to television, we gave interviews, we made it known in art schools, at the **University of Havana**, and at some point it became impossible to ignore the existence of **SODAMC** and its inaugural concert.

Ars Gratia Artis. This is how Havana worked for us. The word 'money' never crossed our minds. No one ever mentioned it. The musicians who would perform the works were all young people eager to play, to show their talent and to be part of something that dragged them away from the mundane. The institutions provided us with their spaces without asking for anything in return. All events would be free. Jacqueline designed the programs, managed to get the paper (a real feat), and Archi loaned us his printer. We chose the performers, carefully studied the pieces, and rehearsed them to perfection. We were ready.



*Aula Magna, University of Havana,
where the last SODAMC concert took place*

At 4 o'clock in the afternoon – we were deliberately punctual, an anomaly in Cuba – on 21 January 1997, the great **Harold Gramatges** delivered the opening speech at our request, in a packed room where one could almost touch the excitement, where collective euphoria electrified the space, and pride overwhelmed us all. The audience was mostly young, but historical figures and other holy cows of composition in Cuba were also eminently present: **Héctor Angulo, Carlos Fariñas, Roberto Valera, Guido López Gavilán, Jorge López Marín**; and other intellectuals who seemed to be there making way for the younger generation, magnanimously accepting Chronos, the inexorable. Those Masters who attended would not miss a single **SODAMC** concert.

That first program was one of young Cuban composers (**Fernando Rodríguez, Keyla Orozco, Luis Aguirre, Irina Escalante, Ailem Carvajal** and **Yosvani Quintero**), performed by young performers (**Edelmis Pedroso, Fabián Álvarez, Yilian Cañizares, Ivoshka Tello, Arabel Moráquez** and me). We presented works from various trends, works for voice and piano, for soloists, for chamber formats, resulting in an attractive experience, surprising and enjoyable for everyone. The success was scandalous. In the end, as would happen in every concert, we invited debate. We discussed the works, we showed the scores. The audience asked, commented, suggested, thanked. Opinions were heard from both music professionals and music lovers without formal instruction. The Masters hugged us, shook our hands, praising us. They confessed to us that they had been missing something of high quality, like this. An emotional Harold kissed us on the forehead. And we were also moved by an unknown man with a rough appearance, when he tearfully expressed his gratitude, his love for this type of art...



*Group of youngsters associated with SODAMC, after a concert. From left to right: **Eva Reyes** (musicologist), **Gerardo Mesa** (pianist), **Iliana Ross** (musicologist), **Ailem Carvajal** (composer), **Yusleidy Hernández** (contrabass player), **Jacqueline Hechavarría** (musicologist), **Yosvani Quintero** (composer), **Lanet Flores** (clarinetist), **Gustavo Corrales** (pianist).*

So a season of concerts and lectures began that would go on uninterrupted until Thursday, June 12th. Throughout that period, in various venues around the city, we premiered Cuban and foreign works, we programmed Cuban and international works that had not been played in Cuba for decades, which was greatly appreciated by the elderly. We invited personalities of Cuban culture to speak, such as **Dr. Danilo Orozco**, the poet **Cintio Vitier**, and **Dr. José Orlando Suárez Tajonera**. We organized a concert where works were presented produced by the **National Electroacoustic Music Laboratory** and by the **Electroacoustic and Computer Music Studio**, an extraordinary event due to the historical professional tensions between these institutions. We organized an exhibition of the

visual artist **Kelvin López**. We invited the young historian **José A. Domínguez** to contribute texts. We obtained the support of **UNESCO** (Regional Office of Culture for Latin America and the Caribbean). Doing more would have been impossible.

The electricity of that first concert set the tone for everything we did afterwards. That original fervor never waned, just as the audience that followed us to the end never waned. The number of young people interested in being part of the project also grew. But the personal cost was high.

The wear and tear was palpable because each action was agonizing. Everything took a lot of effort. What should be accomplished by taking one step, took five. What had to be resolved in ten minutes took two days, if resolved at all. Bureaucracy, ineptitude, indifference and even meanness strangled everything. When you made music you were totally happy, when not, bitterness and hopelessness suffocated you. Everything was both easy and painful. So the inevitable happened: Each of us escaped the country in search of a more organized and stable life. Fed up with the chaos, almost all of our generation emigrated.

Today Ailem lives in Italy, Jacqueline in Austria, Archi in Spain and I in Holland. We were a solid nucleus that radiated strongly and had resonance, but disintegrated prematurely. Today, however, each one of us has maintained that fire, under different circumstances, and has lit – faithful to the angel that drives us – some flame among those around us.



SOCIEDAD PARA EL DESARROLLO
DEL ARTE MUSICAL
CONTEMPORÁNEO

Jorge López
Guido

Encuentro de Conciertos

Roberto Valera
Tajonera
Carlos

Sala Rubén Martínez Villena de la UNEAC
Martes 18 de Marzo de 1997, 5:00 pm

¡Antes: gracias!
Un abrazo enorme para
ti.

Con los auspicios de
UNESCO
Oficina Regional de Cultura para América
Latina y el Caribe.
(ORCALC)

One of the SODAMC programs, with signatures from:

Jorge López Marín

Guido López Gavilán

Roberto Valera (vertical)

Dr. José Orlando Suárez Tajonera

Carlos Fariñas

Harold Gramatges