



Aruán Ortiz - Cuban Nocturne

Musicians:

Aruán Ortiz - Piano

When the film maker Ben Chace finished shooting the movie Sin Alas (“Without Wings”) in Cuba he reached out to Aruán Ortiz to score it. (The haunting original “Cuban Nocturne,” is the film’s theme.) In addition, Ben had a particular piece in mind for the film—Ignacio Cervantes’ “Ilusiones Perdidas.” The short, playful and haunting piece is very well known in Cuba but has special resonance for Aruán. It’s a piece of music he’s been circling since childhood.

Sparked by that collaboration between Aruán and Ben, these songs became a reflection on the music that saturated Aruán’s childhood, a repertoire for the most part, perhaps surprisingly, he has never played before. As Aruán weds his singular genius for improvisation to the classical repertoire of his homeland, what emerges is an investigation of selfhood. It’s the sound of a man balancing and synthesizing the elements of his musical identity.

Born in Santiago de Cuba in 1973, Aruán studied in the formidable Russian-style conservatory training that was ubiquitous in Cuba at the time. However, Aruán had never played the classic Cervantes repertoire, because Aruán was not a piano major. In fact, it was a complete coincidence that sent him on the path to being a musician at all. Aruán went to the local conservatory audition only to accompany his older brother, who had expressed an interest. When they arrived, they learned that his eight-year old brother was too old to audition. After passing the audition, Aruán remembers being immediately drawn to the piano but his mother convinced him that violin, perhaps because of its size and easy portability, was the better choice. Despite being one of the only students there without a family background in music, Aruán loved the discipline and rigor of the school and fell hard for the music. He spent the next eleven years studying violin and viola at the conservatory.

After rising to the top level at the conservatory, Aruán moved to Havana to attend the famed “Instituto Superior de Arte.” He spent two years in the uncompromising classical viola course before ultimately abandoning viola and returning to his first love, piano. Despite being five years older than his classmates, Aruán returned to Santiago de Cuba and re-enrolled at the conservatory, this time as a pianist.

In 1996, when Aruán was 22, a cassette tape of his original music for piano found its way to the great pianist and educator, Cecilio Tiele, leading to an invitation to continue his classical piano studies in Spain. Of all the time that Aruán has spent studying music, he credits his three years studying with Tiele in Catalonia as the most rigorous. It was here he dove deep into the music of the great composers, chief among them the Catalonian master Fredrico Mompou, whose “Musica Callada” is represented on this record. In 1999 Aruán transferred to a modern music conservatory in Barcelona where he could finally start a formal study of Jazz. From there, Aruán won a scholarship to the Berklee School of Music in Boston. However, he spent an additional two years in Spain saving for his trip, mostly from giving salsa lessons. So it was not until 2002 that Aruán arrived Stateside, a full 22 years after starting his musical studies. A life drenched in musical pursuit.

To make a record of Cervantes and other giants of Cuban classical music like Romeu and Lecuona is something that Aruán called “A huge responsibility...I wanted to tackle these pieces from a different angle. They are written very clean—like Mozart. This music is written so completely that it doesn’t really lend itself to improvisation. I wanted to very carefully add embellishments without changing the character of the piece but using the same vocabulary.” As a composer and improviser, Aruán’s recorded work, full of shifting meters and enigmatic titles, is relentlessly modern. Here, in contrast, he’s interpreting music that is nakedly romantic, crystalline and exposed.

After fifteen years in the United States and nine records under his own name, this recording is a fresh look at the music that shaped Aruán’s youth. An examination of the musical fabric of Cuba from an artist now raising two sons of his own in his adopted home of Brooklyn. There’s no easy reductive comparisons to make here, not composer vs. interpretation, nor improvisation vs. composition, nor modernity vs. history. Instead, I hear a persistent undertone—a spirit shaped throughout the globe and the resonance of a life lived in music.

- Elan Mehler