

TULIO PERAMO: CUBAN COMPOSER

By JOHANNES TONIO KREUSCH



Tulio Peramo.

'I'M TWENTY-EIGHT years old', insists Tulio Peramo with a straight face. Actually born in 1948 in Havana, Cuba, Peramo's playful sense of humour speaks volumes about his cheerful though introspective personality. Originally trained as a professional opera singer, he began his career at the National Opera House of Havana. At the (real) age of 25, disappointed and personally harmed by the intrigues and flamboyant life of the singing world, he left the opera in order to start a new life. As he recalls: 'Twenty-eight years ago I found myself at a point of no return. I had lost everything — the faith in my work and even my social backgrounds with all my friends, who couldn't understand this decision — but I still had the deeply felt desire to change my life.' Only after several years of difficulty, all but isolated from his usual environment, supported only by his close family and inspired by solitude and the silence of thoughts, did he come to understand the need to become a composer in order to find a new way of expression.

In 1994, during the guitar festival in Havana, I met Peramo for the first time. I was 23 and he was nearly twice as old. A deep friendship developed between us, and from the combination of

his wise, philosophical and poetic thoughts and my youthful energy arose the music described below.

From our very first encounter it was clear to me that Peramo was different; he was not a typical cog in the music business machine, frequently a repository for opportunists and egoists. By contrast, I found him to be a modest and noble individual who is driven by a need to serve art, rather than himself.

Tres Imágenes Cubanas (1996)

At the young age of 23 I was touched and honoured when, after my performance at the Havana Guitar Festival in 1994, Peramo asked me whether I would like to come back to Cuba in order to premiere the revised version of his first guitar concerto *Tientos y Cantos* during the regular season of the Cuban National Symphony Orchestra. It was the beginning of our musical relationship, which has led to some very fine new additions to the guitar repertory.

Returning to Cuba in 1995 for this performance, I received an offer from Peramo to write a new work for me. I came up with the idea that he should write for guitar and string quartet, because I realised, by hearing other, orchestral

music by Peramo, that he masters the strings in a very special manner. Since the music of Peramo is deeply inspired by his native Cuba, we came up with the idea of using Piazzolla's *L'Histoire du Tango* as a model and of writing a little 'history' of Cuban music, combining all the different elements and styles. Some months later, *Tres Imágenes Cubanas* was born.

The work juxtaposes the string quartet, one of the principal musical forms of European classical music, with one of the most important Cuban instruments, the guitar. The music itself reflects a strong cross-pollination of different cultures, namely the interaction between European (mainly Spanish) and African cultures, that have co-existed in Cuba for centuries. Peramo's first thought, therefore, was to call the work 'Mulata', a term for Cuba's mixed-race women.

Throughout most of the country's history, Cuban society did not accept African culture as part of its artistic life. However, with staunch support from many Cuban writers, painters and musicians who were all deeply influenced by African culture, this began to change. Some of these artists include Fernando Ortiz, Alejo Carpentier, Wilfredo Lám, Amadeo Roldán, Ernesto Lecuona and Alejandro García Caturla. As a result of their efforts, 'Afrocubism' became an integral part of Cuba's artistic life. In fact, today's Cuban culture is regarded as a 'tropical cocktail' of influences. Spanish, French, Nigerian and Asian culture all contribute to Cuba's rich landscape. Though the interplay between Spanish and African styles is the most readily apparent aspect of *Tres Imágenes Cubanas*, elements from all of the backgrounds mentioned above permeate the work. Aside from reflecting Afrocubism, *Tres Imágenes* is also a homage to Alejandro García Caturla (1906-1940), one of the leading figures of the Afrocubism movement.

To better understand the importance of this homage, we must point out Caturla's role in the emergence of Afrocubism. In the summer of 1928 he went to Paris, where he studied composition with Nadia Boulanger, one of the most illustrious French composition teachers. Upon his return to Cuba he settled in the little town of Remedios, where he earned a living as a lawyer. Caturla went on to become a municipal judge who was not liked by the corrupt police and politicians of the town; he was an ethical person who refused to co-operate with them in their 'dirty games'. In Remedios, Caturla lived with a black woman, Manuela Rodríguez, despite the fact that it was then scandalous for a white man to live with a woman of colour. (Some years later, after Manuela's death, Caturla went on to live with her sister, Catalena; eleven children resulted from these relationships.) To further complicate matters, inter-racial couples were forbidden to marry in Cuba.

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Caturla vehemently objected to these rules, and so he dedicated his life fighting for Afrocubism.

Together with Amadeo Roldan, he helped to create a new style of Afrocuban symphonic music in the 1930s. Among his most famous compositions are the orchestral works *Danzas Cubanas*, *Bembe*, *La Rumba* and *Obertura Cubana*. His songs with texts by Nicolas Guillen and Alejo Carpentier are also well known.

Caturla also wrote an opera, some works for strings and various pieces for solo instruments. Along with writing a great variety of music, he was also a skilled band arranger, making many arrangements when he conducted a jazz band in Remedios.

Tragically, it was Caturla's unwavering commitment to uphold the law that led to his untimely death. A young criminal, awaiting trial in Caturla's court and afraid of the sentence that he was sure to receive, met and killed Caturla in the street. At the young age of 34, Caturla, one of Cuba's finest composers, was gone.

Caturla's music was first brought to the United States by Henry Cowell in 1929. Cowell, the director of the Pan American Association of Composers (PAAC), was the first individual to take an active role in promoting Caturla's music, publishing some of his music in his New Music Editions and releasing recordings of Caturla's works. Sponsored by PAAC, the musicologist and conductor Nicolas Slonimsky brought Caturla's music to Europe, South America and the USA. This helped to establish Caturla as an international figure and to identify him as one of the most accomplished Cuban composers. Today, most contemporary Cuban composers credit Caturla's work as a major influence.

Tres Imágenes Cubanas

Caturla's influence is evident in Peramo's *Tres Imágenes Cubanas*, which begins with a quasi-quotation from Caturla's *Obertura Cubana* for orchestra. The first movement is written in sonata form; the opening theme has a Spanish flavour, while the second theme has African elements, something akin to a slow Conga, an African street dance. Within this theme, one can find the Cuban 'clave' rhythm. The second part, which reminds me of the spirit of Caturla's *Berceuse Campesina*, introduces the Cuban peasant 'guajira' rhythm. (I wonder whether this *Berceuse Campesina* by Caturla was also the inspiration for Leo Brouwer's *Canción de Cuna*?) Again, the general idea of this second part is a classical European structure: the Lied form.

The third movement, a *mélange* of Spanish and African influences, is written in rondo form, but ends with the famous Cuban 'son' that again makes use of the 'clave' rhythm.

At this point I would like to interject a note about Cuban music and its relation to percussion. Stereotypically, Cuban music is associated with drums and percussion. While it is true that these instruments play an important role in traditional Cuban music by underlining the pulse, percussion is not what makes the music Cuban. If one listens to examples of contemporary Cuban music — such as music by Brouwer or Peramo — one can hear ‘implied drumming’. The distinct accents and syncopation along with the metrical distribution of accents are what give Cuban music its unique identity. In countries like, for example, Jamaica (also an Island with a strong African presence) the white people barely mixed with the blacks. But in Cuba Spanish men mixed with black women; the *mulata* and *mulato* were born and with them a totally new cultural aspect. The British people in Jamaica did not mix so much with black people; the music lacks the kind of syncopation found in Cuba, and the accents are ‘British’ in a way. So Peramo mainly avoids the use of percussive rhythmical effects, but writes in the true Cuban rhythmical way in order to be faithful to the spirit of Cuban music. Thus *Tres Imágenes Cubanas* is truly an aural journey through the history of Cuban culture.

In 1997, I premiered *Tres Imágenes Cubanas* at the Gasteig Hall in Munich, Germany. One year later, Brouwer invited me to give the world premiere of the orchestral version, together with the Cuban National Symphony Orchestra, at the Teatro Nacional during the Havana Guitar Festival. In 1999, with the help of a grant from La Salle University, Philadelphia/Pennsylvania, and with the great efforts of the Cuba specialist Prof. Charles White, Peramo and I were invited to do a US tour, presenting his music in performances with the Griffin String Quartet.

Aires de la Tierra (1998)

During this trip, Peramo heard another premiere of one of his new compositions. On 6th March 1999, the mezzo-soprano Nan-Maró Babakhanian and I premiered the song cycle *Aires de la tierra* at Carnegie Hall. Since Peramo began his career as a professional opera singer, I wanted him to combine his two beings, singing and composing. Before writing this song cycle, Peramo had never considered returning to the singing world. In fact, it took quite some time for him to feel comfortable with the idea. I’m glad that I did convince him to return to the singing world and that the great success of this cycle inspired him to start composing more works for the human voice. The big orchestral cantata *Leyenda del Bosque* for orchestra, choir and soloists, recently premiered in New York, is an impressive example.

It was my wish that Peramo should attempt a cycle where the guitar is an equal partner to the voice, rather than providing a mere accompaniment. I was convinced that at least one of the

songs should also have an extended solo section for the guitar, not unlike Granados’ *La Maja de Goya*. I also suggested the scoring for mezzo-soprano, which would better reflect the ‘earthy’ sound of Afro-Cuban music.

In this song-cycle, Peramo shows his poetic side, writing the words to the music himself. *Fiesta*, the last song of the cycle, is written in Bozal, a language reminiscent of the Spanish slang spoken by black slaves in Cuba during the 18th and 19th centuries. (Peramo included the following description in his correspondence to me: ‘*Aires de la Tierra* should be sung by a woman who possesses a lyrical voice, but not in an operatic sense. The voice should be very open and clear as well as aggressive, sensual and tender. Remember the Cuban “mulatas”!’).

Fiesta is based on the tango-conga rhythm, a rhythm that can be described as a fast, yet less intense habanera. This particular rhythm was used extensively in Cuban comic theatre during the first half of the 20th century. *Fiesta* keeps some of this theatrical spirit to make the audience enjoy the moment. As Peramo describes it, one can experience here the heritage of the old Spanish literary tradition that came to Cuba and Latin America during the colonial days. The anonymous medieval novel *El Lazarillo de Tormes* is a good example of this tradition. Most of the time this literary world alludes to sexual pleasures and to politics, a strange and unique blend of tragedy and comedy that is an intrinsic part of the magical Latin American world.

When songs in that style became part of Cuban popular theatre, they kept their roguish intentions, but began to mutate into something more refined. Written in the same tradition, though not as direct as *Fiesta*, is the opening song, *Vegas de Vueltabajo*. *Vueltabajo* was the name given to the western side of Cuba back in the colonial days. In particular, this term refers to the province of Pinar del Río, where one can find the best soil for tobacco plantations. *Luna de Guamá* uses the traditional guajira rhythm and is an excellent example of Cuban rural music. Guamá was the name of a native village, located in the south middle side of the island. This song, along with *Mar*, with its beautiful guitar solo parts, and *Psalmody*, a lullaby for a dead child, builds a very intimate and tender contrast to the extroverted beginning and end of the cycle.

En Tardes de Lluvia (1999)

In May 1999, I was on tour in Latin America as a member of a jazz trio together with my brother Cornelius. In Cuba we performed several concerts, and I was also scheduled for a solo recital at the Gran Teatro de la Habana. The endless conversations with Peramo, my brother, and myself and our aimless walks through Havana, around the shore and into little Cuban rural villages — like Hemingway’s fishing village

Cojimar, where people seem not to know the word 'time' — are reflected in *En Tardes de Lluvia*. There is also an impressionistic touch to this music, which reminds me a bit of the aesthetics of Debussy or Ravel.

During Peramo's trip to the United States, we were able to spend a day together in the Impressionists gallery in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. After a long day, talking about these wonderful paintings, as well as the music and poetry connected to Impressionism, I asked Peramo to write a suite for solo guitar in this spirit. *En Tardes de Lluvia* (On Rainy Evenings) was written especially for my CD *Portraits of Cuba* and originated during a period of heavy rain, the perfect poetic surrounding. The music takes inspiration from Impressionism but nevertheless is Cuban in its inner soul. Ironically, we had unusually heavy rain during the recording.

Liturgia (Para El Signo De Virgo) (1994-97)

Unlike the previous pieces discussed above, *Liturgia* uses a different musical language. However, it too is unmistakably Cuban. This five-movement piece, written for violin and guitar, originated in 1986 when Peramo began experimenting with serialism. *Liturgia* was originally written for violin, flute and guitar. Peramo was never completely satisfied with the work, and in 1994 he returned to it and changed everything except the central idea and the main themes. The final version of the work was completed in 1997 and dedicated to my violinist wife Doris Orsan and myself. We premiered it 1999 at the Festival of the Guitar in Munich, Germany. While this final version of *Liturgia* is a tonal and not a serial work, Peramo's use of dissonance creates a distinct harmonic world. In addition, while there are no direct quotations of Cuban rhythmic structures, Cuban rhythms are implied by the music. The percussive effects used in *Liturgia* underline the music's programme and avoid building a rhythmic structure, not unlike the role of a drum during a pagan ceremony.

Spiritual ceremonies like those of the Abacua or Yoruba religions, which were brought to the island by African slaves, have always been important in Cuba. The programmatic idea behind *Liturgia*, though not directly linked to these beliefs, is a very traditional one.

The heathen cult of the sacrifice of an elected

warrior in the name of the pagan gods is the central idea behind this music. This mystical idea reflects the heathen belief in the almighty of nature. As in Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, the whole atmosphere is very earthy and rural, supported by the 'dry' use of the two wooden ('close to earth') instruments, guitar and violin, and the use of percussive effects, which remind one of the holy 'bata' drum in the Yoruba cult. During many ceremonies of this cult, the drum plays an important role by providing rhythmic support for the often wild and ecstatic celebrations.

Moreover, the link to Stravinsky and eastern European culture, namely that of Russia, is very real. Russian culture, full of untapped mystical powers, has had a strong presence in Cuba for decades. Although Tulio says it is merely a coincidence, the violin's opening motif in *Liturgia* is reminiscent of the first melody of Prokofiev's *Five Melodies for Violin and Piano*.

Liturgia's first movement, *Invocación del Elegido* (Invocation of the Elected), depicts a warrior preparing to offer himself to the gods. The warrior is aware that his imminent death will lead him to a new life. In the second movement, *Canto de la Luna Llena* (Song of the Full Moon), the warrior sings to the moon, a goddess who will carry his song to the other gods. In *Ofrenda* (Offering), the section following, the warrior offers himself to the gods. The fourth movement, *Sones de Danza* (Dance Tunes), is the warrior's sacrificial dance. In *Consagración* (Consecration) the sacrifice is over and the warrior's soul ascends to heaven.

Canto de Septiembre (1999)

Canto de Septiembre was composed on Peramo's birthday in 1999. I was surprised to receive this

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Johannes Tonio Kreuzsch in Cuba.

beautiful little guitar piece as a present on his birthday. But it seems to be the greatest present for Peramo to give through music. *Canto de Septiembre* is also the final piece on the CD *Portraits of Cuba* (Arte Nova/BMG), on which one can hear most of the music described in this article. I am happy that finally, through this CD, Peramo is widely recognised as an important composer of our time. I am proud to introduce Peramo to the guitar world and hope that other players, such as Eliot Fisk, who with Paula Robison recently recorded Peramo's *Cantos del Caribe*, will enjoy this 'New Cuban Music'.

To make Peramo's music accessible to the broader public, Kreuzsch Bros. Publishing/GbR, the publishing house of my brother Cornelius Claudio Kreuzsch and myself, is publishing the music of Tulio Peramo. A great variety of his music, from orchestral and can order through chamber music scores to solo works for guitar. The following pages present some examples of our editions.

In the near future there will be a new all-Peramo CD featuring new orchestral works, including a new guitar concerto, a new violin concerto and his orchestral cantata *Leyenda del Bosque*, which was recently premiered in New York.

In the coming year Peramo is also going to give lectures and concerts at several music academies, including the academy in Munich, where I teach.

For me, it is a miracle how one can capture the soul of the guitar in such a refined way without being able to play that instrument himself (although Peramo is always proud to show

that he knows how to play the introduction of one major guitar piece, Brouwer's *Elogio de la Danza*, by plucking the open E string three times). Though his music was first recognised when he won the composition prize of the Cuban League of Artists in 1987 for his tone poem *La Parábola del Rey* for large orchestra, he focuses at the moment mainly on composing for the guitar. Indeed, his catalogue contains a large number of solo pieces for guitar, as well as chamber music works, music for guitar quartet and concertos for guitar. He is a regular guest at seminars and festivals (in past years he has travelled to cities such as Salzburg and New York), presenting his music for guitar. He also won the Agustín Barrios-Mangoré composition prize in Paraguay.

Overcoming living conditions where finding paper or sheet music is as difficult as finding a way to feed one's family each day, Peramo has never lost his love and faith in his country and culture. Like many of his artistic friends, Peramo had the opportunity to leave Cuba. However, his strong belief in his fate to be a Cuban composer has kept him in the place where he was destined to live and work as a Cuban composer in Cuba.

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Described by The Boston Globe as 'a guitarist of unusual talent', Johannes Tonio Kreuzsch is of the new generation of concert guitarists. Born on 9 October 1970, he first studied Philosophy at the University of Munich, later graduating from the Salzburg Mozarteum, where he studied with Eliot Fisk and the Cuban guitarist Joaquín Clerch-Díaz. Later he received his Master of Music degree from the Juilliard School of Music, New York, where he studied with Sharon Isbin. A further important teacher was the Uruguayan guitarist Alvaro Pierri.

In addition to his recordings of standard repertoire works, his collaboration with contemporary composers has resulted in many new compositions for the guitar. He also has a strong interest in improvised and avant-garde music, which is reflected in his own compositions. He is also the artistic director of his own festival, and has established his own publishing house, Kreuzsch Bros. Publishing, in partnership with his brother, jazz pianist Cornelius Claudio Kreuzsch. Their current catalogue ranges from guitar music (solo and with other instruments) to large orchestral works.

The CD *Portraits of Cuba*, which features all Peramo's guitar pieces, is now available on the OEHMS CLASSICS label.

A mi muy querido amigo Johannes Tonio Kreusch

Canto de Septiembre

para guitarra

Fingering by Johannes Tonio Kreusch

Tulio Peramo

Lento $\text{♩} = 54$

sempre molto cantabile

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harm. XII

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La Habana, 8 de Septiembre de 1999