

Spotlight On Cuban Classical Music Ernesto Lecuona's *Danzas afrocubanas*

By Angela Miller-Niles, NCTM

Cuba and the United States have a long history of cultural exchange, stemming back to the times of European colonization. It is especially prominent in the 20th century when Cuban rhythms and dances were heard and seen throughout the United States. Music heard

on popular radio and in musicals like *West Side Story* embraced the sounds of the beautiful island and its unique fusion of Spanish and African sounds. In learning more about Cuban culture and music, we can see new things about the music we have in the United States.

There is a strong history of classical music in Cuba, with many composers and performers working there from the 19th century to the present. One of the most prominent classical Cuban composers is Ernesto Lecuona, whose music presents a unique opportunity for pianists to experience Cuban folk music within the classical style.

The "Cuban Gershwin"


Ernesto Lecuona was born in Cuba in 1895. He achieved international fame that started at age 5 and continued until his death in 1963, a success that was equal in both classical

and popular music. Often called the "Cuban Gershwin" for his incorporation of local music into his classical works, his accomplishments were comparable with the most renowned composers of the time. He used nationalism in his music on the same level as other composers like Grieg or Bartók and was one of the first Latin American composers to use modern classical innovations in traditional music styles.

Ernesto Lecuona is considered one of Cuba's greatest composers of the 20th century. Although few Americans recognize his name, many would recognize his music. He wrote classical music for solo piano and orchestra, music for the theater and popular music. His songs were so popular in the United States they have become long-term standards. Some of these include "Siboney," "Say 'Si Si,'" "Always in My Heart," "Noche Azul,"

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“Two Hearts that Pass in the Night,” “Maria My Own” and “Jungle Drums.” His piano piece *Malagueña* was a consistent best-seller in the U.S. for multiple decades and is still very well-known. His work was recognized during his lifetime, including an Oscar nomination for Best Song for “Always In My Heart.”

Lecuona’s set of *Danzas afrocubanas* for solo piano presents a great opportunity to introduce students to Cuban music. Teachers can use this set as an interesting “world music” experience: it’s a chance to hear Cuban music, learn about Cuban culture and history, and be introduced to Lecuona’s immense catalog of piano works.

This article will discuss some of the important background elements of Cuban classical music, including the *afrocubanismo* movement and concert *danza* form. I will then describe each dance in Lecuona’s *Danzas afrocubanas*, including references to cultural events made in the music that can help with interpretation.

Afrocubanismo

To understand Lecuona’s music and his impact on Cuban culture, the social events of the time must be taken into account. Until the 1920s, the contributions of Africa to Cuban culture and music were not acknowledged. As the country was developing, it wanted to bring itself up to date and many viewed the authentic African music originally brought to the country by slaves as savage or barbaric. Ethnic prejudice and racial discrimination were still pervasive in society.

Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, intellectuals began to accept and even embrace African contributions to Cuban music and arts, giving these arts a new significance as a sign of national unity. As the 1930s progressed, these changes were seen in all types of art and music and became known as the *afrocubanismo* movement. Cuban composers realized they had material that was even more interesting than those “created” by European artists right in their own country. Rhythms, dances and elements from the visual arts that had long been suppressed by prejudice were suddenly open to modern interpretation and use. Eventually, Afro-Cuban themes became the most prominent symbols of Cuban music. In fact, today when one thinks of Cuban music the most likely elements are dance, drums and rhythm, which all have African roots.

The *afrocubanismo* movement focused strongly on African rhythm. African music uses a rhythmic mode or *clave*, which generally stays constant throughout a piece. African

rhythms like the *son*, *rumba* and *conga* can be seen throughout Ernesto Lecuona’s compositions. He would often combine traditional *claves* to create new sounds, or switch between different *claves*. Although these new rhythms don’t fit into the traditional molds, they retain the African sound.

Classical composers incorporated these elements into their “high class” music, giving Afro-Cuban culture a newfound respectability. Lecuona was extremely influential in both creating and promoting this music to the world with his classical and popular compositions.

Cuban Concert Danzas

Before Lecuona, the *danza* was a concert piece in two parts with contrasting character between the two sections. Although some composers had increased the length of the *danza* through repetition there was no development of melodic ideas. The rhythmic figure in the left hand was a simple ostinato that acted as a backdrop for the melody. Lecuona started with the foundations of earlier Cuban composers and developed the *danza* into something new. He was the first to bring the song and dance forms of Cuban folklore into concert music. Even his titles, which referenced Afro-Cuban events and themes, were new to the classical world. Lecuona fused African rhythms with classical forms and modernist innovations.

His performance skills influenced his works and led to highly complex compositions. In his works, the rhythm gains importance, becoming much more of an equal to the melody. He also expanded the two-part *danza* into a ternary structure. This included a contrasting middle section which was often developmental. The use of development brings the overall form of Lecuona’s concert *danzas* to something similar to sonata form, with an exposition, development and recapitulation.

Lecuona published three books of *danzas*, each developing and expanding the concert *danza* in new ways. His work culminated in the third book, *Danzas afrocubanas*, or *Afro-Cuban Dances*. The dances included are “La conga de medianoche,” “Danza negra,” “...Y la Negra Bailaba,” “Danza de los Ñañigos,” “Danza Lucumí,” and a re-release of “La Comparsa.” They show the culmination of Lecuona’s developments in melody, harmony, rhythm and form. He creates an improvisatory character exploiting the timbres of different registers of the piano and using melodic elaboration. He experiments with harmony, superimposing chords of different functions, and using 9th, 11th and 13th chords from French impressionism.

Spotlight On Cuban Classical Music

Danzas afrocubanas

The *Danzas afrocubanas* are a great set of pieces for the advanced student or performer. Lecuona was a skilled pianist and was praised by other artists at the time like Paderewski and Rubinstein. He had large hands and wrote many octave and big chordal passages. These passages can lead to difficulties for performers, but with proper attention and technique can help develop stamina. Complicated rhythms can help develop a strong sense of pulse and hand independence.

The Afro-Cuban elements and cultural background of each *danza* are important to understand to interpret the music. In describing the scenes evoked by each title and highlighting some of the musical elements in each, I hope to encourage performers to look into this set.

“La Conga de Medianoche”

The title of the first dance translates as “Midnight Conga,” an angular and dissonant piece that requires a strong pulse and heavy touch. More than just the name of a drum, in Cuba the conga is a part of the carnival parades. It is a group that marches together, including musicians and dancers. The instruments played by the conga musicians include metallic drums like brake drums or even frying pans, hand drums and a wide variety of other drums. These various types of drums play different rhythms at once. There is also a reed instrument that replaces the more traditional singer to project melodies over larger distances during parades.

The sounds of midnight can be heard in the dark, eerie melodies and unsettling harmonies of this *danza*. Superimposed dissonant chords open the piece, mimicking African drumming introductions (see Example 1 below). Lecuona uses a wide range of dynamics from pianississimo to fortississimo that are suggestive of parade movement. This piece is less difficult than several of the others as there are fewer octave runs. More “modern” harmonies are heard side-by-side with moments of primitivism.



Example 1: “La Conga de Medianoche,” measures 1–6. Copyright permission granted from Edward B. Marks/Hal Leonard.

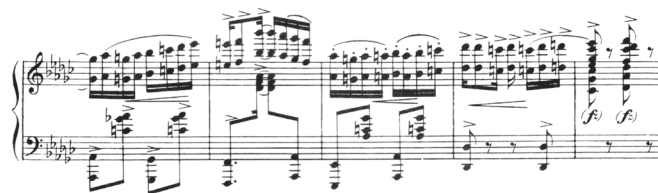
“Danza Negra”

“Danza Negra” (“Black Woman’s Dance”) has no references to specific folk dance types but sounds more generally like a jubilant dance. The ostinato in the left hand (see Example 2) is initially difficult but becomes familiar with repetition. Its difficulty lies in the occasional contrasting

rhythms between the hands. This piece is much lighter in character than the first dance and has a catchy, pleasing melody. The middle section is very difficult with near-constant sixteenthths in the right hand and large leaps in the left hand (see Example 3). This section is faster than the opening and longer than the middle section in many of the other pieces.



Example 2: “Danza Negra,” measures 1–4. Copyright permission granted from Edward B. Marks/Hal Leonard.



Example 3: “Danza Negra,” measures 59–63. Copyright permission granted from Edward B. Marks/Hal Leonard.

“...Y La Negra Bailaba!”

Translated as “...And the Black Woman Danced!” this piece captures the excitement of an energetic dance. This is the most difficult song in the set for several reasons. The left-hand ostinato pattern sounds cheery and celebratory but is full of syncopation and wide leaps. The right hand has octaves for almost the entire piece, requiring great strength and stamina. The pulse is offset by accents and ties, creating a uniquely “Cuban” rhythm full of offbeats (see Example 4). The hands have independent rhythmic ideas, emphasizing the separate roles each plays in the piece. The A section is loud and exciting, contrasted by the more light and airy B section.



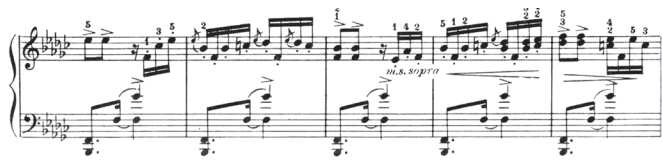
Example 4: “...Y La Negra Bailaba,” measures 1–10. Copyright permission granted from Edward B. Marks/Hal Leonard.

“Danza de los Nañigos”

This title is sometimes translated as “Dance of the Negroes,” which is somewhat correct but doesn’t tell the

whole story. The Nañigos are members of an Afro-Cuban society for men called the *Abakua* that dance in the street carnival. Their music contributed to the development of the rumba and features drumming, dancing and chanting.

This piece has multiple sections, rather than the more simplistic ABA of the other pieces. The opening is smooth and has an airy melody that features hand-crossing. Careful attention to rhythm is needed to accurately play the dotted rhythms and syncopations here. This switches to a heavier “dance” section, meant to evoke the Nañigos’ dances (see Example 5). The rollicking middle section features fast octave passages. The return of the A section is made more difficult by doubling the melody in the right hand in octaves.



Example 5: “Danza de los Nañigos,” measures 22–26. Copyright permission granted from Edward B. Marks/Hal Leonard.

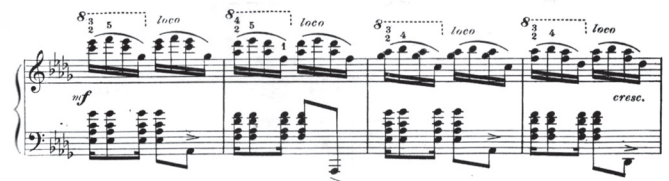
“Danza Lucumí”

The Lucumí are an Afro-Cuban ethnic group, including people of the Yoruba descent from Africa. Their language is used in the Santería rituals which blend more traditional African beliefs with Catholicism. Lucumí dances became prominent because of the *afrocubanismo* movement, which led to public performances of their music and dance. Drumming is prominent and dance is deeply connected to the music. This music is used in modern Cuban popular music, especially the rumba.

This piece is very breezy and has a familiar “Cuban paradise” sound. The melody could be found in a Broadway show from the time and, in fact, was the basis for his song “From One Love to Another.” The ostinato in the left hand is easier than in other movements (See Example 6). The B section is joyous and celebratory, using the full range of the keyboard in passages that sweep up and down the registers (see Example 7). The return of the A section features octaves in the left hand.



Example 6: “Danza Lucumi,” measures 1–10. Copyright permission granted from Edward B. Marks/Hal Leonard.

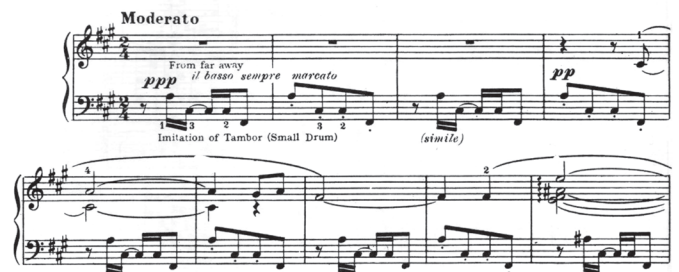


Example 7: “Danza Lucumi,” measures 51–54. Copyright permission granted from Edward B. Marks/Hal Leonard.

“La Comparsa”

The comparsa is part of the carnival celebration. Like the conga, it is a group of people who march together in the parades. Each comparsa has specific uniforms or costumes and the groups are often from specific neighborhoods or social groups. Some of these groups have a very long history and their dances are choreographed.

The parade can be heard in the gradual crescendo and eventual diminuendo of the music. Lecuona’s marking to start the left-hand ostinato in “Imitation of tambor or small drum” and “From far away” evokes percussion coming in from a distance. The seductive melody sneaks in, creating a unique character throughout the piece (see Example 8). This piece is somewhat easier than the others and could be used to give late-intermediate students a taste of this style. The B section provides contrast in the parallel major with the left-hand ostinato switching to octaves and the right hand switching to a grander theme, also in octaves.



Example 8: “La Comparsa,” measures 1–9. Copyright permission granted from Edward B. Marks/Hal Leonard.

Conclusion

The *Danzas afrocubanas* present a great learning and performing opportunity for pianists. Although Lecuona’s writing is challenging, it is a joy to play. These pieces give students and teachers a chance to learn more about Cuban music and its culture. They also provide a way to learn about the work of a great composer. ♪

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