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| Afrocubanismo in Music |
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| Afrocubanismo was an aesthetic trend in art music during the first half of the twentieth century focusing on African cultural features in Cuban society. The movement gained expression in the works of a seminal group of composers whose artistic production reflected neo-nationalistic musical concerns, thus emphasizing the manipulation of timbral and rhythmic elements in a modern harmonic vocabulary. These musical experiments marked a significant juncture in the evolution of Cuban concert music, and forged an inclusive representation of race in the reformation of national cultural identity. |
| Afrocubanismo was an aesthetic trend in art music during the first half of the twentieth century focusing on African cultural features in Cuban society. The movement gained expression in the works of a seminal group of composers whose artistic production reflected neo-nationalistic musical concerns, thus emphasizing the manipulation of timbral and rhythmic elements in a modern harmonic vocabulary. These musical experiments marked a significant juncture in the evolution of Cuban concert music, and forged an inclusive representation of race in the reformation of national cultural identity.  Responding to a period of political turbulence and financial decline, a group of progressive intellectuals, journalists, and members of the artistic community committed to cultural reconstruction established the Grupo Minoristain Havana in 1923. Well aware of Cuba’s ambivalent attitudes towards its African heritage, the circle sought to explore the roots of Cubanness in order to forge a more inclusive, decolonized revision of Cuban cultural history.  As a complement to the socio-humanistic concerns of the circle, an artistic movement emerged called Afrocubanismo*,* which addressed the cultural continuities of Cuba's African heritage. The movement embraced Afro-Cuban themes as the focus of a distinct creole identity, and acknowledged the various influences of African epistemology in art and folklore. Minoristapoets, visual artists, and musicians sought to produce a socially relevant art that reaffirmed the black presence in a society that often denied its value. They regarded the Africanisation of popular culture not only as a sociocultural reality, but also as a potential source of national pride. Consequently, the movement not only sparked a period of prolific artistic production, but also challenged the conventional concepts of nationhood by asserting the legitimacy of Afro-Cuban expressive culture.  The musical manifestation of Afrocubanismo found its voice in a post-Impressionist school of nationalist composers that fundamentally generated twin streams of musical production: the cosmopolitan approach of Minorista members Amadeo Roldán (1900-1939), Gilberto Valdés (1905-1971), and Alejandro García Caturla (1906-1940); and the folkloristic nationalism of the more popular non-Minorista members such as Ernesto Lecuona (1895-1963), Gonzalo Roig (1890-1970), and the brothers Eliseo Grenet (1893-1950) and Emilo Grenet (1908-1941). The language of Afrocubanismoarticulated by these two sets of composers contrasts in several respects. The former is more in keeping with the tonal Romantic idiom, and remained predominantly within the spheres of salon music and zarzuela (Spanish-derived nationalist operetta) such as Roig’s celebrated Cecilia Valdés (1932). These composers crafted works not overly abstract, and gained accessibility in their tendency to straddle between popular and art music. In contrast, the manipulations of Africanist elements were considerably more organic in the rigorous compositional procedures of the Minorista composers, who sought solutions that were unequivocally Cuban in character but more universal in scope, despite remaining rather obscure during their lifetimes.  The movement is generally recognised as commencing with the premier of Amadeo Roldán's (1900-1939) *Obertura Sobre Temas Cubanos* in 1925. With its novel incorporation of Afro-Cuban percussion instruments, it ushered in a new stylistic period of symphonic music. While much Afrocubanist music drew inspiration from the social dances (as in García Caturla’s celebrated *Tres Danzas Cubanas* [1928]), aspects of syncretic religious worship such as ritualistic drumming practices were also explored. The bicultural musical concerns of these composers generated a brand of chamber and symphonic music, ballet, and lyric theatre replete with the expressive resources and modernist language of their day.  The compositional features that articulate the aesthetic ideals of Afrocubanoismo wereexpressed through all musical components. Composers appropriated what they considered to be defining gestures of Africanist expression. Afro-Cuban drums, which had been previously relegated to an accompanimental role in tonal music, were elevated to the symphonic level and conferred soloistic status. Non-pitched percussion instruments were used not as coloristic or rhythmic embellishment, but rather as a central orchestral force in which all the idiomatic, sonorous possibilities could be fully exploited, as exemplified by Roldan’s *Rítmica No. 5* (1930).  Melodic materials were generally motivic (short pitch patterns) constructions based on pentatonic (five-note) and hexatonic (six-note) scales. The thematic materials were mostly subject to repetition and restatement without significant linear development. In the harmonic structures, superimposed intervals of fourths and fifths prevailed, punctuated by occasional tone-clusters and bitonality. Sonorous accompanimental effects were often percussive rather than harmonic.  The most salient compositional feature of Afrocubanist works, however, was the manipulation of the rhythmical and metrical structure, which became critical to the definition of Afrocubanismo. Undoubtedly, the rhythm of vernacular idioms, particularly the son— Cuba’s pre-eminent music genre — was the element with the most profound impact on Afrocubanismo, but composers deliberately exploited many rhythmical and metrical conceptions of unmistakable African origin. Characterising Afrocubanismo were constant syncopations, polyrhythms, polymeter, hemiolas, time-line references, and, in short, conflicting devices that shifted the accents away from the downbeat so to disrupt the stability of the meter.  The chief historical significance of Afrocubanismo is not only that it valorised the traditions of the African diaspora, but that it also clearly elevated the quality of symphonic writing in Cuba, marking a pivotal stage in concert music with the development of a modern, syncretic compositional syntax. These achievements provided the foundation for the next stage of development of cultivated music for subsequent generations of composers in Cuba. |
| Further reading:  (Of the Axis and the Hinge: Nationalism, Afro-Cubanism, and Music in Pre-Revolutionary Cuba)  (Moore)  (Rey) |