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| Grupo de Renovacion Musical (1942-1948) |
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| The Grupo de Renovacion Musical was aschool of Cuban composers that emerged out of the Conservatorio Municipal de La Habana during the 1940s. The young composers were pupils of Spanish-born composer José Ardévol, who served as the leader and mentor of the group. After the premature deaths of Amadeo Roldán and Alejandro García Caturla (1939 and 1940 respectively), Ardévol took over some of their duties as music professor at the Conservatorio Municipal. Ardévol and his pupils saw a need for Cuban composers to focus on compositional techniques, and strongly believed that all composers should master traditional compositional methods, such as traditional counterpoint, sonata form and fugues (most commonly used by composers of the Barroque and Classical periods), in order to fully develop their music-writing abilities. They also rejected the obvious nationalism that Roldán and Caturla had popularized and that was also found in the works of many other Latin American composers from the previous generation, in preference for the neo-classical trends of Europe – mostly France and Spain, with composers Igor Stravinsky and Manuel de Falla serving as models. They never denied the importance of the legacy established by Roldán and Caturla for future generations of Cuban composers, and acknowledged that Roldán and Caturla were visionaries in their own time, influential through their compositions for bringing Cuban music up to date with contemporary music developments in the US, Latin America and Europe, and for introducing the use of traditional Cuban music elements to contemporary art music – particularly the use of rhythm and percussive instrumentation. |
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The members of the Grupo de Renovación Musical made their first collective appearance in 1942, when the Berkshire Music Center offered a scholarship for a young Cuban composer to attend courses in composition with Aaron Copland and orchestral conducting with Sergei Koussevitsky in New York. In order to select the recipient of the scholarship, Ardévol opened a composition competition, where all applicants had to submit a sonata. Several of Ardévol’s students submitted works for the scholarship competition. In order to acknowledge the work of the young aspiring composers, a public concert was organized by Ardévol and his pupils on 20 June 1942, with the support of the Soceidad de la Orquesta de Cámara de La Habana. Thus, the Grupo de Renovación Musical made its first public appearance with Ardévol formally introducing the group and their objectives in a speech that preceded the concert. The composers who contributed to this first concert were Harold Gramatges, Julián Orbón, Hilario González, Gisela Hernández, Edgardo Martín, Serafín Pro, Virginia Fleites, and Esther Rodríguez. Eventually, Juan Antonio Cámara, Enrique Aparicio Bellver, Dolores Torres, and Argeliers León joined the group. Out of this group of talented young composers, Harold Gramatges was selected as the first recipient of the scholarship in 1942. A second scholarship was awarded to Julián Orbón, who studied with Copland in 1946.  Beyond the perfection of compositional skills through mastering classical compositional techniques, and the rejection of overt nationalist tendencies, the group sought to create music that spoke to universal human characteristics and that reflected the true essence of the composers’ creative spirit. They were also highly conscious of their place in history and strove to create permanent works that would transcend national and chronological boundaries. They believed in eternal music that was fully aware of its past – hence their emphasis on perfecting the compositional techniques found in older models, striving for quality and perfection, and rejecting notions of music as diversion or spectacle. By mastering all compositional techniques, each composer would be able to find his or her individual voice.  The members of the group also placed great emphasis on knowledge of contemporary developments in the other arts – mainly literature and the visual arts. In general, the group strove for a renewal, not only of the work composers were creating, but also of the cultural environment that surrounded these composers, in refining and educating the musical palate of musicians and the public. Their interest in improving the public’s general knowledge of and taste for music was manifested through developing the music skills of amateur and professional musicians; organizing and leading chamber music ensembles, choral organizations, orchestras, lecturing during pre-concert talks; and teaching at local conservatories.  The group began publishing their own magazine, *Boletín del Grupo de Renovación Musical*, in 1943, and the members also contributed to the magazine *Conservatorio*. Through these outlets they publicized their aesthetic viewpoints, their mission and objectives. They organized concerts where, in addition to the compositions of the members of the group, they also performed music by other contemporary composers, including Maurice Ravel, Juan José Castro, Francis Poulenc, Alfredo Casella, Béla Bartók, Caturla, Roldán, and Manuel de Falla. Additionally, they promoted Cuban music from all periods, including Roldán and Caturla from the earlier twentieth century, and Manuel Saumell and Ignacio Cervantes from the nineteenth century.  Eventually, the individual preferences of each member became more noticeable. For example, Gisela Hernández focused more on choral music, Hilario González incorporated popular Cuban music elements more audibly in his compositions, and Julián Orbón cultivated an unequivocally Spanish sound. As each composer developed their own style, and most embraced the use of Cuban elements in their music, the group began to lose its initial cohesion; it disbanded in 1948. Although short lived, the group comprised some of the most promising young Cuban composers of the time, most of whom would later be part of cultural and artistic groups during the 1950s, such as the Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo and the Grupo Orígenes. Some of the composers, such as Harold Gramatges and Argelier León, stayed in Cuba after the 1959 Revolution, and became highly involved in the cultural politics of the Revolution and in shaping the role of music in the new socialist Cuban society. Others, such as Julián Orbón, left the island and went on to continue their careers abroad. |
| Further reading:  (Carpentier, 1972)  (Gramatges & Giro, 1997)  (Gramatges & Giro, Grupo de Renovación Musical de Cuba, 2009)  (Martin, 1972) |