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| **Caturla, Alejandro** (1906-1940) |
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| Alejandro Garca Caturla was a prominent figure in the twentieth century art music of Cuba, and leading exponent of the Afrocubanismo movement. He helped define a period in symphonic production, synthesizing African and Iberian-derived elements with novel manipulations of rhythmic and native instruments in a modern harmonic vocabulary. His assassination in 1940 tragically ended his short but prolific career. |
| Born in Remedios, Cuba, Alejandro Garca Caturla demonstrated musical abilities at a young age playing both the piano and violin, and composing songs and *danzones* (Cuba’s national dance). In 1922, he became the second-chair violin of the Orquesta Sinfnica de La Habana at the early age of sixteen. Although he studied law at the University of Havana, he was also a composition and conducting student of Pedro Sanjun (1887-1976). Between 1925 and 1927, he studied composition under Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979) in Paris, where he absorbed the European musical trends and modernist aesthetic ideas that would inform his work.  A chief exponent of the Afrocubanist movement, his aesthetic intentions involved the syncretism of Afro-Cuban elements with modern compositional principles. His interest in fusing aspects of African and European music to produce novel rhythmic and melodic combinations had not been previously manipulated in the symphonic medium in Cuba. The elements of the son, Cuba’s preeminent popular music genre, were particularly exploited in his works. While his point of departure was the primitivism of Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) and the impressionism of Manuel de Falla (1876-1946), he did not subscribe to the overt, rhapsodic nationalism prevalent in Latin American art music of the time.  He was fascinated by creolized African rhythms, which became a defining feature of his works. His proximity to an Afro-Cuban community exposed him to the sounds of Santera syncretic worship and ritual drumming, which would have a formative impact on his compositional style. The first movement, “Danza del Tambor”, of his symphonic suite, “Tres Danzas Cubanas” (1927), for example, features continuous rhythmic development derived from Congolese drumming.  Caturla began using native percussion instruments and combining elements of traditional Cuban themes and dance forms with more dissonant harmonies and polytonality to create a highly personal musical style, as demonstrated by one of his most famous works “La Rumba” (1933). Noting the rich diversity of rhythms in Afrocuban popular music, but well aware of the negative reactions to Afrocubanismoand the critical opposition to the stylization of the music of the blacks in Cuba, he nonetheless acknowledged its symphonic viability as essential to the thrust of his Africanist writing.  Exuberant manipulations of rhythm were not solely restricted to orchestral works, as they are surprisingly characteristic of his vocal repertoire. Polyrhythmic elaborations saturate the texture of many of his art songs such as “Bito Manué” (1930), while the influence of vernacular dance rhythms frequently appear in the melodic lines and accompaniment patterns. In “Manitas en el Suelo” (1934, unfinished), Caturla’s comic puppet opera (with libretto by Alejo Carpentier), the dance-derived patterns are reiterated by native percussion instruments as a means of evoking Cubanism.  García Caturla understood the powerful contribution of rhythm in defining a compositional language capable of challenging the aesthetic preferences and prejudices of middle-class audiences. Consequently, the rhythmic elements give the characteristic stamp to most of his music. Moreover, he dealt a formidable blow to the detractors of Afro-Cuban rhythms with his celebrated Africanist-infused “Obertura Cubana” (1938), which attained first prize in Cuba’s national music contest.  He gained some notoriety when he became a member of an Afro-Cuban family by two common-law marriages (the first at age seventeen), despite his bourgeois Spanish background. In order to support his family, Caturla balanced a career as a composer and violinist with that of a lawyer and subsequent magistrate. Though his considerable obligations to jurisprudence encroached on his compositional schedule, he nonetheless continued to practice conducting throughout the series of provincial municipalities where he was appointed to by forming local performing ensembles, such as the “Orquesta y Sociedad de Concierto Caibarin” in Villa Clara province, which he founded in 1932.  As a courtroom judge, García Caturla tirelessly battled racial injustice, but ironically was assassinated by a black convict on bail, tragically cutting short his promising but prolific life at thirty-four years of age. Although he remained largely obscure during his lifetime, as much of his catalogue was published posthumously, he is nonetheless a prominent figure in the development of twentieth century art music in Cuba, and a pioneer of modern national symphonic art.  List of Works  Symphonic  Berceuse (1925-26)  Tres Danzas Cubanas (1928)  Yamba- (1928-31)  La Rumba (1933-34)  Obertura Cubana (1938)  Chamber  Danza Negra (1925) for piano.  Cuarteto para cuerdas (1927) for string quartet.  Bemb (1929) for chamber orchestra.  Primera suite cubana (1932) for eight wind instruments and piano.  Berceuse campesina (1939) for piano.  Son en fa (1939) for piano.  Art Songs for voice and piano  Dos poemas (1929)  Bito Manué (1930)  Yambamb (1933)  Mulata (1934)  Piano  Danza Negra (1925)  Tocata de do sostenido menor (1927)  Preludios (1927)  Sonata corta (1927)  Berceuse campesina (1939)  Son en fa (1939)  Opera  Manitas en el suelo (unfinished) |
| Further reading:  (Henriquez)  (White) |