

Zenaida Manfugás and her Other Milieus

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Zenaida Manfugás

Zenaida Manfugás has made it into Cuban musical history despite the cultural commissars' efforts to shut her out. They may do so a bit more cautiously now, but their intention is always to exclude Diasporic artists, dead or alive, who refused or refuse to embrace the tropical version of Marxist-Leninism.

Born in 1932 in the Eastern province of Guantánamo, this black pianist decided in 1970 to return to Spain and never again go back to Cuba. By 1949, she had won a scholarship to do specialized study there, after graduating from the municipal conservatory.

For a variety of reasons, among them her skin color, she had to wait until 1952 to receive it.

She took classes from eminent professor Tomás Andrade de Silva and, later, in Paris, where she studied with one of twentieth century's eminent pianists: Walter Gieseeking. One of her achievements we should note, particularly in Spain, was her debut with the Madrid Symphony Orchestra, less than a year after arriving.

In 1958, she once again returned to Cuba and took up a position at the Alejandro García Caturla Conservatory. She participated in concerts with the National Symphony Orches-

tra and international tours through Asia and Europe.

At 38, Manfugás went back to Spain on a one-way ticket; four years later, she would travel to the United States. She spent her life between New Jersey and Miami, frustrated because she was never able to record her work—like her concerts at Carnegie Hall and work as a soloist for the New World Symphony Orchestra (Miami Beach)—on an important record label. She also served on the faculty at Kean College (New Jersey), where she taught History of Music.

Through her talent and what she learned from her mother, Andrea Manfugás Crombet, another great pianist with a gift for teaching, Zenaida made her mark on a hostile scene that discriminated against her for being black, poor and female.

She grew up at a time when it was extremely difficult to suffer those disadvantages and still become someone. Yet, with her unstoppable tenacity and the support of great music maestros like Gonzalo Roig and Ernesto Lecuona, she was able to make her way till she became an artist to be remembered every time the subject of women interpreting the classical repertoire comes up. Just a brief review reveals the very few women born on the island who made it in this realm due to their musical talent.

Famous poet and journalist Gastón Baquero, who eventually became head of the editorial department at the *Diario de la Marina*, and was known as the dean of Cuban journalism (1932-1960), documented Zenaida's genius every time she interpreted a piece: "It was moving to see her at the piano as she played the difficulty and austerity of a Haydn

piece or the tremendous spirituality of Fredric Chopin." Another renowned intellectual, Jorge Mañach, stated:

"Yesterday, at the *Casa Cultural de las Católicas*, Zenaida Manfugás played like an angel, in more than one sense. What I mean is that she, herself, became incorporeal, just a musical presence. There were none of those accents that an overly sharp critic tends to associate with those of her race—exuberance, melodic voluptuousness, superimposed intimate pathos—present in her interpretations. In my very limited opinion, as I know little of these things, her music possessed great sobriety, chasteness, and interpretative purity; it was the sort of music free of half-hearted conceit that is heard only in the playing of great talents in their most revealing or glorious phases."

This singular pianist cannot be forgotten. Her legacy remains at the margins of the maneuvers of those who attempt to nullify her important contributions to Cuban culture. Zenaida definitively left to live elsewhere; perhaps now she is playing the music of her favorite composers—Johann Sebastian Bach, Johannes Brahms and Fredric Chopin—before an audience of cherubim. She left us on May 2, 2012.

She departed this life from her humble apartment in New Jersey, at 80 years of age, and with a fervent desire to play her last concert in Havana or her birthplace, Guantánamo. She often expressed her preference for authors like Miguel de Unamuno and José Ortega y Gasset over even music. Luckily, she never abandoned the piano. Thanks to that fidelity, she is now as eternal as the constellations.