Book Review: Ignacio Cervantes and the XIX-Century Cuban Danza

BOOK REVIEW: IGNACIO CERVANTES AND THE XIX-CENTURY CUBAN DANZA
BY SALOMÓN GADLES MIKOWSKY
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It is not every day that one encounters a flexible and inspiring teacher of classical performance who is also an uncompromising and meticulous scholar, but apparently we have both in Salomón (or Solomon) Gadles Mikowsky, as is evident in his newly published book, *Ignacio Cervantes and the XIX-Century Cuban Danza*. We also have here a “must read” book for those interested in the music of our neighbor to the south – and especially given recent developments in diplomatic relations, that ought to be quite a few. More specifically, we have an excellent study of Cuba’s most important nineteenth-century composer, Ignacio Cervantes (1847-1905), and a diachronic exploration of his favored pianistic form, the Danza, not only central to most Cuban music of his day, but influential to all that followed. In other words, if one is interested in a deep and thorough understanding of Cuban music, one will want to read this book.

Regular readers of New York Concert Review may have read my January review of Kookhee Hong’s book *The Piano Teaching Legacy of Solomon Mikowsky*, but to summarize, Ms. Hong’s book reflects Solomon Mikowsky’s role in the world as a pianist, pedagogue, and person. A reader may click here to read that review: [Book review-The Piano Teaching Legacy of Solomon Mikowsky](http://nyconcertreview.com/reviews/book-review-the-piano-teaching-legacy-of-solomon-mikowsky/). Ms. Hong’s book, (also published by LAP) proved to be a somewhat fast and conversational read, so having been assigned to review this one, I was not quite prepared for the dense scholarship. The latter is an updated version of Dr. Mikowsky’s doctoral dissertation from 1973, Teachers College, Columbia University, so of course a breezy read it is not; it is, however, an extremely reasonable introductory course in Cuban music, and considering the voluminous materials that had to be predigested or evaluated for even each footnote, it is relatively short at 273 pages!

Naturally as an updated dissertation, this book on Cervantes is a highly specialized study. As such, it is appropriate for the serious student or professional, with references to chords and terms that presume at least an intermediate-level musical education; that said, much of it could be appreciated on a broader cultural level, as Dr. Mikowsky’s writing touches on many aspects of Cuban life beyond musical ones. Salomón Mikowsky (appropriately using his Cuban name as author) shows passionate dedication to his...
heritage. That dedication is absolutely essential in this area of music history, previously hindered by inadequate scholarship, domestic upheaval in Cuba, confusing and daunting nomenclature, and perhaps even a too-casual attitude towards the Danza, due to its social origins and the prevailing Euro-centricity of Cervantes’ day. Though there are now some respected reference books on Cuban music and Cervantes (cited by the author himself), it is clear that Dr. Mikowsky was a pioneer to be pursuing this study in the early 1970’s. As Radamés Giró, Cuba’s leading musicologist states in the Preface, “it was the first biography-study ever written about a Cuban composer from the 19th century.”

Ignacio Cervantes is neatly divided into two parts. Part I includes the introduction and background of the Danza, related forms, and the musical predecessors of Cervantes (prominently Manuel Saumell), and Part II is devoted to Cervantes, the man and his music, including generous musical examples and analyses. The Appendices that follow include some 44 pages of Cervantes Danzas that are a reason in and of themselves to buy this book (not to mention additional examples by other composers). Ensuing discussions of various editions and a helpful bibliography listing several hundred titles make this a valuable resource for pianists as well as a springboard for further study.

As stated before, the book is scholarly, packed densely with information, evaluation of sources, explanation of bibliographic and ethnographic considerations, discussion of the origins and even choreography of related dances: the longway, quadrille, cotillion, contredanses, contradanzas, the danza, and the danzón, among others. One may grow faint of heart from what seems a confusing array of fine distinctions in the dances’ overlapping evolutions and transitions from European forms to Latin American, but Dr. Mikowsky does sort it all out tirelessly, with clarity, and with a sense of mission in defining the forces behind a national musical identity. He strikes an expert balance between detail and overview. The origins of the Danza’s precursors from France, Spain, and England are convincingly disentangled based on every conceivable source, and the effects of African and Haitian-French influences are discussed and also disentangled.
Areas of controversy or ambiguity are labeled as such with honesty and integrity, including as an example a point of disagreement with Nicolas Slonimsky on whether Cervantes actually studied with Louis Moreau Gottschalk as often reported (the reader will have to read that for himself – no spoilers here!), but all is illuminated by Dr. Mikowsky’s solid foundation of knowledge. We see the many layers of scholarship behind each statement but are not forced to wade through that scholarship ourselves – mercifully!

Moments in the biographical section are particularly fascinating, including mention of Cervantes auditioning in Paris in front of Charles Gounod (playing the Herz Concerto No. 5 which he had had left only two weeks to learn), embarking on a career in France and Spain, and beginning friendly relations with Franz Liszt. Cervantes became friends with Gioacchino Rossini (and an accompanist for him), as well as with Adelina Patti and Princess Marcelline Czartoryska, a pupil of Chopin who gave Cervantes some of Chopin’s works annotated in his own hand. One imagines that if there were tabloids in heaven, they would contain similar intermingling of legends. Cervantes did indeed win many hearts in Europe, but for reasons on which one can only theorize, he arrived back in his native Cuba in 1870, where he stayed (with the exception of trips to the US and Mexico) and composed what became a source of pride for Cuban musicians. It was not the Europeanized music of his teacher Nicolás Ruiz Espadero or of those Europeans who visited on tour and adopted a Cuban flavor for a miniature or two, but it was the beginnings of a national music.

To express a minor reservation, I would suggest that for the next edition there could be further editing of the prefatory material by Dr Mikowsky’s colleagues, as they contain a few obvious careless errors and some longwinded language (perhaps from awkward translating or language issues). A preface should whet one’s appetite to read a book, not slow one down! I am glad such a matter did not deter me, as the book is one of considerable importance.

by Rorianne Schrade for New York Concert Review; New York, NY

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