

Cirkus-Toccata (1983), *Ella* (1983) and *Galaxia M-50* (1979) all presented on this CD were realized in the ICAP studio. *Cirkus-Toccata* is a live performance piece in which Afro-Cuban percussionists improvised to a tape prepared by Blanco. For this piece Blanco collaborated with Guillermo Barreto (timbales) and Tata Guines (congas), the most celebrated Cuban percussionist who performed with Stan Kenton, Weather Report, and other luminaries who visited the island. For *Cirkus-Toccata*, Blanco used the relatively modest Roland Jupiter 8 synthesizer and an eight-track tape recorder to create a tapestry of patterns and contrapuntal textures. He wrote a score to guide the percussionists through changes in styles, meters and tempos, but Guines and Barreto rejected interpreting the parts in favor of improvising along with the tape in the spirit of Blanco's score. The following year the piece was performed by entire folklore group Foco Cultural de Los Hoyos in Santiago de Cuba, as well as Barreto, queen of Afro-Cuban song Merceditas Valdes among others.

The co-existence of electronic sound, Afro-Cuban rhythm, improvisation and experimental composition had never been explored to this extent in Cuba.

Throughout the 1980s Blanco was involved in multimedia, performance, theater, ballet, film, and environmental sound pieces. In 1986, he established the International Festival for Electroacoustic Music in Varadero, that brought Cuban composers together with artists worldwide and became a key meeting place for composers from Latin America. In 1990, the ICAP studio gained the support of the Ministry of Culture and was renamed Laboratorio Nacional de Música Electroacústica [LNME]. With the advent of LNME, Juan began training his son Enmanuel to run the studio, produce the festival, and help new generations of Cuban composers work with electronics.

Around the time of the ICAP/LNME transition, the studio acquired the first computers used for teaching computer music and public access

to composers in Cuba. Blanco began writing programs to generate digital sound works using a NeXT machine, including *Loops* (1991). The latest work on this CD is *Espacios V* (1993) dedicated to me and premiered on a tour of the U.S. the same year. The piece is one in a series that also features Leo Brower and Paquito D'Rivera using an electronic score created using the Jupiter 8 in the ICAP studio.

Juan Blanco passed away in 2008. In Cuba he is recognized as the pioneer of electronic music and renowned as a critical contributor to the development of modern Cuban culture. It is a great pleasure to present this first CD of his works produced in collaboration with Enmanuel Blanco and Juan who helped start this project and told me during one of our last meetings that he would be listening "from another galaxy."

— Neil Leonard, 2013

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CREDITS

Neil Leonard and Philip Blackburn wish to thank Enmanuel Blanco and James Harley.

Photos courtesy of Enmanuel Blanco:

- Juan Blanco performing *Circus Toccata* en Parque Céspedes with Conga Los Hoyos, Santiago de Cuba
- Juan Blanco in ICAP Studio
- Juan Blanco with Che Guevara, Havana, Cuba
- Juan Blanco at age 15

Neil Leonard: Audio restoration and mastering:

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I first met Blanco when I visited Cuba in 1986 and returned to work with him in the Laboratorio Nacional de Música Electroacústica (LNME) from 1989-1990. I followed his work carefully for the last twenty-two years of his life and during that time gathered much of the information that is presented here.

Juan was born in 1919 in the town of Mariel, a coastal town in the province of Havana. Moving to the city of Havana when he was in his mid-teens, Blanco began composing and studying composition in the provincial conservatory and later earned a degree in law from the University of Havana. Like Alejandro García Caturla, a brilliant Cuban composer and lawyer of the previous generation, Blanco wanted to create a new music informed by global innovation and rooted in the island's rich legacy of folkloric and popular music. Blanco was also influenced by Amadeo Roldán, whose *Ritmicas V* and *VI* are now considered to be the first classical composition scored exclusively for percussion.

In the late 1940's Blanco formed the Sociedad Amadeo Roldán to promote the development of Cuban contemporary music. Blanco later expanded Sociedad Amadeo Roldán to include artists and writers and changed its name to Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo (Our Time). Much like the group of artists who

gathered at Black Mountain College in the U.S. at the same time (John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg and Merce Cunningham), Nuestro Tiempo attracted the participation and attention of the most important artists in the country. Nuestro Tiempo was not sponsored by any college or institution but in the tradition groundbreaking North American composer and insurance agent Charles Ives, Blanco often paid out of pocket to produce concerts of groundbreaking works. Nuestro Tiempo is now recognized as a major pre-revolution catalyst that helped create the foundation for modernist practice in Cuba that continues to this day.

Blanco's standing in the business community helped him survive the severely repressive Batista years. Blanco had become a successful attorney, specializing in tax law and representing large U.S. corporations like Coca Cola. When the rebel army entered Havana to overthrow Batista on January 1, 1959, Batista, Blanco's partners and clients fled the country. Blanco seized this oppor-

tunity to make music his career, and sought a commitment from the new government to give him a full-time job as a musician.

Shortly thereafter, Che Guevara asked to meet the avant-garde composers of Nuestro Tiempo to congratulate them for their role in the resistance. As a reward for their loyalty he appointed them directors of the military bands around the island and assigned Blanco to the Havana orchestra. When Czechoslovakia became the first socialist state to send an ambassador to Cuba shortly after the revolution, Blanco's military band was the centerpiece of a grandiose reception ceremony at the Palace de Revolucion. The ambassador showed strong signs of emotion when Blanco's band struck up the national anthem. His Excellency must be moved, Blanco thought, by hearing his anthem in the Americas for the first time. Unfortunately, Blanco's archivist had confused the Czechoslovakian anthem with that of Yugoslavia, with whom Czech relations at the time were tense.

The next day Guevara ordered the entire band to Cayo Largo, a remote island off the mainland, to gather rocks for a construction crew building a tourist resort. As the army was rather undisciplined, a fellow intellectual convinced Blanco that Guevara would not notice if he skipped the construction detail. Blanco's friend proved incorrect when Guevara caught sight of Blanco on television hosting a music appreciation program. The next day, Blanco and the archivist turned up bright and early at the construction site to lift rocks.

Despite these setbacks, Blanco remembers the early years of the revolution as a time of unprecedented freedom and experimentation in the arts. Blanco premiered cutting-edge interdisciplinary performances in symphonic halls and opera houses. As the newly appointed Director of Music for the National Culture Council, he formed the Orquesta Cubana de Musica Moderna (a forerunner of Irakere) and convinced the state to pay composers a regular salary, as opposed to paying for individual pieces.

When premier Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier brought information on Pierre Schaeffer's musique concrete tape collages from France, Blanco began studying electronic music full time. Unable to leave Cuba to visit the studios where the more advanced electronic instruments were used, Blanco acquired three modest Sears Silvertone tape decks and began making electronic pieces. Limited to one oscillator, tape splicing, feedback and simple overdubbing techniques, Blanco composed his first electronic work, *Musica para Danza* completed in 1961 and presented on CD here for the first time.



In 1969 he premiered "Espacios III," which featured saxophonist Paquito D'Rivera wandering among 20 naked actors and 24 instrumental groups, distributed throughout the Garcia Lorca Opera House. The actors act out various stages of human development as they move through the theater, beginning with primitive man, complete with pre-speech noises. At each stage they are admonished by a loud voice from a huge black speaker shouting "NO!!!" Finally, the people revolt and break the speaker into pieces. Blanco stated "After the premiere in 1969 they fired the responsible in the National Council of Culture for letting me present this work."

Through out his career, Blanco continued to explore the use of spatialization in music. Blanco premiered a number of installations in downtown Havana. In the 1980's Blanco drew up plans to outfit the Amadeo Roldan theater with a 100 speaker sound system for the diffusion.

During the late 70s, Blanco began looking for a place to teach electronic music but was shunned by the conservatories. In 1979, Blanco was appointed director of a small studio at the Instituto Cubana de Amistad con el Pueblo (ICAP). At ICAP, Blanco offered instruction and studio time to composers and young pop musicians interested in electronic music. He initiated a monthly concert series of works by composers as experimental as Luigi Nono and as accessible as Pink Floyd, and facilitated the presentation of works by hundreds of composers from around the world.

