



ARUÁN ORTIZ

MODERNIST FROM CUBA

BY GEORGE GRELLA

The categories of Latin jazz and Afro-Cuban music are convenient fictions, a way to collect and identify a lot of great, important music. But they can also sadly limit listeners' attention to and awareness of music that has roots in those traditions but expands out in unexpected, nontraditional directions.

Take Cuban pianist Aruán Ortiz, who has been a major figure in jazz since his arrival in America early this century. The clave is there in his playing, as he pointed out recently across a Zoom connection from Europe, where he was on tour with bassist Brad Jones and (alternately) drummers John Betsch and Jeff Ballard. But Ortiz is a true modernist; when he plays, it often becomes an opportunity to worry a succinct idea through myriad variations, or explore how many harmonic relationships he can develop out of simple material. That makes for a style of playing that is elegant, sinuous, capable of both introspection and energetic extroversion. An Ortiz solo can be a slender path like a river, or a triumphant arch, like a mountain.

"I work with the melody of rhythm a lot, like building rhythms I generated with lines, and then make them fit into an architecture of style," Ortiz says. He also looks back to his country of origin: "Of course, coming from Cuba, I have a natural approach to rhythm... but not in the way of creating patterns," he adds. That is (he explains), he does not create repeated sections as in Afro-Cuban music. Instead, it's "the way to generate a kind of language...where everything is very liquid and it could disintegrate. The elasticity of rhythm for me is very fascinating, and how you could build layers of different micro-rhythmic cells."

In a historical sense, this is classic modernism, reaching back to older ideas and using them in a new context, and when it comes to jazz and spontaneous music-making, these elements (many of which can be found in Medieval European music) become new each time Ortiz builds something with them. "When you hear all of them, you hear one or two things happening, but it's just like little cells that are one on top of another, and that is another approach to polyphony."

Ortiz' flexible and distinctive personal voice balances rhythm, melody and especially harmony, the foundation of his modernism. He learned the fundamentals from Charlie Banacos, a pianist and teacher with influential harmonic concepts that have become staples at leading jazz schools like Berklee College of Music, the New England Conservatory, and the New School; however, he has developed them in his own way.

"My creative process," he says, "let's put it this way: I've started moving away from the tonal center, and then to organize intervals. It could be based on combinations of intervals, like pitch

collections. So you have a group of pitches, three or four, and I find a relation with all intervallic organizations. Then I go as far as I can to try to move through a path, and organizing it allows me to go back to the center."

He also credits pianist, composer and bandleader Muhal Richard Abrams and reed player Don Byron. The former showed him "compositional rhythm—how to combine harmony, rhythm, and melody at the same time." From the latter, with whom he made the excellent duo recording *Random Dances and (A)tonalities*, he learned ways to integrate his harmonic studies with the range of jazz and jazz-related traditions that Byron brings to the table.

His discography as a leader includes *Live in Zurich* with Jones and drummer Chad Taylor, *Inside Rhythmic Falls* with drummer Andrew Cyrille—who Ortiz describes as "a poet of colors"—and percussionist Mauricio Herrera, and most recently, *Serranías: Sketchbook for Piano Trio*, with Jones and Betsch (all albums are on the Swiss Intakt label).

Ortiz has also been an invaluable member of other groups, especially saxophonist James Brandon Lewis' *Molecular* Quartet, where he shows how powerful his playing can be, and also how comfortable he is playing with stacked harmonies, while always ready to choose freedom as the destination away from the center.

The pianist always plays with a sense of purpose and meaning: there's intention behind each note. His concepts may organize how an individual piece of music works, but also seem to be fundamentally a way of expressing his own voice. "I'm not looking for consonance or dissonance," he explains. "I'm looking for a release of tension. I'm looking for different parameters when I play and compose, like if you have emptiness and you can have activity, so you have something very fast, very slow."

"In a way, that creates an arc, a gesture. I work with a lot of gestures, and if I play something very atonal or dense, I tend to empty that. I create a sense that you're going somewhere, that you're moving in a sort of cycle. I always focus first on the design of it; here's how I know that the pieces are moving in the clear way. All those parameters are always present when I play—that's why I love to improvise and to create all those atmospheres in real time. I am able to challenge myself, to control myself and to listen to myself—to go through that, and just write that story."

For more info visit aruán-ortiz.com. Ortiz is at 411 Kent's "Shift" series Jun. 4, SEEDS Jun. 6, Dizzy's Club Jun. 9-10 as part of Andrew Cyrille's "Caribbean Cross-Generations" and DiMenna Center Jun. 29 with Ensemble Ipse. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Aruán Ortiz Trio — *Vol. 1* (AYVA Music, 2003)
- Aruán Ortiz Quartet — *Alameda* (Fresh Sound New Talent, 2006)
- Aruán Ortiz — *Cub(An)ism* (Intakt, 2016)
- Aruán Ortiz (with Andrew Cyrille, Mauricio Herrera) — *Inside Rhythmic Falls* (Intakt, 2019)
- James Brandon Lewis Quartet — *Molecular* (Intakt, 2020)
- Aruán Ortiz Trio — *Serranías (Sketchbook For Piano Trio)* (Intakt, 2022)

Qubit presents: Infrequent Seams 2023 Spring Festival

Wednesday June 7, 8pm
Qubit Presents: Whitney Biennial Intervention Revisited
Ekphrastic Discourse: James Ilgenfritz + Sandy Ewen
+ Michael Foster + Sam Newsome
Sara Schoenbeck + Josh Sinton + Giacomo Meregga

Thursday June 8, 8pm
Anagram Ensemble: Katie Porter + James Ilgenfritz + Eli Wallace
Sara Bernstein + Stuart Popejoy duo
Time Phase Trio (Ty Citerman + Jen Baker + Shayna Dunkelman)

Saturday June 10, 8pm
Alex Marcelo + J D Parran + Daniel Carter
Anagram Ensemble: Andrew Drury + Thomas Buckner + Nicole Parks plays Aaron Jay Myers

www.infrequentseams.com 411 Kent L to Bedford

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Jim Self

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The Jim Self / John Chiodini Duo

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Tuba/Guitar Duo with Jim Self and John Chiodini

The Light Fantastic
2nd Duo Jazz with John Chiodini

Out on the Coast
13 Piece Jazz Ensemble (triple CD)

InnerPlay
Jazz Tuba and Strings

YO!
Tuba in Latin Jazz Nonet

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Jazz Quintet

Jim Self
Jazz CDs from Hollywood Recording Artist
Other Jim Self CDs and music available at: www.jimself.com