

Cuba Sí: Music for social activism

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by Janice Misurell-Mitchell

I traveled to Cuba for six days this past September with several colleagues as part of a conference on “Useful Art”, or art that includes aspects of social activism. Sponsored by Cátedra de Arte Conducta, an arts program hosted by the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana, the project was conceived by Cuban visual artist and University of Chicago faculty member Tania Bruguera. My colleagues were Chicagoans Tom Mitchell, Bernardine Dohrn and Bill Ayers; our group, “Team Havana” thus included a scholar, two political activists and an artist. Our work was to present lectures and informal sessions, films and videos, and performances.

While Tom, Bernardine and Bill met with visual art students at the offices of the journal *Criterion*, I presented three sessions to music students at the Instituto Superior de Arte. Founded in 1976, the Instituto has curricula at the university level in music, visual arts, theatre arts, dance and audiovisual communication. My sessions involved the interrelations of music and politics, particularly how they intersect in the US; it was also my hope that the sessions would encourage dialog about our two cultures and also that I would learn more about classical music in Cuba.

With the aid of a translator, I spoke about how music may reinforce, illuminate or undermine particular political concepts. We discussed various aspects of national anthems, and how a particular performance may be a flash point for political discussion. They loved watching a DVD of Jimi Hendrix performing the *Star Spangled Banner* at Woodstock, and they eagerly gave many interpretations of his guitar-playing in relation to the war in Vietnam; we also had a detailed discussion (and many points of view) of “Nuestro Himno” (our national anthem in Spanish), which had caused so much controversy in 2006.

Other sessions involved text and music, and how a particular way of writing may be understood as political within a given genre; examples included *Pierrot Lunaire* (which they were completely familiar with) and Ruth Crawford Seeger’s “Chinaman, Laundryman” (which presented *sprechstimme* in a political text). Other connections were with social and political movements in the US: “When the Revolution Comes” by the Last Poets, and an excerpt including Abbey Lincoln’s musical scream from the Freedom Now Suite, by Max Roach and Oscar Brown, Jr. (shown in Ken Burns’ documentary, *Jazz*). They were thrilled to make the connection between the Last Poets and hip-hop—they have a very substantial hip-hop movement of their own; the relationship of the civil rights movement to avant garde jazz was new to them. I performed my own work, *Blooz Man/Poet Woman*, for flute/voice, and when I finished, the whole class jumped up excitedly to see how it was notated and to discuss the meaning of the poetry.

Initially there had been some reticence among the students—only a few spoke at the first session, but by the second they felt more comfortable, particularly when I found myself sans translator (he had to leave to translate for the rest of our team) and several students helped out, creating a real dialog. At the third session, which was mostly about contemporary flute music and extended techniques, I was pleased to see that their repertoire included recent works by Takemitsu, and that they were very open to new sounds and improvisatory works that used them.

The US embargo of Cuba prevents us from sending written or recorded music via mail; several of the students have friends in Canada and Europe who send them materials (I donated a lot of music to their library), and some of the more advanced students travel to Europe and the UK to study with major performers.

It was interesting to speak with some of the women composition students; there were a substantial number of them, but they said that they didn't get as many performances as the male students did. We talked about how to improve the situation, and I gave them information on the International Alliance for Women in Music (although since most of the members are in the US, contact beyond email is still a problem).

Other music that we heard included numerous small bands in bars and cafes in Havana, and a terrific jazz group called Yasek Manzano & su Banda. They averaged about 26 years old, and played some bebop tunes and some new pieces with a great sensitivity to each other and complete clarity despite the presence of three percussionists!