



Ernesto Lecuona. Photo: Wikipedia

# LECUONA

## The art of making music

Music students spend years playing for classmates and teachers; conceiving programs for classmates and teachers, all initiated in the art of music. People who listen to music with knowledge, and consequently attentively and critically.

Once outside academia they are not fully aware that the public for whom they perform thereafter does not understand the music in the same way. Lacking a serious musical education, a trained ear, their relationship with music is, to the contrary, basic. The listener - one audience being more educated than the other – perceives only a portion of the entire complex maze of details to which musicians dedicate hours to perfect.

The uninitiated public perceives emotionally. Ears react to a pleasant melody - much more the pleasant if recognized - perceive a sense of rhythm, order, general equilibrium; connect with basic emotions like sadness, joy, nostalgia. Audiences are impressed with what they call virtuosity, which really reduces skill to agility and speed, regardless of the fact that this is *only part* of the technical mastery of an instrument. It's like watching a movie and assimilating only the story that it tells, without being aware of the lighting, the use of music, framing, editing, sound, etc.

In short, the public, accustomed to the direct, to the immediate, lacks the tools to plunge into subtleties and the musician, on the other hand, gradually may forget that the purpose is to communicate an experience to others; to create an environment, establish *resonance*. While not waking from this, a lifetime will be spent playing for oneself, even if before others. Both the musician and the audience, however, will accommodate to such a relationship.

It is a reflection that I cannot avoid, thinking of **Ernesto Lecuona**, the most played and enjoyed Cuban composer of all time.

Lecuona had an academic background that served him well "*... like a melting pot, which is how it should serve, not like shackles, as it serves to others ...*" as Martí wrote of the poet Longfellow. Lecuona achieved a musical language that continues to fascinate both musician and audience.

Lecuona created his work within the Cuban nationalist tradition. His *zarzuelas* (operettas), songs and copious music for piano transmit a Cubanness rooted in nineteenth century romanticism. His dances for piano follow the same conceptual line of traditional dance, but where Cervantes reflected a scholar intimacy - in a concentrated pianism, often contrapuntal, with bold harmonic combinations – Lecuona's conception of pianism is more akin to the extrovert and spectacular style of Liszt. His musical texture is transparent and his harmonic arrangement rather simple and in tune with that of popular music.

Lecuona simplified the language and let pianism overflow; where Saumell and Cervantes conceived the dance in two parts, Lecuona often composed in three, extending in duration and volume. In most of his dances, especially the *Afro-Cuban dances*, he conceived the left hand as a rhythmic, percussive obstinato which when combined with the melodies - often duplicated with thirds or sixths - by the right hand, created a rich and very Cuban polyrhythm. This arrangement much reminds of popular Cuban musical groups.

While his *Cuban dances* still carry the smell of Spanish music and the French salon, some musicologists claim that it was Lecuona who started the Afro-Cuban trend within musical nationalism with his dance *La Comparsa* as early as 1912. In those dances he tried to reflect the sensual, the mysterious, the ritual, the festive of the universe of the black Cuban. Later in the 20s this interest in the cosmology of the black Cuban would fascinate a good number of Cuban intellectuals, to the point of establishing itself as an aesthetic trend and becoming a key factor in the cultural identity of the island.

Lecuona never ventured into the new compositional techniques, nor in the new harmonic concepts coming from Europe. He kept pursuing natural melodies - as simple as they were ingenious - the development of traditional harmonic sequences and the invention of new rhythmic combinations. Lecuona kept making *Cuban* music, understanding that this was best done without affectation and complexity.