



# Harold Gramatges

Harold Gramatges Leyte-Vidal

Sitting at a table in a restaurant in Bogotá, Harold, his wife Manila, Alain the flute player and I were going over the menu, when the Maestro, reading over his glasses with his eyes almost glued to the paper, longingly blurted out: "I wonder what is happening in Hato Viejo..."

With that question, he not only broke the silence between us, but also destroyed my notion of what a composer of his caliber was, an intellectual of his stature. Harold Gramatges was referring to nothing more and nothing less than the current Cuban television soap opera. Convinced as I had been that he, a composition icon, spent all his time reading literature and philosophy, listening to recordings of the great classics, analyzing scores, conversing with his peers – the wise men and scholars of his generation – I couldn't do more than dry-swallow and take a bite of bread.

It was 1997. We were in Colombia, having been invited to the International Contemporary Music Festival to honor him in relation to the Tomás Luis de Victoria award. This award, granted to the Maestro a year earlier for his significant, transformative contribution to Ibero-American music of the 20th century, is the highest honor granted to a living composer and this festival dedicated one night to his music in a recital that would be carried out by Alain Alfonso, baritone Ramón Calzadilla and myself... And Harold not only missed his soap opera but was also letting us know that he did! Grand.

Harold Gramatges was a slender man with a noble figure, a slow walk and few gestures. He spoke in a low voice with the sympathetic accent of eastern Cuba, where he was born. A very eloquent communicator. His erudition was never pretentious, on the contrary, he seemed to feel the need to break with formalities and would certainly avoid any hint of arrogance, by sprinkling his speech with humorous words or expressions. Sometimes he simply exaggerated his eastern accent or omitted the d's in his (Spanish) participles, gaining grace and offsetting solemnity. Unlike many intellectuals, knowledge did not wither his face or sour his character, and sarcasm never infected him. He was prudent, friendly, generous, and in love with life and mystery.

The Maestro had gained a solid craft in the classrooms of Amadeo Roldán and José Ardévol in the 1940s (a prodigious decade of Cuban culture: *Origenes* magazine, *Musicalia* magazine, *Grupo Renovación Musical*, the *Modern Cuban painters* exhibition at the MoMA, etc.). He not only perfected his skills as a composer but also deepened and expanded his knowledge of the arts, philosophy and culture in general. Combining his technical mastery, his rigorous sense of musical architecture and his affection for popular culture, he almost always recreated popular genres, alloying the danceable and the scholarly; let's not forget that he was a good dancer (Cabrera Infante mentions it in *La Habana para un infante difunto*). He connected the base and the apex with his imaginative intellect: Stravinsky playing his *changüí* tune on the shore of the river Cauto; Hindemith conceiving a *son* on an Aires Libres del Prado terrace.

The Maestro carefully dissected the *habanera*, *son* or *danza*, soaking up their essences and, once internalized, transformed them into academic products, into works of art enriched with harmonic tensions, intervallic reinventions, rhythmic readaptations, structural elaborations in conjunction with various compositional techniques, giving us *sones* and *guajira* as a toccata as easily as the flamenco lament made sonatina; combining sarabanda and siciliana in a suite as easily as resurrecting Cervantes in the modernity of the *danza*.

The dissonances that form the fabric of his musical language almost always revolved around tonal centers or hinted at tonality but there was a period when the Maestro became more experimental. He put aside dance and calculation and let himself flow. He made abstract music based on improvisation, on aleatorism. He explored the tonal possibilities of instruments beyond the known, extracting unusual sounds from them, creating new sounds, producing unexpected atmospheres on the piano, on the flute, or on the violin. He managed to create an emotionally free and powerful language whereby the interpreter is allowed to create during the performance, although within parameters established by him.

It seems to me, however, that in general Harold's music rather than honey is the elaborately constructed honeycomb. It is a French garden, it is the forest rather than the jungle or a jungle in a greenhouse. It is less about diversion than the perfectly designed machinery that provides it.

Harold Gramatges was also an educator by calling. From the time of *Nuestro Tiempo*, a society that he founded in the 1950s, until his old age at the Superior Institute for the Arts (ISA), he was always transmitting his knowledge. At the ISA he taught Composition and Analytical Listening. He was an empathetic, patient, and effective teacher of whom we were all very fond. Always surrounded by young people, he kept a fresh spirit, a curious mind: he lived the past and understood the future. I remember that when I saw him arrive at the Institute, I would notice the strong contrast between the explosive green of nature around him and his sober image of Janus Caribe whom time did not hurry, whose hair the wind did not ruffle, the tropics didn't make him drop his posture, the sun didn't make him perspire.

Once I remember seeing him with a blue beard and then he seemed like a character from some fantastic story escaped from a book. Nowadays it wouldn't surprise me at all that that overly blue beard was deliberate mischief against old age, like I know it was mischief taking that poster from the office of the festival director in Bogotá, to then tell us, laughing naughtily: "I saw it, I liked it and I rolled it up. Who would ever think that I stole it, me, the great honored composer."

Harold Gramatges Leyte-Vidal lived a rich life and bequeathed wealth. He followed his fate and Cuba won. He died satisfied. Those of us who knew him will remember him as someone always ready to support the dreams of young musicians, to guide them, to encourage them. We will remember him as an inspiring, stimulating person who was part of a legendary past lived among mythical names. We will remember him as one of the most loved, admired and revered people of the Cuban intelligentsia in recent times. And we will remember him, above all, with deep gratitude.