



César López Zarragoitia

# CÉSAR, my Mentor

## (II)

César López is the only person I ever met who, once he has received his salary, goes out straight to buy books. Used as I was to money being used in Cuba to buy clothes and food, those trips to the bookstore *La Moderna Poesía* were incredible to me. I accompanied him many times and saw him buy eight, ten books at a time. Sometimes he read two or three books at the same time. If I remember correctly, he was a philology graduate from the University of Havana. He always wore his shirt tucked into his pants.

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The man's working capacity was astonishing. He confessed to me that he was incapable of devoting himself to one single task. He had to spread his energy. So he accompanied singers and instrumentalists, taught piano classes at various schools, had private students whom he did not charge (I particularly remember a blind kid called Lucio), gave solo and chamber music recitals, wrote articles for the *Clave* magazine, managed the National Symphony Orchestra, organized music festivals, led music departments, premiered contemporary works, in short: tireless.

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His sight-reading is legendary. He told me that he developed it from a very young age because he had little access to gramophone recordings. To know the works he had to buy the scores and read the music, and those scores were not limited to the piano solo repertoire. They included choral, chamber and symphonic music. He thus learned to read in any key. He was capable of transposing any work at a glance. He accompanied any repertoire with the same excellence, from the violin to the trombone. I think that he had an excellent ear and an extraordinary musical memory, which allowed him, while reading, to deduce what was to come, to remember what was to come, facilitating the fluency of reading: a gift.

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“Obey the music.” It dictates the tempo, the sound, the phrasing, etc. The first law is to serve the music. He didn't say to serve the composer, but rather the music. One does whatever needs to be done so that the music sounds as it was intended and sounds as natural as possible, without affectation, without deficiencies, without excesses. The voice, the singing, is always the best reference to organize the phrasing.

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The information must be thoroughly understood and deeply assimilated, so that when reproduced, when played, it is expressed as second nature, in an organic way. That is, playing as if it had not been learned, but as if it were natural.

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Do not listen to recordings of the work you are going to learn until you have a clear concept of what you want to do with the performance. It is essential to have your own vision of the work from the score. It's all in the score. Later you may listen to recordings and compare, and take on or reject.

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He gave great importance to gestures. He spent time to ensure one's understanding of the correct gesture for each result in sound. Sometimes, during class, I would start playing and before my fingers made contact with the keys he would make me stop. I didn't understand how, without me having played, he already knew that what I would do would be wrong. Today I understand that seeing the gesture one can imagine the sound.

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Music does not begin when playing the piano but in the mind. You listen internally to the sound you want to produce and then execute it.

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I marveled at how effectively he solved some technical problems for me (although he used to say that at the root of almost every technical problem is essentially a musical error). I would have spent the entire week trying to resolve some passage, without success. On the day of the class, after listening to it, he would simply tell me to: “make a circular movement with your wrist”, or “lower your wrist”, or “move your elbow a bit away from your body”, or “accentuate the third note” and instantly the passage sounded perfect.

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Sometimes he made me learn works that were beyond my intellectual capacity and even my technical abilities. They were works that we worked on without the intention of playing them in public or in exams. We worked on them alongside the official program. Today I understand the impact that just trying to understand complexity has on the mind, the mere fact of looking at something superior and trying to decipher it. I particularly remember Scriabin's Sonata No. 6 Op. 62. I was barely 17 years old.

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The word “difficult” was forbidden to me when referring to certain works. He insisted on the correct mental attitude before anything: if you think you are going to face a monster, you will be paralyzed by fear and even discouragement. He would prefer that, if applicable, I would take it as a work that required more work and therefore more time. Period.

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Not only enjoy the music that is produced but also find physical pleasure in the contact of the fingers with the keys.

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He was not very fond of expressing oneself with the body when playing. He preferred it to remain as stable as possible. Sobriety allowed for better control of the process and did not distract from the music, which is what is essential.

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He taught me to listen to the silences in the music, to express with them the emotions they contain.

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He insisted that I carefully read Konstantin Stanislavski's books on acting techniques and methods.

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His teacher was César Pérez Sentenat.

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### **Two anecdotes:**

Leaving school one day, some workers, colleagues, who were drinking rum sitting on the sidewalk call him and invite him for a drink. He approaches them kindly, thanks them and declines the offer. As he walks away, the men throw him some rude words, almost insults, and César says: "...what alcohol does to those poor people..." And he said it with so much pain, with such compassion, that my anger instantly subsided.

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Overflowing with pride, one day when I heard him play for an audience I told him that he should play more often, that people loved to listen to him, that "many have told me so..." and he tells me, humbly: "...Gustavo, it is not right to put yourself on display like that."

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After his death, for six years in a row I was dreaming the same dream: We accidentally met on a street, or in his house. Finding out that he had not died filled me with joy and peace. He told me that he had never really died but had wanted to get away from the public eye. Sometimes, in my dreams, he still advises me.