

“Misa Cubana and the Missing Cultural Connection”

Cristina Morales

**FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY
JOURNAL OF MUSIC RESEARCH
VOLUME 1: MARCH 2015
James E. Cunningham, ed.**

As one of Cuba's contemporary composers, Jose Maria Vitier contributes to the multitudinous colors of Cuban choral literature. Primarily a jazz musician and film score composer, Vitier captures Cuba's music history and culture in his *Misa Cubana*. The piece allows listeners of all backgrounds the opportunity to understand and appreciate the many colors captured in *Misa Cubana*. *Misa Cubana* has been performed all over the world and has had successful outcomes of each performance, but the Miami premiere lacked elements so crucial not only to the success of a performance, but to the success of this piece in the demographic it represents. *Misa Cubana*'s North American premiere in south Florida lacked "Cubanidad", or Cuban-American identity, due to the impact of communism in Cuba, perceptions and performances of the mass as a performance piece rather than liturgical music, and the absence of communication and connection to the community.

From the 1960s to 1992, Cuba limited religious practice and the state adopted the anti-religious policy of Marxist-Leninist ideology and promoted atheism. Many professional Catholic priests and Protestant ministers fled the country to the United States and several Catholics were being prosecuted. "The Committees for Defense of the Revolution said: 'It is not good for your children to go to church.' Religious beliefs were viewed as reactionary, backward, ignorant, superstitious, ... We suffered discrimination in schools and at work...and many chose to hide their faith" (Oliva 1994). In 1992 Cuba amended the constitution to remove the Marxist-Leninist ideology and article 42 was revised to forbid discrimination against people on the basis of their religious beliefs (Oliva 1994). This amendment gave the people the opportunity to not only practice religion publicly, but to also give back to the church through art and music.

Cuban pianist and composer Jose Maria Vitier, conceived the idea for *Misa Cubana* after his son's quick recovery from a tragic accident. Vitier and his wife, poet Silvia Rodriguez Rivero, together created a "musical thanksgiving" to Cuba's patron saint, *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* (Hoke 2000). *Misa Cubana* is unique in that it includes texts from the Ordinary of the Mass as well as poetry from Emilio Ballagas and the composer's spouse. The *Misa Cubana*'s format is slightly different to that of traditional masses. The first 5 movements are part of the Introductory Rites. The mass opens with *Déjame Tomar Asiento* (Let Me Take a Seat), written by Ballagas who was a colleague of Vitier's father, Cuban poet Cintio Vitier, as an offering to the Virgin Mary. *Kyrie Eleison* continues the mass in its traditional order, followed by *Gloria, Laudamus Te*, and *Quoniam*. Vitier divided the *Gloria* into three parts rather than keeping all of the text in one song, giving each section its own musical identity and interpretation. Rather than having the *Credo* as the next movement, Vitier chose to substitute it with *Misteriosa Transparencia*, a poem written by Silvia Rodriguez Rivero. This movement would be performed between the *Credo* and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The *Credo* would not be omitted, as it is part of the Liturgy of the Word; it would be spoken rather than sung. The mass continues with the Liturgy of the Eucharist, which includes *Sanctus* (Eucharistic Prayer) and *Agnus Dei*. It concludes with *Plegaria a la Virgen del Cobre*, also written by Rivero.

The timing of this piece couldn't have been any better. Vitier completed *Misa Cubana* in 1996 and was premiered in December of that year. With more than three decades of religious oppression, this piece signifies religious freedom from the state, as if

removing the symbolic red scarf from one's neck when wearing a Cuban school uniform, indicating disassociation with the Communist party.

Misa Cubana premiered in the Catedral de La Habana on December 8, 1996. It was truly a remarkable performance because many of those in attendance, e.g. Cuban Minister of Culture Armando Hart and celebrated singer Silvio Rodriguez, were avowed atheists. Rodriguez opened the performance with his solo in "Déjame Tomar Asiento" accompanied by Cuban chorus *Exaudi* and other Catholic musicians under the direction of Jose Maria Vitier. Just a few years before this performance, this moment would have been inconceivable due to the Marxist-Leninist ideology the Cuban government adopted. "Regardless of faith we may have or not, this is monument to Cuban culture, is an act of faith for the country and tells the world of the excellent relations that now exist between the Church and the Cuban state," said composer and singer Amaury Perez, who closed the Mass with a heartfelt "Plegaria a la Virgen del Cobre". "The Mass was very good, deeply felt, as a celebration (the virgin) deserves," expressed the Cuban Minister of Culture. Hart greeted the Cuban cardinal Jaime Ortega at the end of the Eucharist and met again during a toast at the San Carlos Seminary (Cespedes 1996). The ceremony showed that peace between church and state can be achieved and it reassures the Cuban people that discrimination towards religion is no more. The state still carries atheist ideals, and the press does acknowledge this by keeping the review of the *Misa Cubana's* premiere performance very "politically correct" in the eyes of the government. Cardinal Jaime Ortega also maintains political politeness by delivering a message in his homily of "peace and brotherhood for all Cuban houses of worship " (Cespedes 1996). From the clues provided in the article, we can assume that the premiere performance in Cuba was

done liturgically and in a mass. Due to the press' role of keeping this article short and to the point, additional information about the Havana premiere of *Misa Cubana* is minimal.

On January 13, 2013, Vitier celebrated the mass' 100th performance at the National Theater of Cuba. *Misa Cubana* has been performed worldwide, including France, Italy, Spain, Denmark, Argentina, Brazil, Portugal, Switzerland, among others (Cruz 2013). There have been performances in North America as well. The first North American premiere of the mass, as stated by the choral organization's website, was on April 14, 2000 in Arlington, Virginia by the Voce Chamber Singers under the direction of Ken Nafziger. The premiere was so successful the Voce Chamber Singers performed it a second time in 2003 with Vitier at the piano. Alexander Grant, a baritone soloist from Havana who performed in the 2000 performance of the mass, introduced Nafziger to *Misa Cubana*. Another successful North American performance of the mass was in Ottawa, Canada by Coro Vivo Ottawa on February 9, 2013. The director, Antonio Llaca, was born in Cuba, raised in Venezuela, and music studied at the University of Ottawa. "What I'm trying to do with Coro Vivo is to start bringing things that are not necessarily mainstream choral works, to offer the community something different," says Llaca (Ottawa Citizen, 2009). There was also a performance of *Misa Cubana* on November 21, 2014 by The Vermont Collegiate Choral Consortium. Vitier states that he has done little to promote the mass but receives frequent requests for permission to perform the piece (Hoke 2000). In places like Virginia, Ottawa, and Vermont, it makes one wonder why a Cuban-composed mass would be successfully performed there and not performed or even known in a Cuban-American community like Miami, Florida, when in fact, there was.

A performance of *Misa Cubana* occurred in Miami on May 2 and 3, 1999. The Civic Chorale of Greater Miami premiered the piece at the University of Miami's Gusman Concert Hall and the Church of the Little Flower, both located in Coral Gables, along with the Choir of the Conservatory of Music in San Juan, Puerto Rico (Korman 1999). The only announcement of the performance was found in the Miami New Times newspaper and a review of the performance has yet to be located. I contacted Dr. Kenneth Boos, the director of the Civic Chorale of Greater Miami, but he was unable to provide any information since the performance occurred before his tenure with the organization. From what I could gather from the announcement in the Miami New Times, the *Misa Cubana* was delivered as a performance piece and not a liturgical piece performed in a mass. So far, all known North American performances have not been performed in a mass or service but rather in a concert setting.

With the success of Cuban artists in popular music, the introduction of Cuban choral literature is not just an idea anymore. Recently, The Choral Journal published an article titled "Cuban Choral Music: Historical Development and Modern Influences." In the article, Jose Rivera discusses the beginning of Cuban choral literature to the output of today's Cuban composers, like Jose Maria Vitier. At the 2015 American Choral Directors Association National Convention, Sine Nomine, Cuban's premiere all male choir, is scheduled to perform. The communication barriers between Cuba and the United States are slowly crumbling and the music we are hearing from the island couldn't sound any sweeter or more refreshing. As for bringing the sweetness to the United States, particularly south Florida, it would be wise to begin with an institution that could help promote and support the performance. Florida International University's Diaz-

Ayala Collection, generously donated by Cuban immigrant Dr. Cristobal Diaz-Ayala, hosts performances by Latin American music on campus to promote the collection at the Steven and Dorothea Green Library in southwest Miami. This community in Miami-Dade is home to many Cuban exiles and Cuban-Americans and could be a possible location to host the premiere of *Misa Cubana*.

Another way to give this piece a proper premiere would be to connect with the Archdiocese of Miami and coordinate a performance of *Misa Cubana* at the Our Lady of Charity National Shrine in Coconut Grove. This would bring a great number of Cuban-Americans to the performance since the mass is dedicated to La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre (Our Lady of Charity). Roman Catholic masses in Latin are gaining popularity, especially with younger generations in Miami-Dade County. Juventutem Miami, or Youth Miami, is an international federation of young people between the ages of 16 and 35 who seek to grow closer to God, especially through traditions of the Roman Rite (Meszaros 2014). The increase in attendance confirms that parishioners are supporting the movement of having a few ceremonies in Latin. With this rediscovered avenue of timeless worship, this could be the perfect opportunity to re-introduce *Misa Cubana* to Miami and perform it with a proper second homecoming.

With the political, spiritual, and cultural barriers that the Cuban people have experienced, the common connection has been music. New exposure to Cuba's music and culture allows the opportunity to perform pieces like *Misa Cubana* has become more attainable. The musical and religious expression of a Cuban mass can plant the seed for unification in the community and can bridge the 90-mile gap between the island and Florida. The challenge of reaching out to the community and promoting the performance

must be overcome by utilizing all forms of media, such as local newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, and social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. With the multiple ways to communicate, the barriers from 15 years ago have been broken and ways to reach the public are faster and easier, and with proper planning and execution, the public can be aware of these performances and the sense of “cubanidad” could be cemented in the community.

Bibliography

- Cespedes, Roberto. "Reune Misa En La Habana a Politicos Y Cantantes 'Ateos.'" *Reforma*. December 10, 1996, sec. Internacional (International).
- Cruz, May Gamboa. "Hundredth Concert of Misa Cubana." Accessed October 13, 2014. <http://oncubamagazine.com/culture/hundredth-concert-misa-cubana/>.
- Hoke, Zlatica. Voice of America Kaleidoscope radio broadcast. "Voce Chamber Singers - Media." Accessed October 13, 2014. <http://www.voce.org/media.php> .
- Korman, Nina. "Night & Day." *Miami New Times*. Accessed November 12, 2014. <http://www.miaminewtimes.com/1999-04-29/calendar/night-day/> .
- Meszaros, Jessica. "With Ancient Language, Catholic Mass Draws Young Parishioners." Accessed December 10, 2014. <http://wlrn.org/post/ancient-language-catholic-mass-draws-young-parishioners>.
- Oliva, Enrique Lopez. "Religious Reawakening: Stirrings in Cuba." *The Christian Century* 111, no. 29 (October 19, 1994): 940+.
- Ottawa Citizen. Published on: December, 2009Last Updated: August 27, and 2014 4:17 Pm Edt. "A South American-Flavoured Christmas Concert Dec. 4-5 with Coro Vivo Ottawa." *Ottawa Citizen*. Accessed October 13, 2014. <http://ottawacitizen.com/entertainment/a-south-american-flavoured-christmas-concert-dec-4-5-with-coro-vivo-ottawa> .