

A Confluence of Vibrant Rhythm and Hopeful Goodwill in Havana, For International Jazz Day

WBGO | By [Nate Chinen](#)

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Steve Mundinger/Thelonious Monk Institute Of Jazz

Chucho Valdés dances onstage during the finale of the 2017 International Jazz Day Global Concert"

HAVANA, Cuba — Chucho Valdés and Gonzalo Rubalcaba sat at a pair of grand pianos on Sunday night at the Gran Teatro de la Habana Alicia Alonzo, during the sixth annual International Jazz Day Global Concert, and modeled more than one kind of equilateral exchange.

Playing “Blue Monk,” by Thelonious Monk, they each unspooled phrases like billowing streamers, but imbued with architectural balance and magisterial composure. Their cadence evoked 1930s Harlem stride piano, but at a deep, easeful pace — not so much a stride, perhaps, as a *paseo*, or stroll. The quality of their listening qualified as its own event: One rumbling glissando, across the full range of the piano, was initiated by Rubalcaba and deftly finished by Valdés, in a handoff worthy of an Olympic relay baton.

Valdés and Rubalcaba — two of Cuba’s greatest improvising pianists, from successive generations — made their duo into a highlight of the all-star concert, which capped off a week’s worth of musical, educational and diplomatic outreach in Havana. (It was streamed worldwide, and broadcast on Cuban television.) International Jazz Day, presented by UNESCO and the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, also encompassed satellite events in 195 countries, espousing a gospel of creative collaboration at a distinctly fractious moment in our global geopolitics.

“It’s a kind of solidarity of the planet that doesn’t really happen very often,” said Herbie Hancock, the eminent pianist, UNESCO goodwill ambassador and co-artistic director of the concert, along with Valdés.

“All the musicians on the stage were from various countries,” Hancock added, standing on a Juliet balcony of the Gran Teatro after the concert. “And we all worked together as though we were in the same family. See, humanity is one family.” He laughed softly. “We don’t realize that enough.”

There’s no way for an American-run enterprise to bring a production of this scale to Cuba without acknowledging the impact of the longstanding embargo, and the bitterness that lives on — notably among naturalized Cuban-American expatriates — even after the death of Fidel Castro.

Castro was still alive when the International Jazz Day Global Concert was held at the White House last year. That evening, <https://youtu.be/1JCOTXatLK8>”>Valdés performed with Paquito D’Rivera, the clarinetist, saxophonist and NEA Jazz Master — and his former band mate in the groundbreaking Afro-Cuban jazz group Irakere. It was a show of reconciliation between two artists who have rarely shared a stage since D’Rivera’s defection to the United States in 1981.

Still, there was little chance that D’Rivera — or trumpeter Arturo Sandoval, another breakout Irakere star and outspoken Cuban expat — would show up for International Jazz Day this year. A handful of other artists have expressed criticism of the event.



Credit Steve Munding / Thelonious Monk Institute Of Jazz

Orlando "Maraca" Valle

Over five days in Havana, I encountered a prevailing attitude among musicians participating in the festivities. Orlando “Maraca” Valle, an eminent flutist who also once belonged to Irakere, declared the concert historic, and of its moment. “It’s very, very important,” he said. “Because now, we are in a very special moment of the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba. But always we are together.”

Rubalcaba noted that Cuban musicians of his generation — to say nothing of Valdés’ — never dared to imagined such a momentous communion.

“This event is like a confirmation of the vision, the dream, the idea we had about music in Cuba,” he said. “Today the people see that it’s possible to create a bridge, it’s possible to collaborate with people that think different, with people that have different roots — a different reality, socially speaking. That we can go together to the stage and under that respect, we can make things together: Listening, offering, and receiving.”



Credit Steve Munding / Thelonious Monk Institute Of Jazz
Regina Carter

The violinist Regina Carter, making her third visit to Cuba, offered an American perspective. “I know there are a lot of people that don’t agree, like we shouldn’t come here,” she said. “But I think at that point, you kind of have to let the politics go. Because the people don’t have control of that. We’re leaving politics out of this. It’s really just to come together.”

Carter and her peers on the trip made that principal a vibrant reality: Playing concerts with Cuban musicians, sitting in at local clubs, conducting seminars and workshops in a variety of schools, even striking up impromptu jams in the street in the hours before daybreak. (I’ll chronicle some of these and other highlights in a separate post, soon.) At Sunday’s concert, the interactions were more formal but no less genuine, and governed by a spirit of selfless convergence.

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In that spirit, the concert featured few expressly political remarks, unless you consider a blanket appeal to freedom to be one of those. (“Jazz is freedom,” said Irina Bokova, UNESCO’s director-general, in a typical elocution, “renewing itself every time it’s played.”) Far more common was a glow of cooperative goodwill, with results that only occasionally strained under the weight of the premise.

Every spoken introduction or rhetorical flourish in the program — and these were as plentiful, unwieldy and poetically functional as vintage American cars rumbling down the Malecón — had to be delivered in both English and Spanish, often by separate announcers.



Credit Steve Munding / Thelonious Monk Institute Of Jazz

Esperanza Spalding

Esperanza Spalding, the irrepressible bassist and singer-songwriter, was the host who best handled this bilingual seesaw, with the same beaming aplomb that later suffused her performance, of an original samba, "I Adore You." (Will Smith, the concert's celebrity

announcer, proved a reliably efficient delivery system for human charm, though his opening remarks — hinging on a signature phrase of Hancock’s, “the ethics of jazz” — were obviously composed by committee.)

The concert had an American musical director, pianist John Beasley, as well as a Cuban counterpart, Emilio Vega. They put together a series of performances diligently designed to support Hancock’s thesis about global convergence.

So along with notable jazz artists from the United States — like the singers Cassandra Wilson and Kurt Elling, and the saxophonist Antonio Hart — there were representatives from about a dozen other nations. Some, like the Russian tenor saxophonist Igor Butman, the Tunisian oud player Dhafer Youssef and the Chinese pianist A Bu, were slotted into the matrix as sidemen, and granted a brief but flattering moment in the spotlight.

Takuya Kuroda, a groove-obsessed trumpeter born and raised in Japan but well established in New York City, made the most of one such moment, on “Bilongo,” a Cuban standard: His solo, though full of punchy syncopations, had a sly, hang-back-in-the-pocket poise. (He has logged some productive time with salsa bands in New York.)



Credit Steve Mundinger / Thelonious Monk Institute Of Jazz
Richard Bona, foreground, performing "Bilongo"

But “Bilongo” was first and foremost a showcase for Bona, who featured the song on a recent Afro-Cuban album. Several days earlier, during an amiably crowded afternoon workshop with music students from the Instituto Superior de Arte, it had been instantly clear that Bona and the young Cubans in the room shared a wavelength, and probably a bond.

His concert performance likewise featured an array of Cubans, including pianist Roberto Fonseca, conguero Yaroldi Abreu and the laud virtuoso (and *Buena Vista Social Club* veteran) Barbarito Torres. There were, in fact, far more Cuban musicians on the program than any other nationality — a byproduct of diplomatic politesse as well as natural terroir.

Given the intangible reality of home-field advantage, among other factors, can it be any surprise that the most compelling moments of the evening involved Cuban musicians playing Cuban music? No slight intended to Hancock, who led a head-turning crew of associates — saxophonist Kenny Garrett, electric bassist Marcus Miller, trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire, drummer Antonio Sanchez — in a smoothed-out arrangement of his tune “4AM.”



Credit Steve Mundinger / Thelonious Monk Institute Of Jazz
Youn Sun Nah performing "Guantanamera"

Nor should anyone downplay the bravery exhibited by Youn Sun Nah, a vocalist from South Korea, in standing before a tribunal of Cuban music aficionados to sing a beloved bolero, “Bésame Mucho.” Her delivery, operatically precise and emotionally ripe, slowly disarmed a skeptical *frisson* in the room. (The cheers at the finish could have been roses sailing onto the stage.)

Still, nothing could really surpass “New Era,” a churning fanfare with an intricately boppish horn line. The musicians onstage for that number were locals to a man, including Valle, trumpeter Yasek Manzano and pianist Harold López-Nussa. When the revered *sonero* Sixto Lloerente, known as El Indio, took the stage with a row of exhortations, an already turbocharged performance shifted into fantastic overdrive.

Along similar lines, a now-familiar closing refrain of this concert — John Lennon’s “Imagine,” delivered in the round-robin fashion of a charity anthem — took a welcome detour courtesy of Bobby Carcassés, a singer and entertainer with vivid memories of Havana’s Tropicana era.

Carcassés steered Lennon’s song toward one even more iconic, at least in this setting: “Guantanamera,” the rousing Cuban standard. (He had suggested this pivot in rehearsal. “Because it’s the same chords, same harmony,” he explained. “Immediately when I talked to the director, he said ‘Yes, we will do it.’”)



Credit Steve Munding / Thelonious Monk Institute Of Jazz

Richard Bona and Esperanza Spalding raise their hands during "Guantanamera," the finale of the International Jazz Day Global Concert

As a finale, the shift could hardly have felt more appropriate, zooming in from the expression of a universal ideal toward something local, resonant and culturally specific. Of course, the musicians turned it into an ebullient jam, with a churn maintained by the percussionists Ramsés Rodríguez, Adel González and Oscar Valdés, among others. At the front of the stage, the vocalists beamed; Spalding, Nah and Bona tested out a dance step.

“This is probably the biggest musical event that [has] ever been organized in Cuba,” Bona had reflected a couple days earlier, at the Hotel Nacional de Cuba. “We’re talking about a country that’s still in the embargo, technically. So us being here is also a way of showing the world that if we artists could do this — man, you guys up there could do better.”