

VOLUME XXXVIII, NO. 2 WINTER 2013

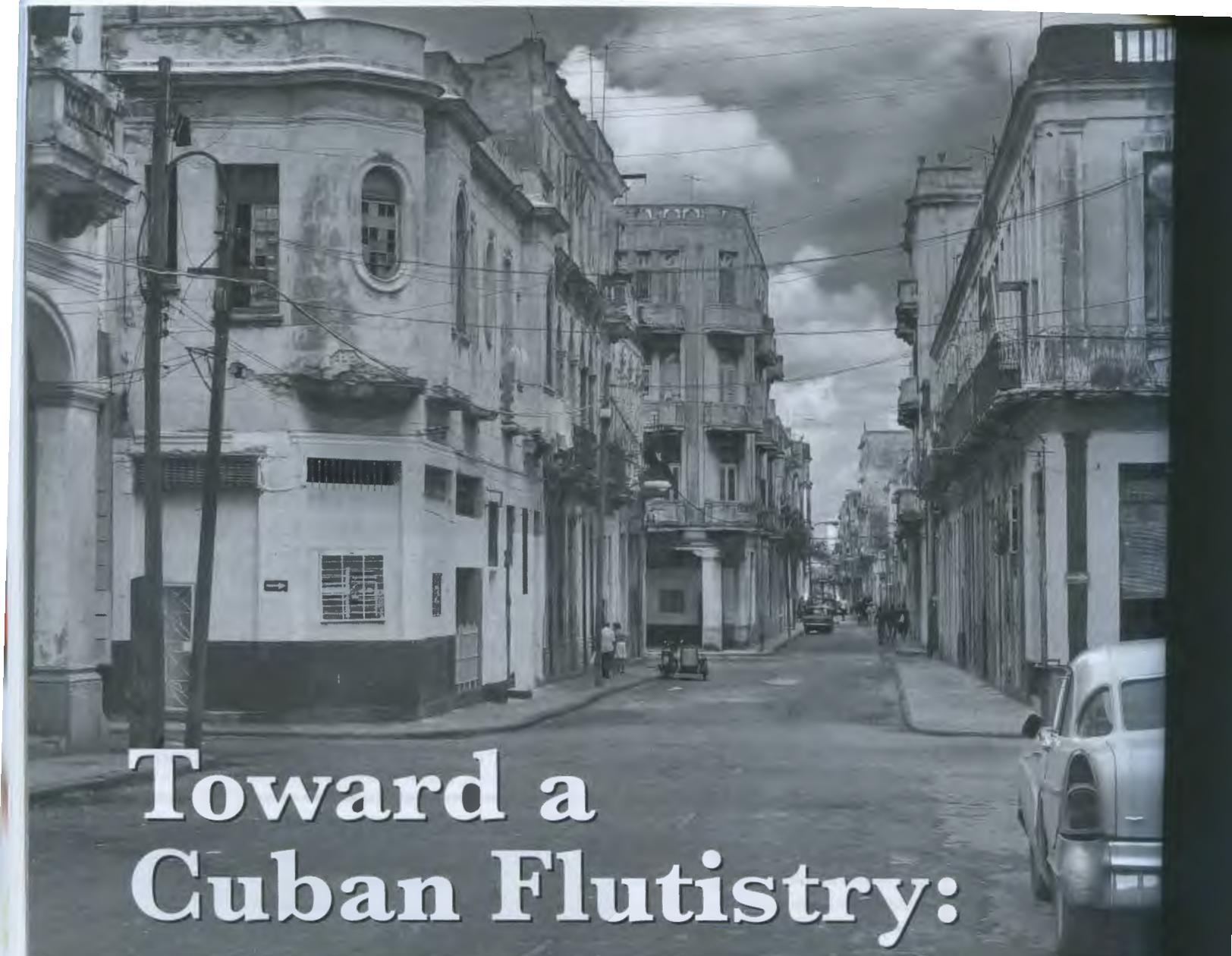
THE **f** LUTIST QUARTERLY

# Marya Martin:

New (Flute) Music Midwife

Toward a Cuban Flutistry  
The Powell Spoon Flute at 102  
Flute Festival in Honduras





# Toward a Cuban Flutistry:

## An Exploration of the Charanga Flute Tradition



From the ballrooms of France to the Spanish courtyards to the African rhythms of the Congo Basin, Cuba's charanga—cooked in a long-simmering international stew of musical tones and timbres—is today a distinct, and very specific, national tradition of flutistry.

by Martha Councill-Vargas

Flutists Policarpo Tamayo, left, and Arellys Fernandez, center, are among those interviewed while in Cuba.

The flute plays an essential role in the dance music of Cuba. The rich, diverse history of this music can be traced to the 15th-century English countryside, to the royal courts of France and Spain, to the *Bantu* speaking tribes of Africa's Congo Basin, and to the earliest Amerindian inhabitants of the island. This history culminates in a style of music today that not only displays the roots of its diversity of influences but also is well defined: a *Cuban flutistry*.

To understand the context and development of Cuban flutistry, it is important to explore the history of the *danzón*, an elegant ballroom dance that became popular around the turn of the 20th century. Diverse musical styles influenced *danzón*, a tradition that became a symbol of Cuban cultural identity. Its music reflects the kaleidoscope of influences—the English country dance, the Spanish *contradanza*, the French *contredanse*, and the undeniable influence of African rhythms that arrived with slaves—that shaped it and its special tradition of flute playing. The outcome of this mix would at first be considered unrefined by the dominant, mostly Euro-Cuban elite, and later hailed with pride by the same group as Cuba's own traditional dance.

On New Year's Day, 1879, Miguel Faílde (1852–1921) premiered *Las Alturas de Simpson*, which is reputed to be the first *danzón*, with an ensemble called *orquesta típica* consisting of cornet, valve trombone, ophicleide, two clarinets, two violins, contrabass, timbales, and güiro. The popularity of the *orquesta típica* did not last as long as that of the *danzones* it was playing; the large and cumbersome ensemble was soon replaced by *charangas francesas*, a smaller ensemble that featured piano and flute as the solo instruments.

Thus, the standard instrumentation of *charangas* eventually established itself as follows: piano, wooden five-keyed flute, violins, bass, timbales, and güiro. As one author notes, “The trilling French flute sounded wonderful, but it had to soar high above the percussion, greatly taxing the flautists' stamina...”<sup>1</sup> Its difficulty notwithstanding, meeting the wooden flute's projection demands also created a particular and signature style of flute playing.

### All in the Flutists

What makes this flute tradition so special? The flutists themselves, of course! Cuban flutistry evolved through the contributions of solo flutists in each *charanga* orchestra, defining, developing, and preserving this tradition over time. *Charanga* flute playing does not have a discernable pedagogical pedigree; it is an aural tradition, passed down by listening and copying other flutists rather than taught in a weekly lesson. “*No se enseña*,” says flutist Eddy Zervigón, solo flutist in the New York City-based *charanga*, Orquesta Broadway. “*Nace en la persona*.” (“It's not taught, it's born in each person.”)<sup>2</sup>

Policarpo “Polo” Tamayo, flutist in several of Havana's leading *charangas* including *Ritmo Oriental*, agrees. He says he learned to play the instrument through “*técnica de la calle*” (“technique of the street”).<sup>3</sup> Three of the most influential Cuban flutists, however—the names that seem to continually resurface in conversation, literature, and recordings—are Antonio Arcaño (1911–1994), José Fajardo (1919–2001), and Eduardo “Richard” Egües (1923–2006).



Eddy Zervigón



José Fajardo



Antonio Arcaño



Eduardo “Richard” Egües

Arcaño's influence was established with the popularity of his *charangas* in the 1930s. In 1937, he joined a *charanga* led by the singer Fernando Collazo. Arcaño replaced him as the director in 1940 and the band reformed under Arcaño's guidance. His colleagues in the ensemble included an important innovator in the development of Cuban dance music, legendary bassist Israel “Cachao” López (1918–2008)<sup>4</sup> and his brother, Orestes, who joined the group on cello. Orestes was also the composer of the group and is credited with the original idea of adding a final rhythmic section to the *danzón* in a fast tempo, featuring *tumbadoras*; they called it *mambo*. The addition of the *mambo* section meant the flute was required to improvise at a fast pace and in its highest register at the end of each *danzón*. Arcaño's mark on Cuban flutistry was the introduction of the flute's exciting improvisatory role in *mambo*.

In addition to his work as the leader of *Arcaño y sus Maravillas*, Arcaño also formed a large radio orchestra, *La Radiofónica*, for which he recruited a larger string section, including eight violins, three violas, and two cellos. The success of Arcaño's groups meant that from that point on, the cello became part of the best *charangas*, and he padded his *Maravillas* with the best strings from *La Radiofónica*.

Every day we would introduce a *danzón*. Orestes López composed about two hundred of them...The López brothers played symphonic music, but since the Concert Association paid them fifteen or twenty pesos per month, they were obliged to play at dances or in the dancing academies. It's the miserable condition of musicians in symphony orchestras that allowed me to have an orchestra of high quality. And we raised the *danzón* to the rank of a symphony.<sup>5</sup>

So, in addition to the *mambo* section that featured the flute, we have Arcaño to thank for the mass popularization of the *charanga* via its significant radio presence in the 1930s and '40s.

José Fajardo began his career by playing the five-keyed wooden flute in a *charanga* led by his father, a clarinetist, and soon came to admire Arcaño. He says, “I first heard Arcaño over the radio in 1939 while I was in the Cuban army, stationed at El Rancho Bollero. I immediately became an admirer of his. In 1940 or 1941 he was playing a modern *danzón*.”<sup>6</sup>



Popular among charanga flutists is Orquesta Aragón's Eduardo Egües (center).

After a few years subbing for Arcaño in Las Maravillas, Fajardo started his own charanga, *Fajardo y sus Estrellas* (Fajardo and his Stars). Their recordings became quite popular—so popular, in fact, that Fajardo eventually created and led three bands by the same name, until he started a new charanga in New York City, where he found steady work at the most prominent Latin clubs. His recordings became a model for New York-based flutists; he had the courage to regroup in the U.S. and the temerity to bring this tradition to a larger audience. His recordings for the Columbia, Fania, and Coco labels are legendary.<sup>7</sup>

Eduardo Egües, famous for his involvement in the legendary Orquesta Aragón, is perhaps the most celebrated charanga flutist because he brought a heightened level of virtuosity and expression to the tradition. While Arcaño tended to play in a melodic style with vibrato, pulling back somewhat on the rest of the orchestra, Egües played ahead of the orchestra in a more soloistic, virtuosic, and assertive style,<sup>8</sup> brought about by the more percussive approach the repertoire demanded. Charangas in the 1950s played mostly chachachás and mambos; the danzón's popularity had decreased. The improvised solos played by Egües—who had begun as a classical musician on the Böhm flute, later taking up the five-keyed wooden flute<sup>9</sup>—were florid, ornamental, exciting, and inventive.

The most important things to remember, Egües would say, are that the charanga has to work as a team for a unified sound<sup>10</sup> and that the flute must be communicative, in conversation with the dancer's feet.<sup>11</sup> He played, toured, and record-

ed with Orquesta Aragón for 31 years. After leaving the group, he remade some of the well-known classics that he had made famous with Orquesta Aragón.

### The Instrument, Its Melodies, and Its Rhythms

The capabilities and limitations of the flute itself dictate the timbre and range in which flutists play in a charanga. The change over time in the ensemble's size, scope, and repertoire—from danzón to danzonete, to chachachá and mambo, and eventually salsa—also affected the role of the flute as a featured solo instrument. In addition to practical considerations such as tessitura and timbre, the instrument used in charanga orchestras dictates, to some extent, the melodic figurations used during flute solos.

Most importantly, however, the overriding characteristic that defines charanga flute solos and the language of Cuban flute playing is its role in a complex rhythmic counterpoint, one based in the African rhythmic traditions that contributed to Rumba and the development of the danzón. The Cuban style of flute playing can be analyzed, therefore, within the framework of the following subcategories: specific instrumental capabilities; melodic figuration; and rhythmic complexity.

### Instrumental Capabilities

The flutes used in the original *tumbas francesas* were transverse wooden flutes that arrived in Cuba with 18th- and 19th-century settlers. Because the French settled much of Haiti, Haitian refugees settled much of eastern Cuba in 1803, and these settlers were the first to establish dance ensembles that used the flute, the flutes used in the *tumbas francesas*, the ancestor of the charanga orchestra, were the same as those made and played in 18th-century France.

These wooden flutes produced a mellow, hollow timbre in the middle and low registers. The high register, however, sounds loud and can have a penetrating, though still hollow, timbre. This register projects well, can stand alone to feature the flute as the solo instrument, and can be heard easily within the context of an ensemble.

Cuban musician, composer, and legend Paquito D'Rivera describes his experience with the five-keyed flute:

Did you ever try to play that?...They pull out the [head-joint], and then it's totally out of tune...Then they made the hole bigger...They open the hole and then they cover it with metal, because when the hole is bigger you can play the high notes easier, but not the low notes. They are totally out of tune...<sup>12</sup>

Maestro D'Rivera's account is supported by information we have about the historical instruments that still exist today.

Key systems developed along national lines...most early 19th-century French flutes had four or five keys, with a separate joint for each hand. ...their head-joints were now, after innovations by Richard Potter (1726–1806), often lined with metal.<sup>13</sup>

Although the five-keyed wooden flute was the original charanga instrument and is still used by Cuban flutists today, the modern, Böhm-system silver flute was and is also used. It is



Eddy Zervigón (top right), founded the ensemble Orquesta Broadway, shown here in 1964.

more typical, however, for a charanga flutist to use the five-keyed flute from the beginning, or for a Böhm player to change to the five-keyed flute to play in a charanga orchestra.

Why would a Böhm system (or “*sistema*”) player return to the traditional instrument? The five-keyed wooden flute offers a distinctive timbre, one that stands in complimentary contrast to the charanga ensemble’s string section. Typically, the charanga flutist improvises in the high register (C6-C7) and beyond, often reaching to high E7.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, *Orquesta Broadway’s* founder and flutist, Eddy Zervigón (b. 1940), regularly hits top F sharp and G in the fourth octave. The use of this register makes sense because the register’s timbral contrast means it projects well over the string and piano ensemble and is thus well suited for performance in a large dance hall. A listener cannot help but notice a flute featuring its very highest range.<sup>15</sup>

In an interview in 2006, Cuban flutist Melquiades Fundora, known for his exceptional solos in the Havana-based charanga, *Orquesta Sublime*, describes his experience as follows:

...(t)he five-key wooden flute is very powerful and very difficult to play. You have to battle with it to get the right sound. Friends often ask me, “How do you get the sound you want with that flute?” It is difficult to stretch and

cover the holes, as there are only five keys. There’s only a handful of five-key flute players in Cuba at present.<sup>16</sup>

Eddy Zervigón moved from Havana to New York City in 1962 and started *Orquesta Broadway* with his twin brother Ruddy, a charanga that maintains an active touring and recording schedule today. Zervigón started on a wood flute and prefers it to metal because of its clarity in the high register. The wood flute is also lighter than a metal flute, which makes it more comfortable to play.

Ultimately, however, Zervigón tells us that when it comes to great flute playing, it doesn’t matter what equipment we use. “*No es la flecha, es el indio!*” (“It’s not the arrow, but the Indian.”)<sup>17</sup>

### **Melodic Figuration**

The all-encompassing term used today to describe the improvisatory style of charanga flutistry is *típico*.<sup>18</sup> Literally, *típico* means typical, but the more accurate translation in this case has to do with being traditional; *típico* also means old-fashioned. *Típico* encompasses the types of melodic figuration used in charanga flute solos; the color, quality, and range of the flute sound; and the solo’s rhythmic complexity and contrapuntal interaction with the rest of the ensemble.



Legendary flutist Policarpo Tamayo speaks to author of “es bonito” playing.

Interestingly, the flute’s improvisational style within a *danzón* is derived from the 18th-century ornamentation style typically used by players of the five-keyed wooden flute. As flutist Policarpo Tamayo puts it, “The wood flute (itself) distinguishes the style of improvisation.”<sup>19</sup> Specifically, the figures used in the flute solos of a charanga orchestra are idiomatic to the instrument itself; figures similar to the ornaments used in the late baroque and early classical flute tradition are commonly used because they sit well beneath the fingers on the five-keyed instrument. Turns, trills, mordents, and grace notes embellish the melodic figurations used in flute improvisation.<sup>20</sup>

A typical charanga flute solo is made up of several brief melodic interjections, rather than an extended lyrical melodic line, that take place in the highest register of the flute, serving the practical need of the flutist for phrase duration in that range to be relatively brief. Playing in the flute’s highest range requires advanced breath support, a compressed, fast air stream to reach the upper partials, and a relaxed but firm embouchure. To play an extended, slurred melodic line in this register would be taxing for the flutist. Articulation of these figures is clear and percussive; slurs and vibrato are rarely used.<sup>21</sup> In rehearsal with legendary flutist Policarpo Tamayo and the group *Charanga de Oro*, he avoids holding the tied notes on the page full value, and when asked, he replies simply, “*Porque no es bonito.*” (“Because it just isn’t pretty.”)<sup>22</sup>

Melodic figuration in charanga flute solos developed over time at the hands of the flutists themselves. The solo style of Arcaño, for instance, is to remain behind the rest of the ensemble, almost pulling back the orchestra; he uses noticeable (fast, French style) vibrato and plays melodically much of the time. Egües, by contrast, seems to be playing ahead of the orchestra, almost propelling it with his virtuosic energy. Egües was famous for his virtuosity, especially a fast single-tongue and an aggressive rhythmic style, described by flutist Rene Lorente as “*notas picadas, en estilo conversacional, y percusivo.*” (“Pointed notes, in a conversational style, and percussive.”)<sup>23</sup>



Councill-Vargas and Sergio “Chucho” Sarmiento (center) with members of Estrellas Cub

### *Harmonic Language*

The language of charanga flute players’ solos is diatonic and classical in nature. Rarely are flute solos in a *danzón* chromatic or harmonically complex; chromaticism in improvisation is more typical of the jazz tradition than that of Cuban dance music.<sup>24</sup>

Generally, flute solos are based on the simple alternation of tonic and dominant harmony. Flutist Arelys Fernandez, who plays with the Havana charanga *Orquesta Sublime*, describes a typical charanga flute solo as follows: “*Es muy sencillo y muy rítmico.*” (“It’s really simple and really rhythmic.”)<sup>25</sup>

### *Rhythmic Complexity: The heart of Cuban Flutistry*

The most important characteristic of a charanga flute solo is its rhythmic complexity, and the virtuosity of charanga flute players lies in their ability to make it rhythmically interesting. As Melquiades Fundora puts it:

In jazz, you improvise on a theme; but it’s different in Cuban music. For us, music is much more of a rhythm thing—we play to lift our spirits, while we walk, talk, smile... we feel the syncopation and play from the heart.<sup>26</sup>

The foundation of all Cuban dance music is the *clave* rhythmic cell. Flute solos must adhere to the *clave* pattern and fit into the unrelenting structure it provides to accomplish the rhythmic accuracy and contrapuntal complexity that makes this music so appealing.

Several common rhythmic figures are typically used in charanga flute solos. Use of these stock rhythmic fragments is an important part of the tradition of Cuban flutistry. These particular rhythms interlock well with the *clave* foundation, creating a complex rhythmic counterpoint with the rest of the ensemble. Most prominently, the use of syncopated eighth notes and triplets ornamented by mordents and grace notes dominates the overall rhythmic figuration of a charanga flute solo.

The importance of the flute’s role in the charanga orchestra is clear. It provides timbral contrast; it is featured as a soloist; its sound—particularly in the case of a five-keyed wooden

flute in the high register—projects well in a large dance hall; and its rhythmically complex interjections provide an irresistible musical idiom that has established itself in Cuba and has become popular throughout the world.

However, the flute's importance goes beyond that of a characteristic sound and catchy rhythms:

With its distinctive high-register filigree on a hard-to-play wooden five-key flute, the peculiar timbre of the charanga became the sonic seal of Cuban nationalism.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, the important role of the solo flute—with its percussive articulation, chirping phraselets, high-register filigree, and irresistible rhythmic interjections—is the identifiable marker of Cuban popular music. Because it unifies African and European musical elements, the sound of the charanga orchestra is a symbol of Cuban national identity. Thus, the charanga orchestra—especially the delightful and recognizable sound of the solo flute—is a defining symbol of Cuban cultural identity, a musical representation of what it means to be Cuban. \*

*Author's note: This research would not have been possible without the generosity of the following artists, whom I am privileged to call mentors, colleagues, and friends: Cuban flutists Arelys Fernandez, Policarpo Tamayo, and Sergio Sarmiento, and Cuban-American artists Paquito D'Rivera, Rene Lorente, and Eddy Zervigón.*

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## End Notes

- 1 Isabelle Leymarie, *Cuban Fire: The Story of Salsa and Latin Jazz*, (London: Continuum, 2002), 69.
- 2 Eddy Zervigón, interview by author, New York, NY, December 21, 2011.
- 3 Policarpo Tamayo, interview by author, Havana, Cuba, August 14, 2011.
- 4 Jon Pareles, "Cachao, Mambo's Inventor, dies at 89," *New York Times*, March 24, 2008.
- 5 Erena Hernandez, "La Historia de un Monarca," *La Musica en Persona* (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 1986), 55.
- 6 Max Salazar. *Mambo Kingdom: Latin Music in New York*, (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 2002), 179.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Rene Lorente, Interview with Author, October 15, 2011, Miami, Florida.
- 9 Sue Miller, "An interview with Richard Egües," *Pan: The Flute Magazine*, 19, no. 4 (December 2000), 46, and Paquito D'Rivera, interview by author, North Bergen, New Jersey, August 20, 2008.
- 10 Sue Miller, "An interview with Richard Egües," *Pan: The Flute Magazine*, 19, no. 4 (December 2000), 46.
- 11 Rene Lorente, Interview and translation by author, Miami, Florida, October 15, 2011.
- 12 Paquito D'Rivera, Interview by author, North Bergen, New Jersey, August 20, 2008.
- 13 Jeremy Montague, et al., "Flute," *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Eddy Zervigón, Interview by author, New York City, December 22, 2011.
- 16 Sue Miller, "An Interview with Melquiades Fundora," *Pan: The Flute Magazine*, 22, no. 1 (March 2003), 22.
- 17 Eddy Zervigón, Interview and translation by author, New York, December 22, 2011.
- 18 John Murphy, "The Charanga in New York and the Persistence of the Tipico Style," *Essays on Cuban Music: North American and Cuban Perspectives*, ed. Peter Manuel (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1991), 117.
- 19 Policarpo Tamayo: Interview and translation by author, Havana, Cuba, August 14, 2011.

- 20 Sue Miller, "Cuba's Charanga Flute Style," *Pan: The Flute Magazine*, 27, no. 2 (June 2008), 45.
- 21 Paquito D'Rivera, Interview by author, digital recording, North Bergen, New Jersey, August 20, 2008.
- 22 Policarpo Tamayo, Interview and translation by author, digital recording, Havana, Cuba, August 15, 2011.
- 23 Rene Lorente, Interview and translation by author, Miami, Florida, October 15, 2011.
- 24 John Murphy, "The Charanga in New York and the Persistence of the Tipico Style," *Essays on Cuban Music: North American and Cuban Perspectives*, ed. Peter Manuel, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1991), 122.
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- 26 Sue Miller, "An interview with Melquiades Fundora," *Pan: The Flute Magazine*, 22, no. 1 (March 2003), 22.
- 27 Ned Sublette, *Cuba and its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004), 309.

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