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FROM COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY TO AFRICAN SYNCRETISM: Musical Life in Cuba

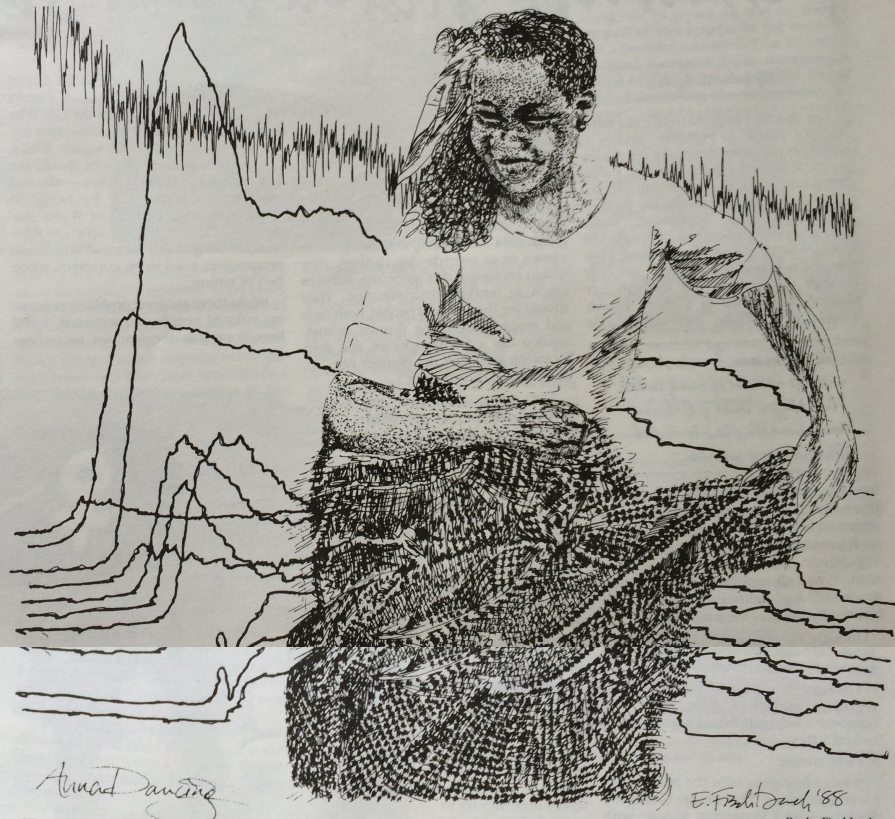
By Andrew Schloss

Whenever I mention that I have recently returned from a computer music conference in Cuba, most people are somewhat perplexed. Computer music? In Cuba? They are interested in electronic music in Cuba? Most people would associate Cuban music with African folk rhythms or Salsa. But musical life in Cuba is even more varied, as I, as a composer of computer music and ethnomusicologist/percussionist, have seen during my several visits to Cuba.

It would seem at first that there is very little connection between high-tech computer music and "primitive" music. In fact, there is a connection; and my experience there is an interesting and surprising affirmation of that connection. I will describe here two events in which I participated in both musical worlds. *Primavera en Varadero*, an electroacoustic music festival, and *FolkCuba '87*, a workshop in traditional Afro-Cuban music and dance forms at the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional* in Havana.

The field of computer music had its origins at the Bell Telephone Laboratories in the 1950's; in the 1970's the spotlight moved to Stanford University, to the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics. Computer music is a music generated or analyzed by computer. Any sound can be represented as digital information and can be generated, stored or manipulated directly by computer. Though at first the equipment needed to do this was prohibitively expensive, the cost has dropped precipitously since the 1960's and 70's. As a result, the field of computer music has (in the past ten years in particular) moved from the hidden laboratories of a few special enclaves to the center of a worldwide revolution in the music business. A huge market has developed—this is the commercial side of computer music. The noncommercial, or experimental, side is what is typically represented at universities in the United States and at conferences such as the one that I attended in Cuba.

Primavera en Varadero, also called the *Festival Internacional de Música Electroacústica*, is an international conference held biannually at Varadero Beach in Cuba. It has been held three times so far—in 1983, 1985 and 1987—each time hosted by Cuban composer Juan Blanco. This past May I was one of two North Americans invited to the conference; other participants were from Germany, Britain, France, Italy, Belgium, Spain, Holland, Austria, Hungary, Algeria, Argentina, Venezuela, Peru, Mexico and Cuba. All participants were composers. We spent the days listening to concerts of electronic and computer compositions and new instrumental works, discussing current trends in the field, viewing demonstrations of new methods, and watching a series of multimedia events with music selected from the conference and performed by Cuban students. The Cuban composers there seemed excited about the affordability of the new synthesizers; although it is still impossible for individuals to afford the equipment, it is now within reach of the government to provide new equipment for their use.



The Cuban pieces presented were quite diverse, with the composers using the technology that is available in very creative ways. There were examples of electronic music that incorporated Cuban folk music, and there were many pieces that could not be identified as "Cuban" but sounded more European. In

ple followed the coverage every day. All concerts were outdoors and open to the public, and people occasionally stopped by to listen. I noticed considerable amusement on the part of the locals, who found the music a bit strange.

Moving into an entirely different world, just a few days after the *Festival* in

attracting the many foreign visitors who are fascinated by it. Music in Cuba is so tremendously rich and the amount of material so overwhelming that one realizes that the influence of Cuban music in this hemisphere is far wider than is always understood.

I find it is amazing that Cuba has such a variety of musical forms; I have been able to follow my own diverse path in computer music and ethnomusicology in a place that is surprisingly receptive. I see in both computer music and "primitive" music a certain abstractness that links them together; the Cubans seem to have an intuitive appreciation of the possibility of seeing apparent polar opposites as points on a circle, points so far apart that they almost meet in a cyclical concept of the world. In my own work I see this happen-

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ing, and I am excited by the possibility of seeing this carried out in such a rich cultural environment as that of Cuba. ■

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general, it seems that Cuban popular music is closely tied to the United States, while Cuban "art" music is more closely allied with Europe.

Conference participants had an opportunity to meet with the Minister of Culture, Armando Hart, who took an interest in the conference. This was significant, because his support of computer music will have a strong influence both on the resources available to composers and on the continued success of the conferences. Impetus to get involved in the new technology is also provided by popular music groups, who see promise in the use of new synthesizers. This is one of the developing links between popular and "art" music.

Music is a very important part of Cuban life, and there was substantial media coverage of the conference, with reviews and interviews of participating composers, both Cuban and foreign. The Cuban peo-

Varadero ended, I enrolled in a two-week workshop called *FolkCuba '87*. It was hosted by the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional*, one of the premier performing groups of traditional Afro-Cuban music and dance in Cuba. The participants in *FolkCuba '87* were mostly European, although dancers and musicians from South America—from Colombia, Mexico and Uruguay—were also present. Many styles were represented, for example *palo*, *rumba*, *comparsa* and *santería* (played on *batá* drums). Most of these folkloric styles, with African roots, are complex mixtures of voice and poly-rhythmic percussion with a call-and-response structure.

There is serious interest today in Afro-Cuban music and dance on the part of a large number of Europeans and North Americans. The Cuban government is aware of the importance of supporting its rich folkloric heritage and is actively