

First Festival of Cuban Music, Havana 1961

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Abstract: *Various studies on art music in Cuba during the latter half of the 20th Century highlight concert festivals as key platforms for promotion and recognition of contemporary repertoires. An analysis of documentary sources and personal testimonies supports this assertion, while also acknowledging the establishment of a systematic programming policy for contemporary repertoires beginning in the 1960s. By examining these festivals as aesthetic events that produce and represent meanings, we can appreciate their role as spaces where narratives about repertoires, composers, performers, and cultural institutions are articulated. This paper focuses on the First Festival of Cuban Music in 1961, exploring its management and impact as a critical moment for contemporary music in Cuba. It considers the political, social, and cultural context surrounding the festival, as well as the ideo-aesthetic reflections it produced from participants following its conclusion.*

Key-words: *twentieth-Century Cuban music, post-revolutionary cultural policy, music festivals, ideo-aesthetic debates*

1. Introduction

Previous research on musical dissemination spaces for contemporary art music in Cuba—starting from the 1960s—has confirmed the existence of music festivals as one of the principal means of promoting this type of musical repertoire in the country.

Although concert programming has since become a regular activity, as demonstrated, the systematisation and specialisation of various festivals, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, confirm the idea mentioned above (Pérez Gómez 2011, 12).

The foundation and continuity of these events suggest that there was a privileged environment for the composition, performance, dissemination, and

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reception of contemporary art music, an area we believe has not been sufficiently explored by musicology in Cuba.

A review of the general literature on events and festival studies uncovers a currently growing scholarly field. Scholars have particularly delved into various aspects of festivals, seeking to deepen the theoretical and methodological foundations for analysing these cultural phenomena. This may explain the abundance of literature reviews related to the field, alongside case studies (Duffy and Mair 2021, 9-23).

Research in this area has also revealed a significant number of works about contemporary art music festivals worldwide, which concur that festival organisation is one of the main activities for contemporary music in different countries. Furthermore, these festivals facilitate social interactions that shape practices, values, and concepts associated with contemporary music, playing a fundamental role in defining new music and establishing related ideas. See in Jakelski (2017), Grebosz-Haring et al. (2018, 60-77), or Hadžić (2020, 169-183).

This topic has also emerged as a recent interest in the Latin American region, where works have been published discussing these events as encounter points that create networks and allow for the circulation of people, musical works, and discourses related to contemporary music (Fugellie 2022, 11-13).

2. Objectives

In Cuba, some authors have regarded music festivals as relevant events for composition and performance in art music, particularly for contemporary creation.³ A review of previous works and other relevant documents suggests the importance of music festivals in Cuba for the promotion and understanding of contemporary music. Recognising their nature as aesthetic events that produce or represent meanings (Spencer 2020, 21-60) allows them to be valued not only as concrete spaces for the musical act but as territories for articulating ideas and historical accounts about repertoires, composers, performers, and cultural institutions.

The First Festival of Cuban Music⁴, which took place during the month of June in 1961, is the oldest of those events that have been documented or study so far, due to its scope in terms of concert programming, the existence of a documental corpus about it, and the evidence of critical reception beyond the historical time of its realisation.

³ See Ardévol (1966 and 1969), Martín (1971), Eli Rodríguez (1981), Gramatges (1997), Morales Flores (2022).

⁴ The original name in Spanish was "Primer Festival de Música Cubana".

This paper aims to demonstrate the historical relevance of the First Festival of Cuban Music as an early instance of a systematic institutional policy for musical dissemination during the initial years of post-revolutionary Cuba. To achieve this goal, we study the structure of the event, the repertoires promoted through it, the musicians' participation, and the impact of its existence, as well as the topics of debate and value judgements that circulated in subsequent years.

3. A critical year for Cuban History: 1961

The Revolutionary Triumph (1959) in Cuba occurred during a turning point in world history and simultaneously became a symbolic image within a complex global reality, polarised by the atmosphere of the so-called "Cold War" (Pogolotti 2006, VI). By establishing substantial and profound transformations in the sociocultural reality of the nation, the Cuban Revolution led to a new era based on a particular ideology under the principles of sovereignty and identity.

Decisive steps in this endeavour included the intervention and nationalisation of the principal industries and mass media, which had previously been controlled by North American firms and national capital. This also involved the creation of institutions and cultural organisations that would ensure the implementation of actions outlined in a new cultural policy programme (Díaz 2001, 49).

This sequence of events and decisions by the revolutionary government led the country into a confrontational terrain, reaching one of its critical moments with the proclamation of the socialist perspective of the Cuban political process in 1961, following prior attacks and the invasion of Playa Girón.⁵ This was indeed a significant year for Cuban history, as noted in the title of this section.

Socially and culturally, it marked the period of the "Alphabetisation Campaign", one of the most recognisable contributions of the revolutionary government, which involved the majority of the population, regardless of social origin. There was also intense debate concerning crucial topics such as the freedom of creation within the new socio-political system,⁶ culminating in a series of

⁵ The Playa Girón invasion, also known as the Bay of Pigs invasion, took place in April 1961 when a CIA-sponsored paramilitary group, comprised mainly of Cuban exiles, attempted to overthrow Fidel Castro's government. The operation failed, resulting in a decisive victory for Cuban forces. This incident marked a significant escalation in Cold War tensions and solidified Castro's socialist position, leading to increased United States hostilities towards the Cuban government.

⁶ This debate was generated after the censorship of the film *P.M.* a documentary by Sabá Cabrera Infante and Orlando Jiménez which was qualified as a partial glimpse of national reality. (Otero 2 June 1961, 2)

meetings between artists and intellectuals and the revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro, and ultimately the announcement of the first Congress of Writers and Artists.⁷

The activities of the First Festival of Cuban Music occurred right in the middle of that year, amid a variety of social, political, and cultural happenings. However, it was also a result of that complex process, given that it was organised by the institutions created under the new regime. All of this might lead one to assert a positive stance for the “revolutionary government” within the festival’s organisation, regardless of the musical repertoire included in its programming.

4. The “First Festival” and the Cuban Musical Historiography

The first mention about the 1961’s festival within the historiographical discourse is found in references by the composer José Ardévol, whose book *Música y Revolución* (1966), compiling some of his critical works, registered the organisation of this event as “a very extensive Cuban music festival” (Ardévol 1966, 204). This simple qualification implied an inclusive perspective regarding the historical periods considered for the concerts.

This criterion is also reflected in another text, wherein the composer listed the “most important musical achievements in the five years of revolutionary government” (Ardévol 1966, 2019). He noted that the programming of the festival showcased various genres and periods, including popular music.

The composer Edgardo Martín also dedicated a section to “Festivals” in his book *Panorama histórico de la música en Cuba* (1971) and asserted that the 1961 event was “a recount of the most important aspects of Cuban musical creation up to that moment” (Martín 1971, 206).

Musicologist Victoria Eli described the First Festival as a broad recount of Cuban musical creation that encompassed symphonic, chamber, choral, and solo music, considering it a moment of great interest and importance for composers and performers (Eli Rodríguez 1981).

More recent musicological works have mentioned the event but do not attribute the same significance to it. For instance, in Marysol Quevedo’s doctoral thesis, she dedicated a section to music festivals, commencing with this festival as the first documented in the literature (Quevedo 2016, 200). She only references

⁷ The First Congress of Writers and Artists of Cuba, held in August 1961, aimed to unify cultural and artistic expression under the revolutionary banner, promote socialism in the arts, and address issues related to cultural policy. The congress emphasized the role of artists and intellectuals in shaping a new Cuban identity post-revolution.

the event as noted before, yet it is not mentioned in her subsequent book (Quevedo, 2023), based on that thesis.

The foundational role of the First Festival of Cuban Music was also expressed in Iván C. Morales's article about contemporary music festivals in Cuba, in which he analyses special dynamics of exchange between Cuba and Eastern Europe and Latin American countries. About the 1961 event, he highlighted its occurrence during the aforementioned encounters between Fidel Castro and Cuban intellectuals (Morales Flores 2022, 45).

5. One month of Cuban music: traces of the First Festival's memories

The First Festival of Cuban Music was organized by the National Commission of Music⁸ and the National Council of Culture⁹, the institutions that led musical and cultural activities at the time. It ran throughout a month, comprising fifteen concerts from June 7th to June 30th (Hernández 2000, 57).

Its strong connection to the institutions created after 1959 is evident through words written by J. Ardévol, one of the organisers of the event whose works were featured: this festival was one of the most important achievements of the "revolutionary government". In fact, the programme's opening note expresses these premises:

*The Revolution, in its process of conquering sovereignty, social justice, freedom; in its contribution to the struggle for peace, which is the main issue of humanity at present, it constantly inaugurates procedures and achievements, both in the economic-social order and in the cultural. Furthermore, and as a very important part of all this, it claims and rescues what is its own, both in historical contexts and in sources of wealth as well as in the artistic.*¹⁰

⁸ Comisión Nacional de Música.

⁹ Consejo Nacional de Cultura.

¹⁰ La Revolución, en su proceso de conquista de la soberanía, la justicia social, la libertad; en su contribución a la lucha por la paz, que es la cuestión capital del hombre en los presentes momentos, inaugura constantemente procedimientos y realizaciones, lo mismo en el orden económico-social que en el cultural. Además, y como parte muy importante de todo eso, reivindica y rescata lo propio, tanto en lo histórico y en las fuentes de riqueza como en lo artístico. ("Primer Festival de Música Cubana junio/ 1961" 1961)

This introductory statement can be viewed as a principle represented throughout the festival's concerts. It also raises key points of reflection at that time and onwards: how to articulate the ideas of revolution, tradition, and renewal.

Regarding the historical context surrounding the festival's establishment, it serves as evidence of systematic or regular music programming following the creation of the National Symphony Orchestra (OSN)¹¹, for example, in the emergent institutional system for culture. The event was directly related to the political and social processes occurring in the country, as reflected in the presentation note of the programming book. This relation is further illustrated through the dedications of each concert, a common feature in the regular programming of the OSN. Among them was the First Congress of Writers and Artists, scheduled for the last days of June and which eventually took place on August 20th, 21st, and 22nd.

The reaffirmation of support for the Revolution, as noted in the introductory remarks of the concert programme for the festival, is significant during a time when the feeling of siege was palpable, particularly following the events at Playa Girón. This is observable through the press of the time, which featured announcements for each concert of the festival systematically, such as in the newspapers *Hoy* or *Revolución*, which even reported the cancellation of one concert due to the conductor's indisposition, alongside reflections on all the social and political processes taking place.

The National Library's musical magazine, directed by composer and musicologist Argeliers León from its music department, covered the event as news on two occasions: in the July edition of that year (Duchesne 1961, 186-187), where a summary of the programmes presented at the festival was featured in the News section. Then, in the October edition, a summary was published, offering a brief judgement describing it as "the most important event that has taken place so far this year [...]". (Colina 1961, 244)

This statement allows us to perceive an initial judgement that shapes the planned programming for this festival in relation to what was considered the most representative of national composition up to that point.

Regarding the specifics of the First Festival of Cuban Music and the connection between concerts, works, and performers, it is crucial to highlight that documented accounts agree that its purpose was to encompass all aesthetic trends and provide a sort of overview of national creation. According to reports, the festival served as a summary and assessment of contemporary musical creation (Valdés Cantero 1990, 11).

¹¹ Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional (OSN).

It is interesting to note that, despite the festival being presented ecumenically in its name, only two programmes of popular music were included, specifically labelled as such in the programme booklet.

Manuel Saumell	(1818-1870)	Natalio Galán	(1917-1985)
Ignacio Cervantes	(1847-1905)	Harold Gramatges	(1918-2008)
Guillermo Tomás	(1868-1933)	Argeliers León	(1918-1991)
Amadeo Roldán	(1900-1939)	Juan Blanco	(1919-2008)
Alejandro García Caturla	(1906-1940)	Hilario González	(1920-1996)
Serafín Pro	(1906-1977)	Nilo Rodríguez	(1921-1997)
José Ardévol	(1911-1981)	Fabio Landa	(1924-2003)
Enrique González Mántici	(1912-1974)	Electo Silva	(1928-2017)
Gisela Hernández	(1909-1971)	Carlos Fariñas	(1934-2002)
Edgardo Martín	(1915-2004)	Leo Brouwer	(1939)
Félix Guerrero	(1916-2001)		

Table 1. *Composers whose works were programmed in the First Festival of Cuban Music*

From the very visibility of its general program, a hierarchy can be inferred emphasizing the images of Amadeo Roldán and Alejandro García Caturla, whose works appear in multiple conceived programmes (See Figure 1).

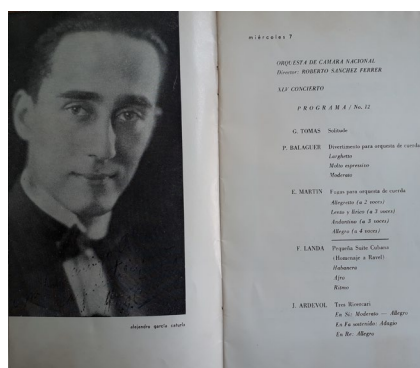
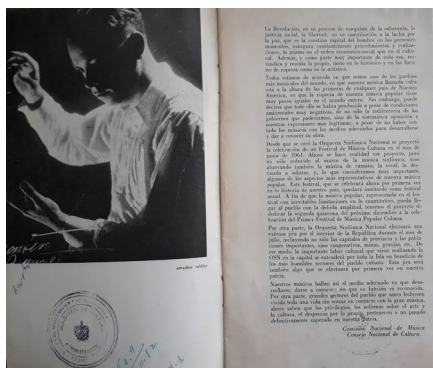


Fig. 1. *Images taken from the Programming Booklet of the First Festival of Cuban Music June/1961.*

Library of the Centre of Research and Development of Cuban Music

In fact, relating the names of the composers mentioned in these programmes confirms the predominance of some over others. Besides Roldán and Caturla, we

can also mention J. Ardévol and Juan Blanco (1919-2008), who held positions within the institutions that were beginning to shape musical policy at that time.

6. A New window for Musical Creation: The First Festival of Cuban Music as a reflection topic

It is also useful to consider the reflections offered by participants of this festival some time after its completion, with the relative objectivity that perhaps temporal distance provides. When contrasting opinions expressed about this festival, a general judgement emerges regarding the prevailing aesthetics in creation up to that moment, one of the main debates that would later arise in the ideological-aesthetic sphere following the emergence of what would later be defined as the Cuban musical avant-garde of the 1960s.

In this context, what was heard at the concerts of the First Cuban Music Festival of 1961 is called into question, where works by composers later associated with that avant-garde movement were also included.

On one hand, the general opinion of composers was that musical creation was on a closed, repetitive path, and the attitude defending national sovereignty and art at a critical moment for the country no longer held validity. (Eli Rodríguez 1981)

The perspective of conductor Manuel Duchesne Cuzán, a key figure in all these processes and controversies, was even more critical:

The most restless among us came to realize -after the conclusion of the First Cuban Music Festival held in 1961- that everything we heard sounded the same, within the same stylistic framework, even though it was signed by different authors (José Ardévol, Edgardo Martín, Harold Gramatges, and others...) There was an insistence on a nationalism that was already exhausted and had long been brilliantly resolved by Amadeo Roldán and Alejandro García Caturla. No other work composed afterward has reached the level of those composed by them in that language.¹²

¹² Los más "inquietos" llegamos a darnos cuenta de que todo lo escuchado sonaba igual, en el mismo marco estilístico aunque lo firmaban diferentes autores nuestros (José Ardévol, Edgardo Martín, Harold Gramatges y otros...). Se insistía en un nacionalismo ya agotado y que hacía tiempo había sido genialmente resuelto por Amadeo Roldán y Alejandro García Caturla. Ninguna obra posterior ha llegado al rango de las compuestas por ellos en ese lenguaje. (*Clave. Revista Cubana de Música* 1988, 50)

Upon closely observing the relationship between works by composers who were active in creation and musical activity at that time, it can be noted that the temporal range is relatively broad, spanning from 1936 to 1961, but with an emphasis on the 1950s. Even from the titles of the works, a tendency towards traditional formats and structures can be perceived.

Composer	Work	Year
Serafín Pro	<i>Serie de Fugas</i> (string orchestra)	1959
	<i>En Cuba nació el niño Dios</i> (choir)	1959
José Ardévol	Tres Ricercari (string orchestra)	1936
	<i>Música de cámara</i> (six instruments)	1936
	Miraglos muchos fase la virgen (choir)	1946
	<i>Tres Estudios</i> (piano)	1947
	<i>Quinteto para instrumentos de viento</i> (wind quintet)	1957
	<i>Cuarteto no. 3</i> (string quartet)	1958
Enrique González Mántici	<i>Concierto no. 2, op. 10</i> (violín and orchestra)	1961
Gisela Hernández Gonzalo	<i>Zapateo</i> (piano)	1954
Edgardo Martín	<i>Fugas para orquesta de cuerdas</i> (string orchestra)	1947
	<i>Soneras para orquesta</i> (symphony orchestra)	1951
	<i>Preludio</i> (piano)	1949-50
	<i>Sonera no. 2</i> (piano)	
Félix Guerrero	<i>Homenaje al Sóngoro Cosongo</i> (Tres Nocturnos para orquesta) (symphony orchestra)	1950
Hilario González	<i>Preludio en Conga</i> (piano)	1938
Natalio Galán	<i>Liborio y la esperanza</i> (ballet music)	1961
Harold Gramatges	<i>Montuna</i> (piano)	1948
	<i>Tres Madrigales Infantiles</i> (choir)	1950
	<i>Sinfonietta</i> (symphony orchestra)	1955
	<i>Guajira</i> (piano)	1956
	<i>Quinteto</i> (wind quintet)	1957
Argeliers León	<i>Cuatro escenas para ballet</i> (clarinet, trumpet, Cuban percussion, piano)	1944
	<i>Suite Cubana</i> (string orchestra)	1946
	<i>Sonatas de la Virgen del Cobre</i> (piano and string orchestra)	1947
	<i>Cuarteto no. 1</i> (string quartet)	1957
Juan Blanco	<i>Tríptico Coral</i> (choir, vocal soloists, trumpet, double bass, Cuban percussion)	1951
	<i>Quinteto no. 1</i> (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, violoncello)	1954
	<i>Elegía</i> (Homenaje a los héroes del pueblo caídos en la lucha por la libertad y la justicia social) (symphony orchestra)	1956
	<i>Quinteto no. 2</i> (flute, clarinet, horn, timbal, piano)	1959
Nilo Rodríguez	<i>Ya no sé, mi dulce amiga</i> (choir)	1959
	<i>Cantares</i> (string orchestra)	-

Composer	Work	Year
Fabio Landa	<i>Pequeña Suite Cubana</i> (Homenaje a Ravel) (string orchestra)	1951
Electo Silva	<i>Dos movimientos para cuerdas</i> (string orchestra)	1957
Carlos Fariñas	<i>Tres Sonos Sencillos</i> (piano)	1954
	<i>Música para orquesta de cuerdas</i> (string orchestra)	1958
Leo Brouwer	<i>Auto Sacramental</i> (ballet music)	1959-60

Table 1. *Musical works by active composers by 1961, featured at the First Festival of Cuban Music*

Subsequently, this event can also be viewed as a sort of “showcase” that allowed for the presentation of advancements in the musical institutions founded after 1959, particularly concerning different instrumental and vocal formats: National Symphony Orchestra, National Chamber Orchestra, Havana Quintet, National Quartet, National Choir¹³, in addition to the soloists and conductors who performed with the aforementioned ensembles.

We believe it is pertinent to reflect on events like this, a particular case that marked a turning point for contemporary music in Cuba, both due to the political, social, and cultural context in which it developed, and because of the self-reflection exercises it prompted among the participants of the event and, more generally, among the composers of the time. This was also influenced by the level of information and international exchanges they had access to before or after 1959.

In a way, it served as a window for this type of creation, constituting a space to glimpse what was understood as contemporary music at that time and its values, allowing for reflection on the relevance of the aesthetic positions expressed through the repertoires showcased in the festival programmes.

7. Conclusions

The First Festival of Cuban Music (Havana, 1961) marked a pivotal moment in the cultural landscape of post-revolutionary Cuba. It aimed to reflect the state of national musical creation and included works from prominent composers such as José Ardévol, Edgardo Martín, Harold Gramatges, Juan Blanco, Carlos Fariñas, and Leo Brouwer, who played different and active roles within the new cultural institutions.

¹³ Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional, Orquesta de Cámara Nacional, Quinteto de La Habana, Cuarteto Nacional, Coro Nacional.

The festival was deeply connected with the political and social changes occurring in Cuba following the 1959 Revolution. Its programming emphasised the themes of sovereignty, social justice, and cultural identity, aligning with the revolutionary ideals of the time. The event served not only as a platform for artistic expression but also as a means of reinforcing the cultural policies advocated by the revolutionary government.

Critical reception of the festival highlighted its significance as a turning point for Cuban music, with periodicals recognising it as one of the most important cultural events of the year. The festival's legacy continued to influence the organisation of future music festivals in Cuba, establishing a foundation for the systematic promotion of contemporary art music.

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