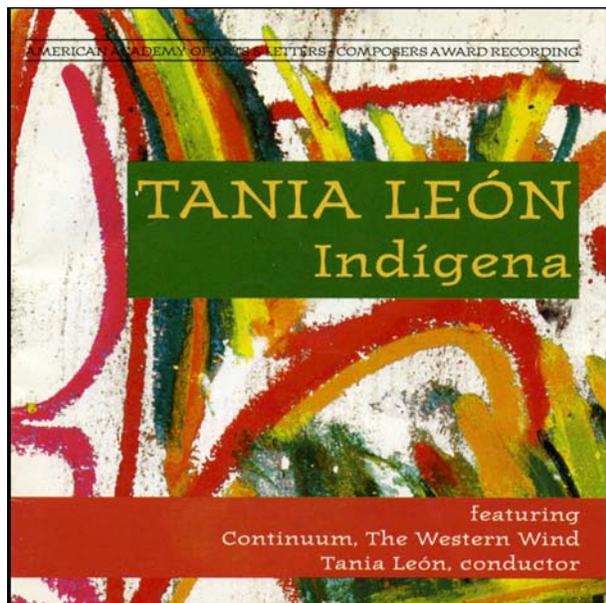


NWCR662

Tania León

Indígena



1. *Indígena* for Chamber Orchestra (1991) (8:18)
Richard Kelley, trumpet; Continuum: Jayn Rosenfeld, flute; Marcia Butler, oboe; David Gresham, clarinet; Susan Helneman, bassoon;

Dan Grabois, French horn; Erik Charlston, percussion; Cheryl Seltzer, piano; Mark Steinberg, violin; Serena Canin, violin; Naomi Katz, viola; Maria Kitsopoulos, cello; Victor Kioulaphides, double bass; Tania León, conductor

2. *Parajota Delaté* for Chamber Ensemble (1988) .. (3:09)
Continuum: Jayn Rosenfeld, flute; Mark Steinberg, violin; David Gresham, clarinet; Maria Kitsopoulos, cello; Cheryl Seltzer, piano
3. *Rituál* for Solo Piano (1987) (5:28)
Clemens Leske, piano
4. *A la Par* for Piano and Percussion (1986) (12:49)
Chris Lamb, percussion; Virginia Perry Lamb, piano
5. *Batéy* for Vocal Ensemble and Percussion (1989) (20:44)
(written in collaboration with Michel Camilo); The Western Wind Vocal Ensemble; Puntilla and New Generation; Daniel Ponce, conga; Erik Charlston, percussion; Joseph Passaro, percussion; Tania León, conductor

Total playing time: 63:27

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Notes

Once you stop to consider **Tania León's** dizzying multi-ethnic background, it's easy to understand why she dislikes the American penchant for neat, simple categorizations. Born in Havana in 1943, she is of mixed French, Spanish, Chinese, African, and Cuban heritage. "My ancestors came from different parts of the world; they came from different cultures," she says. "I take pride in the heritage each of them passed on to me, and I represent all of them within myself. I prefer to be an inclusive human being."

But León's process of acknowledging her own cultural universe was a long and arduous one. At age four, when the rest of her family was listening to cha-cha-chas, mambos, and boleros, she happened to hear classical music on the radio. Her grandmother, sensing her interest, took her to the Carlos Alfredo Peyrellade Conservatory for piano lessons. She gave her first recital at five, and graduated with the equivalent of a master's degree at seventeen. During the intervening years, she got a thorough drilling in the conservatory's French-style curriculum, and showed talent as a songwriter. On the side, she studied accounting, so that if her career as a pianist didn't pan out, she would have something to fall back on.

In 1967, León took a plane ride that would change her life forever—a ride from Havana to Miami, a ride that would lead to undreamed of musical and professional opportunities. Within a week of her arrival, she was in New York, putting her accounting training to good use. "At that point I considered myself a pianist, period. I had no other ambitions."

Quite by chance, in 1968 León met choreographer Arthur Mitchell, who was in the process of starting a new dance company. When his Dance Theater of Harlem became a reality, he hired León, first as an accompanist, soon after as his music director. For a dozen years she held that post, acting as director of the Dance Theater's music school, as its resident composer, and as the conductor of its orchestra.

"Those years gave me an opportunity to try my fears," she recalls. "Arthur offered me the first real commission in my life. He said, 'Why don't you write a piece and I'll do the choreography?' I didn't want to do it, because I had no formal training in composition. And the same thing happened when we went to Spoleto, Italy in 1971, and they dumped me in a pit to conduct the orchestra for the first time in my life. I thought I was going to die, but I didn't."

León's first ballet for Mitchell, *Tones* (1973), was followed by further collaborations, such as *Douglas* (with Geoffrey Holder, 1974) and *Spiritual Suite* (with Marian Anderson, 1976). Meanwhile, her musical horizons expanded at a dizzying pace. In 1977, at the invitation of Lukas Foss, she founded the Brooklyn Philharmonic's Community Concert Series (together with the composers Julius Eastman and Talib Rasul Hakim). In 1978, she became the music director of the Broadway production of *The Wiz*. And she began working toward a doctorate in composition at New York University, studying with Ursula Mamlok. It was only then that she realized that she was destined to be a composer.

But how would she make use of the vast array of musical

styles that jostled in her head? Not only did she bring with her a rich Cuban tradition, but in New York she got to know everything from jazz to African-American popular music to Carter and Stravinsky. "My upbringing facilitated an open ear for everything. I had never had anybody to teach me how to dislike something because it was not appropriate. So I enjoyed everything from the music of the peasants to music from other countries to music of tremendous complexity, like Boulez and Stockhausen."

In New York, however, she suspected that her diversity would be a liability if she wished to be taken seriously as a composer by a new-music community that might have sneered at her heritage. "During the 1970s I was very keen to conceal my background," she admits. "Perhaps I was looking for an entry into the mainstream." The turning point was her return to Cuba in 1979. "I felt an explosion inside of me. I realized that there were very cherished things in me that I was denying. And I felt the sounds of my environment, the sounds of my childhood, starting to come back to me." Now there was no possibility of returning to the status quo: the time for musical integration had arrived.

Once León stopped suppressing her own voice, her compositional gifts blossomed. Beginning in the 1980s, she started embracing her past with a vengeance. *De Orishas* (1982), for the vocal ensemble The Western Wind uses Yoruban poetry; *Batá* (1985) is an orchestral work that incorporates Yoruban religious drums; *A la Par* (1986), she writes, "is my first attempt to express the dichotomy between the folk-music traditions of my native Cuba and the classical European training I received at the Havana Conservatory."

A la Par, a powerful duet for piano and a wide range of percussion (including mallet instruments, bells, bottles, and drums of every variety), translates as "going together." "Think of it as like the rails of a train," she says. "In the distance they look like one. And as they come toward you, they are in sync; if they take a curve, they take it together."

Those rails might as well be her two different musical heritages, moving in sync for the first time. The first movement, dissonant in harmony, jagged in contour, plunges us into a frenzy of rhythm, its unrelenting pulse enlivened by unpredictable accents and metric shifts. In the middle of the eerie, shimmering second movement, a rumba *guaguanco* emerges from the haze. León gradually builds up a dense polyrhythmic texture that includes an obsessive rumba ostinato in the left hand of the piano, angular chromatic interjections in the right hand, and tricky cross-rhythms in the drums. (No literal appropriation of a folk idiom, this *guaguanco* has clearly been filtered through a modernist sensibility.) The third movement returns to the propulsive rhythmic drive of the first, now coupled with a gradual *accelerando* and frantic harmonic stasis.

Those same traits characterize *Rituál* (1987) for solo piano. After a languid, almost improvisatory introduction, León gradually builds up an ostinato pattern that leaps from the lowest note on the keyboard to its upper extremities. Again, the pulse is constant but the accents are unpredictable; again, the dissonant harmonies are relatively static; again, all the musical elements are subsumed by the savage, brutal rhythmic power. The piano-shaking ferocity of *Rituál's* conclusion might suggest that León had some actual ceremony in mind, but she insists that the ritual she refers to is really her own rite of passage. Dedicated to the Dance Theater of Harlem's founders, Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook, *Rituál* is "about the fire in the spirit of people who encourage other people, because they see something that the person doesn't see herself. It's the first that initiates

something."

Parajota Delaté (1988) inhabits a world very different from *A la Par* or *Rituál*. Its title translates literally as "for J from T," and it refers to León's long friendship with the composer Joan Tower. Commissioned by the Da Capo Chamber Players as a birthday tribute to Tower, it is a delicate, miniature scherzo, as mercurial in mood and fleeting in gesture as an animated conversation. Here linear atonality, modernist angularity, and fluidity of pulse replace the rhythmic single-mindedness of *Rituál*.

But León's heritage returns to the fore in *Indígena* (1991), commissioned by Town Hall for the Solisti Chamber Orchestra of New York. It opens with a series of rhapsodic, cadenza-like woodwind flourishes (each answered by a burst of percussion) that lead into a motoric, interlocking, polyrhythmic groove. In this dissonant context, a sudden turn to a static G-major triad is breathtaking, and it announces what is essentially *Indígena's* Carnival scene.

Now León conjures up a *comparsa*, the group of masked revelers who roam the streets during carnival season. "In the *comparsa*, there's always a winner, and the king of the *comparsa* is the trumpeter. You might hear that a *comparsa* is approaching, because you hear the trumpet from a great distance, and then you hear the polyrhythms getting closer and closer."

In *Indígena*, the trumpet stands and delivers several bold and brilliant solos, each of which prompts a response from the rest of the instruments, the *comparsa's* "chorus." Only once does the trumpet quote an authentic *comparsa* melody, "La Jardinia," which is echoed by the ensemble. A frenzied outburst of revelry ensues.

With *Batéy* (1989), we enter a unique musical universe, one defined by both the nature of the commission (for The Western Wind) and the unusual compositional process. A musical collaboration between León and Michel Camilo, the noted Dominican-born pianist and composer whose many recordings straddle the worlds of jazz, classical, and Latin music, *Batéy* evokes an African spiritual legacy that still thrives in the Caribbean. A *batéy* was a village built for the workers who toiled on a sugar-cane plantation and the word itself was coined by West African slaves who were brought to the New World.

Batéy is scored for six amplified singers and six percussionists, who play an array of traditional and non-traditional instruments. Once those forces were determined, León and Camilo had to divide up the compositional duties. First, they decided on a four movement structure—"Canto" (Chant), "Yoruba," "Rezós" (Prayers), and "Rumba." Then they crafted a hybrid text, one that is primarily in Spanish, but that embraces nonsense syllables, a few words of English (including a quote from Martin Luther King) and Yoruban, and what León calls "a Cuban dialect that imitates the dialect of Africanos." Finally, they decided who would compose which movements. "We would analyze what kind of tonal ambience we wanted for each section, and then we would go home and write," León recalls. "When we would come back, we'd compare notes, and create bridges between each of our sections."

Still, their two personalities stand out clearly. Camillo's sections are not only more tonal, but more literal in their use of folk traditions. León's sections are more dissonant and denser in their rhythmic layerings (although *Batéy* undoubtedly contains some of her most readily accessible music). The "Ritos" portion of "Yoruba" uses voice and percussion to construct León's characteristically spiky polyrhythms, but the *a cappella* sections of "Rezós" revel in a

closely textured, sensuous harmony that is new to her work. Perhaps most remarkable is "Tarura," the central portion of "Rumba," in which the voices turn to scat-singing. Over a rumba *guaguanco* ostinato, the six singers negotiate angular, chromatic lines whose tricky syncopations and swooping melodic leaps recall the exuberance of bebop.

Batéy, a celebration of the spiritual and cultural tenacity of a forcibly displaced people is also a work that reflects León's own journey to self-acceptance and liberation. "In my heart I

carry my beloved people," she writes in "Rezos." "In my heart I carry the dreamer, black baby-girl." Today that dreamer, finally unfettered, is free to soar to new creative heights. With León's first opera (based on Wole Soyinka's *A Scourge of Hyacinths*) scheduled for a May 1994 premiere in Munich, and her two-year residence with the New York Philharmonic only just beginning, no mountain would seem too high for her to climb.

—K. Robert Schwarz

Production Notes

CD Produced by Tania León.

Executive Producer: Joseph R. Dalton.

Indígena and *Parajota Delaté* recorded in the auditorium of The American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York City, June 4, 1993. Recording and Engineer: Frederick J. Bashour, Dufay Digital Music. Produced by Martha Mooke.

Rituál and *A la Par* recorded at BMG Studio B, New York City, October 21, 1992. Dennis Ferrante, Recording and Editing Engineer. Produced by Tania León.

Batéy recorded and mixed by Ed Rak, Clinton Sound Studios, New York City. Produced by Michel Camilo, Licensed courtesy of Western Wind Records.

All works published by Peer-Southern Music Co., Inc. (ASCAP) except *Batéy* by Michel Camilo and Tania León. (BMI/ASCAP).

Mastered by Tania León, Joseph R. Dalton, and Robert Woolf, Engineer at Sony Classical Productions, Inc., New York City. Special thanks to Continuum, Cheryl Selzer and Joel Sachs, directors, and to Todd Vunderink, Martha Mooke, and Gayle Morgan.