

AMERICAN MUSIC REVIEW

THE HITCHCOCK INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN AMERICAN MUSIC
Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York

VOLUME LI, ISSUE 1

FALL 2021

Considering Gestural References to *Batéy* in Performing *Axon* by Tania León Maja Cerar

When Tania León set out to compose *Axon* for violin and interactive computer in 2002, she immediately envisioned the work on two levels.¹ The technically demanding violin part, notated in the style of modernist concert music, represents the first level. The second level is an electronics part containing audio samples from recordings of previous compositions by León. Nearly all the samples are from *Batéy*, a collaborative work for vocal ensemble and percussion by León and Michel Camilo (1989), and at least one is from *A La Par* for piano and percussion (1986).²

When I asked León in an interview about the relationship between the two levels, she described it as follows: “[When] I wrote *Axon*, I knew [*Batéy*] inside out. As I created [...] the violin piece, I knew instinctually [sic] where [*Batéy*] will be able to converse with that piece [*Axon*]. [...] I went through [*Axon*] like magic, and I knew where each one of [the sound samples] were going to be placed. [...] I worked with both elements: the intellectual and the intuitional. I don’t feel so great when I don’t allow my intuition to tell me what to do.”³

The score to *Axon*, however, does not mention *Batéy*, *A La Par*, or any relationship among the pieces.⁴ The one-paragraph program note in the score states that in *Axon*, “pulses and impulses travel and refract away from each other thus creating a sound world of new spectral motivic sound images.”⁵ The audio samples from *Batéy* and *A La Par* — their occurrences indicated only by general keywords in the score, such as “congas” — are dramatically different in style from the violin part of *Axon*, and often appear in jarring juxtaposition with the violin material.

Axon, as its title may suggest, opens avenues of connectivity.⁶ León says: “[*Batéy* and *Axon*] are interrelated. [...] [Despite the] contrast, there is an affinity.”⁷ In exploring that affinity,



Tania León with Maja Cerar post performance of *Axon* at National Sawdust in 2016

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Considering Gestural References to *Batéy* in Performing *Axon* (cont.)

I have found that it resides, among other shared elements, in similar motivic pitch and gestural material by which *Axon* engages in a process of re-contextualization of moments from *Batéy*, a process that is part preservation and part renewal and reflection.

Another significant element of *Axon* that is not explicitly notated in the score is the frequent live processing of the violin's audio signal, which warps the timbre and harmonic of the violin sound, imparting a distortion of its identity. León conjures affinities between this audio processing and the violin through the use of extended techniques on the violin, which draw it toward the electronic timbral palette.

In *Axon*, the sampled sounds and audio processing both punctuate and fuel the violin part. The task of a performer crafting an interpretation of *Axon* thus includes actively devising bridges between the extended technique sounds and the incorporeal electronics, which exert such a significant change of voice or even imply additional voices. However, performing with the unpredictable audio processing is quite unlike rehearsing chamber music with other players and more like training in a kind of sorcery (more on this below).

Leaving a closer examination of pitch organization in *Axon* to another paper, I will focus on gestural interconnections between *Axon* and *Batéy*. This approach delves into elements that are nearly impossible to specify completely in notation, such as the range of possible actualizations of rhythms, emphases, articulations, and, to some degree, pitches and interval sizes in double stops and chords. From this perspective, the performer may explore the potential to evoke connections with *Batéy* in the violin part, placing performance choices on a continuum between "abstract" and "connotative," which may be re-evaluated at any given point of the piece. As an extension of this idea, in my discussion I will briefly consider the physicality of grouping motives in certain passages into sequences/phrases, where the larger choreography of the piece may help streamline a violinist's bowing and fingering choices.

I will end the essay by considering a dynamic attitude of the performer towards the score, including the electronics. Thinking of attitude as a planned shifting of the performer's state of mind and mode of enactment while playing specific moments of *Axon*, I will consider how this may also influence one's choices from a palette of techniques and thus open an additional venue of expressively engaging with the

electronics.

1. AXON AND BATÉY⁸

Cuban-born Tania León embodies a diverse heritage and a polyglot of cultural expressions in music and language. Her work often bridges variegated musical styles, finding affinities in contrast and creating via synthesis and extrapolation, broadening the expressive potential of styles she has mastered.

Written in 1989 for the Western Wind Vocal Ensemble, *Batéy* is scored for six singers (two sopranos, one countertenor, two tenors, and one bass) and percussion ensemble (marimba, congas, tom-toms, roto-tom, batá, zurdo, rain stick, chekere, caxixi, maracas, chi, claves, crotales, and cowbell).⁹

In *Batéy*,¹⁰ links are forged between vocalized nonsense-syllables and the languages of Spanish, English, Yoruba, and, according to León, "a Cuban dialect that imitates the dialect of Africanos."¹¹ The lyrics are set to a multitude of styles, paving connections to history, the American Civil Rights Movement, and spiritual realms.

2. THE ELECTRONIC PART

Axon is dedicated to violinist and composer Mari Kimura, who not only premiered it, but also programmed an original software instrument to make *Axon* an interactive electroacoustic work.¹² For *Axon*, Kimura created an instrument that filled three roles for the piece: to play pre-recorded sound samples from *Batéy* and *A La Par*; to use signal processing algorithms to manipulate the sound of the violin performance as captured by a microphone; and to track the pitch of the violin during performance, so that the software could begin or end some of its own output based on perceiving specific cue pitches.¹³

3. PERFORMANCE CHOICES IN AXON

The audio samples in *Axon* are layered percussive rhythmic patterns, as well as vocal motives and harmonies. In *Axon*, none of the audio samples from *Batéy* contain complete words, except "chereku," an invented word that León intends to make a sound like maracas.¹⁴ All the vocal samples are incorporated into *Axon* as sounds without any semantic connotation. In an interview, León encouraged me to "...think of the words as sound, not trying to imagine what the words might mean."¹⁵

Considering Gestural References to *Batéy* in Performing *Axon* (cont.)

3.1 Emulating the sound in the samples: Interpreting *Axon* in light of *Sea Tu Nom...*

Among the sound samples that occur prominently in *Axon* is a vocal chord that is set to the word “dream.” This is the only word in *Batéy* that is in English. In *Batéy* the “dream” chord concludes an a cappella segment titled “Sea Tu Nom...” Aside from “dream,” this section only uses text fragments in a language of León’s invention. León explains, “At the end of *Sea Tu Nom* it is as if I have a dream. And that is actually thinking of Martin Luther King.”¹⁶ In *Axon*, the word “dream” is rendered indecipherable by the electronic processing. The chord appears several times near the end of the piece, where a copy of it transposed up a major sixth is superimposed onto it. This latter version of the sample concludes the piece (m. 178).¹⁷

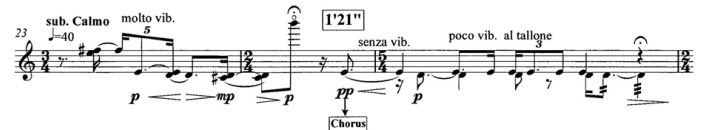
Near the beginning of *Axon*, in mm. 23-25, a similar abstraction from semantic meaning is carried out, using a fragment of the same “Sea Tu Nom...” segment of *Batéy*. At m. 24 of *Axon*, León cues a sample from the opening solo portion of “Sea Tu Nom...” in which a male soloist sings a rising tritone, F4 to B4. In *Batéy*, the solo contains a series of strikingly large interval leaps, extending from a low range to a high falsetto. The sample in *Axon* appears with the “S” of “Sea” cut away, leaving “ea tu.” The sample “ea tu” is harmonized by the software instrument as it is played, resulting in a harmonic progression (see Example 1).

(a)  (b) 

Example 1: Original “Sea tu” from *Batéy* (a) and harmonized sample “ea tu,” in *Axon*, mm. 24-25 (b).

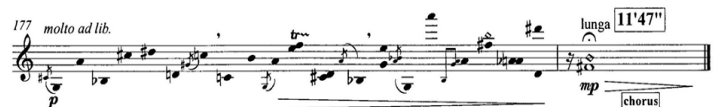
In *Axon*, the violin extrapolates the vocal’s upward reach from *Batéy*, obscured in the sample by the harmonic progression, with a much larger interval than the tritone in the voice sample, traversing the range from a low C#4-D4 dyad to a natural harmonic played on B6. Though the pitches and interval are different, the violinist may choose to imbue this upward gesture with the same quality of continuity and color change as the vocal’s contour in “Sea tu.”¹⁸ Framing this leap, the violin sustains the notes E4 and D4 from the middle voices in the chord progression of the harmonized sample, thus melding the two chords from the harmonized sample

together from within, and sealing the syllables into a new unit, “eatu.” The violin thus aids in the blurring of traces, as text becomes transformed to sound. The connection between the violin and the vocal sample may be further strengthened if the violinist makes a point to match the interval of D-E that she plays with inner voices of the harmonized “eatu” (see Example 2).



Example 2: mm. 23-25 of *Axon*.

Heeding León’s direction to disregard any semantic residue from sampled voices in *Axon*, these sounds may nevertheless remain evocative of context. Thus, the final occurrences of the “dream” chord in *Axon* may still suggest that the violinist consider its context in *Batéy*. The final cadenza in *Axon*, a series of large interval leaps, could be compared to the male singer’s solo passage in “Sea Tu Nom...” The violinist might choose to finger some of the higher notes in this passage on the G and D strings, evoking the leaps in falsetto range of the male singer in *Batéy* and charging the violin leaps with similar tension and comparable timbral change (see Example 3).



Example 3: mm. 177-178 of *Axon*.

Leaps across large spans of the violin’s overall range are thematized across *Axon* and manifest in a rich variety of gestures, reaching into the instrument’s absolute extremes via subharmonics and harmonics.¹⁹

3.2 Performing “Guan”

Another vocal sample that the violin might emulate is “Guan,” which appears in m. 55 (see Example 4). The violin’s pizzicato and upward glissando that coincide with the playing of this sample might imitate the elastic quality of the vocal accent by making the pizzicato plucking motion as round as possible, and matching the bow speed to the nature of the accent and following decrescendo in the glissando. The insights from this exercise may then be applied when the same or similar plucking

Considering Gestural References to *Batéy* in Performing *Axon* (cont.)

motives appear without the vocal sample, such as at the end of m. 140 (see Example 5).

Both the falsetto reach and plucked glissando are gestures that traverse large registral spans. Their nature is very different, however. The emphasis in "Guan" is on the low note, as a springboard for the leaping, whereas in "eatu" the measured accent is on the final syllable, a reach with a precise aim in landing. Here and with other recurring motives in *Axon*, purposely drawing these sonic affinities with vocal gestures might keep them audible in the violin part during the longer stretches when they are absent.

Example 4: Excerpt of m. 55 of *Axon*, showing indication of text "Guan."

Example 5: m. 140 of *Axon*, showing similarity to m. 55.

3.3 Grouping gestures into phrases

There are many other motives that would warrant closer discussion, but here I'd like to consider the perspective of how the performer can connect motives into thematic units. Creating flow requires a larger perspective on which the exact execution of these motives will depend; sometimes it helps to reframe the task and step outside of the violin idiom.

Much of the score in *Axon* is virtuosic, featuring tightly-juxtaposed challenging gestures that are, by themselves, idiomatic to the violin, but difficult to execute in the prescribed order and tempo. I found this situation reminiscent of the challenge pianist David Tudor faced when preparing to perform Pierre Boulez's *Sonata No. 2* in 1950.²⁰ Although the situation of the music in his case was very different, the idea of seeking an alternative framework to enact musical continuity is comparable.

I find that when faced with passages like mm. 1-7 of *Axon*, experimenting with stepping outside of the common gestural vocabulary of classical violin playing can significantly speed up the learning process of such an intricate passage (see Example 6). Assuming a compound meter from m. 1 (although no meter is marked in the first two measures), the violinist may practice by imagining a choreographic phrase spanning from mm. 1-7, with a sub-phrase ending on the fermata in m. 3. This phrasing may inform bowing, vibrato, dynamics, emphasis, and centers of gravity in rhythmic gestures. Thus the violinist's own motions with their hands may emulate the velocity, strength, agility, and elasticity of a dancer.

Example 6: mm. 1-7 of *Axon*.

This exercise is not necessarily about emulating a specific type or style of dance.²¹ Rather, it is about subsuming a string of motives or gestures into a larger phrase that takes into account the whole body and performance space. Simply put, it is about stepping beyond the up and down motion along the length of the bow and fingerboard, and instead, articulating a phrase in an expanded space. This helps collect the rhythmic groups under larger arcs and facilitates the determination of bowings and fingerings. The method of borrowing from a gestural vocabulary of another discipline can also help forge gestural hybrids that help connect a challenging array of separate motives, even at great speed. After this stage of learning, the performer may let go of any markers of dance in the above passage, or choose to keep some, to add to the energetic drive of this segment.

3.4 Shifting state of mind in performance: Relating to the electronic sounds

Beyond the physicality of performance, one may consider the attitude of the performer toward a specific passage. Musicians have choices of enactment that include, among others, presenting a work dispassionately, like a narrator; rhetorically, like an orator; or dramatically "living" the piece of

Considering Gestural References to *Batéy* in Performing *Axon* (cont.)

music on stage. I think that nuanced, era- and style-specific discussions of enactment techniques would be a fruitful addition to any musician's interpretation-crafting, along the lines of how actors consider acting techniques in theater and entertainment media.

In *Axon*, for example, should the performer perceive the electronic enhancements as empowerment or menace? Or might the violinist's attitude change at different points in the composition? Could the violinist at times even be independent of, or unaffected by, the presence of the electronics? To illustrate the possibilities, I will touch on two attitudes that seem to lend themselves to the nature of *Axon*.

An example of empowerment or control of the violinist in *Axon* is "playing the mic." The performer can learn, through repeated practice with the software instrument, to timbrally paint the sound processing. Because the processors act upon the audio signal from the violin, the loudness, proximity to the microphone, and timbre of the violin all alter the sounds that the software emits. In other words, the performer may choose the violin's dynamic level and sound color to shape the sonic data that these processors act upon.

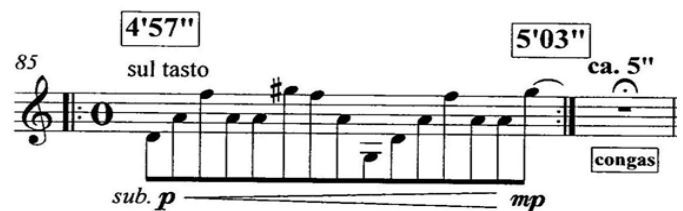
In the case of some of the electronic processing, the answer is less obvious. For example, one of the types of processing used frequently in *Axon* is harmonization. This effect multiplies the violin's presence, creating choirs of transposed sonic clones, higher and lower than the violin, extending its range and seemingly augmenting the instrument. Add to that the fact that the harmonization is often paired with delay effects, which spill out temporally-scattered clones of both the original and transposed violin sounds, and the situation quickly becomes overwhelming! Akin to a medium or a shaman inhabiting a ritualistic moment, in such passages the violinist might be temporarily absorbed by handling what was conjured from the microphone, rather than playing to an audience, momentarily switching to a different mental state and then back again, adding perspective to the concert performance framework.

Returning to the audio samples in *Axon*, one might consider their sonic appearances in the piece similarly. The sampled material inserts fragments of performances by other musicians, visible neither to the violinist nor the audience. These moments happened elsewhere, in the past; and as such, they make a connection to another place and time, bringing that past performance back into the current

moment. Moreover, these samples are unconcerned about their impact on an ongoing performance. At times the violinist triggers these inserts, by playing specific pitches that the software instrument is listening for, and at other times the software instrument cues them. Either way, the performer may decide whether to project the impression of control of these sonic apparitions and how to relate to them, similar to considerations regarding the sound processing.

3.5 Shifting state of mind in performance: the 'practicing' theme

Another set of passages in *Axon* where the performer's attitude or state of mind might become important pertains to a repetitive figure that appears midway through the piece (m. 85), intruding upon and disrupting the previous content and trajectory (see Example 7).



Example 7: mm. 85-86 of *Axon*.

Although seemingly a detail at first, this repetitive motive and its transformations emerge as predominant thematic material in much of the latter portion of the work. León speaks about the intrusion of this material:

"After a tremendous amount of complexities, I had the necessity to go simple. And that simplicity also brought me to times when I was a young musician practicing. It sounds like a violinist practicing a specific passage. And that is how it becomes part of the piece, and it grows, and it takes over almost the second part of the piece. But that was a moment that sort of [...] intruded into what I was doing, and I said, 'Wow,' and I put it there, and it took me somewhere else! [laughs]." ²²

As León described, this motive seems to appear from a different reality, one in which the performer is in a practice room, finding themselves at a stage of preparation, not delivery, meticulously drawing paths in the air with the bow hand, not concerning themselves yet with rhythm or expression, but merely with crisp string crossings.

Considering Gestural References to *Batéy* in Performing *Axon* (cont.)

Given the nature of this figure, the performer of *Axon* may place herself into a “practice” state of mind when playing. In essence, the practice state implies a sharp focus on the precise execution of the kinetic task called for, with a relative disengagement with the specifics of the performer’s current surroundings. Practice state is characterized by a sense of isolation, a calm and persistent pursuit of a single technical task, seemingly oblivious to the presence of an audience. This repeating purposive action both stores a custom-made embodied tool in gestural memory and frees the mind to go to places of heightened awareness and creativity.

This approach is supported by León’s own description of her compositional process, in which the form of the piece arose from her intuitive pursuit of the intrusive motivic idea. In an interview, León described such invading musical elements as “flashes,” saying, “...you don’t know where they are coming from ... and that’s one of my intuitions. If I hear something that all of a sudden came through, I don’t let it go. [...] Because it is like another me inside of me that is in fact telling me things, and sometimes captures my attention.”²³

CONCLUSION

I have touched on some interpretive choices a performer might consider when preparing the realization of a given score, described through the example of Tania León’s *Axon*. The choices include gestures as combinations of articulation, rhythmic emphasis, and tone color, and their choreography as they are put into practice, as well as considerations of different mindsets on the performer’s part. The latter takes into account the experience of the performer as they bring a work of music to the stage. There are many possibilities in which this aspect of performance could be approached and theorized. At their best, gestural and performance experience considerations may reveal or enhance large-scale dynamic factors at work in the shape of a composition, especially when in symbiosis with theory, analysis, and historical research.

A performer’s considerations also have an element of dramaturgy to them. But developing a performance is a process of continuously testing and varying; it is a process of exploring by doing, and as such is constantly evolving and feels imperfect. As well, the process of endless repetition, weighing, and refining does not stop after the performance on stage. A work like *Axon* is in some ways akin to a neural network: the internal connections activated are

never the same in any actualization.

A performer carries much responsibility. Some performances inspire us to think and create, to interpret and imagine — these are memorable and transporting — whereas others leave us cold. Performers often have tremendous power over how a composition is perceived. Such responsibility and power, of course, reside also with theorists and historians. Collaborations between scholars and performers can help us think outside our comfort zones and the usual courses of action in our work. More often than not, each party emerges from a collaborative process mutually invigorated.

Notes

1. Tania León, interviewed via phone by Maja Cerar on 18 October 2017.
2. *Axon* was commissioned by the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) and was premiered by violinist/composer Mari Kimura at the Society’s annual World Music Days in Hong Kong in 2002.
3. León, phone interview, 2017.
4. Tania León, score to *Axon* for Violin Solo and Interactive Computer, New York and Hamburg: Peermusic Classical, Copyright 2002 by Iroko Music. All Rights Reserved.
5. Ibid.
6. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, an axon is a nerve fiber that transmits impulses from neurons to other neurons, muscle cells, or gland cells. <https://www.britannica.com/science/axon>, accessed 19 Sept. 2019.
7. León, phone interview, 2017.
8. Both León and Kimura, in their communications with me, have mentioned that *Axon* contains samples from previous works by León. However, León only spoke about the relation of *Axon* to *Batéy* in her phone interview of October 2017.
9. Peermusic website, <https://www.peermusicclassical.com/classical-us-catalog/results?id=11902&Composer=Tania%20Le%C3%B3n&EnsembleType=Chorus%20and%20Ensemble>. Accessed 22 September 2019.
10. The title *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

Considering Gestural References to *Batéy* in Performing *Axon* (cont.)

the New World." K. Robert Schwarz, "Tania León; Indígena." Liner notes to *Batéy*, by Tania León. CRI CD 662, 1994.

11. Ibid.

12. For more detail on the composition of *Axon*, please see Alejandro Madrid, *Tania León's Stride: A Polyrhythmic Life* (University of Illinois Press, 2021), 161-164.

13. *Axon* was originally composed with the interactive software Max/MSP. However, when one purchases the score today, it comes with an audio CD containing only the pre-recorded samples. The CD-based version does not include any live processing of the violin's sound. If performers wish to play the interactive version, they must contact Mari Kimura for the software.

14. León, phone interview, 2017.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. León created the processed samples from her previous works with the help of composer Noah Creshevsky.

18. The concept of gesture in music performance has been studied and theorized extensively. For examples in recent scholarship, see Elaine King and Anthony Gritten, eds., *Music and Gesture* (Routledge, 2016) and *New Perspectives on Music and Gesture* (Routledge, 2016).

19. Mari Kimura, "Subharmonics," <http://www.marikimura.com/subharmonics.html>.

20. You Nakai, *Reminded by the Instruments: David Tudor's Music* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 83-85, 89.

21. Moreover, it is not about illustrating the meaning of sounds in gestures, often derogatorily referred to as "Mickey-Mousing," but about sounding as similar as possible and thus acknowledging the experience of a gesture in another idiom. For a thoughtful discussion on issues pertaining to 'literalness' in visualizing music through movement, see Hamish J. Robb, "Looking Beyond Facile Understandings of 'Literalness' in Music-Dance Collaborations: Mark Morris's *All Fours*," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 30, no. 2 (2012), 126-146.

22. León, phone interview, 2017.

23. Ibid.

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American Music Review

Volume LI, Issue 1

ISSN 1943-9385

Fall 2021

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AMR is published in the Fall and Spring. Copyright 2021 by the H. Wiley Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, 2900 Bedford Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11210.

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Institute News

Stephanie Jensen-Moulton

A quick intake of breath. That low and broad laugh festooning into the harmony of shared mirth. An electric presence that literally turned on the lights above her as she walked down the hallway towards her office at Brooklyn College, smiling, opening her arms gracefully, just at the waist, greeting one of her students warmly with an idiomatic “Sweetie...”

Tania León—pianist, dancer, creator, conductor, and composer—retired in 2019 from her position as Distinguished Professor of Music Composition at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center. Her legacy and mentorship loom too large to celebrate through just one outlet: Tania, one might say, has the same indelible effect on people as her music has on the ear. Therefore, we dedicate this issue of the *American Music Review* to her life and work, and in so doing, we assemble a group of short essays in the burgeoning new subfield of “Tania León Studies,” here written by colleagues, collaborators, and former students.

Maja Cerar’s cover essay locates her connection with León’s compositions in her idiomatic performance practice for the 2002 work for violin and electronics, *Axon*. Because of her unique positionality as performer and musicologist, Cerar is able to provide a compelling close reading of her tactile and intellectual relationship to the webs of electric impulses in León’s piece for solo violin and electronics. **Carol Oja’s** essay incorporates quotations from the Oral Histories of American Music collection featuring extended commentary by León about her extraordinary life. While contextualizing León’s 2021 Pulitzer Prize-winning piece *Stride* within the landscape of the composer’s own words and works, Oja complicates León’s historical rejection of identity markers such as “Black” and “Cuban” with regard to her creative life. **Isaac Jean-François**, who has been hard at work organizing León’s immense and priceless archive of notes, photos, and scores for its eventual deposit alongside Arthur Mitchell’s papers at Columbia University, writes passionately of his experience diving headfirst into this artist’s life via her artifacts. Deeply changed by migration from Russia to the US early in her career, composer **Polina Nazaykinskaya** considers the influence of Tania León on her music, her career, and her life. And finally, **Alejandro L. Madrid** discusses the process of writing the first substantive Tania León biography.

MUSIC IN POLY CULTURAL AMERICA SPEAKER SERIES

Looking back to the start of the Fall 2021 semester, our speaker series began auspiciously with a lecture on Hawaiian slide guitar music by **Kevin Fellezs** entitled “*Nahenahe: The Restorative Politics of Hawaiian Music.*” Fellezs explained how native Hawaiians (*Kanaka Maoli*) created a narrative through their mid-century popular music tradition, reaffirming cultural values shadowed by the biased narratives of American tourists. Brooklyn College MM alumna **Ana Alfonsina Mora Flores** returned (virtually) to share her research in the talk, “*Feminopraxis ruidistas: Interlacing Affections, Sound, and Beyond in Latin America.*” Mora Flores asserted that the creation of noise music or *ruido* has led to a movement of feminist collectives in South America that immerse women in a culture of safety and belonging. And finally, **Nancy Yunhwa Rao** joined us from a conference in Taiwan to discuss “*A Transpacific History of American Music.*” Empowering scholars to further explore the deep cultural links between Asian immigration patterns and American musics, Rao highlighted Chinese opera theater as a particularly rich topic for investigation along the lines of race, class, gender, and nationality.

STAFF NEWS

Along with a new academic year and its array of changes, Fall 2021 ushered in a new era for the staff of the Hitchcock Institute. With the official retirement of **Ray Allen**—who has now fully committed himself to HISAM Board activities while writing a second book on Brooklyn Carnival music—the Institute is now a four-person operation. But we’re pleased to introduce our new Managing Editor, Graduate Center DMA cello performance candidate **Kirsten Jermé**. This fall, Jermé had the privilege of working with Tania León on “*Oh Yemanjá*” from León’s 1994 opera *Scourge of Hyacinths*, along with Kaija Saariaho’s “*Mirage.*” Both works, scored for soprano, cello and piano, were performed by a trio of Graduate Center performers on the Music in Midtown series. Additionally, she continued to serve as a TA for several music courses at Brooklyn College while teaching one final semester remotely as Applied Music Lecturer in cello at North Carolina State University. Welcome to HISAM, Kirsten!

Institute News (cont.)

Composer and conductor **Whitney George** continued as the HISAM College Assistant while maintaining a packed schedule of creative work. This fall, she continued teaching with the music and film series **ThinkOlio** via Zoom, in addition to beginning a new collaboration with the Kauffman Music Center's Luna Lab, which provides mentorship and performance opportunities for young composers who are female, non-binary or gender nonconforming. Also with Kauffman, George began a position at the Special Music School (a New York City public high school for contemporary music) where she teaches composition, the Composer's Forum, and conducts the Improvisation Ensemble. In September, George's music was featured in Tania León's COMPOSERS NOW "Dialogues" event at National Opera America. And to cap off her fall term, George saw the release of two albums on Pinch Records: **For You** in September 2021 with The Curiosity Cabinet (featuring BC alumni Adam von Housen on violin, and Edward Forstman on piano); and **Solitude and Secrecy**, also with the Curiosity Cabinet. Congratulations, Dr. George!



Album art by Whitney George

Recently, contributing editor **Michelle Yom** presented her paper "Towards a Formal Genealogy of Black Art: Cecil Taylor, Arthur Jafa, and W.E.B. Du Bois" at the Black Portraiture[s] VII Conference. **Jeff Taylor** has taken over as Director of Jazz Studies at Brooklyn College--under the label of "Jazz@BC" (riffing on the name of a famous jazz organization in Manhattan) and housed at HISAM. He is working with ensemble leaders **Kat Rodriguez** and **Ronnie Burrage** to build a culture of jazz at BC, with strong ties to our lively surrounding community.

He continues to head a committee charged with some important revisions to our Masters in Global Jazz degree program. Please check out Jazz@BC social media accounts: @jazzbccuny (Instagram), @jazzbccuny (Twitter) and @jazzcunybc (Facebook). For more information, please email **jazzcunybc@gmail.com**.

In addition to planning and enjoying each of our HISAM lectures, initiating the first phase of a fundraising campaign for the Institute, and anticipating events for Spring 2022, I've taken part in two panels: one at the annual meeting of the American Musicological Society, where we discussed feminist approaches to musicology careers in the creative industries; and a second in which the panel engaged with the idea of "Disruptive Pedagogy" particularly in the field of American Studies. I look forward to reuniting with many of you as we meet in a freer, brighter, and, hopefully, healthier new year.

In solidarity,
Stephanie Jensen-Moulton

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"Can You Imagine?": Reflections on the Career of Tania León

Carol J. Oja

Friends of Tania León will smile at the title of this essay, which captures one of her signature phrases. With it, she expresses a sense of wonder at the boundaries she routinely yet improbably crosses while navigating a high-profile career as a composer, conductor, pianist, educator, and new-music organizer. As time passes, she gains ever-more acclaim – most recently with the 2021 Pulitzer Prize in Music – yet she has remained down-to-earth and community-based, exercising a strong social conscience even as she fashions a distinctive compositional aesthetic.

My connection to Tania dates back to the mid-1980s when she joined the faculty of the Conservatory of Music at Brooklyn College. At the time, I was teaching there too, and we became fast friends. Tania had then been in New York City for nearly twenty years, after escaping the dictatorship of Fidel Castro on a "Freedom Flight" and thus joining the Cuban diaspora. "Because when I was leaving [Cuba]," she later recalled, "I never realized the pressures of the leaving. When you are in a place where all of a sudden the political connotations of the environment become so heightened, if you don't swim into what is supposed to be the area that you're supposed to swim, you are, like, at odds." And therein lies her life-long challenge, whether in Cuba or the U.S.: finding ways to "swim" that honor her cultural heritage and gender yet avoiding stereotypes based on expectations of what she is "supposed" to do.

Throughout this essay, I quote from an extended interview with Tania that was conducted by Jenny Raymond for Vivian Perlis's Oral History of American Music (OHAM) at Yale¹. The interview took place in 1998-99, and the 1990s were central to the Brooklyn College phase of my friendship with Tania.

Tania has established consistent values as both an educator and a composer, and she has been in the vanguard of navigating mobility and race. Today, universities and musical institutions across the country struggle to accommodate changing demographics and deepening racial strife. At Brooklyn College, as a public urban institution of higher learning, those challenges have been the norm for decades, and Tania has been a force in educating the college's diverse body of students. A striking memory for me is seeing students of color



Tania León receiving the 2021 Pulitzer Prize in Music
Photo by Jordan Strauss/Invision/AP

line up outside her door during office hours. She patiently makes herself available, while facing a familiar time pressure for faculty of color.

Tania exemplifies approaching education "as the practice for freedom," as articulated by the late bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress*. "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential," hooks writes, "if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin."² Those same principles also underpin Tania's work with major musical institutions, which she challenges to recognize the humanity of their urban neighbors. An early stage of this work took place with the Brooklyn Philharmonic in the 1970s, where Tania collaborated with the composers Julius Eastman and Talib Rasul Hakim to transport the orchestra beyond the concert hall, modeling community-based initiatives that have since become the norm for American orchestras. "We went to churches, we went to gymnasiums,

"Can You Imagine?" (cont.)

museums—we even went to prisons, hospitals, everywhere," she recalled. With COVID-19, those programs have become a survival mechanism for some musical organizations.

Yet amidst this dedication to socio-economic, racial, and ethnic difference, Tania simultaneously resists "labels," a term that she evokes frequently and with frustration. She voices irritation at being identified as a Black composer, a Cuban or Latin American composer, a female composer. "Why do you call a person a Black composer? Do we call the other people the white composers?" she challenges.

Over the decades, then, I have had the privilege of witnessing Tania's career unfold. Together, we commiserate about the ongoing challenges for women in the American university and, in her case, for persons of color. But then Tania is so warm and embracing that she has many close friendships, often with a professional tie. This essay meditates on my personal sense of the core principles and issues that animate her work. Each section opens with Tania's voice, quoting from her OHAM interview.

Role Models

"I understand that Joan [Tower] said that she had no role models. I never had one."³

Issues of lineage are complex for creative artists, especially those with personal identities outside the traditional ancestries of Western classical music. Tania affirms multiple luminaries as forces in her aesthetic genealogy, whether "playing Chopin and Beethoven and Czerny and all these big composers in my home" in Cuba, or perceiving composers like Bartók, Dvořák, Rachmaninoff, and Stravinsky as offering a vision for "incorporating all of me into what I do." She studies the music of Boulez, Ligeti, and Messiaen "a lot." But those figures are remote, even a bit alien. They are white and male and European. So when asked about her own models by Jenny Raymond in 1998, Tania referred to Kathryn Talalay's *Composition in Black and White: The Life of Philippa Schuyler*, a book that was then brand new. Tania expressed shock at not knowing about Schuyler previously. After all, Schuyler was a mixed-race woman, pianist, and composer who, as Tania remarks, "was buried twenty days before my arrival in New York." Yet erasure meant Schuyler was not visible as a potential role model in Tania's youth.

Therein lies a puzzle: for a woman and a person of color, many potential ancestors have been ignored in concert programming and standard histories, which yields the unsettling result of staring into a void while searching for a lineage.

Community

"If you're going to go with an orchestra to Harlem, right? Don't go there to teach them that this is the best music of the world."

Tania León has long coattails, consistently embracing the communities around her and, in the process, building new ones. Composers Now, of which she is founder and artistic director, is the most recent manifestation of that impulse, as attested in its mission statement: "Composers Now empowers all living composers, celebrates the diversity of their voices and honors the significance of their artistic contributions to the cultural fabric of society."⁴ León's⁵ career represents a wide and generous embrace, including not only her neighborhood work with the Brooklyn Philharmonic but also leadership of Sonidos de las Américas of the American Composers Orchestra (1994-99), to cite one example. In 2015, I had the pleasure of assisting her to curate "Voces de America Latina," which marked another milestone: the first-ever Fromm Players concert at Harvard that was devoted to Latin American contemporary music.

A community-based spirit infuses many of León's compositions as well. Her one-hour work *Drummin'* (1997) offers an exhilarating example. There, she created an intercultural extravaganza bringing together percussionists trained in European classical music with those in "ethnic percussion ensembles," as her work catalogue terms it. "So we have two [types of] virtuosos in front of each other," León recalls, "and they don't know how to talk to each other." She describes the fear – "the threat" – that the musicians felt and how it took prolonged negotiations with musicians in Miami, then in Germany, to achieve a space in which musicians of radically different backgrounds could find a way to coexist compatibly.

Memories

"Who am I? And I went back to Cuba [in 1979]. Twelve years of not seeing the place, twelve years of not seeing my family."

"Can You Imagine?" (cont.)

León might distance herself from cultural labels, but she continues to identify intensely with memories of her childhood in Cuba. When she finally obtained her first visa to return home, she did so after many family births and deaths had taken place without her.

Tania's grandmother Rosa Julia de los Mederos is central to her public reflections about Cuba.⁶ Clearly, her grandmother realized that the family had a prodigy on its hands, bringing Tania at age four to study at the conservatory in Havana. Over the decades, I have watched Tania retain those family ties, despite persistent political impediments. When her mother was in her final years, the challenge was to find friends traveling to Cuba who could deliver basic necessities like prescription drugs, eye glasses, and new nightgowns. Recently, it meant learning at an unbridgeable distance of a half-brother's death in Cuba from COVID-19.

In her music, León often reflects on her heritage, and *Indígena* for chamber orchestra (1991) is a stunning example, as well as being one of her best-known compositions. The work is "a commentary about the activities of my neighborhood [in Cuba]," as she puts it, "the neighborhood that I recalled in my memories once I went back. See, that piece is a direct hit of that emotion, going back." *Indígena* is a burst of polyrhythmic energy, referencing *comparsa*, the exuberant processions of masked dancers that parade through Cuba's streets during Carnival.

Memories are complex, however, and for a person in diaspora they are often tinged with loss. León describes *Indígena* as ending with a "tremolo coming out of the winds and the strings, as though it's a plane that is leaving. That was me leaving the place again."

Syncretic Modernism

"I speak with an accent, so my music might have an accent, which might not be understood by many people. And if the accent has to happen to be roots or folklore or whatever you want to call it at some point: fine! That's okay. But . . . it's [also] like adopting the culture of Schoenberg and becoming a twelve-tonalist person. It's a language that I learned from him, and all of a sudden I created this work, and it's a twelve-tone work."



Tania León speaking at the premiere of Stride
Photo by Chris Lee/Courtesy New York Philharmonic

Sounded evocations of Cuba are only one component of León's highly personal compositional style, which she fights to define on her own terms. "I didn't synthesize anything," she asserted pugnaciously during her OHAM interview. "We [Cuban creative artists] have always been crossover without thinking that you had to have a label for that." For any composer, developing a musical style has to do with translating a personal vision – an aesthetic – for the public. In León's case, she positions herself in relation to Tower, Miriam Gideon, and Louise Talma, as well as Schoenberg, Luciano Berio, and György Ligeti. Her style represents her own vision of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century modernism: syncretic, edgy, challenging, grounded in life and displacement. It is often atonal, at times twelve-tone, and with rhythm often prioritized over melody.

Courage

"'Tania, you conduct it.' Me, conducting? You've got to be kidding! What else am I going to be doing? Of course, at Dance Theatre of Harlem, everybody did everything: If I wiped the floor and painted the walls and put the nails, and you know what I mean? I wrote a ballet. Okay, now I conduct an orchestra. It was not such a big thing. Even then, I was frightened to death."

Rising to prominence in a new country, apart from family and professional networks, requires extraordinary courage and an indomitable work

"Can You Imagine?" (cont.)

ethic. León talks of how she has repeatedly gotten into "snowball situations" where she "rolls with the punches." This means that she has made the most of opportunities, even when the payoff was not at all clear. In the OHAM interview, León recalls her time during the mid-1990s as a resident composer with the New York Philharmonic under Kurt Masur. Her account in the interview matches my memory of our conversations at the time. She arrived at the Philharmonic in a position designed to promote contemporary music, only to find herself in a hall of mirrors – or in this case a storage room chock full of scores that had been submitted by composers hoping for performance opportunities. The packages were unopened, and León immediately set out to address a disrespectful situation. She described herself as filling the role of "a cleaning lady" to mail back the scores or, if the sender could not be located, to deposit them at the American Music Center or the Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.

During those years, Masur did not program León's music, although he did open an opportunity for her to conduct the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig. With the Philharmonic, "it was like being there and not being there," she recalled. Fellow composers were frustrated with her because the orchestra was ignoring their music too. Yet she had no power. As I listened then to Tania's frustrations, I heard a lament common to women and people of color: being closed out of conversations and decision-making, being marginalized. It takes tremendous courage and resilience to keep going in the face of such negation.

Yet over the course of her still-thriving career, Tania León has had the fortitude and creativity to "imagine" a life for which there was no readily available template. All the while, she has retained her deep integrity and loyalty to her Cuban heritage while building a whole new family – a professional and personal network – in her adopted home. She composes steadily and prolifically, and she regularly conducts major orchestras at home and abroad. Her list of awards is substantial, including the recent Pulitzer, and while she might have found it difficult to find role models at the start of her career, she has ended up serving in that very capacity for a diverse spectrum of young composers. Personally, I am grateful for the good fortune of Tania's steady friendship – for her kindness, brilliance, and abundant generosity of spirit.

Notes

1. Tania León, interview with Jenny Raymond, Jackson Heights, New York, 13 November 1998 and 7 June 1999. The interview was part of "Major Figures in American Music," a visionary initiative of nearly 1500 interviews initiated by Vivian Perlis for Yale's Oral History of American Music. I quote from the interview with León's permission. Thanks to Libby Van Cleve, Director of OHAM, and Anne Rhodes, Research Archivist for OHAM for help obtaining the interview materials.
2. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 13.
3. The written quotations here are lightly edited versions of the OHAM transcription, which at times condenses León's speech.
4. <https://www.composersnow.org/cn/about/mission/>. Accessed 27 March 2022.
5. To signal the shift from writing about Tania as a colleague and friend to a more scholarly consideration of her compositional oeuvre, here, I make an intentional change to referencing her as I would any other respected research subject, by last name.
6. Thanks to Alejandro Madrid for supplying the full name of Tania's grandmother.

Archiving Tania León's Limitless Dance

Isaac Jean-François

Upon opening the door, I never knew what to expect. I might encounter images of Tania León at the helm of the Thailand Philharmonic Orchestra; or clad in a leather jacket and boots in front of the old New York Times building alongside fellow composer-performers Julius Eastman (1940–1990) and Talib Rasul Hakim (1940–1988); or maybe offering dozens of Ferrero Rocher chocolates to awe-struck guests at her home.¹ I remember coming across all of these facets of León in a visit to her home with Ellie Hisama, now Dean of the Faculty of Music at University of Toronto, and Jennifer Lee, Curator for Performing Arts at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University. It was incredibly special to be in the presence of so much storied ephemera: original manuscripts and photographs with material history. León spent time looking outside where large trees create a forest view from her back windows; I was getting a glimpse into the natural world that framed so much of her compositional expertise.

My encounters with León's luminous spirit, both playful and knowing, demonstrate the fullness of her inimitable sonic vision. Her composition gathers disparate musical traditions, like salsa and classical genres, and listens to the movement of creatures on the earth—to *alma* of humans and nature colliding. Initially, my writing on Eastman led me to an early image of the Brooklyn Philharmonic Community Concert Series organizers, and yet it is León, at the photo's center, who draws the viewer's gaze into her captivating mind. In any tempo, León bears a confident look as the conductor and composer of a huge collection of path-breaking works. She crafts with precision, weaving a fabric of sound that encompasses a vast and varied instrumentation.

The opportunity to reflect on León's archival acquisition, in progress by Columbia University's library, has been a challenging one. The trouble with writing any definitive history or description of León's archive, and conceptualizing her oeuvre more broadly, is that it runs up against her emphatic rejection of boundaries and borders. The composer herself maintained many of these precious documents and original materials on her own, with an archival care from which we, as listeners and researchers alike, are privileged to benefit. Any attempt to encapsulate León within a single identity or under the rubric of a particular ideology would collapse the sonic freedom that sounds in her work. León resists easy definition. She is a driven composer who lives her mantra—that self-made *cantus firmus*—filled with endless compositional vigor.



Tania León (center) with fellow Brooklyn Philharmonic Community Concert Series organizers, program director Corrine Coleman and composers Talib Hakim and Julius Eastman, in front of the old New York Times building, ca. mid-1970s. Photo by Marbeth, courtesy of Tania León



Courtesy of Tania León

Archiving León's Limitless Dance (cont.)

When I process the many comprehensive accounts of León's life, I am reminded of Fred Moten's idea, "consent not to be a single being."² As a rule, León warns against any quick apprehension of her form through the analytics of race, gender, and nationhood. Alejandro Madrid's 2022 biography of the composer "examine[s] the different ways in which Tania León appears in Western art music history narratives."³ He continues: "León has rejected terms such as 'black composer,' 'woman composer,' or even 'Afro-Cuban music,' in favor of more fluid and strategic ways to highlight the impermanence and transitivity of the human experience."⁴ Ironically, this rejection somehow intensifies the archivist's drive to label León's compositional verve—to place her energy into boxes that, in her perspective, limit that motion. I personally find this tension to be exciting and generative; encountering images of her at the helm of orchestral and classical music spaces—environments that have strategically absented people who did not fit the categorical image of a "conductor" or "composer" in Western classical idioms—feels incredibly empowering to me.

Walter Aaron Clark, in his 1997 review of León's *Indígena* (1991), observes that the piece "commences with an atonal exchange between percussion and woodwinds characterized by a 'motoric, interlocking, polyrhythmic groove.' This gives way to a more tonal environment in which León evokes the Carnival season and its music, the *comparsa*."⁵ Song and dance shift gears from sounds of celebration to an ongoing and vibrant scene of affective citation in León's imaginary. Even a piece like *Rituál* (1987) for solo piano, dedicated to Dance Theatre of Harlem co-founders Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook, has an emphatic ostinato. This piece jumps over two octaves and hits some of the lowest notes on the piano. *Rituál* draws listeners to memories of dances and parties, across cultural experience, that might register in the latent corners of our consciousness. Engaging the dexterity of a composer who has created across the forms of opera, dance and orchestra, León invites us to place ourselves within the reach of her sound's motion.

León's work invites us to listen in several registers: love, care and constructed sonic fantasies. Her almost fifty years of caring practice has altered my experience of listening, an act already charged by archival encounters. Beyond the confines of institutional holdings,⁶ León has guided my listening process, allowing me to hear percussion and wind instruments to the fullest. Her ability to play with the lyrical edge of a flute, for example, can flip right

into a meditation on the metallic interior of a wind instrument or the taut strings of a piano. *Alma* (2007), for flute and piano, explores the wide range of possibilities among instruments while allowing them to exist as separate entities. The swaying rhythms of the piece bring the listener into a miniature dance within a brief span of musical time.



Dance Theatre of Harlem at the Guggenheim Museum, 1971
Photo by Suzanne Vlamis

León worked with the Dance Theatre of Harlem in New York for over a decade. The company's premiere in January of 1971 was part of her origin story as a composer and visionary in the genre of sonic choreography and dance. Although I was expecting to find dance photography in her archive, I was almost brought to tears when I saw this photo for the first time. The white spiral interior of Frank Lloyd Wright's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum warps at the seams in this image captured by Suzanne Vlamis. Black motion, steadied by bars, disrupts the dizzying spiral: movement cannot be trapped by the ordering impulse of the museum's interior. The Guggenheim held the dance company's debut performance: art historical archives and choreographic motion are part of León's legacy.⁷

How do I attend to the chromatic dissonance I experience in both the photographic portraits of León and the works that she has composed—the light and dark, the energy in excess of language, an art deeply rooted in faith and family? León has shared the inspiration she received from her mother in composing her opera *Scourge of Hyacinths* (1994).⁸ León draws us into the audible link between mother and child, shifting how we imagine narratives of

Archiving León's Limitless Dance (cont.)

sonic inspiration. The repetition of a mother's voice motivates her to create sound that reconfigures loss and remembrance.

With the pandemic still raging and climate change spiraling out of control, León's brilliance continues to reach, encounter, resolve. Her music, which often implicitly calls for a dance, moves us to continue in this world ethically and joyfully. She embodies the varied ways in which composition in diaspora, outside of strict labels, imagines music's unheard futures. León encourages us to reckon with sound and to experience dance and flight.

Notes

1. William Robin, "A Composer Puts Her Life in Music, beyond Labels." *New York Times*, February 7, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/07/arts/music/tania-leon-new-york-philharmonic.html>. More context around this image of Tania León alongside Julius Eastman and Talib Rasul Hakim is available online in this striking review of León's oeuvre.
2. Fred Moten, *Black and Blur: consent not to be a single being* (Duke University Press, 2017).
3. Alejandro Madrid, *Tania León's Stride: A Polyrhythmic Life* (University of Illinois Press, 2022), 168.
4. *Ibid.*, 167.
5. Walter Aaron Clark, "Tania Leon. *Indigena*." *American Music* 15, no. 3 (1997): 421-422.
6. For more on the specific nature of León's compositional expanse, see James Spinazzola, "An introduction to the music of Tania León and a conductor's analysis of *Indígena*," LSU Doctoral Dissertations, 2006, 3326. Image of Tania León with baton is available at University of Missouri Kansas City Libraries' "Tania León Digital Exhibits @ UMKC Libraries," *Shining a Light: 21st Century Music from Underrepresented Composers*, Digital Exhibits @ UMKC Libraries. <https://exhibits.library.umkc.edu/s/shining-a-light/item/582>. (accessed January 21, 2022).
7. Mari S. Gold, "Works & Process Rotunda Project Dance Theater of Harlem at 50. Rotunda, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum," *New York Arts: An International Journal for the Arts*, <https://newyorkarts.net/2019/10/works-process-rotunda-project-at-the-guggenheim-dance-theater-of-harlem-at-50/>. (accessed March 30, 2022).
8. careergirls, "Composer/Conductor: Scourge of Hyacinths Opera - Tania Leon Career Girls Role Model." YouTube, January 12, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpQw_KtSiDA.

WISDOM FROM WILEY

When I first came on board as a junior faculty member at Brooklyn College, H. Wiley Hitchcock had just retired, but we met occasionally for lunch at a bistro near his Upper East Side apartment (as well as at the Century Club, where we both unabashedly people-watched). I remember that at one of these early meals he brought up Tania León and how much he admired her. His words to me were something like "you must get to know Tania." It was only a handful of years ago that Tania mentioned to me she had just finished her third decade at CUNY, and as I approach that milestone myself, I realize I didn't heed Wiley's advice sufficiently. Tania brought a unique voice and perspective to our department; her spirited calls for diversity, musical inclusion, and a greater appreciation for contemporary music were an important feature of our faculty meetings, even if she was often frustrated by our institution's lack of movement in those areas. I wish I had taken better advantage of the years we were colleagues, but her truly inspiring presence did play a major role in how I viewed my own teaching and professional work. Most likely, Wiley would not let me off the hook so easily and comment: "there is still time!"

-Jeffrey Taylor



Tania León and Jeffrey Taylor

Tania León: Perpetuum Mobile of Inspiration

Polina Nazaykinskaya

When I think about how my journey as a composer began in my beloved home country of Russia, the distance in years and miles seems long. As I recall my career up to this point, it becomes increasingly clear that Tania León has played a pivotal role in the formation of my musical identity as a composer. But perhaps I need to give a little more background.

I first studied music as a violinist and flutist. I loved playing instruments and received encouragement from my teachers, as I was a good student who maintained long hours of practice and showed a good pace of development. Meanwhile, my career as a performer also progressed at a rapid pace, with victories at regional and national competitions, an orchestral job, and a continuous array of solo and chamber performances. Despite that period of initial success as a performer, I had discovered a powerful gravitation toward composition, which soon became nothing less than a calling in my life. The culture at the music schools in Russia is rich and remarkable, yet offers lackluster support for women in composition. As a student-composer, I felt isolated when I chose to forge a new path and withdraw from performance to concentrate full-time on composition, against the advice of my esteemed teachers.

My composition professor in Moscow, though a magnificent musician and skilled composer, did not believe composition could be a “woman’s career” and therefore often told me (in a jesting manner) to reconsider my focus on composition, opting for the “more normal life of a lady instrumentalist.” Essentially, he made clear to me that no matter how far I got I would not be taken seriously as a composer due to my gender. Fueled by my teacher’s disparaging comments and archaic disrespect, I made two unorthodox decisions: to leave the Conservatory, and then, to move to the United States to pursue my dream of being a professional composer.

It wasn’t until I arrived in New York and met Tania León that I understood the tremendous impact of a positive role model. When I first encountered Professor León, I was taken aback by her disarming warmth and her velvety voice which quickly put me at ease. Her luminous gaze exuded inner strength and a profound understanding that infused her presence with an air of regality to which I was immediately drawn. From the start of our meeting, I felt I had met an extraordinary person who would play a significant role in my life—and I was not mistaken.



Tania León and Polina Nazaykinskaya

I knew I needed a mentor who could demonstrate success in a breadth of genres as well as the ability to create significant contributions not only to music but also to theater and education; Professor León had composed, created, and influenced in all these areas. Being one of the founders and the first music director of The Dance Theatre of Harlem, Professor León has helped change the face of modern dance not only within the context of New York City but also in the international dance community. In addition, the value of music education was integrated into The Dance Theatre of Harlem’s DNA from the start with its incorporated music school and orchestra. Like the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater before it, The Dance Theatre of Harlem puts Black dancers and other persons of color at the center of its creative nucleus, not only in the troupe itself but also in terms of the kinds of music commissioned and the narratives the organization chooses to tell.

Perpetuum Mobile of Inspiration (cont.)

Professor León's ballets written for The Dance Theatre of Harlem – *Haiku* (1973), *Douglas* (with Geoffrey Holder, 1974), and *Belé* (with Geoffrey Holder, 1981) – represent invaluable contributions to the development of American modern dance as an art form in its own right. I was inspired by Professor León's *Douglas*, which I saw at least four times performed live at the New York City Center. I distinctively remember a moment of awakening when I felt a definitive longing to write music for dance myself. In addition, I was mesmerized by Professor León's power as a conductor and the majestic grace and vitality which she brought to every note. Serendipitously, opportunities to write for ballet would soon present themselves to me. One of the highlights of my career has been composing music for a ballet entitled *Nostalgia*, which was commissioned by RIOULT Dance and staged at the Joyce Theater in New York City in 2018. I sought Professor León's guidance in navigating the ebb and flow of the creative process. Her support was instrumental at every stage, including in my performance as conductor of the chamber ensemble accompanying the ballet. Since 2018 I have been fortunate to write four more ballets: *Vstrecha* for Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow, *Reverse Perspective* for choreographer Jonah Bokaer, *Encounters* for MorDance, and *The Rising* for San Francisco Ballet.

I find myself drawn to the expressive manner with which Professor León is able to sculpt the soundscapes of our lives and integrate the roots of her cultural identity in original and invigorating ways. Her orchestrations represent a truly virtuoso understanding of acoustic sound and how the texture of a symphony orchestra can morph into a representation of the real-life soundscape. "The path of the composer" requires tremendous courage since a composer reveals their innermost soul to the world. Through music, we express ideas, feelings, and memories. We tell the world where we belong and for what we yearn. And in return, we ask to be heard. Therein lies the potential source of agony: we cannot predict the emotional level on which our musical expression will resonate with the audience. The way Professor León shares her inner world through her music is an inspiration for me to do the same.

Professor León's journey as a composer began with writing for dance, and the essence of movement remains present in all her compositions. It's interesting how our first steps as composers stay with us throughout the years. When she tells that story it sounds so natural, but it takes a courageous, spirited artist to delve into such an endeavor without years of experience and preparation. It was a natural evolution

of Professor León's talent from an accomplished pianist to a composer. Professor León speaks of how she would rearrange the pieces of piano repertory she was working on at the conservatory. Her teachers wouldn't hear it, but she needed that creative outlet from early on. That was the composer in her, needing to create, even if it meant re-imagining music that was already there. I admire that quality in her immensely.

I believe that for both of us, the emigrant experience is part of our musical identity. Being away from a homeland gives us perspective, a certain distance from which we can crystallize the very thing we hold most dear about our countries. Professor León's experience of growing up in Cuba with its diverse musical and cultural heritage creates a continuous leitmotif throughout her career, reincarnating in different genres, from dance to opera to chamber music works, such as *Haiku*, *Drummin'* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Stride*.

For me, being away from Russia brings on a sense of nostalgia, which, in turn, becomes a very potent source of emotional inspiration. My connection to my heritage has only strengthened over the years since immigrating. I wonder if the absence of daily life minutia, which inadvertently comes with living in a place (any country, really) gives the artist an ability to synthesize the essence of their homeland, to capture its spirit, and translate it into art. For example, I am transported to Cuba when I hear Professor León's work, even though I have not physically traveled there. Her music seems to embody the spirit of her ancestors, while always surprising listeners with an innovative approach to composition.

After working with Professor León, it became clear that performing music wasn't enough to allow my inner voice to come out, to express my thoughts and experiences. I only felt musically at home while composing. I think she recognized me as a composer who needs to write music as a way of making sense of the world, my place in it, and my thoughts and feelings. And she always supported my emotional attachment to my Russian roots, allowing my particular style to evolve naturally, retaining a unified continuity of voice.

Under the mentorship of Professor León, I have taken on the challenge of becoming the conductor of a youth orchestra. In observing Professor León lead performances of her work, I take delight in how she infuses the musicians with her enormous charisma and vigor. Similarly, my

Perpetuum Mobile of Inspiration (cont.)

early years of playing violin in the youth orchestra in Russia now provide invaluable resources as I step out onto the podium as the leader of such an orchestra. And I realize that all those years ago I didn't cease performing; I just needed to take a step back, let the seeds of my life germinate, and find a way to return to that particular path.

It was also on Professor León's advice that I began my career as an educator at Brooklyn College. Little did I know that the magical ritual of transferring knowledge (the miracle of amalgamation!) was to become an important aspect of my musical life. When I began to witness the processes of absorption, adaptation, and re-invention of the principles I teach my undergraduate students, the work Professor León and I have done together acquired additional meaning and added depth. I see with more clarity how gently yet specifically she has guided me along this path.

Perhaps the quality in Professor León that has influenced me and others the most is the way humanity and humility flow through her music and embrace her audience. In her latest symphonic work, *Stride*, the underlying meaning transcends musical form and elevates experience into the realm of collective communion with our humanity. I had the great privilege of being present at those now-historic performances with the New York Philharmonic celebrating women composers and the adoption of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. What an immensely meaningful task it is to continue the work of women that came before us, in all spheres and industries; for our work is not yet done.

Music, with its power to move and speak across linguistic and cultural barriers, is therefore a tremendously potent medium in which Professor León's important messages have been seen, heard, and felt. Following and expanding on her example of leadership and humanity, I hope to find the music within me to act on my passion for social equity in such a tangible, influential, and creative way. I carry the deepest gratitude to my remarkable mentor, Tania León, for standing by me and supporting me on this path to my dream: a life in music.

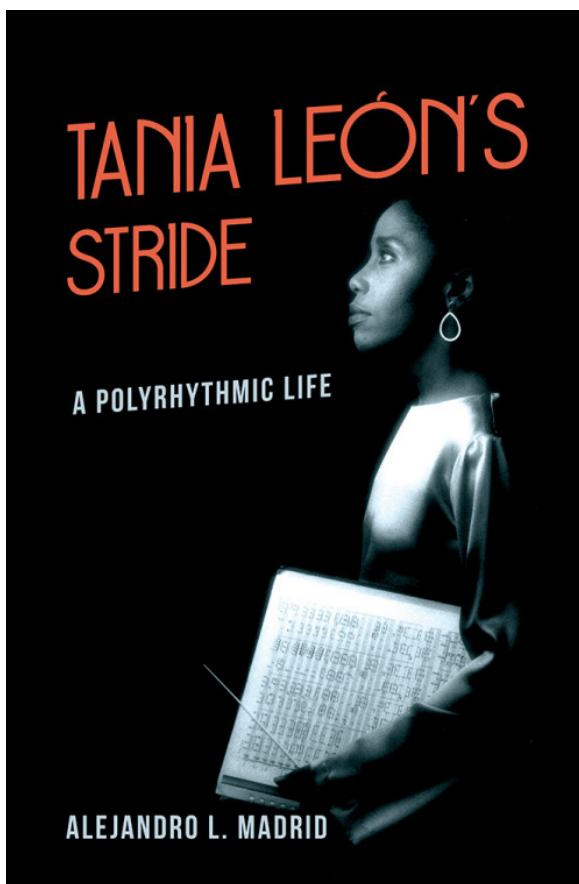


Pascal Rioult, Aaron Jay Kernis, Tania León and Polina Nazaykinskaya

Biographical Counterpoint: A Conversation with Alejandro L. Madrid on Writing *Tania León's Stride: A Polyrhythmic Life*

Stephanie Jensen-Moulton

On a stormy Saturday in November, I carried my laptop to the basement to record an interview with music scholar and prolific writer Alejandro L. Madrid, whose recent biography on composer Tania León was published in late 2021 (University of Illinois Press). The unexpected tornado warning and electric skies provided a dramatic backdrop for the conversation about our mutual colleague, and on the practice of writing about living public figures, individuals whom we admire, and who share in the reading and editing of their own biographies.¹



SJM:
I'm here [on Zoom] recording a conversation with Alejandro L. Madrid, the author of *Tania León's Stride: A Polyrhythmic Life*. So when did you first think about writing on Tania León and had you known her personally before you began this project?

ALM:
That's an interesting question. I wrote about her for my book on *danzón*, the book that Robin Moore and I wrote.² The last chapter deals with reinventions of the *danzón* in contemporary settings and by concert

composers who are not necessarily thinking about dance. And you know, the *danzón* is something that appears very often in Tania's music. We analyzed one piece by Tania in that book, and we actually had some conversations back then to ask her how she was incorporating the *danzón* in that piece. So, I did an analysis in which I was trying to trace the quotations of the *danzón* ["Almendra" by Abelardo Valdés] and she liked it a lot, apparently. That's how we met. And then years later, in 2016 or '17—it was the 50th anniversary of her arrival in the United States—she started looking for someone to write her biography. She told me that she approached Walter Clark from UC-Riverside, and Walter told her that I might be a good person to ask. Tania reached out to me and asked [if I was interested in writing the book]. I very hesitantly agreed to take on the project, because I had just written this book called *In Search of Julián Carrillo and Sonido 13* (Oxford, 2015), which I sort of conceptualized as an anti-biography. <SJM laughs> I wanted to move away from all of the traditional narratives [that] biographies reproduce, like these great men and their genius masterworks and all of that. Then Tania called me... I made a very blatant statement of what I felt about biographies. Now I [was] going to write one?

SJM:
That probably made her like you even more!

ALM:
Maybe! <laughs> Maybe. But yeah, we discussed the idea and it was clear that she did not want just an uncritical hagiography, right? And once it became clear that I would maintain some sort of independent agency, I decided to take on the project. There was also a commission that came from Brandon Fradd.³ He paid for everything, basically for me doing the research—my trips to Cuba to interview her relatives and her friends and my trips to New York to interview her and other people and attend events that she was involved with—all of that was paid for by this commission.

SJM:
That's really helpful, and it kind of leads me to another question, and, in a way, answers it. I was wondering how you decided to divide up the chapters because the form of the book is very unconventional for a biography. I'm guessing it has to do with your anti-biography project? I find it both feminist and non-positivist, and I wonder if you can

Biographical Counterpoint (cont.)

illuminate this a bit more in relationship to your previous project.

ALM:

Yeah, that's for sure. The very first thing that I wanted to do was to break away from a chronological narrative. I had this idea that I was going to take musical motifs from her music, and relate them to things that were important in her life; like the idea of tonic as home, you know, the home that she had to leave, and then make a new home in a new country. Then displacement and syncopation as again this idea of having to leave and having to incorporate the rhythms of a new life in a new place. That gave me a good reason to explore the relationship that she has with different Afro-American initiatives and cultural projects that she has been involved with. As you know, she really had to negotiate [a lot in that scene] because she was perceived as Black, but once she opened her mouth she was no longer perceived as Black. So for her, it was very difficult to deal with both how she was seen and how she saw herself differently from what people expected from her.

Then I thought about the idea of the conductor as a leader—not only as leading an orchestra, but leading in life! Leading her mentees and her colleagues and opening paths for people to flourish, right? So that metaphor of conductor as a life leader and mentor was conducive to organizing the book.

SJM:

Absolutely. And I think those metaphors are really telling of the way that you perceived her life as a series of important events and as connective in many ways. I thought this was a very unconventional way to write a biography that I could appreciate....

ALM:

But I also want to tell you something about my first idea, which was to organize all of these different motives around the same moment, when Tania was invited to conduct the National Symphony Orchestra in Cuba. I wanted to take that moment as a vignette to start all of these different chapters, and then branch out into different directions. There were descriptions of that moment that were based on many different perspectives. One description was what the newspapers in Cuba were telling us about that concert; another perspective was how her family was looking at the concert; another, how audiences were looking at her coming on stage. It was a very cinematic idea. But Tania was very against it. She liked the general idea, but she didn't want that particular moment to be so central in her story. She said, basically, 'You are giving too much agency to

the Cuban government and that particular invitation. And I don't want this to be about that moment.'

SJM:

I can imagine Tania disliking that as an axis for her life view because the 2016 visit to Cuba was a sensitive and difficult time.

ALM:

That's a good example of the type of negotiations that we had to do, because I really liked the idea and I still think that maybe with a different vignette it could have worked very well. But after hours and hours of conversations with her, about her relationship with the island and the regime and people who stayed behind, I understood; and I said to myself, 'She is definitely right.' But I held on to the general idea, because I still liked it.

SJM:

Yeah. I almost feel like if Tania had won the Pulitzer a couple of years earlier, that would've been the perfect moment, because it's very positive.

ALM:

And, you know, there's also that she wrote that composition for the New York Philharmonic, and then it ended up winning the Pulitzer Prize. And I was aware that this moment of going back to the New York Philharmonic after what happened [with her and that organization] in the 1990s was in itself sort of a metaphor of her life—of doing all these things and not being recognized; and then finally, thirty years later, people coming back and asking her to be on the [orchestra's] board and all of that. So yeah. The timing was a little bit off <laughs>.

SJM:

And so ironic, too, that Tania's so against the identity issue of being recognized only as a woman composer and it was a commission for the Project 19.

ALM:

Her response to that was actually very telling, no? Because I asked her, 'So what's up with this, it's a project about female composers?' And she said, 'Well, it's about reparations.' And to me, it seemed like it was a very personal thing [related to] all that she went through with the New York Philharmonic in the 1990s.

SJM:

Absolutely. Yeah. That's fascinating. So, with a living author, where you're deeply involved in learning their life, how did it go when she finally read the manuscript?

Biographical Counterpoint (cont.)

ALM:

I gave her the manuscript when I finished it about two years ago. And she had it almost for a year before she actually read it. I think she felt that it was too close [to her]. She felt somehow that it [dealt with] very sensitive [issues], so she didn't want to read it.

SJM:

So, I imagine that must have been very difficult [for her]. But that was also a long time... <laugh> for an author.

ALM:

Really a long time. The book should have been out last year actually, but I mean, she took a look at the way that I portrayed different characters in her life. And in most cases we agreed. There were a few things that we didn't see eye-to-eye on, but she was always very respectful.



Alejandro L. Madrid, Cornell University

SJM:

Of course. So did you ever encounter any difficulty in getting [into Cuba] and acquiring documents? Or was it like no issues whatsoever?

ALM:

No, no, no. The same as usual. I mean, the same problems that you usually have when you go to Cuba <laugh>, but nothing particularly new.

SJM:

But you got there just in time so the timing was good.

ALM:

Yeah, and I was always very lucky to have two very good research assistants in Cuba, one [Liliana González Moreno] who was even in Cuba when Tania went to do her concert [with the National Symphony Orchestra]—I was not able to go. I wanted to, but I couldn't since I was in Cambridge at the time. And then I also had an assistant when I went [to Cuba], who actually organized my whole agenda, and my calendar, and my schedule. And she [Gabriela Rojas Sierra] basically scheduled the interviews with everyone, the places to visit, and the photos. So, I was very lucky in that sense, [especially given that I was] there only for a week.

SJM:

So it must have been just seamless once you got there! That's a dream research trip. And, so, what do you do when you're writing about someone like Tania, who constantly has a new piece, a new festival she's conducting, another award she's won? How do you know when you're done writing? I can't imagine, because her work is always amplifying!

ALM:

Yeah! I think there are two answers to that question. One is the answer regarding [what] I was going to include in the book.

SJM:

Is that where there is the dialogue with Tania in the chapter?

ALM:

Yeah, so, it was my idea. Tania initially wanted a more traditional musicological take in which you go over the main works and then describe them to create a narrative based on her representative works. But that [ended up being] too long. I wanted to search for how her [compositional] voice came into being, and look at that trajectory. For me, it was through specific pieces where I could actually trace the commonalities. And to me, by the early 2010s, it's clear that she has a well-established voice that you can recognize. So that was what I was interested in, and so that was a source of a little bit of tension... <laugh> Also the way that I wrote it included her voice and the voices of other people in a sort of constant dialogue. I think in the end she liked it. But some of the peer-review readers of the book didn't like it at all—they felt that it was too experimental and led the readers in different directions. But yeah, it was even more experimental in the earlier version!

Biographical Counterpoint (cont.)

After I revised, it became what it is now.

SJM:

I thought of it as a new form of feminist music analysis—a great use of the composer's own voice in the analysis of her works. So often we try to interpret subjectively what is going on in the composer's music, but if they're there and they can assist in the analysis, why not have their voice? And then how did you decide what moment in time to stop writing about her?

ALM:

The moment in time was going to be the concert in Cuba, but then *Stride* happened, and I thought, 'There's no way that I cannot include this.' And this is what I was telling you—this is the moment where the reparation for the events of the early 1990s happens, and it was that mini-metaphor of her life. So that's why I included [it in] the epilogue.

SJM:

Yeah. That makes sense. And so, because I'm imagining you had stopped [writing] and then the Pulitzer Prize happened, the publisher allowed you to add on the epilogue?

ALM:

Actually, the prize happened when the page proof had already been approved! It happened around the moment when I got the proofs, so I didn't really have a lot of space to do anything at all. But I found a moment at the end of the epilogue where I could include a footnote, <laugh> so I'm like, 'Okay, why can't we put a footnote here that speaks about the Pulitzer Prize?' And the publisher was able to do it, but yeah, it almost didn't get in there.

SJM:

Wow. So, at least you got it into a footnote <laugh>! But what about the title though? Because it seems like you had to change the title, too.

ALM:

No, no. The title was already *Stride* because of the composition. So, Tania had told me that she had gotten this commission; so [the name] was already in the air. She told me about these references to her grandmother, her mother, and to Susan B. Anthony, and this idea of just walking forward [no matter what]. You know where you're going and you keep going. And to me, that's life. That's her life. That's her.

SJM:

Absolutely her. I mean, the most striking photo to me in the whole book—which has so many incredible

photographs—but the one that strikes me the most is her playing the piano when she's eight and she's looking so intensely at the camera. I suppose anyone who knows Tania knows that look <laugh>. It's like she's fully formed as a human at that moment, and that's the *Stride* look that says, 'I'm going to walk this path to its end.'

So as you're writing, these are really tumultuous years between 2016, '17, and now, and the conversations on race and gender are changing so rapidly in this country. And I'm wondering how that might have altered any thoughts you had about editing or writing the book during this really weird time in the US?



Alejandro L. Madrid and Stephanie Jensen-Moulton in conversation on Zoom

ALM:

Well, it was clear that the issue of race had to be central in the book, but it also had to be negotiated, because, you know how Tania feels; she doesn't want race to be the thing that defines her, right? I also didn't want the book to be too theoretical. So I decided to speak a little bit about her in terms of race and gender at the beginning of the introduction, and then just let the book sort out the ideas and the rhetoric the way they stand and let the reader decide. And then, the last chapter is about canonization. To me, it was necessarily the moment to go back to the subject and say, this is how people look at her, regardless of how she feels about it. She's been seen as an African-American, Afro-Cuban woman, and this is how she's entered the canon; so let's try to deconstruct the canon and see how introducing her on these terms into this particular canon is actually doing violence to her as an artist and a person. So that was already in my mind. But also, the more radical moment of [the] race conversation that we had in the United States really happened after the book was already written—during that year in which she had the book, but was not reading it yet. So, it all happened at around the same time.

Biographical Counterpoint (cont.)

I think it had more of an influence on how the peer-review readers read the book and how they read those ideas about identity politics, and how they became defensive about Tania's stance. So, after I got the external reviewer's comments, basically I needed to make the whole argument more nuanced since the readers had perceived it as maybe a little bit too drastic and too radical, which was definitely not the way Tania was saying it. But, in that moment, I think the revision helped me to smooth out the argument and think about it in a different light.

SJM:

Yeah, that's interesting. So the moment when the readers had the manuscript, then, was really more of the transactional moment with the cultural politics that were happening at the time. I wouldn't have thought of it that way. That's fascinating. So, in retrospect, what do you think was the most difficult thing about writing this book?

ALM:

Well, I think the most difficult thing was to find that balance between uncritical celebration and critical interventions without being too theoretical, because the book was not meant to be just for academics—it's for a general audience. So finding that balance was very difficult.

SJM:

Do you think that stands as a rule when you're writing a biography about someone living, someone who's presumably going to read what you're writing?

ALM:

In general, yes. I think that's true for most cases. We actually just had a session about that at the [2021] AMS [meeting] with people who were writing about Mario Lavista, John Adams, Bang on a Can, and some others. And that was sort of the common thread, that we need to negotiate because there's always a question of ethics, no? I think that doing this work about living composers sort of puts that onus on the table in a very obvious way. That is, when we write about dead composers, we don't see it, but it's still [there]. I mean, we're writing about someone, there should be some sort of ethical concern about what we say about these people, right? Regardless of whether they're living or dead.

SJM:

Yeah. We don't look through that same ethical lens when we're writing about a composer who's been dead for a hundred years. But we definitely should—an amazing point.... And what do you think was the highlight of this project for you?

ALM:

I think the highlight is related to what I was going to tell you that I was sort of forgetting: this question of celebrating or not celebrating this legacy. And that was one of the things that happened to me throughout years of conversations with Tania and hundreds of hours of recording interviews, especially interviewing people who had been her advisees or who had been her students, or who had been sort of touched by her [teaching and influence]. I already admired Tania as an artist; but [after conducting the research], I gained this understanding of her as a human being who has touched the lives of many people in such a positive way. So how do I speak about that without sounding like I'm just, 'Whoa, this woman is, you know, [amazing].' <laughs>. So, that was definitely a highlight of the whole experience, learning this side of a creative person you admire, and [getting to] admire her even more.

Notes

1. Although I have edited the interview for length and legibility in this article, the full, unedited interview conducted on 13 November 2021 can be heard, with transcript, at tinyurl.com/MadridInterview.
2. Alejandro L. Madrid and Robin D. Moore, *Danzón: Circum-Caribbean Dialogues in Music and Dance* (Oxford University Press, 2013).
3. Brandon Fradd is a philanthropist who has focused his efforts on music and arts, and since 2007 has been a Trustee of the CINTAS foundation which funds research about and works by Cuban and Cuban-American artists. He commissioned this biography of León through his work with The Newburgh Institute for Arts and Ideas (Madrid, *Tania León's Stride*, xiii).

POSTSCRIPT BY NANCY HAGER

Question: what do you call an Energizer Bunny musician? Answer: Tania León. What Tania has achieved in the fifty years since she arrived in New York from Cuba is simply staggering. Her compositions have been performed all over the world. Some were composed on commission from the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Kennedy Center, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and Dance Theatre of Harlem. Prestigious orchestras in Germany, Switzerland, England, Spain, Mexico, and South Africa have engaged her as guest conductor. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, serves on the Boards of the New York Philharmonic, ASCAP and the MacDowell Colony, and won the 2021 Pulitzer Prize in music.

What is less widely known is Tania's work as an educator and advocate for the arts. She is the founder and artistic director of Composers Now, which champions the music of living composers. For over thirty years she taught composition at Brooklyn College, from first semester undergrads to graduate students completing a thesis composition. She had a reputation for having a no-nonsense but caring approach, and for helping students hone their compositional skills as well as get in touch with themselves as creative artists. She once told me that her advice to help a student overcome a creative block was "try parting your hair on the other side." Gentle but effective. In the semesters when Tania led Contempo (the Conservatory's new music ensemble) or conducted the Conservatory Orchestra, performance majors benefited from her broad knowledge of repertory and her interpretive insights. In those contexts, too, she had high expectations and players quickly learned to come prepared to rehearsals.



Brooklyn College President Christoph Kimmich, Distinguished Professor Tania León, Nancy Hager, and Distinguished Professor H. Wiley Hitchcock at León's induction ceremony.

There was no absence of persuasive evidence when I nominated Tania for appointment as a CUNY Distinguished Professor. But for the sake of full disclosure, I should report an incident I observed when our Energizer Bunny encountered a challenge she could not master, that spring afternoon when we sat on the floor of her office completely defeated by pages of instructions for assembling an Ikea glass-doored book case. A kind passerby came to the rescue.

