WHAT'S NEW:
Latino Life & Culture
FROM COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY TO AFRICAN SYNCRETISM: Musical Life in Cuba

by Andrew Schloss

Whenever I mention that I have recently returned from a composer music conference in Cuba, most people are somewhat perplexed. Computer music? In Cuba? They are surprised in electronic music in Cuba! Most people would associate Cuban music with African folk rhythms, and the musical life in Cuba is even more Africanized than Cuban. As a composer of computer music and ethnomusicologist, I have seen many of the Cuban music conferences and events. I would like to briefly discuss one event that I participated in during my visit to Cuba: the Festival Internacional de Música Electronica y acoustic, which took place in Havana in April of 1987.

The Festival Internacional de Música Electronica y Acústica, also known as the Festival Internacional de Música Electronica, is an international conference held biennially at Varadero Beach in Cuba. It has been held three times so far: in 1983, 1985, and 1987. Each time hosted by Cuban composer Juan Blanco. This past May I was one of two North Americans invited to the conference; the other participants were from Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Spain, Holland, Austria, Hungary, America, Argentina, Venezuela, Peru, Mexico, and Cuba. All participants were composers. We spent the days listening to concerts of electronic and computer music compositions and went on to work on new scores. To discuss the current trends in the field, we worked on a series of multimedia events with music selected from the conference and performed by Cuban students. The Cuban composers were excited about the affordabilities of the new synthesizers; although it is still impossible for individuals to afford the equipment, it is now within the government's reach to provide new equipment for their use.

The Cuban pieces presented were quite diverse, with the composers using the technology that is available in creative ways. There were expository works that incorporated Cuban folk music, and there were new pieces that could not be identified as "Cuban" but sounded more European. In general, it seems that Cuban popular music is closely tied to the United States, while Cuban "art" music is more closely aligned with Europe.

Conference participants had an opportunity to meet with the Minister of Culture, Armando Hart, who took an interest in the conference. This was significant, because his support of computer music will have a strong influence both on the resources available to composers and on the continued success of the conferences. In Cuba, music is very important to the people and is incorporated into the culture. It is a part of everyday life and is used to express emotions and ideas. Despite the political differences, music is a unifying force in Cuban society. I was able to follow the coverage of the festival every day. All concerts were broadcast live on the radio and television, and people occasionally stopped by to listen. I noticed considerable interest in the festival on the part of the locals, who found the music to be a bit strange.

Moving into an entirely different world, a few days after the festival in Cuba, I was in Havana watching the local music scene unfold. People were dancing on the streets to the music of traditional Cuban music and dance. The streets were filled with people enjoying the music and the ambiance.

Music in Cuba is so rich and the amount of talent is overwhelming. I feel that I have had the opportunity to witness a unique culture that is rich in history and traditions. The Cuban government is aware of the importance of supporting its rich folkloric heritage and is actively working to preserve and promote it.

I see in both computer music and "primitive" music a certain abstractness that links them together. I am excited by the possibility of bringing together the rich cultural environment of Cuba and the creative possibilities of computer music.

I am grateful for the opportunity to witness this unique cultural scene and to share it with the world. I hope that my experiences in Cuba will inspire others to explore and appreciate the richness of this culture.