Tania León

Photo Credit: Michael Provost

When I brought my music home my father said, "Your music sounds very interesting, but where are you in there?" He didn't explain to me what he meant by that, but the way I took it was that something of me was missing in my music. I started having nightmares and hearing all sorts of rhythmical twists in my mind, and my music started being affected by that emotional state. Nowadays I compose anything I feel like composing.

The story of Tania León (b. Cuba, 1943) is a dramatic one and, though I was familiar with the basic arc of her tale before I ever spoke with her, the details of her ascent in the music world still left me amazed at the remarkable series of events that propelled her along her path to becoming

the eminent composer, conductor, and educator she is today. Clearly a deeply gifted artist, she also must have a powerful guardian angel helping to orchestrate her career, and no one seems more incredulous about it than León herself.

A pivotal quirk of fate brought her in quick succession from Havana to Miami to New York City, where her talent was embraced wholeheartedly, first as a pianist and ultimately as a composer and conductor. Her educational credits include the National Conservatory in Cuba and the New York University (NYU) School of Music, as well as studies with Leonard Bernstein and Seiji Ozawa at Tanglewood. León was one of the earliest members of Dance Theatre of Harlem, instituted the Brooklyn Philharmonic Community Concert Series, was New Music advisor to the New York Philharmonic, and served as Latin American Music advisor to the American Composers Orchestra.

Many of her early compositions were based on principles of serialism, but her music soon evolved into a much more eclectic mix of Western classical, jazz, and Latin music, with numerous influences from various other world musics as well. León both embraces technology and espouses the importance of developing the traditional practices that have served composers over the centuries. In addition to her well-honed skills in orchestral composition, Leon is well versed in popular music and has served as musical director and conductor for a number of musicals, including Broadway productions such as *The Wiz*.

Despite an already impressive list of accomplishments, León exudes a sense of passion and excitement about the future; this force of nature seems to be just getting started.

You recently won the Victor Herbert Award from ASCAP.[1] Congratulations!
Oh! That was just incredible; ASCAP is such an important institution to me.

It's quite an honor. And you have also received a commission from the New York State Council for the Arts for a new quintet. Have you started that piece yet?
I'm still in the process of gathering materials because I've never written something like this before. I've written a lot of string quartets, and I've written a lot of piano music, but the merging of the two is something very interesting to me. And because it's in the nature of something I've not done before, I'm listening to a lot of music, a lot of quintets. I try to identify myself with the sound. Even though I have the sound in my mind, it's good to listen to that sound coming from other voices as well.

So listening to works by other composers with similar orchestration is part of your pre-compositional process, at least in this case. What other methods do you use when preparing a new piece?
Usually, prior to writing a piece, I work on the music through the creation of sketches. Whenever I get an idea, I create a sketch for that idea. By the time I get ready to put the entire puzzle together, I may have 100 or 150 sketches. So it takes me a great deal of time to begin the piece, but that's how I begin structuring and ultimately writing the form of the piece.

Do you develop these sketches at the piano?
Not really. Usually I work directly from my mind to the paper. I might work a little slower than other people who write directly to the computer, but for me the computer is used at the end; it's not how I work in the beginning.

You use the computer at the end of the composition process then, to create parts?
Yes, yes. Of course, if I have a particularly strong idea, I write it down wherever I am. I usually travel around with a pad, and wherever I am when I get an idea I'll write it down. That flash can come anywhere and at any time, and it might be a really important idea for the piece, so I like to be prepared to write it down.

Several composers have alluded to a sort of "mystical," or at least mysterious, aspect of the compositional process, saying they sometimes have no idea where the creative ideas come from. Do you ever feel that way?
All the time. Sometimes I'll come back to a score days after finishing a piece and there are whole sections that I cannot identify or remember writing. I seriously wonder, "Who wrote that?" I don't know. It feels like someone else came in at just that moment and wrote that passage, or that entire section. In a way, it feels almost like getting back to a place I recognize from my own past.

Do you find that writing a new piece of music follows a familiar pattern, or is the process different for each piece that you compose?
In my case, there are two very, very different types of process. I sometimes write a piece very quickly. One piece I wrote for piano, *Momentum,* was titled that because it came to me in one afternoon. I wrote the entire piece in just a few hours. I don't know where it came from; it just came to me fully composed. At times like that, I almost feel that I am in contact with something. It is hard to define, but *something* that

is driving *me*, rather than me driving *it*. Then, at other times, I have to elaborate a great deal before I am able to come up with a piece, or with particular moments of a piece. For instance, I was having a really hard time writing the ending for my opera. I was going to have to kill the main character; he was going to be executed. I remember quite well what happened to me when I finally sat down to write that passage, that final piece needed to complete the entire work. I sat down to write it, and it may sound ridiculous, but I cried all the way through the writing, because I was killing this person. It was very emotional. I was sobbing, crying for his mother and for this innocent man who was about to be shot. I have never before been in such a trance. It was interesting because what I wrote was very, very simple; a sustained drum roll and then total silence, but it came out of something very deep and I think people feel that. At the initial performance, it was about five minutes before the audience started applauding. Sometimes as humans, I think we are working on many planes, some that we don't understand so well yet.

It's a very dramatic moment in the piece. Did you find writing an opera to be a difficult creative experience?
Oh, yes; it was overwhelming, because you get so involved with every single character, and every single instrument, every word, every note.

You moved to New York City from Cuba, as a pianist really, not as a composer or conductor at the time. It can be so difficult to get a foothold and start a career, yet here you were in a new city, a new country, and you took on all of the challenges that came your way. I think young composers, perhaps most particularly young women composers, would like to hear a little about your experiences and how you developed into the successful artist you are today.
When I was studying music in Cuba, it was not really such a big deal that I was a woman; there were a lot of other women at the conservatory, specifically studying an instrument such as the piano. The fact that I excelled as a pianist also was not such a big deal because many of my classmates were incredible and they were all developing their technical skills and interpretive skills, as I was. One thing that was different about me was that I didn't come from a family that had anything to do with music, and also I was not from a neighborhood that tended to have this type of schooling for the children. Still, it is interesting that in my building there were seven other musicians, professional people who were well recognized

in the country, including the first bass of the Cuban Symphony Orchestra. He told my grandmother, after listening to me progress, that he thought I had talent.

So your first formal musical studies were in Cuba, and you received a degree there as well?

Yes. I arrived in the United States after graduating with my master's degree in piano, solfege, and theory in Cuba. I came here thinking it would be a stop on my way to the Paris Conservatoire, and that I would then study there. But based on the political situation between my birth country and the country that embraced me, things were out of hand and I had to stay here, at least for the first five years after my arrival. At that time, leaving Cuba meant a loss of citizenship. So basically, I arrived here in the United States without citizenship in any country and with a canceled passport. The authorities told me that I would have to be here for at least five years before I could even apply for US citizenship and that, at the end of that period, an analysis would be made of my behavior and my background and everything. Based on that evaluation, they would decide whether to approve my application or not.

It must have been a very difficult experience for you. Did you come directly to New York from Cuba?

I first arrived in Miami, but I immediately made the decision to move to New York. On May 29 I was in Miami, and on June 1, I arrived in New York, and the rest is history. Upon my arrival, I stayed with some friends in the Bronx, in their living room on a sofa bed. By looking in the yellow pages [telephone directories], we found an organization called the American Council for the Émigrés in the Professions, which was across the street from the United Nations. I met a very old Hungarian woman there who was in charge of the music aspect of the organization. They got someone to translate so I could explain my situation. Then she told me she wanted to hear me play. So, they took me to a piano, I played, and she said, I'm going to get you a scholarship. Just like that.

Wow! What a great story!

It was the most incredible thing. Then she took me to the New York College of Music,[2] where they made me do sight-reading, and play the piano. At the end of that audition I had a scholarship! They also sent me to learn English, and eventually I was transferred to NYU.

How did you become the first Musical Director of Dance Theater of Harlem?[3]

A friend of mine, Laura Wilson, was playing piano accompaniment in Harlem, and she asked me to replace her for a Saturday because she was very ill with the flu. She gave me the music books and explained what I should do. It was the first time I took the subway by myself to Harlem, to a church at 145th Street and Saint Nicholas Avenue. The singer Dorothy Maynor was in charge of the program. I didn't know she was a very famous soprano who was launching a program that would later be called the Harlem School of the Arts.[4]

I played for a woman who also didn't speak English—she was originally from Europe—and so we communicated using hand signals. She would show me the steps and count the rhythm of the movements so I could follow her. It just happened that this was the exact day when a gentleman went there looking for a space to start a project he had in mind. He heard me playing the piano, and he approached me, and I said yes, and it changed the course of my life. I didn't know that he was Arthur Mitchell and that the project he had in mind was Dance Theater of Harlem, and I didn't know that I would be the first musician he contracted—the first pianist—and I didn't know that I would turn into a composer. One day he invited me to write a piece and said he would do the choreography so, out of the blue I wrote my first major piece of music, *Tones*, for the ballet. And then when we went to Europe, they literally threw me into the pits and I had to start conducting. So the first time I conducted, the first time in my life, I actually knew nothing about conducting. It was all like jumping out of a plane, being in freefall, but I did it!

It sounds a bit like a movie script, to meet someone like Arthur Mitchell on such a chance encounter.

Yes! And he wasn't the only amazing artist I worked with at Dance Theater of Harlem. Jerome Robbins[5] taught me his choreography for Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. I also met George Balanchine then. He was one of the early mentors of Dance Theater of Harlem and of Arthur Mitchell. He had given his permission for the company to dance his ballets, and so I had to learn them all—not only the music but the steps as well, so I would know what to watch for. I particularly remember him sitting with me at the piano and breaking down the score of Bach's *Double Violin Concerto* in D minor, showing me the steps he had designed for each section of the music.

That all happened pretty rapidly, and suddenly you were not only performing but also conducting and composing. I believe that composing and orchestral conducting was particularly unusual for a woman at the time.

I went to NYU and changed my major to learn composition. That's when I studied with Ursula Mamlok[6] and started understanding the situation that composers who happen to be women were in. She told me about Miriam Gideon[7] and Louise Talma[8] and I ended up meeting both of them. Before that, I had never thought in terms of, oh, I am a woman and I compose, or I am a woman and I conduct because being a woman had never been an impediment to me. When I was in Cuba, there were a lot of us doing all sorts of different things and it was all right, and when I came here, I never got even a moment of discouragement because of that either, so I didn't ever have any other reference to go by.

Now I reflect a great deal on that, and I think the one who gave me a lot of that [confidence] was my grandmother. She was very well schooled and loved to read.

She was a strong woman and an inspiration to you.

She talked to me about Marian Anderson,[9] about Josephine Baker,[10] about these luminaries of color in the world of music, as examples for me to know about. Fate made it to happen that after being with Dance Theater of Harlem, I wrote a piece and the narrator was Marian Anderson. Then we did a show at the Palladium in London, and who were we performing with? Josephine Baker. It was a shock to me. I wished I could tell my grandmother, but she had passed by then! It was very weird, like an episode of the *Twilight Zone*.

You also were the musical director and conductor for the musical *The Wiz* on Broadway in 1978. What was that experience like?

Incredible. Some people despise Broadway; I don't. I love all forms of music. I learned a lot about what goes on behind the scenes, all the coordination that goes into a production like that. And I enjoyed working with all those great artists and wonderful musicians and singers who had a different perspective on musical performance. It was a tremendous experience. Then, I did something similar, working on *The Human Comedy* with Joseph Papp at the Public Theater.[11] Then we went to Broadway.

All composers are influenced by their backgrounds, but yours is particularly interesting. Please share your thoughts on how your heritage has informed your music. For example, a couple of things often alluded to when people speak of your music are the infusion of elements of jazz in your sonorities and form and, especially, your unusual and powerful use of percussion.

None of this occurred in my life until the 1980s. The music that I wrote before, with the exception of a few things I did for Latin theater, Teatro-Latino, was, in a way, very much political. I studied composition when serialism was the thing of the moment and, therefore, I had to do that. Besides that, at a very young age I had learned that system and in order to be accepted you had to write in that style. *Haiku* came out of that period. I didn't know that I had a voice in percussion, an instinct for it, until later. I may have jazz gestures or jazz influences, but that is not an instinctive part of my music. I say that because one of the things that really captivated me when I came to this country was jazz. A Korean classmate of mine introduced me to jazz. He played me a record, and my mouth dropped. I said, "Who is this person, this piano player?" It was Art Tatum. Until then, I didn't know Art Tatum existed. When I was in Cuba, jazz, for me, was *Rhapsody in Blue*. Of course, I hadn't realized the fact that when I was improvising with other Conservatory students on the weekends, we were playing Latin jazz! We had a way of synchronizing things, a way of jazzing up a tune—any tune. We would all play Bach in school, and then we would make a Latin Bach version that we could play to entertain ourselves. I mean, it was our thing, you know? Not until I really got out of Cuba and arrived in New York, and specifically after I heard Art Tatum, did I get really, really, interested in jazz. I mean, I thought I could play well, but when I heard him I said, "Oh, my God, how can this man play this way? It's impossible!" It was tremendous for me! I started learning more about jazz, and through Dance Theater of Harlem I met a lot of jazz musicians, including Miles Davis.

I've studied as much as I can. With some pieces I deliberately lean toward certain jazz rhythms and gestures, jazz integration. An example is a piece called *Singin' Sepia* for voice and mixed ensemble, with the poetry of Rita Dove.[12]

You and I have talked about the fact that I'm originally from New Orleans and the jazz tradition of that region. When I was first in the Caribbean and Latin America, I was blown away by the incredible music there—it's *so* powerful and sensual, fantastic driving

rhythms and soaring melodic lines. So I guess I had a similar, parallel experience to your awakening to jazz. Do you consciously incorporate elements of Latin and Caribbean music into your compositions? I ask because I hear the influences there, but they are subtle and seem to be molded to your individual voice.

I didn't really go into the aspects of music from Cuba or the Caribbean or Latin America until after I went back to Cuba for the first time. People who left Cuba around the time I did weren't allowed back to the country because of travel regulations. Then in 1979, the Cuban government opened travel for family reunification, and that's how I was able to return home after 12 years of being away. I got to meet all of the new members of my family that had been born, and I saw my parents. Specifically, I remember the shock of seeing my father with completely white hair. I didn't realize it was the last time I would see him; he died several months after my visit. And that was the shock that made me reconsider what kind of music I was writing. When I brought my music home my father said, "Your music sounds very interesting, but where are you in there?" He didn't explain to me what he meant by that, but the way I took it was that something of me was missing in my music. I started having nightmares and hearing all sorts of rhythmical twists in my mind, and my music started being affected by that emotional state. Nowadays I compose anything I feel like composing. I mean I can do a very straight piece, devoid of all of that [influence of Latin music].

Not a stamp, but your heritage is in your blood and expressed in your unique musical voice, as it is in many creative people, artists and composers. . .

I very much believe that each creative person is the sum total of their experience and background. I am much more comfortable now because all of my influences—the music that I have encountered in the world—have made an impact on me and on my life. Once the music makes an impact on me, I go hunting and researching and trying to understand the specific musical aesthetic of what it is that has moved me so. For *Haiku*, I studied a lot of the theater gestures of Noh.[13] I have so many books on the music of Japan in my studio from that time. When I went to China four or five years ago, I bought scores from there as well. Historically, in those old scores the musical language and the type of notation they used were totally different from the graphics we commonly use to notate music, and it interested me very much.

You went to Madrid and Beijing as a US Artistic Director of American Culture. What an honor. That must have been a demanding and transformative experience.

That was tremendous, oh my God yes! I got a call from the embassy and they wanted to appoint me US Director of American Culture. So I went and they did performances of my work in Madrid. That was really very moving. I gave lectures and I visited universities and conservatories. I talked about new directions in music and my heritage and how the Spanish syntax is in the music of countries such as the one in which I grew up. In Cuba you can see the influences of Spain, France, Africa, and China. I was surrounded by all of that rich heritage. We are a mélange of all of it, especially in our music. That's why the music has become what it is, because it is a hybrid of all these different cultures, by the artists of each generation, you know? So that's why for me to hear someone's description of my music is always amazing. But what people really hear in my music is me, myself, trying to portray how I listen, and how all of these influences have affected what's happening within me in terms of sound.

So those influences are part of the makeup of your musical voice. When you work with your students, do they ask you or do you advise them as to how to find their own voice as composers?

All the time. I usually tell my students that at the beginning it is natural that they will lean toward sounds or techniques or influences by the creators that they admire. That is a natural step toward progression as an artist. As we move away from those first steps, I think it is important to begin thinking very profoundly about who it is we are, you see? Who am *I*? What do *I* have to say? For that you have to go very deep. That is beyond technique; it is a little bit more spiritual or subconscious, but it is a quest that we all have. Otherwise what are we doing on this planet? Everyone wants to know, "Who am I?" before we leave the planet. So I never talk to students about following anyone but themselves. I tell them to try and discover who they are.

Do you think that composition and composers today are any different from when you were a student? Has there been a change in attitude, technique, or esthetics?

I think that the computerized world has revolutionized everything. Everyone is involved in the quest for gaining speed, and sometimes we don't give ample time to whatever it is we are creating. Out of three or four works that we write, which one will be singled out? It has to have that something in a very special way. The young students and composers of this age are very prolific.

Some of them can write incredible pieces, in terms of orchestration skills and craftsmanship. How much are they saying of who *they* are though?

Do you think the computer has helped or hurt the students?
Certainly, the computer is fascinating. We have all of these notation programs now. So, voila! There is a score realized right there in front of you! On the other hand, you have to be very, very disciplined not to allow the computer to influence your writing. Cutting and pasting, or repeating something can be seductive; it's so easy to take something out of the end and stick it in the middle. With all the easy editing you can do with these programs, it might change the composition process that one would naturally follow. We are living in the computer world, and where we are heading, I have no idea. But definitely we are heading to something much more supreme than what we have right now. But we have to be careful that we don't lose ourselves and our creativity in the process.

What's coming up next for you? I know you are working on your quintet. What do you look forward to, as a composer and as an artist in the years ahead?
Well, let me see. I have been approached about writing a second opera, and that's something that interests me a great deal. I really don't know what comes next.

To tell the truth, I am always amazed that I am doing what I am doing. It's been a magnificent ride. It is like *Alice in Wonderland*: coming from Cuba and arriving as a pianist, getting into composition and conducting, being in the world of academia, doing all of these exciting things. If you asked me tomorrow if I would like to conduct *Cirque du Soleil*, I would say, Sure! And then you would see me at *Cirque du Soleil*, conducting the show! [Laughs]

I love people; I love the music of the world. I don't call it world music; I call it the music of the world because I include all the musical systems that I don't know of yet. The music of the world is fascinating to me. I was supposed to be a musician and that's what I am. Above being a composer, or a pianist, or a conductor, or whatever, I'm a musician. This is the world of music and we are musicians—and that's the only title that I'm comfortable with.

SELECTED WORKS OF TANIA LEÓN

Ethos (2014), Piano and String Quartet
Inura (2009), Voices (SATB), Strings, and Percussion

Ácana (2008), Chamber Orchestra
Alma (2007), Flute and Piano
Toque (2006), Clarinet, Alto Sax, Piano, Percussionists, Violin, Double Bass
Reflections (2006), Poems by Rita Dove, Soprano, Clarinet, Tenor Sax, Piano, Trumpet, String Quintet, Percussion
Axon (2002), Violin and Interactive Computer
Rezos (2001), Text by Jamaica Kincaid, SATB Choir
Horizons (1999), Orchestra
Singin' Sepia (1996), Poems by Rita Dove, Soprano, Clarinet, Violin, Piano Four Hands
Scourge of Hyacinths: Full Opera (1999), Chamber Opera (1994), Libretto by León, based on a play by Wole Soyinka, Orchestra
Kabiosile (1988), Solo Piano, Chamber Orchestra

▶ To learn more about Tania León and her music, visit www.oup.com/us/compositioninthedigitalworld.

NOTES

1. Tania León was presented with the Victor Herbert Award from ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) at its 14th annual Concert Music Awards in 2013.
2. The New York College of Music was established in 1925 and was merged with the NYU School of Music in 1968.
3. In 1969 León became the first musical director of Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theater of Harlem. She was a founding member and established its music school and orchestra.
4. Founded in 1964 by soprano Dorothy Maynor, Harlem School of the Arts offers courses in music, dance, and the visual arts.
5. Jerome Robbins (1918–1998) was an American choreographer and producer. He worked on many ballet and Broadway productions including *West Side Story, The King and I*, and *Peter Pan*. His many accolades include two Academy Awards, five Tony Awards, and the National Medal of Arts.
6. Ursula Mamlok is a German-born American composer and teacher.
7. Miriam Gideon (1906–1996) was an American composer who studied with Roger Sessions. She was the second woman inducted into the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1975).
8. Louise Talma (1906–1996) was an American composer and educator. She studied at Juilliard, NYU, Columbia University, and privately with Nadia Boulanger. She was the first woman to be inducted into the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1974), to receive two Guggenheim Fellowships, and to receive the Sibelius Medal (1963).
9. Marian Anderson (1897–1993) was an American contralto. She was the first African American to perform at the Metropolitan Opera. Her awards include the Presidential Medal of Freedom (1963), the National Medal of Arts (1986), and a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award (1991).

10. Josephine Baker (1906–1975) was an American-born dancer, actress, singer, and world-famous entertainer.
11. The Public Theater was founded in 1954 by Joseph Papp (1921–1991), and produced numerous award-winning plays and musicals including *Hair*. León conducted *The Human Comedy* produced by Joseph Papp on Broadway in 1984.
12. Rita Dove is an American poet. She served as Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 1993 to 1995. She received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (1987), and was the Poet Laureate of Virginia from 2004 to 2006.
13. Noh theater is a form of classical Japanese musical drama whose origins date to the 14th century.