



# AMERICAN CLASSICS



Roberto  
**SIERRA**

**Sinfonía No. 3 'La Salsa'**

**Beyond the Silence of Sorrow**

**Borikén • El Baile**

**Martha Guth, Soprano**

**Puerto Rico  
Symphony Orchestra**

**Maximiano Valdés**



## Roberto Sierra (b. 1953)

### Sinfonía No. 3 'La Salsa' · Borikén · El Baile · Beyond the Silence of Sorrow

Roberto Sierra's *Sinfonía No. 3 'La Salsa'*, *Borikén*, *El Baile*, and *Beyond the Silence of Sorrow*, illustrate the gamut of the composer's remarkable oeuvre, abundant with arrangements for various soloists and ensembles, and combining a wide range of musical and artistic ideas.

Originally commissioned by the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra in 2005, *Sinfonía No. 3 'La Salsa'* earned the Serge and Olga Koussevitzky International Recording Award (KIRA) which celebrates contemporary orchestral works produced by living composers. The award is hosted by the Musicians Club of New York, one of the oldest in U.S. history (1911). *Sinfonía No. 3* is a large-scale work scored in four exuberant movements: *Tumbao*, *Habanera*, *Danzas* and *Jolgorio*. As the title suggests, the symphony owes much inspiration to the music of the Spanish Caribbean: Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Cuba. The popularity of salsa in the 1960s and '70s, which included an enthusiastic New York music scene, imparted much support and notoriety to the genre, eventually defining a movement. Sierra writes: "In the true spirit of salsa ("sauce" in English), I mix diverse types of older and newer rhythms from the music I remember growing up in Puerto Rico."

Stemming from European music traditions dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the first movement is structured in sonata-allegro form, exposing two groups of themes in the early part, followed by several measures of development, and closing with the reprise of the opening thematic groups (4'23"). The different themes presented in the first movement evoke piano riffs, *tumbaos*, common to salsa music, and frequently associated with the Caribbean. The second and third movements, *Habanera* and *Danzas*, are slower and follow popular dance styles of the eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, respectively. The *habanera* is a social dance derived from the English country dance and transformed, in the Caribbean, by the luxurious multi-layered and syncopated African rhythms. The mysterious tone of the second movement is highlighted by winds and violins,

followed by an imposing march-like gesture in the brass and percussion that conjures a regal parade. The music eventually dissipates into a thin instrumental texture of long held notes shared between strings and winds. In *Danzas*, Sierra quotes two *danzas* by Puerto Rican composer Juan Morel Campos (1857-1896), namely *No Me Toques* and *Si Me Tocas*. The *danzas*, emblematic of national expression, usually include several sections of distinct melodic motifs. The main rhythmic and melodic lines bounce between instruments, especially brass and winds, sometimes in rapid passages with repetitive patterns. The last movement is named after the *jolgorio*, a revelry of sorts often showcasing groups performing stylized Afro-Caribbean line-dances, which inspired Sierra to capture the spirit of these lively celebrations. In this movement Sierra scores two Caribbean rhythms, the *merengue* (Dominican Republic) traditionally played by guitars and accordion in rural areas and by larger orchestras in urban centres, and the *plena* (Puerto Rico), a vocal style of the early twentieth century featuring humorous texts and social commentary, here in instrumental form. This exciting movement commences with the memorable sound of congas in a recurring pattern to which increasing instrumental colours are added. As the music progresses, brief excerpts of Latin rhythms are heard in a modified, fragmented manner, and periodically contrasted with softer atmospheric music. This tension is actually quite fun and catchy, seeming as if two forces were actually in opposition. When the imposing sound of the horns is heard (4'49"), signalling a promising end, a sense of anticipation is established. Merriment wins out. The texture is gradually reduced to a delicate layer of strings and winds which brings back the rhythm of the *habanera* (5'41"), then at the moment where the work picks up speed and dynamics (6'53") toward a majestic conclusion.

Based on the Baroque genre of *chaconne* (or *passacaglia*) – a repeated bass line (*basso ostinato*) supporting imaginative melodies in constant variation running above it – *Borikén* presents this Spanish-derived

musical form with a distinct Puerto Rican twist. The Baroque period (roughly 1600-1750) was a time when the orchestral tradition grew in size and significance and, thanks to that innovation, a comprehensive range of instrumental colours became a powerful custom of the concert stage. The marvellous influence of orchestral development, culminating in the early twentieth century, can be observed in the lavish instrumental timbres emanating from *Borikén* playfully highlighting the *cadencia antillana*. Alternating between principal textures and supporting accompaniment, the *cadencia antillana* is a common feature of popular and folkloric styles giving purpose to the title of the piece, *Borikén*, the original name of the island as used by its indigenous inhabitants and their descendants, the "Jíbaros" or "Boricuas". At present, when we see a "rediscovery" of the indigenous peoples and its heritage – for ages thought to have been wiped out – *Borikén* offers a fresh and inspiring way to observe the continuity of the native presence in the lives of islanders. As past records indicate, the language of *Borikén* was once a hybrid of Spanish with many native vernaculars, offering an insightful parallel as to the potential of creative adaptations in cultural and artistic spheres to preserve local identities while still speaking a contemporary language. Written in 2005 for the 50th anniversary of the Casals Festival (2006), the forceful, accelerating rhythms and adorned percussive touches of *Borikén* provide for a magnetic and colourful sonic experience.

*El Baile* (2012) is another orchestral composition that reveals Sierra's penchant for the use of theme and variation. This type of musical procedure allows for great plasticity and ingenuity by continuously modifying the original idea, in this case a motivic cell spelling out J.S. Bach's name (b flat, a, c and b natural – corresponding to the letter h in German). The idea behind the motivic cell is constantly developed through pattern alternation: by shifting the notes to a different key, changing the rhythms and duration of the original cell, and also by inverting the notes – playing them in reverse order – among other strategies. The final effect is one of inventiveness within structured order. As with many other works of Sierra's output, a distinctive cultural marker is imparted by the

invocation of Puerto Rican traditional music and dance genres. In *El Baile*, Sierra kindles the work with a slow foggy introduction of rhythmic structures suggestive of the Afro-Caribbean music and dance of *Bomba*, common to black plantation communities of the island circa the seventeenth century. *Bomba* also describes the main barrel-shaped drum utilized in the music. In *El Baile* one hears the motivic cell peek in at the beginning, followed by a gradual rhythmic escalation with moments of reprieve, only to return with greater strength. The rhythms bounce between the brass section and violins, with percussive accompaniment, reaching a highpoint at the closure ringing in *fortissimo* unison.

*Beyond the Silence of Sorrow* (2002), a song cycle for soprano and orchestra, is a musical setting of six poems by N. Scott Momaday (b. 1936), offering a captivating lyrical rendition of texts ranging in scope from birth to love to absence. Momaday, born in Lawton, Oklahoma, to a Kiowa father and part Cherokee mother, left an imprint with his first book *House Made of Dawn* (1968). The book sparked what some scholars termed a "Native American Renaissance" – the renewal of publication interest in native literature – and earned Momaday a Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1969. Momaday's poetic compositions often invoke native storytelling and images with complex cultural signifiers, for example in the art of cradle-making for a new child by a relative (sometimes a grandparent), or in the distinctive aspects of tribal courtship (i.e. "he brings my mother glittering beads"), as heard in this song cycle. Sierra resignifies these poems by cross-culturally "translating" them into his own emotive scenarios. For instance, by relocating Momaday's poems in a civil and human rights context of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Sierra connects his own Puerto Rican heritage to those of diverse backgrounds. Sierra states: "I tried in my settings to portray the vivid imagery of the words, ranging from the playfulness of *About Me Like a Robe* to the tragic tone of *A Cradle for this Child*". Indeed, in a semi-declamatory style, the singer's melodic contours move in a well-paced fashion allowing the words to ring forth with clarity and dynamism. Brief instrumental interludes between poetic stanzas permit suitable breaks for self-reflection. The masterful orchestral

settings add colour and emotional import to special words and cadences, and assist in the development of the ideas being exposed. The entire cycle presents the following songs: *Prayer to the Land, About Me Like a Robe, To Tell You of my Love, A Cradle for this Child, Little Newborn, and The Woman Who Walked Here*. The cycle ends on a wondering note – “where is the woman who walked here?” – which posed in the composer’s mind (in close relation with Momaday’s own notion of the “past as a

journey”) a thought-provoking dichotomy between past and present: “About the many cultures and peoples that are with us, and that preceded us; some forgotten and some in a fragile state of existence.”

**Silvia M. Lazo**

For more information about Roberto Sierra please visit [www.robertosierra.com](http://www.robertosierra.com)

## Martha Guth



Photo: Michelle Doherty

Soprano Martha Guth has performed extensively throughout North America and Europe in concert, recital and opera, and her performances have been broadcast live on BBC Radio 2 in England, the CBC and Radio Canada and WDR in Germany. She has worked with the conductors Seiji Ozawa, Robert Spano, Helmut Rilling, John Nelson, Scott Speck and Richard Bradshaw among others. Her recital partners include Graham Johnson, Malcolm Martineau, Erika Switzer, and Spencer Myer. Her discography includes the Brahms’s *Liebeslieder* waltzes through *Sparks and Wiry Cries*, a solo disc of Schubert *Lieder* with fortepianist Penelope Crawford for Musica Omnia, *The Five Boroughs Songbook* recorded for GVR records, and *Magna Mysteria* by John Fitz-Rogers for Innova. She is a founding faculty member at the Vancouver International Song institute (VISI), and is the co-creator and co-editor of *Sparks and Wiry Cries*, a website, commissioning programme and performance platform dedicated to Art Song. [www.sparksandwirycries.com](http://www.sparksandwirycries.com)

## Puerto Rico Symphony Orchestra



The Puerto Rico Symphony Orchestra began to take root in 1956 when Pablo Casals accepted the invitation of the government to establish himself in Puerto Rico, where his mother, Pilar Defilló, was born and raised in the town of Mayagüez. The inaugural concert was held in 1958 in Mayagüez, directed by Casals. The soloist was José (Pepito) Figueroa, a local violinist who had already triumphed in Europe and the United States, and who from then until 1990 served as the Symphony’s concertmaster. The current musical director is the respected Chilean conductor Maximiano Valdés. Other prominent figures who have led the Orchestra throughout the years are Alexander Schneider, Juan José Castro, Víctor Tevah, Sidney Harth, John Barnett, Odón Alonso, Karl Sollak, Eugene Kohn, Guillermo Figueroa and emeritus conductor Roselin Pabón. Recently, Rafael Enrique Irizarry was named associate conductor. Today the Puerto Rico Symphony brings together musicians with established careers and excellent young musicians also active on international stages. Its importance in the country’s musical life can be felt in its annual concert season, its educational, pop and outreach concerts and its collaborations with the Casals Festivals as well as opera and ballet companies. It has been the orchestra of Operalia, the singing competition founded by Plácido Domingo, and has left its mark with successful presentations in the neighboring Caribbean, Central America, the United States, and Spain. In 2008, the Puerto Rico Symphony proudly celebrated its fiftieth anniversary and inaugurated the Pablo Casals Symphony Hall, an ideal space for its performances, constructed as part of the cultural complex formed by the Luis A. Ferré Performing Arts Center and the Santurce Cultural District.

### Maximiano Valdés



Photo: Guillermo Real

In February 2008 Chilean conductor Maximiano Valdés was named Music Director of the Puerto Rico Symphony, and in March 2010, Artistic Director of the internationally famous Festival Casals of Puerto Rico. He recently ended a sixteen-year tenure as Music Director of the Orquesta Sinfónica del Principado de Asturias in Spain, is a former Music Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and served as Chief Conductor of both the orchestra and opera at the Teatro Municipal in Santiago, Chile. During his career Maximiano Valdés has guest conducted most of the leading orchestras in the United States, including the St. Louis, National, Montreal, Baltimore, Seattle, Houston, Dallas, and New World Symphonies and The Philadelphia Orchestra. Also an active international conductor, he has led the Dresden Philharmonic, London Symphony, Russian State Symphony Orchestra, Warsaw and Katowice Philharmonics, Lisbon Philharmonic, Israel Chamber Orchestra and many others in Latin America and Asia. He has recorded an extensive collection of Spanish composers for Naxos Records with the orchestra of the Principality of Asturias.

Roberto  
**SIERRA**  
(b. 1953)

**Sinfonía No. 3 'La Salsa' (2005) 28:31**

- 1 Tumbao 6:46
- 2 Habanera 7:50
- 3 Danzas 5:19
- 4 Jolgorio 8:36

**5 Borikén (2005) 14:14**

**6 El Baile (2012) 9:36**

**Beyond the Silence of Sorrow  
(2002)\* 22:20**

- 7 1. Prayer to the Land 5:30
- 8 2. About Me Like a Robe 3:08
- 9 3. To Tell You of my Love 4:19
- 10 4. A Cradle for this Child 3:08
- 11 5. Little Newborn 3:20
- 12 6. The Woman Who Walked Here 2:55

**Martha Guth, Soprano\***

**Puerto Rico  
Symphony Orchestra**

**Maximiano Valdés**

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**AMERICAN CLASSICS**

The sonic colour and distinctive rhythms enshrined in these four works provide further evidence of the art of internationally acclaimed Puerto Rican composer, Roberto Sierra. The award-winning *Sinfonía No. 3 'La Salsa'* owes its inspiration to the music of the Spanish Caribbean and is a salsa of older and newer rhythms, intoxicatingly presented amidst revelry and dance. The instrumentally vivid *Borikén* is based on the baroque *chaconne* but with a Latin twist, while *El Baile* invokes traditional music in a wholly distinctive way. *Beyond the Silence of Sorrow* is a captivatingly lyrical song cycle.

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Playing  
Time:  
**74:42**