

CUBAN MEMOIRS

Music by Andrés Alén
William Villaverde, piano

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Theme and Variations on a Theme by Silvio Rodríguez ♦ Unison* (from the Saxophone Quartet) ♦ **Prelude No. 6 ♦ Prelude No. 2 ♦ Prelude No. 1**
Prelude No. 3 ♦ Prelude No. 4 ♦ Prelude No. 5 ♦ Danzón "Legrand"
(arr. William Villaverde) ♦ **Theme and Variations on a Theme by Pablo Milanés**

* World premiere recording

Total Playing Time: 53:52



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1. **Theme and Variations on a Theme by Silvio Rodríguez** (16:25)
2. **Unison*** (from the Saxophone Quartet) (0:56)
3. **Prelude No. 6** (2:39)
4. **Prelude No. 2** (2:54)
5. **Prelude No. 1** (2:33)
6. **Prelude No. 3** (2:37)
7. **Prelude No. 4** (3:31)
8. **Prelude No. 5** (2:32)
9. **Danzón "Legrand"** (arr. William Villaverde) (5:34)
10. **Theme and Variations on a Theme by Pablo Milanés** (13: 56)

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COMPOSER'S INTRODUCTION:

As a composer, I'm always surprised when listening to my music as performed by other musicians, with their different approaches that are sometimes new and unexpected. I certainly find this process to be very interesting and challenging. But the truth is that I am somehow happiest when hearing performances of my works that are as close as possible to the original ideas that inspired them. It's almost like when I "heard" them for the first time in my head before even writing them down. This composer-performer affinity is exactly what I feel when listening to William Villaverde's recording. Because of his unique knowledge of classical, jazz and Cuban music genres, he truly understands the nature of my works, bringing out the different styles and effects in the proper places and combining them seamlessly into a coherent whole. His brilliant technique and interpretive skills do the rest to achieve great performances of my music. Thank you, William.

—Andrés Alén

PERFORMER'S NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

In 1993 while living in Havana, my first piano teacher took me to meet one of the

Andrés Alén — and, after playing for him, I was accepted into his studio. For the next eight years I was his student and learned most of his piano music and some of his chamber music works. As a profound admirer of Afro-Cuban jazz, one of the pillars of Alén's artistic creations, I became one of the most enthusiastic promoters of his music. This album is a compilation of the piano music that I learned directly from him and the works that he composed before the year 2001, the year I left Cuba.

Theme and Variations on a Theme by Silvio Rodríguez: Composed in 1999 and containing ten variations, this piece was inspired by the song "La vida" (Life), written by Cuban singer-songwriter Silvio Rodríguez. The inclusion of many different classical and popular music genres makes this piece particularly appealing. Alén explores not only Cuban dance forms such as *contradanza* and *cha-cha-chá*, but also more traditional European genres like prelude, étude, fughetta, nocturne and toccatina.

Unison: The original version of this piece is the fourth movement of Alén's Saxophone Quartet. I premiered the solo piano version as an encore during a concert tour in Bolivia in the fall of 1998. This CD presents the work's premiere recording. This

nature, harmonically driven scale-wise passages and jazzy sonorities.

Preludes: These are independent pieces that Andrés Alén composed between 1979 and 1999. Even though these preludes were not composed as a set, they work amazingly well together. In search of dramatic climaxes and contrasts, I'm presenting them here in the same order that I use when performing them in recitals rather than grouping them chronologically. The works are described below in the same sequence in which they are performed in this album.

Prelude No. 6 was composed in 1999 and premiered by the composer in the same year. It is dedicated to Lev Vlazenko, Alén's teacher at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow. This piece explores rich and trendy harmonies, which—superimposed over its syncopated rhythms—suggest an Afro-Cuban jazz ensemble. Additionally, this charming prelude features what is known as a "montuno," also quite characteristic of Afro-Cuban dance music.

Prelude No. 2 emerged in 1981. In writing this piece, Alén was inspired by the sonorities of the jazz band format. It is dedicated to the memory of Rafael Somavilla: a Cuban pianist, composer, arranger and conductor of several jazz bands. Alén

admired him greatly, as both a wonderful person and a superb musician.

Prelude No. 1 was written in 1979. Alén dedicated it to his wife, pianist Maria Dolores Novás, who premiered the piece. Its calm and steady beginning, with its open harmonies, offers a pleasing contrast to the flashy and grandiose ending of the second prelude. This piece is characterized by shifts in meter and the occasional use of the typical syncopated bass that's always present in Afro-Cuban music.

Prelude No. 3, composed in 1982, is dedicated to Margot Díaz Dorticós, Alén's first piano teacher. This prelude is characterized by the contrasting alternations of its rhythmic and lyrical sections. At the same time, the work's lyrical sections could be considered as the climactic points for all the preludes, had they been grouped together as a set.

Prelude No. 4 was crafted in 1992, ten years after the third Prelude. Alén—who premiered the piece—dedicated it to his second piano teacher, Cecilio Tieles. It is the only one among the six that has a slow tempo. This prelude serves as a window into the composer's unique harmonic world. The piece is chordal and lyrical in character, standing in beautiful contrast to the sonorous third prelude that precedes it.

Prelude No. 5 was written in 1999 and dedicated to Vitali Dotsenko, the last piano teacher Alén had in Cuba before going to study at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow. As the flashiest of all the preludes, the piece rightly serves as an effective finale to this album's group of preludes. It was inspired by Latin rhythms, specifically those found in Venezuelan music. I premiered this work in Havana in the same year of its composition.

Danzón "Legrand," composed in 1968, is Alén's earliest and one of his most famous works. It has been performed around the world in many different formats and arrangements. Following the composer's style and using the piece's piano trio version as a model, I arranged the closing section to include a montuno section with improvisatory solos, some originally composed and some borrowed from Alén's piano trio version.

Theme and Variations on a Theme by Pablo Milanés was composed in 1993. It contains fourteen variations based on a segment of the song "El breve espacio en que no estás" (The brief space in which you are not), by the Cuban singer-songwriter Pablo Milanés. These variations are not only technically challenging but also intellectually demanding and highly imaginative. As Alén's brother, Cuban

musicologist Olavo Alén, has described them: "Every variation represents a different style of composition, mood, or state of mind." Its final variation serves as a most effective coda to the entire CD.

—Dr. William Villaverde

BRIEF BIOGRAPHIES:

Andrés Alén is a Cuban pianist, composer, arranger, and educator with a distinguished reputation among critics and musicians alike. His substantial music catalogue is characterized by the fusion of Cuban music, jazz, and both traditional and contemporary compositional techniques of classical music. He has written for symphonic and chamber orchestras, choirs, chamber music ensembles, jazz ensembles, and piano. His works have been performed around the world by legendary Cuban musicians, including Arturo Sandoval, Paquito D'Rivera, and Jorge Luis Prats. As described by renowned Cuban jazz pianist Chucho Valdés as "one of Cuba's most complete musicians," Alén is a multifaceted pianist with expertise in classical, jazz, and popular idioms. As a piano pedagogue, he has mentored several generations of pianists who have gone on to win prestigious awards worldwide. As a recording artist and producer, Alén has been the



winner of several Cuban and international nominations as well as awards for his recorded albums. For more information, please visit andresalenmusic.com

William Villaverde is a multi-award winning Cuban pianist with an extensive in-

ternational performing history spanning over two decades. His affinity for both classical and Afro-Cuban jazz idioms give him a unique perspective as a performer. The *Charleston City Paper* described his performances as "unforgettable" and commented, "the sense of eclecticism is at



the core of the pianist's style and is what sets him apart." Villaverde has appeared in international music festivals and has performed as a soloist with several symphony orchestras around the world. The *Diario de Leon* (Spain) described him as a "marvelous Cuban pianist" in a review of his interpretation of Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1. Villaverde holds a Doctorate of

Musical Arts degree in Piano Performance with a cognate in Jazz Performance from the University of Miami. His research into Cuban piano music led him to write his doctoral dissertation on the piano works of Andrés Alén, and to record this album presenting many of Alén's piano compositions. For more information, please visit williamvillaverde.com

SPECIAL THANKS

- To my parents, Jose M. Villaverde and Andrea Barban: for their endless and unconditional support.
- To my brother, Vladimir: for sacrificing some of his childhood years so I could practice the piano.
- To my most influential mentor, Andrés Alén: not just for all this wonderful music and teaching me how to play it, but also for bringing out my “inner pianist” by pushing me to my limits while encouraging and inspiring me; furthermore, for showing me how to perceive the piano as a way of life.
- To the brilliant Cuban pianist Jorge Luis Prats: without his support and advocacy, I would not be where I am today.
- To my piano teachers Virginia de la Osa, Enrique Graf, Joaquín Achúcarro, and Dr. J.B. Floyd: for sharing with me their knowledge and passion for music.
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Photo of William Villaverde: Mario Garcia Joya
Piano: Steinway
Piano Technician: Paul Bruno
Cover Image: El Malecon at sunset — Havana, Cuba