José COMELLAS
PIANO MUSIC

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FIRST RECORDINGS
Seventy years after its publication in Mexico, the book *Music in Cuba*,¹ by the Swiss-born Cuban novelist, essayist and musicologist Alejo Carpentier (1904–80), remains the quintessential work on the subject. Carpentier’s vivid and gripping prose narrates the importation of European (and, later, African) musical culture to the prized colony from the early sixteenth century onwards, and its subsequent development and dissemination well beyond its geographical frontiers. As laudatory as Carpentier’s efforts are, they represent a particular historical viewpoint that coincided with the search of the young Cuban Republic for an inclusive national identity and the author’s personal musical aesthetic and social – as well as political – ideology. A fervent admirer of Neo-Classicism – as cultivated by Stravinsky and Les Six – and a confirmed follower of Fernando Ortiz’s *Afrocubanismo*,² Carpentier lashes out at the Romanticism still prevalent in Cuban music in the early decades of the last century and at its adherents, the entrenched social and political forces – overwhelmingly of European descent – that opposed the inclusion and equal acceptance of African elements in its myopic concept of national musical culture. Such Romantic figures as Nicolás Ruíz Espadero (1832–90), Cecilia Arizti (1856–1930), Guillermo Tomás Bouffartigue (1868–1933) and Eduardo Sánchez de Fuentes (1874–1944) – all Caucasian – are, at best, tolerated by Carpentier but ultimately dismissed to varying degrees as mere imitators of European musical trends and of insensitivity to the African elements surrounding them. Musical transculturation remains his paramount criterion, regardless of racial or ethnic origin. Whereas composers such as Manuel Saumell Robredo (1817–70) and Ignacio Cervantes Kawanagh

² Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969) was a leading pioneer of the 1920s *Afrocubanismo* movement, which proclaimed the inseparable contribution of black culture to Cuba’s national conscience. Amadeo Roldán (1900–39) and Alejandro García Caturla (1906-40) were the leading figures in its musical counterpart.
(1847–1905) – also Caucasian – are rightfully venerated for their contributions to a developing transcultural idiom, especially evident in their nationalistic danzas and contradanzas. Carpentier does not spare the talented black pianist-composer José Manuel ‘Lico’ Jiménez, trained at the Leipzig and Paris conservatoires, heard and praised by both Wagner and Liszt. Jiménez’s efforts, which include a piano sonata and a concerto (both await rediscovery in Hamburg, where he taught) are dismissed as ‘[probably] not adding a great deal to the island’s musical tradition’. Carpentier’s valiant stand for the repressed Afro-Cuban society and culture had the effect of understating one of Cuba’s most endearing characteristics (until 1959, when immigration virtually ceased): its racial and cultural heterogeneity. Consequently, Carpentier’s definition of Cuban musical nationalism excludes composers worthy of attention principally because of their conscious adoption of an inherited European musical tradition. Recently, there has been a hesitant but noticeable effort in Cuban musicological circles to re-examine the Romantic era and correct some of Carpentier’s excesses. This album, which presents

3 The nineteenth-century contradanza and its subsequent offspring, the danza, had its origins in the French contredanse (which became, in English, ‘country dance’). Essentially a couples’ dance with elaborate choreography, the genre was represented musically through a binary form totalling 32 bars, though in practice a contradanza was repeated several times and joined to others, creating a chain. Musically, the two halves were often distinct: the first more restrained, even classical, in style and the second imbued with rhythmical intricacies derived from African rhythmic patterns. The suggestive titles of many nineteenth-century Cuban contradanzas illustrate a peculiar and often outrageous sense of humour.

4 Carpentier, op. cit., p. 272 (‘La guerra nos ha impedido reclamar esas partituras que, de todos modos, no añadirían gran cosa a la tradición musical de la isla’).

5 Besides the obvious Iberian (primarily Canary Islanders, Basques, Asturians, Catalans and Galicians) and French contingents, one could find migration from central Europe, Ashkenazy Jews from Poland, Sephardic Jews from the former Ottoman Empire, Chinese coolies arriving in the late nineteenth century and many other such groups.

6 Underlying Carpentier’s narrative there is an obvious reference to the role the Cuban independence movement played on selected emerging composers during the nineteenth century and it coincides with his ultra-nationalist bent. José Comellas’ European outlook and his undeterred commitment to his art, devoid of politics, would probably have elicited Carpentier’s criticism. Since the mid-1800s, the political quagmire between Spain and its increasingly insubordinate Cuban colony marred and displaced, to varying degrees, the careers of fellow Cuban-born composers such as Pablo Desvernine, Gaspar Villate, José ‘Lino’ Fernández de Coca, José White y Lafitte and Ignacio Cervantes Kawanagh. The last two were, indeed, forcibly exiled in 1875 for their support of the independence movement and are mentioned in the writings and oratory of Cuban patriot José Martí.

7 Cuban pianist-musicologist Cecilio Tieles Ferrer published in 1994 the first major biography of Nicolás Ruiz Espadero – a favourite target of Carpentier’s criticisms – followed by the publication of some of Espadero’s major works and a CD: Espadero: música y nación en Cuba colonial, Ediciones Museo de la Música, Havana, 1994 (rev. 2007); Espadero: lo hispánico musical en
first recordings of selected solo-piano works by José Comellas, inaugurates a new series for Toccata Classics and aims to vindicate some of the many *cubanos perdidos*.

José Comellas (y Carmona) was born in Matanzas (on the northern coastline of Cuba, 90 kilometres to the east of Havana) on 21 February 1842 into a family of Catalan immigrants. His father was a versatile musician: a violinist, pianist, conductor, even a vocal coach – before his arrival in Cuba, he was musical director of the Valencia theatre (1839) – and he successfully exploited these talents once the family moved permanently to Havana after an initial residence in Puerto Príncipe, province of Camagüey. Young Comellas not only received violin instruction from his father but also joined his sisters Dolores and Altagracia in piano studies. In a short time Comellas came to be regarded as a child prodigy, thus joining fellow musicians, the Cuban-born Nicolás Ruíz Espadero (1832–90) and Adolfo de Quesada y Hore (1830–88) – born in Madrid but trained in Cuba from the age of six – as an initial wave of pianists destined to achieve renown. The fact that they were Caucasian denotes a noticeable change in Cuban society, for the musical arts – especially the more popular in vein – were almost exclusively dominated by Africans, since whites were expected to elect careers deemed more suitable to their class, as in the civil service, military, jurisprudence, medicine and so on. The contemporary philosopher José Antonio Saco (1797–1879) lamented this ‘black hegemony’ in his

*Cuba*, Agil Offset, Barcelona, 1994; *Espadero: obras para piano* (EGREM CD, 2006); *Espadero: obras para piano*, Ediciones Museo de la Música, Bogotá, 2007. Espadero was a leading Cuban pianist-composer and teacher and perhaps the most internationally recognised Cuban-born composer of his day, through the works published primarily by Léon Escudier in Paris. In time, Espadero’s personal and musical relationship with Louis Moreau Gottschalk became invaluable for the future preservation of many of the latter’s works.

8 Comellas’ subsequent views on his European ancestry must be examined at this point: not only did he adopt an anglicised spelling of his first name from José to ‘Joseph’ when his future works were published by Schirmer and Breitkopf und Härtel – or simply J. Comellas when published by smaller American companies such as Martens Brothers in New York and that run by his fellow Cuban Agustín Cortada – but it is curious to note that in the 1880 United States census, while a boarder in the residence of Gustavus R. Glenn’s – president of the Columbus Female College at the time (1875–1884) – in Columbus, Muscogee county, Georgia, Comellas declared that his parents were born in Italy (Comellas is also an Italian surname). His responses include his original birthplace as Cuba; birth year: 1840 [*sic*]; race: white; marital status: single; occupation: teacher of music. This self-negation of his Iberian ancestry is possibly due to his training in Leipzig and frequent travels to and from Europe, along with his cosmopolitan and peripatetic existence in both Cuba and principally the United States. The effervescent political climate between Spain and the aspiring future American power may have also played a role, including American isolationism and its suspicious view of foreigners prior to the large-scale European migrations to come in the early years of the twentieth century.
writings, all the while encouraging a reversal of fortune for the white population. In an 1830 essay on vagrancy in Cuba, Saco affirms: ‘Among the enormous ills this wretched race has brought to our soil, one is having kept our white population away from the arts’.

Nineteenth-century Cuban classically trained pianists and violinists normally gravitated towards Paris to advance their studies, not only lured by the prestige of the Paris Conservatoire but also influenced by the considerable numbers of French descendants who had emigrated to the island during the 1790s Haitian revolt and throughout the new century. Two early examples include the pianists Fernando Arizti (1828–88) and Pablo Desvernine Legras (1823–1910), pupils of such notable figures as Kalkbrenner and Thalberg. Violinists include the notable Afro-Cubans José White y Lafitte (1836–1918), a pupil of Alard, and Claudio Brindis de Salas (1852–1911), a pupil of Léonard and Dancla. Later in the nineteenth century, Ignacio Cervantes Kawanagh (1847–1905), José Manuel Jiménez (1855–1917) and Michael Castellanos (1862–1940), a New Yorker of Cuban descent and a close friend of Edward MacDowell, all studied with Marmontel and featured prominently in the annual Conservatoire concours.

Comellas, by contrast, chose the Leipzig Conservatoire instead, and was not the first to do so. In 1849, the black violinist-pianist José Julián Jiménez (1835–80) received the financial support of three rich landowners from Trinidad, Las Villas province, on the south side of the island – an uncommon gesture, given the existing racial barriers – and enrolled at the Leipzig Conservatoire shortly thereafter as a pupil of Ferdinand David on violin and Ignaz Moscheles on piano. Comellas followed suit (there is no evidence he may have known Jiménez previously) and is mentioned as a pupil from 1854 in Emil Kneschke’s Das Konservatorium der Musik in Leipzig, a 25th-anniversary commemorative

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9 José Antonio Saco, ‘Memoria sobre la vagancia en la isla de Cuba’, Obras, Roe Lockwood and Son, New York, 1852, p. 32.
10 Ibid, p. 32 (‘Entre los enormes males que esta raza infeliz ha traido a nuestro suelo, uno de ellos es haber alejado de las artes a nuestra población blanca’).
13 José Calero and Leopoldo Valdés Quesada, Cuba musical, Imprenta de Molina, La Habana, 1929, p. 78.
publication published in 1868, as ‘Joseph Comellas’ from Port-au-Prince [sic]. It is curious that Jiménez’s name appears in the annual list of examinees’ records dating between 1849 and 1862 and yet Comellas’ is not found at all, which suggests that he may have had private tuition from Moscheles, as part of the latter’s expected load.\textsuperscript{14}

It would seem that Comellas returned to Cuba at the conclusion of his studies and performed a series of recitals in the 1860s, though it is currently impossible to establish precise dates and activities. For instance, in the \textit{Diario de la Marina} of 23 January 1862, there appears an announcement for the inauguration of Our Lady of Mercy Catholic church, including the performance of a newly composed Mass with large orchestra by the resident organist, Don José Comellas, but it is uncertain if this reference is to Comellas or to his father.\textsuperscript{15}

Arriving in Baltimore in the early 1870s, Comellas probably dedicated much of his time to teaching in his home (201 Decker Street), in private conservatoires and in the households of prominent socialites. Why he selected Baltimore remains a matter of conjecture, but the city had long boasted a significant musical life, from the late 1780s through the creation of the Peabody Conservatory in 1857,\textsuperscript{16} though the institution did not technically begin offering instruction until 1868. It’s also possible that Comellas’ decision may have materialised through the intervention of influential sectors in Baltimore’s German community with ties to Leipzig. Though Serafín Ramírez\textsuperscript{17} described Comellas as a ‘loyal, sincere friend who, had it not been for his “exaggerated modesty”, may have doubly triumphed,’\textsuperscript{18} Comellas’ future activities in the

\textsuperscript{14} Mark Kroll, \textit{Ignaz Moscheles and the Changing World of Musical Europe}, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2014, pp. 172–73. Kroll sheds possible light on the discrepancy surrounding the true number of students taught by Moscheles, his required schedule at the Conservatoire and the fact not all his students appeared listed in official records.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Diario de la Marina}, 23 January 1862.

\textsuperscript{16} It is curious to point out that Scottish-born pianist-conductor Reginald Stewart (1900–84), during his tenure as Director of the Peabody Conservatory (1942–52), instituted the practice of hiring principal players from the Baltimore Symphony, based in part on Mendelssohn’s practice at the Leipzig Conservatoire.

\textsuperscript{17} Serafín Ramírez (1833–1907) was a critic and music historian as well as an amateur cellist and the founder of the Society for Classical Music. His \textit{La Habana artística} is an indispensable source of material chronicling musical activity in the Cuban capital. As a cellist, Ramírez participated in numerous Cuban premieres of European chamber-music works.

Baltimore area, combined with the fact that his surviving compositions were published by Schirmer and Breitkopf und Härtel, suggest that he must have been able to publicise his talents effectively and operate comfortably in the higher echelons of society. There are reports in the press, for instance, announcing his departure for Bremen on the steamship *Deutschland*,\(^\text{19}\) which suggests he had an active performing schedule, one which merited public comment; selling a William Knabe upright piano, ‘for want of use, the owner leaving for Europe’;\(^\text{20}\) and a note on his return to 201 Decker Street.\(^\text{21}\) All the surviving press notices indicate a nomadic existence between Europe (almost exclusively Germany) and his new homeland. The claim that Comellas taught at the Peabody Conservatory\(^\text{22}\) is unfounded, based on a 1969 dissertation on the history of that institution by Ray Edwin Robinson.

Two concert reviews give further evidence of Comellas’ recognition in the eastern United States: early in January 1877 at the Baltimore Academy of Music, Comellas offered a programme – assisted by singers – to a largely sold-out house. An unidentified critic in *Der Deutscher Correspondent* wrote of ‘the well-known music teacher’ on 23 January of that year that:

> The star of the evening was evidently Mr. Comellas, incidentally a [graduate] of the Leipzig Conservatory. He performed a piano sonata [*Sonate brillante*, Op. 21] of his own composition, Beethoven’s Sonata Op. 27 [presumably Op. 27, No. 2] and a nocturne and polonaise by Chopin. Correct understanding and high technical skill characterized his interpretation […].

An announcement in *The New York Times* on 27 November 1881 reads:

> On the sixth of next month Mr. Joseph Comellas, a pianist of distinguished merit, will give his first soirée of chamber music at the theatre of the Turk Club, Madison Avenue

\(^{19}\) *The New York Times*, 8 June 1873.

\(^{20}\) *The Baltimore Sun*, 8 May 1877.

\(^{21}\) *The Baltimore Sun*, 22 September 1877.

and Twenty-sixth-street. The programme consists of the Beethoven Trio in C minor, for piano, violin, and violoncello, with the sonate, Op. 10, No. 3, played by Mr. Comellas, with a nocturne and polonaise of Chopin’s. […] as an interpreter of Beethoven, Mr. Comellas retains the traditions of the great master, having been one of Moscheles’s favorite pupils.

An entry in *The New York Tribune* of 20 September 1885, announces that ‘Joseph Comellas has resumed his piano instruction. Address: 39 West, 16th street’, indicating a possible move to New York City. Comellas died, from causes still unidentified, on 9 February 1888 in Havana, weeks short of his 46th birthday. A posthumous performance of his *Adieu à la Havanne*, Op. 2, for flute and piano, on 27 March 1906 reported in *The Baltimore Sun* proves his lingering musical presence in Maryland, but by then his published works had fallen into oblivion.

**The Piano Works**

Comellas’ extant published works for solo piano fall into four categories: two patriotic works, five salon dances, four nocturnes and a sonata.\(^{23}\) His style is, undoubtedly, derivative of the salon prototype of the Romantic era, with its mostly conservative harmonic language filled with expressive melodic-harmonic clichés – derived from practices present from Schubert through Italian and French operas – and almost never venturing into Liszt’s and Wagner’s chromaticism. Numerous examples exist by Comellas’ contemporaries that – in the eyes and ears of later musicians – are unredeemed kitsch.

\(^{23}\) There is also a *contradanza* entitled *El faro industrial* (‘The Industrial Lighthouse’), written for a magazine of the same name and published on 30 September 1847. Some may be tempted to consider it as the effort of the precocious five-year-old Comellas, but it is more likely to have been written by his father, for several reasons. First, some of the phrases include thirds and sixths – a pianistic adoption of the typical ensemble setting of many *contradanzas* for two violins, clarinets and contrabass – which would have proven difficult for a child to execute; second, the composer is identified as ‘Don’ José Comellas, an epithet usually reserved for an adult. And in an era replete with claims of child prodigies, it would be inconceivable that Comellas Senior would have let pass the opportunity of promoting a highly gifted child.

The *Revista pintoresca del faro industrial de la Habana* was published between 1841 and 1851, when it was censured and forced to close by the Spanish authorities. During its short life, it boasted contributions by several notable writers, including Cirilo Villaverde (1812–94), author of the novel *Cecilia Valdés*, one of the first to deal with the then-taboo subject of interracial relationships. *Cecilia Valdés* was turned into a zarzuela by composer Gonzalo Roig (1890–1970) in 1931 and continues to hold its place in operatic revivals both in Cuba and elsewhere.
Comellas’ music, I believe, is better than that: there are redeeming qualities in his work and an underlying seriousness of purpose allied to a genuine pianistic conception, even in his lighter works. Shortly after Comellas’ untimely death in 1888, his friend Serafín Ramírez perhaps summed it best when he described his music as ‘if not too original, at least well written’.  

It is difficult to ascertain the order of composition of six works that appeared en masse in 1874 but it is probable that some were composed at different times and places, probably also including Leipzig during Comellas’ student days. What is certain is that one of the two patriotic pieces, the **Washington et Lincoln: Élégie sur la tombe de ces deux Héros**, Op. 3 [5], was first published by G. Schirmer in 1867, probably indicating the start of a publishing relationship with the American firm. Written two years after Lincoln’s assassination, it is a commemorative funeral scene, more elaborate in its form than examples from the pens of Schubert, Liszt and others. The work pays homage to Washington as the first President and confirms Lincoln as the saviour of the Union and the ‘first’ President of a newly conceived Republic, at least in the eyes of the victors. One wonders what could have prompted Comellas to write it – could it have been a calculated publicity stunt as an introduction to the American market, or did Comellas harbour wishes for American annexation, not uncommon in a segment of the Cuban population at the time? The Élégie is cast in the sombre key of E flat minor with six episodes and

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24 Op. cit., p. 409 (‘si no de mucha originalidad, de mucha corrección al menos’).
25 The other patriotic work, published in 1874 and dedicated to Comellas’ sister Dolores, is the **Illustration sur des Airs Américains et Anglais**, Op. 6. Conceived as a set of variations primarily on the hymn ‘Hail Columbia’, with veiled references to ‘Yankee Doodle’ in modulating episodes and concluding with ‘God Save the King’ (which Comellas presumably knew under its American titles ‘My Country, ’Tis of Thee’ and ‘America’), it follows the path of Gottschalk’s *L’Union* paraphrase (1862) and *Battle Cry of Freedom*, Op. 55 (c. 1863) and yet manages to avoid, for the most part, Gottschalk’s tasteless bombastic extravagances, except in the closing page. The general effect, though, is a bit contrived and its musical value questionable.
26 Most of Comellas’ extant works were published concurrently by G. Schirmer and Breitkopf und Härtel, possibly indicating an existing accord. In most cases the cover page clearly designates Schirmer as the original publisher, except in the case of the 1874 *Adieu à la Havanne*, Op. 2, for flute and piano, where Breitkopf assumes this role.
27 Schubert’s *Grande marche funèbre*, d859, was written in 1825 to commemorate the death of Russian Czar Alexander I; Liszt’s *Marche funèbre en memoire de Maximilien I* forms the sixth item in the third book of *Années de Pèlerinage*.
28 The American Civil War proved a polarising conflict for Cuban-born Spanish subjects, increasing the already conflicting views on the future of the island that favoured annexation by the United States, independence or a continued union with Spain. Some served
the coda in the major mode – Comellas used E flat major in six of his twelve published works, including several phrases of the Sonate, Op. 21. The Élégie begins with a stately introduction, followed by a substantial three-part section replete with the melodramatic gestures, sigh motifs and pathos of the Romantic era. A martial section in E flat major prepares the funeral march proper, which is rounded off by a short coda that functions as an apotheosis.

Four of the five salon dances conform to the general formal plan of the waltz, mazurka and polka as practised in Europe: a pattern of alternating episodes derived from the rondo.29 The Natalie Mazourka [sic], Op. 10 (1874) [6], is dedicated to the Cuban pianist Natalia Broch30 de Calvo (1830–76). A native of Matanzas like Comellas, she eventually studied in Havana with Nicolás Ruíz Espadero. She performed primarily in salons, was praised by Alkan and Auguste Wolff,31 who reportedly exclaimed: ‘the sound she draws from the piano is unknown in Europe, and it is the second time the island of Cuba reveals to us new effects on the instrument’.32 Natalia Broch died suddenly on board the German passenger-ship Frankfurt on 19 December 1876, during a return voyage to Cuba from London. After an expressive introduction, the principal Mazurka theme launches the work, followed by the first episode, in A flat major. A second episode, in C sharp minor, is reminiscent of Chopin in its melodic contour and chromatic line in the tenor voice, even more so in the modulatory sequence that reintroduces the initial Mazurka theme before the coda.

The mazurka The Five Roses, Op. 26 [4], was published in 1885 by the New York firm Martens Brothers and is dedicated to Mary Botet and other female members of her family. It is almost certain that this family is related to the twentieth-century Cuban

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29 The exception is Comellas’ Leipzig Mazurka-caprice, Op. 16 (dedicated to his sister Altagracia), which is in simple tripartite form.
30 The name is misspelled in the score as ‘Natalia Brocchi de Calvo’.
31 Auguste Wolff (1821–87), pianist-composer and an associate of Camille Pleyel since 1853, would guide the Pleyel factory through its heyday in the late 1880s.
composer María Enma Botet Dubois (1903–89). The Mazurka is in rondo form: ABACA–coda.

*Christmas Toys*, a ‘Little Polka’ (without opus number) [12], also dates from 1885 but was published by Agustín Cortada. Its 64 bars encapsulate a concise rondo (introduction–ABACAD–codetta) and its opening and closing bars imitate the ‘wind-up’ of a toy as it is set in motion.

The grand waltz *Vienne*, Op. 4 [2], was published in 1874 by Schirmer and reissued by Breitkopf in the same year. It is a sequence of six waltzes, following the pattern established by von Weber’s *Aufforderung zum Tanze* (1819) – with an Introduction, a principal thematic waltz recapitulated before the coda and four intervening waltz-episodes. Its coruscating melodic contours give proof of Comellas’ assimilation of the Viennese-waltz prototype and his ability to write effective dance music. Never truly bombastic, *Vienne* captures the attention through its gracefulness and sentimentality as it cleverly traverses varying tonal centres (F, D flat, A flat and its return to the home key).

The four Nocturnes – since the *Souvenir*, Op. 1, is all but a nocturne by name – share similar traits: tripartite structure derived from the nocturnes by Field and Chopin, with the optional inclusion of an introduction and/or coda, and a shared tonality (again E flat) in three of them. All four are equally representative of Comellas’ pianistic craft and expressive – and often sentimental – writing.

*Souvenir*, Op. 1 [1], and the Nocturne *Far Away*, Op. 12 [3], appeared in 1874 in the Schirmer and Breitkopf catalogues. *Souvenir* begins with a sixteen-bar introduction in E flat minor, part of which is set as a vocal declamatory line accompanied by a tremolo figure, clearly orchestral in style. The A section contains the familiar nocturne setting of melodic line in octaves with triplet accompaniment in the left hand. The saccharine middle section moves to E flat major and varies the pianistic garb. The return of A at bar

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33 Agustín Cortada (c. 1846–89) was not only a contemporary of Comellas but, according to his obituary in *The Musical Courier* of 6 March 1889, he had been educated in France and lived in Europe for some twenty years. Cortada initiated his publishing house around 1882 and published not only several compositions of his own and those of fellow Cuban and Latin American composers, but also typical parlour music of the times, arrangements of choral works, etc.
73 recapitulates the material, slightly varied and proceeds to the short codetta, which accentuates its ‘Amen’ plagal cadence and the final ‘Picardy’ conclusion.

*Far Away* also begins with an introduction (this one eight bars in length) in four-part harmony – it’s easy to imagine it sung by a barbershop quartet – followed by the nocturne proper. The A section continues the tradition of setting the melody as octaves accompanied by triplets, but this time there is a foray into G major before the second phrase and a preparation to G flat major, announcing the enlarged B section. The return of the A section is trimmed to a single statement, after which a coda rounds up the work.

Whereas the first two nocturnes were dedicated to American socialites (Miss Amelia Griswold and Florence B. Gate, respectively), the last two were published in 1885 by Martens Brothers and dedicated to Creole or Cuban-born women (Marie Andux and Josefita Carbonell). The *Nocturne*, Op. 24, is Comellas’ most elaborate in terms of phrase-structure, harmonic language and pianistic layout. It eschews an introduction and instead presents its main melodic idea (a three-note descent) outright and modulates to G major at the end of the first phrase. The second phrase sequentially gravitates toward G major as the dominant of C minor. The third phrase re-establishes E flat major and provides a melodic-harmonic variation, remaining in the home key, which serves as the preparation to the middle section. This B section is also enlarged to three phrases and traverses from A flat major through a chromatic sequence reminiscent of Tchaikovsky until the third period fluctuates between B flat major/minor and seamlessly converges upon the return of the A section. The recapitulation of A is also compressed to a single phrase, and its delicate filigree owes much to Chopin’s use of similar gestures derived from vocal models. The brief Coda juxtaposes the tonic E flat major triad and its augmented sixth chord.

*Le Retour*, Op. 25, is structurally the simplest and shortest of the four nocturnes. Whereas the other three Nocturnes are written in $\frac{3}{4}$ or $\frac{4}{4}$, Op. 25, still adhering to the undulating triplet movement, is conceived in $\frac{9}{8}$. Lacking an introduction, the A section,

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34 The use of a major triad to end a work (or section of a work) conceived in a minor key.

35 An augmented sixth chord is built on the flattened submediant of a major or minor tonality, usually resolving smoothly to the dominant and/or tonic chord in second inversion as a preparation to the dominant.
in A flat major, is composed of a single phrase. The tumultuous \( B \) section is in \( F \) minor, the relative minor. \( A \) is recapitulated without change, followed by the coda which, six bars before the end, enunciates a dominant-tonic cadence in \( A \) major for two consecutive bars\(^{36}\) followed by the expected confirmation of \( A \) flat major four bars before the end.

Undoubtedly, the *Sonate Brillante* in \( G \) minor, Op. 21 is Comellas’ most ambitious work and the first sonata composed (for any instrument) and published by a Cuban-born composer in the nineteenth century.\(^{37}\) Published by G. Schirmer in 1876 (but not issued by Breitkopf)\(^{38}\) and dedicated to three female members of the Scott family (Gay, Bessie and Lilia),\(^{39}\) the *Sonate* was presumably played by Comellas on numerous solo appearances. The date of composition cannot be ascertained but even if the Sonata was written before 1870 – the year Espadero claimed to have completed his sonata\(^{40}\) – the compositional influences on Comellas’ view of sonata form remain a matter for conjecture. By 1876 the genre had undergone historic changes, from the expansion of the form in Beethoven’s middle-period sonatas, ultimately leading to the ‘Hammerklavier’, Op. 106, and to the compression of the last three sonatas (Opp. 109–11). Beethoven’s Op. 27 sonatas furnished yet another route from the established prototype – by avoiding an opening movement in sonata form, for instance – and subsequent contributions from leading Romantic figures (from Hummel, Weber, Chopin, Schumann, Alkan and others) inevitably paled in comparison with Liszt’s *Après une lecture du Dante* and the monumental B minor Sonata from 1853. Contemporary efforts by composers of

\(^{36}\) This procedure is reminiscent of Schubert’s Sonata in \( C \) minor, \( d958\), second movement, bars 107–9.

\(^{37}\) Cecilio Tieles Ferrer, *Espadero, lo Hispánico Musical en Cuba, loc. cit.*, p. 161. Espadero, in a letter written to his friend, the Portuguese composer Arthur Napoleão (1847–1925), dated 30 July 1870, states that he has composed a ‘Grande Sonate’ but the work was never published and the manuscript disappeared after Espadero’s death in 1890.

\(^{38}\) Currently available sources confirm seven opus numbers between Opp. 1 and 19 to have been published by both firms, with eleven items missing and Op. 3 as a Schirmer release. The song *Separation*, Op. 20, and the Op. 21 *Sonate*, published exclusively by Schirmer in 1877 and 1876 respectively (the discrepancy between the dates may be significant), signal a departure from Breitkopf and a move to a less distinguished publishing firm – that of Martens Brothers – with Opp. 24–26.

\(^{39}\) Nothing is yet known about Comellas’ relationship with the Scotts but the family’s origin in New England may have included a member, John Samuel Scott, who had lived for over twenty years in Cuba as a clerk on a coffee plantation. The dedicatees of the *Sonate* were probably the daughters of a Dr. M. P Scott.

diverse trajectories fell into three main camps: those attempting to remain faithful to conservatoire training (Grieg, Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky), those slightly departing from the rigidity of the prototype (Saint-Saëns, Alkan) and the Lisztian imitators (Balakirev, Reubke).

Comellas’ view of the form lies somewhere between the first two positions, his main transgression being the lack of a self-contained second-subject group in the exposition in favour of the continual development of motifs. The primary motif – revisited at key points during the course of the first movement (Allegro risoluto) – is based on an arpeggiated descent of the tonic chord in second inversion. A reappearance of the motif readily propels the expected modulation to the relative B flat major, but this point is where Comellas’ fantasy takes hold and gradually weaves back to the initial G minor tonality, leaving in its wake the semblance of scattered melodic cells that eventually will be assembled to suggest a second-subject group in the recapitulation. B flat major is reinstated once more in what appears to be a monothematic second-subject group, but Comellas once more thwarts an expected coherent theme in favour of continual development. The juxtaposition of G minor and B flat major dominates the ensuing section until Comellas introduces a lyrical new subject in E flat major. This expressive, nocturne-like motif is subjected to further development – at times orchestral in concept, reminiscent of Tchaikovsky – until the announcement of the recapitulation. The initial sixteen bars are restated intact, and the second-subject recapitulation becomes in effect a new theme woven from chromatic lines presented earlier. Further development of the initial motif and the recapitulated one propel the movement to a substantial coda.

The second movement, a nocturne-derived Andante, is essentially monothematic, nurturing its melodic signature from the opening four-note gesture. In the course of the movement, this opening gesture is treated to sequential variation and development as it inflates to 88 bars, disguised as a rondo-like structure. Bars 33–40, in B minor, transform the main motif, followed by its varied restatement. Further sequential development

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41 It is similar to the initial gesture in the Sonata, Op. 7, by Grieg – incidentally also a graduate of the Leipzig Conservatoire in the late 1850s.
culminates in an augmented-sixth chord, signalling a shortened recapitulation of the initial phrases of the movement in G minor, followed by the coda.

The fleeting last movement, Allegro vivo, provides the dual role of scherzo and finale, and is conceived as a rondo (AbcAb–coda). As in the first movement, Comellas alternates between G minor and B flat major not only locally but also as part of a larger structural plan, as in section A. Section B presents the melodic theme in the bass, and the pianistic figuration recalls Weber’s last-movement Rondo from the Sonata in D minor, Op. 49. Section C, in B flat major, provides a lyrical episode in its 48 bars, gradually modulating to G minor for the largely unmodified recapitulated A section. As Comellas restates section B in G major, Weber is further imitated when a new counter-melody in the treble cohabits with the main theme in the bass, as in Weber’s Op. 49. The spectre of Weber appears once more in the G major spiralling coda before the G minor conclusion.

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sparkle, while the slower, more lyrical ones truly sing. [...] He knows just when and where to hold a note, to push forward, and to tonally alter the sound to get the maximum effect out of this music.

His website can be found at www.joselopezpiano.com.
Cuba’s heritage of classical music is composed largely of three strands: the inheritance of colonial times and the subsequent influence of African and European musicians. But even after three hundred years of development, most Cuban composers remain unknown to international audiences. This first recording in a series intended to uncover some of those lost voices presents piano pieces by José Comellas (1842–88), of Catalan descent. Most of them are salon works that blend Chopin and Gottschalk, but Comellas’ ambitions also went further, with the first sonata published by any Cuban composer.

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- I  Allegro risoluto 18:00
- II  Andante 9:08
- III  Allegro vivo 4:41

**Nocturne, Op. 24** (publ. 1885) 4:11

**Christmas Toys: Little Polka** (1885) 6:24

**1:28**

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