

Alejo Carpentier's Musical Phases



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ALEJO CARPENTIER—novelist, musicologist, maverick public figure, amateur composer, essayist—was born at Havana (Maloja Street) December 26, 1904. His immigrant parents had reached Cuba two years earlier, in 1902.¹ His father was a respected French architect, his mother a Russian. The landmark buildings in Havana for which his father was architect included the Havana Trust Company, the old country club, and the electric plant of Tallapiedra on the bay.

His father, lover of things Spanish and owner of a fine library, spoke Spanish fluently. Passionately fond of music, he was a moderately accomplished cellist who claimed to have studied with Casals. Alejo's paternal grandfather, Alfred Clerc-Carpentier, had been in 1840 one of the first explorers of Guiana. In adulthood, Alejo "wore a pair of cufflinks made of Manaus gold molded in 1842 and bequeathed by his grandfather."² His paternal grandmother had studied with César Franck. Alejo's mother studied medicine in Switzerland, without, however, completing the course. Possessor of a literary bent, she instead became a professor of languages.

Alejo's parents imbued him from infancy with their love of music on his father's side and with their literary enthusiasms on both sides. His childhood, largely spent on a farm in Loma de Tierra outside Havana, was in many ways idyllic—certainly so from a financial point of view. From 1912 to about 1921 he studied at a lycée in Paris. Throughout later life³ "he always preferred speaking French rather than his peculiarly throaty, strongly French-accented brand of Cuban Spanish."⁴ Among reasons for doing so, the Venezuelan journalist Alexis Márquez Rodríguez reported that "Carpentier's guttural Spanish was due to a speech defect that prevented him from rolling his r's."⁵ Or, Carpentier may have cultivated a French-accented spoken Spanish in an early effort to call attention to his originality.

According to Salvador Bueno, he took some theory lessons during his nine years in a Paris lycée and learned to play the piano decently. He also learned somewhere to read scores sufficiently well to make good sense of them without playing them.

¹Roberto González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 37.

²Rafael A. Pineda, "Alejo Carpentier en la ciudad de las maquetas," *Imagen* [Caracas], March 14, 1972, p. 2.

³González Echevarría, p. 36.

⁴Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann, *Into the Mainstream: Conversations with Latin American Writers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 45.

⁵"Dos dilucidaciones en torno a Alejo Carpentier," *Casa de las Américas*, no. 87 (1974), p. 39.

But his musical knowledge, neither in his youth nor later, reached a truly professional level. His chief prop always remained recordings, to which he listened for hours, days, and months.

To prepare for a career, he studied architecture at the University of Havana in 1921 and 1922. In the latter year "his father abandoned his family (never to be heard from again)."⁶ To earn his livelihood the young Alejo thenceforth, until so late as 1959, earned his living chiefly as a journalist. In 1924 he wrote for *La Discusión* and for *El Heraldo de Cuba* (totalitarian Cuban President Gerardo Machado's newspaper). He joined the editorial board of the *Revista de Avance* in 1927 but "left the board right after the appearance of the first issue and was replaced by José Z. Tallet."⁷ In 1928, shortly before leaving Havana for a second Parisian sojourn that lasted to 1939, he contributed the first installment of an article to the first issue of *Musicalia*, edited by María Muñoz de Quevedo.⁸ With the second installment published in the July-August 1928 issue of *Musicalia* (1/2) appeared this note:

Alejo Carpentier has been in Paris now for a few months. In one of his last letters, he sent us—with refined cruelty—an infinite number of programs from the concerts, exhibitions, and lectures that he has attended. Now he finds himself in a milieu favorable to his artistic ideals, his exquisite culture, and his dearest aspirations. He has already been made editor-in-chief of *Gaceta Musical*, and we have read some of his refined critical articles. He will begin to write for *Candide*, *L'Intransigent*, and other prestigious publications. Carpentier took with him to Paris a Cuban ballet, with music by Amadeo Roldán and stage design by Hurtado de Mendoza, for which we wish him the most generous reception.

Carpentier never edited *Gaceta Musical* (this was Manuel M. Ponce's ephemeral magazine), nor did he publish anything in *Candide*. However, he did write not one, but four libretti for Amadeo Roldán—two for Roldán's ballets *La Rebambaramba* (1928) and *El Milagro de Anaquillé* (1929),⁹ and two for choreographic sketches never completed by Roldán, *Mata-Cangrejo* and *Azúcar*. In 1929 he wrote lyrics for three of Alejandro García-Caturla's songs (solo voice with piano): *Dos Poemas Afrocubanos*, *Mari-Sabel*, and *Juego Santo*.

At Paris, Carpentier in 1928 met Villa-Lobos, whom he was henceforth to hail as the paragon of Latin American composers.¹⁰ Also, he met Milhaud and wrote texts for Marius-François Gaillard's *Yamba-ó* ("Lord, Praised be thou," musical tragedy, 1928), *Poèmes des Antilles* (1929), *Blue* (1930), and *La Passion Noire* (cantata for ten soloists, choir, and orchestra, 1932).¹¹ In 1932 Radiodiffusion Française hired him to produce plays, to concoct sound effects, and to provide musical backgrounds for literary portraits (using recordings). Five years later (1937) "with the support of Paul Deharme, a young French businessman who promoted him,"¹²

⁶González Echevarría, p. 36.

⁷Martín Casanovas, ed., *Orbita de la Revista de Avance* (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1965), pp. 8-9.

⁸González Echevarría, p. 37n.

⁹*Estudios Afrocubanos* 3 (1939), 112-118.

¹⁰Antonio Estévez, Alejo Carpentier, Inocente Palacios, Pedro A. Ríos Reyna, and Vicente Emilio Sojo, "Problemas de la música en América Latina," *Cruz del Sur* [Caracas] 1/4 (June 1952), pp. 53, 56.

¹¹In 1929 Eschig published Gaillard's *Para Alejo* [Carpentier] (for violin, cello, and percussion). See Armand Machabey, "Gaillard, Marius-François," *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* IV (1955), 1256.

¹²Carpentier, "El radio y sus nuevas posibilidades," *Carteles*, December 17, 1933, pp. 14, 96, 98.



Fonoric Studios engaged him to provide radio programs with music backgrounds and to produce recordings. In 1939 he and Jean-Louis Barrault put together the Radio Luxembourg première of Milhaud's *Le livre de Colombe*. As for other trips away from Paris: he visited Berlin in 1932, and Madrid "in 1933, 1934, and again in 1937 with the Cuban delegation to the Congress of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals" that included Nicolás Guillén and Juan Marinello.¹³

At the outbreak of World War II Carpentier had no option but to return once more to Havana, where in 1940 he was appointed director of Radio Station C.M.Z. (founded by then Colonel Fulgencio Batista) of the Ministry of Education. In addition to producing musical programs for this station, he gave music history courses in 1942 at the University of Havana. Four years later, Fondo de Cultura Económica at Mexico City published his still standard text, *La música en Cuba*.

Although generally useful up to the 1940's, this book after 1940 becomes fantasy-prone and inexact. His evaluations of his favorites among the Grupo de Renovación become bombastically inflated, various works that he cites were never completed or not even written, and subsequent careers frequently fail to justify his rhetoric.

In 1943 he visited Haiti, in 1944 Mexico City. From 1945 to 1959 he resided chiefly at Caracas, where he worked for Publicidad Ars, "an advertising agency founded by Carlos Frías, a friend from Paris years,"¹⁴ wrote a column on music and literature, "Letra y Solfa," for the Caracas daily *El Nacional*, and frequented parties attended by Pérez Jiménez and that dictator's entourage. His subsequent career is too well known to require rehearsal here.¹⁵ He was married twice, first to Eva Frejaville, who later taught French at the University of California at Riverside, and second to Lilia Hierro of the Havana upper classes. From 1968 to his death at Paris on April 24, 1980, after a long illness, he was cultural attaché at Fidel Castro's Cuban Embassy.

¹³Carpentier, "España bajo las bombas," *Carteles*, September 12, 1937, pp. 32, 52. See also Pablo Neruda, *Confieso que he vivido: memorias* (Barcelona: Barral, 1974), pp. 180-185.

¹⁴*Imagen*, March 14, 1972, p. 2.

¹⁵For discussion of Carpentier's music-related novel *El Acoso*, see Emil Volek and Helmy F. Giacomán's essays "Análisis del sistema de estructuras musicales e interpretación de 'El Acoso' de Alejo Carpentier" and "La relación músico-literaria entre la Tercera Sinfonía 'Eroica' de Beethoven y la novela 'El Acoso'" in *Homenaje a Alejo Carpentier*, ed. H. F. Giacomán (New York: Las Américas Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 387-438, 441-465.

For titles and dates of Carpentier's 1925 articles (more than half on musical topics) published at Caracas in *El Nacional*, November 11, 1945, to November 16, 1961, see Roberto González Echevarría and Klaus Müller-Bergh, *Alejo Carpentier Bibliographical Guide* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983), pp. 27-172.