

# LACCS CELEBRATES

By THÉRÈSE WASSILY SABA

THE LATIN American and Caribbean Cultural Society (LACCS) has become an important part of the concert scene in London during its 22-year history. There have been many historically momentous concerts, which have brought together legendary artists such as Laurindo Almeida, Alirio Díaz, Charlie Byrd, Carlos Barbosa-Lima, Eduardo Falú, Eduardo Fernández, Sharon Isbin, Oscar Castro-Neves and Eliot Fisk. The repertoire they have presented has been significant, including many world and UK premières such as Carlos Barbosa-Lima playing guitar concertos by Francisco Mignone and Radamés Gnattali with the English Chamber Orchestra; works by the Brazilian composer Marlos Nobre; works by Carlos Chavez and Silvestre Revueltas played by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra; María Isabel Siewers with the Delos Quartet playing music by Carlos Guastavino; the *Cantata-Oratorio Colombo* by Antonio Carlos Gomes (1836-1896); Oscar Ohlsen playing the *First Sonata* by Pablo Delano and *Creole et Fontaine* by Edmundo Vásquez, and Ariel Ramírez's *Misa Criolla*: performed in the presence of the composer, featuring percussionist Domingo Cura, the tenor Zamba Quipildor, baritone Jorge Rojas, pianist Facundo Ramirez and the Cuarteto de los Andes of traditional Andean Instruments. The artists have come from all corners of Latin America and the Caribbean: the Colombian guitarist Francisco Zumaque, Paraguayan guitarist Berta Rojas, the Ecuadorian soprano Beatriz Parra, Uruguayan soprano Beatriz Figares and Peruvian pianist Juan José Chuquisengo. The concerts have also included folk instrumentalists such as the Bolivian singer Luzmila Carpio singing in Aymara-Quechua language from the Andes, a marimba ensemble from Guatemala and the Uruguayan bandoneon virtuoso Rene Marino Riveros. Sometimes the scope of Latin American has broadened to include artists from Egypt and there has even been an evening of traditional music from Vietnam.

LACCS was established in London in 1983. Its Director, Juan R. Monroy, is a Chilean who has been living in London for 30 years. 'Before that I spent one year in Peru teaching sociology at the Ricardo Palma University and the Masters programme at the National University of Education, La Cantatuta, in Lima. I had also lectured in sociology at the University of Chile in Antofagasta and at the Technical University of Chile. I grew up in Iquique, which is about 700 kilometres north of Antofagasta, near the Peruvian border. It is a port city encircled by pure and famous Atacama Desert.'

Juan Monroy learned the guitar, like so many Latin Americans, because it was played at home by his father. 'There were many guitars in our house. I grew up watching people playing boleros, tangos



PHOTOS: THÉRÈSE WASSILY SABA

Juan Monroy, Laurindo Almeida and Deltra Eamon.

and many other styles. My father played every afternoon. It was very hot and he would sit there with an open door and accompany songs using rasgueo and very simple chords. I was 9 years old when I started playing the guitar. He bought me a requinto to make it easier for me to play. I tried to copy everything I heard. When I was 10 years old I was part of a trio in Iquique. I used to 'punteaba' the melodies with my requinto, accompanied by another boy of the same age called Jose Meneses. We recruited a third boy, Rigoberto Rojas, who played the maracas and sang. Our then unknown trio was acclaimed at family parties, weddings, baptisms and at celebrations of the Catholic Saints' Days.'

'My teacher was Manuel Berrios and he played both classical and popular Latin music (boleros, rumbas, zambas from Brazil and Argentina, tangos, milongas, Mexican corridos, guarachas, joropos and banbucos from Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba and so on). Later I went on to study history and sociology at the University of Chile in Santiago. I was lucky to have seen many popular musicians in Iquique and other Chilean cities where I lived in my student days. In those days there were so many good, popular guitarists playing boleros. There were Mexican trios like Trio Los Panchos and Los Tres Diamantes. I remember when, in 1951, the Trio Los Panchos made a tour of South America, starting in Mexico, worked its way through Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and finally Chile. The very important thing about these musicians was that they didn't only tour in the capital cities, they also

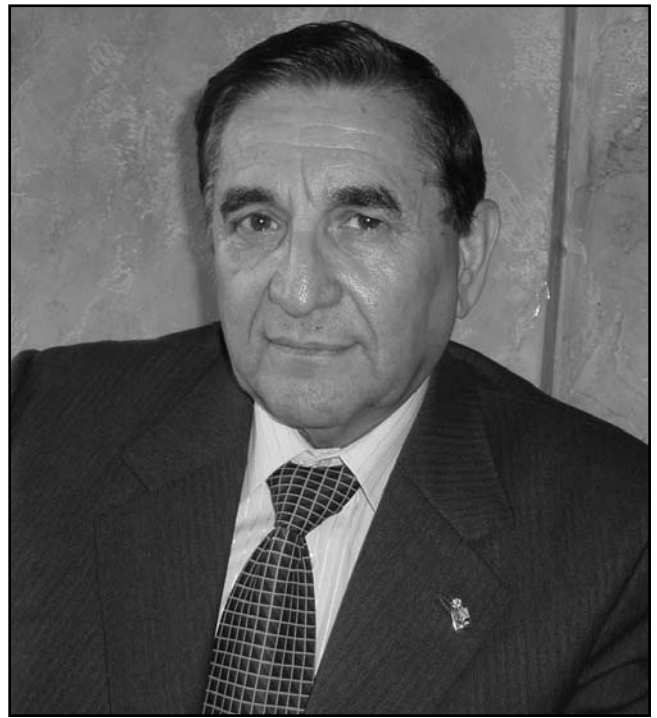
went to the smaller cities and outer regions.'

'When I heard that the Trio Los Panchos would be performing, I ran to buy my ticket for the Teatro Nacional de Iquique. In the first half of the programme there was a film and then in the second half was the concert by Trio Los Panchos. This was usual practice. The film would last about an hour and a half. Then, after the interval, out would come the microphones and the musicians. On another occasion I saw a film and then a concert of Los Indios Tabajaras. Usually we had fantastic Mexican films. The 1950s was the golden age of the Mexican film industry.'

'For classical guitar in Chile, unfortunately we didn't have the influence and legacy of someone like Barrios. Uruguay had Segovia, who lived for some years. Neither did we have Savio, the teacher of Carlos Barbosa-Lima. I think the great influence for Chile came from the Argentinian Atahualpa Yupanqui, who visited the country many times. Eduardo Falú is a continuation of that musical tradition. Yupanqui had a great influence on many guitarists in the 1950s when a democracy was established in Chile. Argentina started to have political problems so many people began to move countries. We received all these people and when things settled down in Argentina, they went back again. It was a good cultural exchange. Atahualpa was one of several guitarists working in record companies like RCA Victor and Odeon in Santiago de Chile. They became part of the team of local guitarists in radio as well. In the 1950s we had very rich programmes of music on radio. There were live shows like Radio Minería and Radio Cooperativa, which still exist. Radio stations, like Radio Belgrano de Buenos Aires and Radio Nacional de Buenos Aires, had 400 or 500 seat theatres attached to them. People would buy tickets for the performances on Saturday and they would broadcast the show live.'

Juan Monroy came to London in 1975. 'I spent five years at the University of London doing research on the political history of Latin America. I took part in a few conferences in Oxford and Swansea and delivered papers on the subject. I was also a member of the Brighton Institute of Development and Education Studies.' He worked for a time in the private sector until his gradual career change.

The two main venues for LACCS concerts have traditionally been London's South Bank, which includes the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Purcell Room, and St John's in Smith Square, London. I asked Juan Monroy about how the relationship with the South Bank began. 'In the 1980s London had a large number of Latin American émigrés. People came for political reasons, from Brazil, Uruguay, from all the countries, so the General London Council (GLC) decided to start a programme for the ethnic minorities. One day they suggested that we organise a Latin American arts festival and I got involved. The first International Festival of Latin American and Caribbean Culture



Juan Monroy.

was held from 3-8 September in 1984. It was only a week-long festival but we had meetings every Thursday for a whole year to organise it. We had a discussion on literature, focusing on the cultural identity of Latin America. We found some journalists, like Richard Gott from The Guardian, who were experts on Latin America, and we had a forum where we discussed the poetry of Ernesto Cardenal, the Nicaraguan priest and Pablo Neruda. We had good moderators like Robert Pring-Mill, who was a Professor of Literature from Oxford. He is an expert in Neruda and has translated Pablo Neruda's work into English. The British actors came mostly from the Royal Shakespeare Company: Estelle Kohler, Jeremy Wilkins, Jane Sherwin, Adrian Howell and Joanna Pearce. We also had support from Emma Thompson and Julie Christie.'

'We then invited the artists: guitarist Eulogio Dávalos, pianist Roberto Bravo and groups like Barricada, Grupo Cali de Colombia, Los Guaraníes from Paraguay, Rumillajta from Bolivia, the London School of Samba and Los Awatiñas. We brought films from Bolivia by Jorge Sanjinez like *Las Banderas del Amanecer*. He was a very good director who made protest films about the life of the miners in Bolivia. Then Antonio Skarmeta the Chilean writer who was living in Germany. He wrote the original film script for the film about Pablo Neruda, which was remade by the Italians as *Il Postino*.'

'There were many people involved when LACCS was founded in 1983. There was a strong collection of Brazilians taking Masters degrees in economics at the London School of Economics, so they appointed a delegate to come to our meetings. The Bolivians had a delegate, the Uruguayans had a delegate... we ended up with about 10 to 12 of them. With the political situation at that time, we had to do something which would represent us all, so we couldn't do anything political. In the end we

all agreed to do something cultural with cinema, dance, music and literature. We could use literature as a means of discussing our identity, inviting poets and writers to discuss their work and allowing audiences to ask them questions. As time passed problems arose. The idea was difficult to homogenise because everybody wanted something different. Eventually this big group was reduced to a smaller group who organised everything. I was the President of the committee.'

'That was the beginning. After the week at the Royal Festival Hall we decided to continue with the idea because it was the right moment at that time. But we couldn't cover everything because we didn't have the resources. We decided to shift our concentration to classical music because, while I was here, I came across many good artists, like the pianist Roberto Bravo from Chile, who didn't have a chance to perform in the proper music venues such as the Wigmore Hall. It was a tragedy for them because if you are a musician, you need to express yourself by giving concerts. The most that these people were getting was a lunchtime concert in a church. So we decided that we would try to open a platform for these people. That was our aim.'

The big issue with putting on concerts is funding. I asked Juan Monroy about whether he had the resources to plan and navigate such a project. 'No. We had nothing. That was another big problem. We needed to submit applications to the GLC. While we were looking someone suggested that we show films because there were no films about Latin America in London. We showed two or three films, one in Hampstead, another in Brixton. They brought in some income but not enough, so then we decided to focus on the music.'

In 1985 we held our first concerts at St John's Smith Square. In that first concert series we had a pianist from Chile called Roberto Bravo, the soprano Raquel Satres and pianist Carlos Cebro, and the Uruguayan soprano Beatriz Figares. The first guitarists to play at the festival were the Chilean guitarist Eulogio Davalos and the Brazilian guitarist/composer Celso Machado.

Although the LACCS concerts are heavily weighted towards the guitar, it wasn't always like this. 'We started with a mixture of concerts, including sopranos and different ensembles, but then we started inviting guitarists. As we got more and more involved with the guitar (although we didn't realise it at first) we discovered that the guitar was in fact an important part of Latin America's cultural identity: it is the common denominator of all the Latin American countries.'

Corporate sponsorship has played an important role in the continued success of LACCS. Over the years it has attracted support from companies such as John Walker & Sons Ltd, British Airways, Blue Circle, Lloyds Bank, De La Rue and the Clarkson Puckle Group.

Juan Monroy reminisces about the early concerts such as that of guitarist Marco de Santi in September 1987 who played a programme of Latin



*Carlos Barbosa-Lima, Juan Monroy and Gustavo Colina.*

American guitar music by Villa-Lobos, Chavez, Ginastera and Piazzolla. 'It was at that concert where I met Colin Cooper for the first time. We talked during the interval and at the post-concert wine reception in the Crypt of St. John's Smith Square. John Duarte was also there with his pipe and interesting conversation. There was a full house of London guitar aficionados.' While the number of guitar concerts held in London has considerably diminished in recent years, LACCS continues to put on a regular series which introduces new players and new music.

The 2005-06 series began with Carlos Barbosa-Lima and the Venezuelan cuatro player Gustavo Colina playing Brazilian and Venezuelan works. The concert was a great success and there was a full house at the Purcell Room. On 5 October, Matthew Marshall gave two premières and two UK premières - all works by contemporary New Zealand composers. On 11 November, British audience will hear the famous Pasillos Ecuatorianos, a unique local rhythm of the Andes in Ecuador, Quito and Guayaquil, played by Júlio César Almeida. The Puerto Rican guitarist Alberto Rodríguez Ortiz will perform with special guest percussionist Ricky Rodríguez on 17 February. On 5 April 2006 Luz María Bobadilla from Paraguay will play music by Barrios as well as music from Paraguayan folklore. The last concert will be on 10 July 2006 with the Mexican guitarist Juan Carlos Laguna playing the UK première of four guitar concertos at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. In short, the Latin American and Caribbean Cultural Society is going from strength to strength!

Website: [www.laccs.com](http://www.laccs.com)