

La Orquesta Aragon

Thursday, November 8, 2001, 8 pm
Zellerbach Hall

Rafael Felipe Lay Bravo, conductor and violin
Ernesto Bacallao Serrano, vocals
Juan Carlos Villegas Alfonso, vocals
Eduardo Ramon Rubio Perez, flute
Dagoberto Pascual Gonzalez Piedra, violin
Lazaro Dagoberto Gonzalez Siboré, violin
Celso Valdes Santandreu, violin
José Palma Cuesta, guiro
Roberto Espinosa Rodriguez, bass
Orlando Jesus Pérez Montero, piano
Guillermo Gonzalo Garcia Valdès, percussion
Inocente Arcadio Alvarez Pagan, timbales
Armando Amezaga Valera, percussion

Javier Lay Rojas, sound engineer

Tonight's program will be announced from the stage.

This evening's performance is sponsored, in part, by Hear Music.

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For more than 40 years, Cubans have made Monday lunchtime their regular listening date with Orquesta Aragon on the band's weekly Radio Progreso broadcast. The group has been a musical standard bearer in Cuba for more than six decades, enjoying an illustrious career that has influenced music as far away as Africa.

Orquesta Aragon was founded in 1939 by Orestes Aragon Cantero, who created a charanga comprised of violins, piano, flute, percussion, and a singer. Charangas specialized in the danzon, a style that was then about 50 years old but still the rage. The group played waltzes and fashionable Spanish tunes, and was one of a number of musical ensembles that played at dances and parties, but its founder's personality made Orquesta Aragon something truly special.

Orestes Aragon Cantero held values that embraced the popular Socialist party and had communist allegiances. He declared that performance fees must be shared equally, and that it was out of the question for a larger share of the profit to go to a director or star singer.

"I want to found a musical family," he said. "I'm not looking for virtuoso players, but musicians with human qualities."

Aragon conducted his band according to his ideals for nine years, until a serious lung infection forced him into early retirement in 1948. He then appointed violinist Rafael Lay as his successor (Lay was only 20 at the time, but had played with the band since he was 13). At Lay's instigation, Orquesta Aragon gave its first concerts in Havana—a daring step at a time when provincial musicians viewed the city as an impenetrable fortress. Then in 1953, when the vogue for cha-cha swept out the mambo, Orquesta Aragon won a recording contract with the American company RCA Victor, which was active in Cuba at that time. A string of successes followed, propelled by the cha-cha.

In 1954, flutist Richard Egues brought his virtuosity and unequalled sense of improvisation to the band, and hits such as Egues' "El Bodeguero" catapulted the band's popularity beyond Cuba's coastlines. Nat King Cole even recorded "El Bodeguero," a sign of the band's expanding popularity in the United States.

Orquesta Aragon came to mean cha-cha, and people throughout the world danced to its music. The orchestra also treated Cuba to its first demonstration of stereophonic music. Audiences were invited to tune into their radios and

televisions simultaneously to hear the sounds of Egues' flute or Lay's violin pass from one speaker, or device, to the other.

In 1959, the band placed itself at the service of Fidel Castro's new government. All of Cuba's musicians at that time became state employees and were awarded the same salary, which in effect extended to the whole of the profession the cooperative principle instituted by Orestes Aragon. In the service of the state government, Orquesta Aragon traveled the length and breadth of the country, playing in sugar cane production complexes, villages, factories, schools, and hospitals.

Castro knew how to turn music to the revolution's advantage, and his government quickly began sending musicians abroad to act as ambassadors for Cuba's culture. In 1965, the Cuban Music Hall tour brought Orquesta Aragon to France for the first time, where the musicians were ecstatically received throughout their residence at the Paris Olympia.

Orquesta Aragon's influence especially resonated in Africa, where countries had lived through the end of colonialism and accession to independence. The Cuban models of dance rhythms had a far-reaching influence on modern African forms, starting with the Congolese rumba. To African ears, Aragon was the standard by which Cuban music was judged, and almost everywhere it went, the band was given a welcome befitting a head of state.

Africa, in return, left its mark on the group's music, in numbers such as "Muanga," by Franklin Boukaka from the Congo, and later "Yaye Boy," a hit from the Senegalese band Africando. The cha-onda, a rhythm and dance created by cellist Tomas Valdes at the beginning of the 1970s, owes much to a tour of Guinea and a band in that country called the Bembeya Jazz National.

The musicians in Orquesta Aragon are very much like a family and continue to hold the standard high for Cuban music. Although those who were part of the band's founding or golden age may have retired, the sons of these musicians and eager aspirants from all over Cuba continue the band's rich heritage.