

Tania León's Stride: A Polyrhythmic Life

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Tania León's Stride captures an indispensable biography of the extraordinary life and career of an American composer, conductor, and community arts advocate. In it, a prolific and celebrated scholar of American music and sound, musicologist Alejandro L. Madrid, tackles the biography and aesthetic works of one of the most compelling, expansive artists of contemporary classical and experimental music of our time. The result is an electrifying excavation of diasporic mobility, artistic growth, affective intricacy, and aesthetics in the life and artistry of León.

With characteristic rigor, Madrid traces León's fiercely idiosyncratic self-framings as she navigates the personal and professional vicissitudes of large-scale historical events that impact her life, her work, and its reception: The Cuban revolution, the Cold War, the civil rights and post-civil rights eras in the United States, and ongoing U.S.–Cuban political vitriol. An experimental work, Madrid's monograph notably eschews traditional approaches to linear, chronological biography in favor of topical excavations of León's life and artistry. Each of the six chapters explores discrete aspects of the artist's life and work through recourse to musical metaphor: "Tonic" (Chapter 1), "modulation and displacement" (Chapter 2), "syncopation and color" (Chapter 3), "direction" (Chapter 4), "voice" (Chapter 5), and "canon" (Chapter 6). Although the first three chapters delve into León's early biography, including her upbringing in Cuba and her painful, unintentional exile from the revolutionary state in New York City in the 1960s and 1970s, the overall thematic rather than chronological organization of the chapters allows issues attendant to León's life and work to emerge—and reemerge—across discrete analytical frames.

Born in Havana, Cuba in 1943, León trained as a concert pianist in Cuba's elite music conservatories and early revolutionary arts initiatives before embarking on an expansive, multifaceted career in New York City in 1967. As Madrid delineates, a chance encounter with African American ballet dancer and company director Arthur Mitchell in the late 1960s led to León composing her first major work as music director for Dance Theatre of Harlem, the first permanent Black ballet and dance company of its kind in the United States. This artistic invitation altered the trajectory of León's career and life. León subsequently enrolled in a master's program in composition at New York University, shifting her horizons from that of an aspiring concert pianist to a composer, conductor, educator, leader, and advocate for the arts. Over the coming decades, León would collaborate with many of the greatest artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including Arthur Mitchell, Leonard Bernstein, and Seiji Ozawa. León would also conduct for, advise, and complete residencies at the New York Philharmonic, the Brooklyn Philharmonia, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Company, Broadway theater, and the American Composers Orchestra, and eventually found Composers Now. In Madrid's nonchronological treatment, these diverse artistic opportunities and leadership roles emerge and reemerge across chapters. Throughout, the author takes intricate care to honor the complexities of a life as abundant and irreducible as León's.

One of the themes that most captivates the author reappears across the manuscript: Namely, León's fierce resistance to identitarian labels yet tireless advocacy for inclusionary arts and institutional practices. Famously, León adamantly rejects her categorization as a "black composer," "female composer," or "Afro-Cuban" artist (2). Drawing on a rich historiography of scholarship on León's work and its place within the art music canon since the 1970s, Madrid validates her position, noting the deep-seated contradictions and contrasts between the "raceless and ethnic-free rhetoric about white European

composers,” and León’s own inclusion “in the Western art-music canon, but only as an individual marked by gender, racial, national, or ethnic considerations” (176). The final chapter of the book especially turns to this issue, presenting an historiography of León’s scholarly representations since the 1970s and its subsequent impact on her (and the broader art music world’s) “canon.” Here, Madrid deftly unearths León’s divergent representation as “African American,” “Cuban,” “Afro-Cuban,” “Latin American,” or a “woman composer” across decades, provocatively highlighting the historically contingent and reductive mobilizations of such ascriptions in relation to the artist’s own self-framings and individual subjectivity. Madrid finds that, “the work these labels do, although strategically empowering, can also obscure the complex particularities of an individual’s experience” (3). Madrid thus presents León’s “passionate rejection of labels and fervent labor in favor of inclusion and community-building as expressions of her interest in understanding individual’s experiences on their own terms and in being a force for progressive change” (3). In so doing, Madrid follows previous scholars who have likewise attended to León’s resistive self-framing, including Marc Gidal, Iraida Iturralde, and Helen Walker Hills.¹ Additionally, Madrid revives deep-seated debates on identitarian labels and essentialisms, their ideological efficacy, and how and by whom they are mobilized.² Ultimately, Madrid makes a vibrant case for honoring León’s resistant position, rooting his discussion in his own previously published critiques of identitarian—and often heavily racialized—labels.³

Madrid’s refreshingly multimodal and self-consciously “polyphonic” approach to biography generatively conjoins the personal and the aesthetic, highlighting the “affective ways in which she [León] has navigated antagonistic networks and discourses of identity in order to develop her own, more fluid, sense of belonging” (8). Madrid draws on photographs; ethnographic interviews with León and her family, students, and colleagues; and scholarly dialogues with his own colleagues and listeners to expand his—and the reader’s—understanding of León’s life and “artistic voice” (8). In a wrenching analysis in Chapter 3, for example, the author attends to two photographs taken by Marbeth Schnare (d. 2006), a photographer who documented the Dance Theatre of Harlem for decades. Through them, Madrid reveals how the “adversities” faced by León in exile in the 1960s and 1970s (the death of her grandmother in Cuba, her inability to attend the funeral, and her divorce from her husband who remained on the island) “took a toll on her body and spirit” (72). León admits in interviews that she was wearing a wig in the photographs due to losing her hair from the stress, and that she felt too sad to smile (72). Here, Madrid’s powerful, affective visual analysis richly captures the sorrows, stresses, and hardships of León’s exile from Cuba at that time.

Madrid’s affective analysis of León’s complicated relationship with her Cuban homeland also inflects the biographer’s aesthetic analysis of the development of León’s “artistic voice” (8). Rather than framing the presence of certain Cuban musical tropes and aesthetics as a facile expression of “Cubanidad,”⁴ Madrid underscores the “buried,” “distorted,” and “disguised” appearance of Cuban musical tropes, such as the *cinquillo* timelines or other African-inspired rhythmic figures, across works (i.e., *Carabalí* [1991], *Indígena* [1991], *Horizons* [1999], *Toque* [2006]). In so doing, Madrid resists characterizations of these figures in León’s work as a Cuban “essentialism,” as defined by

¹Marc Gidal, “Contemporary ‘Latin American’ Composers of Art Music in the United States: Cosmopolitans Navigating Multiculturalism and Universalism.” *Latin American Music Review* 31, no. 1 (2010): 40–78; Iraida Iturralde, “In Search of the Palm Tree: An Afternoon with Tania León,” in *Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced*, ed. Andrea O’Reilly Herrera (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 223–34; Helen Walker-Hills, *From Spirituals to Symphonies: African-American Women Composers and Their Music* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

²See Juan Diego Díaz, *Africanness in Action: Essentialism and Musical Imaginations of Africa in Brazil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

³See Alejandro L. Madrid, “Listening from ‘The Other Side,’” in *Decentering the Nation: Music, Mexicanidad, and Globalization*, ed. Jesús Ramos-Kittrell (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020), 211–30; Alejandro L. Madrid and Robin D. Moore, *Danzón: Circum-Caribbean Dialogues in Music and Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴See Rebecca M. Bodenheimer, *Geographies of Cubanidad: Place, Race, and Musical Performance in Contemporary Cuba* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

Díaz,⁵ or an identitarian claim to roots (155), instead highlighting the mobile, complex, and irreducible ways that León resignifies such musical figures to evoke “routes,” “migratory...passage,” and “palimpsestic” sensibilities (2, 155, and 165). Madrid argues here that León’s recurring techniques and preferred sonorities, including such distorted or buried Cuban musical figures, do not in and of themselves define her compositional voice. Rather, he underscores that León uses such practices “within a larger palimpsestic texture to speak about resilience and hybridity based on her unique life experiences” (165). It is at this nexus of “style and idea,” Madrid argues, rather than technique “that Tania Leon’s compositional voice emerges clear, recognizable, and unique” (165).

Madrid’s richly rendered inquiries into the life, affective intricacies, and compositional voice of León offers the first—and, undeniably, a rigorously captivating—biography of this essential American artist. Published mere months after León won the Pulitzer Prize in Music for the composition *Stride*, which premiered at the Lincoln Center in New York City in 2020, the biography also provides a timely excavation of León’s artistry, collaborative works, and impact, furthermore offering an exemplary base for future studies of this uniquely American composer, conductor, and advocate.

Ruthie Meadows is an assistant professor of ethnomusicology at the University of Nevada, Reno. Her research explores contemporary dynamics of engagement and reimagining between the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and the Global South, with special attention to gendered and sexual subjectivities, jazz and ritual music, and ecology. Meadows’ first book, *The Efficacy of Sound: Power, Potency, and Promise in the Translocal Ritual Music of Cuban Ifá-Òriṣà*, was published by The University of Chicago Press (2023).

⁵Díaz, *Africanness in Action*, 2021.