

***“For me, a Piano is like 88 drums. Whenever you play with Marialy, the energy of those 88 drums evolves into 88 smiles. Or 88 flowers.”***  
**(Omar Sosa)**

Marialy Pacheco meets Hamilton de Holanda, Joo Kraus, Rhani Krija, Max Mutzke, Omar Sosa and Miguel Zenon; six established figures from across the globe, each master of his own craft.

With such a wealth of expertise and musicality on hand, a performance featuring *all* of these artists at the same time would inevitably mean that some aspects would be lost. So instead we have chosen to feature a series of separate ‘rendezvous’. And the Cuban pianist extracts the very best out of each individual encounter. The title of the CD, *‘Duets’*, sums up this concept succinctly and although this may sound rather matter-of-fact, more lies behind it - much more.

No other line-up can illustrate concepts from every-day life with such persistence: there is much talk of ‘nakedness’, ‘intimacy’, ‘discussion’ or ‘dialogue’, even couples’ ‘musical relationships’. The duo promises communication pure: people converse and at the same time entertain others. Stories are told, questions are asked and answered, there is contradiction, ironizing and flirting. Ideas are expressed, expanded upon and steered in new directions. Intimate moments alternate with heated debate. Duets are associated with the art of dialogue: the ability to have a constructive discussion, not to talk at cross-purposes, to contribute and play a part without dominating the other person.

With so much anthropological significance it might come as a surprise that this form of vocal exchange is relatively new in human jazz history. An early milestone was set in 1972 by Gary Burton and Chick Corea in Munich: they had finished their individual solo performances at a festival when the organiser approached them with the request to perform together as a duo by way of an encore. Forty-two years later it was that same Chick Corea who, during a solo concert in Dortmund as part of the Ruhr Piano Festival, asked the young Cuban pianist, Marialy Pacheco, who had been sitting in the audience, to join him on the stage for a duet.

Chucho Valdes, the grand old man of Cuban jazz, once described the pianist as *“the greatest of young piano talents”*. At the time, she had just won a young musicians competition in Cuba, where Valdes headed up the jury. Pachecos’ mother conducts a choir which is famous both in Cuba and further afield. When the choir took part in the Bremen ‘Choir Olympics’ in 2004, Marialy was there and she decided to remain in the city, home of the ‘Stadtmusikanten’ (the town musicians which feature in the famous fairy tale written by the Brothers Grimm). After an extended stay in Australia, the pianist returned to Germany. Initially back to Bremen but she now lives in Dortmund. In 2012, Pacheco won the renowned Montreux Solo Piano Competition.

Cuban jazz pianists have always left a lasting impression - from Chucho Valdes, Gonzalo Rubalcaba and Hilario Duran to Omar Sosa, Ramón Valle and Roberto Fonseca, David Virelles, Alfredo Rodriguez and Rolando Luna. Time and again they combine Caribbean temperament and excellent technique gained through intensive study to produce a truly breath-taking performance culture. This has both a positive and a negative effect, for that ‘gimmicky’ style of playing along with the bland high-speed fusion (which failed because of our own egomania and which we thought had been laid to rest with the

case long closed) - well, it still exists. It is perhaps not quite as pronounced as before, but is so virtuosic and flawless as to have lost none of its earlier impact. The admiration for Cuban jazz pianists grows and also for the number of exceptionally talented musicians that such a small country produces.

When Marialy Pacheco performs one can truly sense her virtuosity, flair and sheer joy of making music without constraints, set free after her strict classical training. But we'll leave it up to the 'gender specialists' to decide whether the striking and pleasing absence of machismo in her playing is due to the fact that she is a woman. One never gets the impression that she is trying to prove anything. It's all just about the music and musicianship. She is more a musician than a pianist - and not so much a Cuban, but rather a well-travelled artist who is not just interested in jazz, but in music in general.

The six fellow musicians who Marialy Pacheco invited to join her in duet at the renowned Bauer Studios in Ludwigsburg could be similarly described. Musical citizens from around the world: a Puerto-Rican who lives in New York (Miguel Zenon), a Cuban whose home is in Barcelona (Omar Sosa), a Moroccan from Cologne (Rhani Krija), a Brazilian conqueror of the music world (Hamilton De Holanda), a trumpet player from Ulm, who recorded one of his albums in Havana (Joo Kraus) and a native of Waldshut-Tiengen, who is known throughout Europe not just for his participation in the Eurovision Song Contest (Max Mutzke). Musicians who are not stylistically blinkered, but who are passionate, individual and authentic and endowed with the virtues which are the basic prerequisites for performing as part of a duo: the ability to listen, to engage fully with their counterpart and to leave their ego at the studio door.

***El Bola:*** A duet between two compatriots and fellow musicians. Omar Sosa is a cosmopolitan and globe-trotter, who absorbs like a sponge the various languages of sound from the places he visits - Cuba, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Congo and Angola, Ecuador, the USA, Spain. Musically speaking, he manages to be everywhere at the same time - in the Caribbean, in South and North America and in Africa. Marialy comments that "*El Bola is Omar's dedication to Reinaldo 'El Bola', a legendary Cuban flautist and friend of his who passed away in summer 2016. Omar sent me this composition after Bola's death but without thinking about the 'Duets' album - he just wanted to share it with me. It immediately appealed to me because it illustrated precisely what Omar represents, not only as a composer, but as a person.*"

***Gitanerias:*** To speak of a non-verbal 'soliloquy' by Marialy sounds all too introverted. However, it is reminiscent of the song title 'Alone Together' or Bill Evans' record entitled '*Conversations With Myself*', a 1963 album on which the pianist did exactly that: he 'spoke' with himself by overdubbing the second piano part. Whereas Evans recorded both parts using the same piano, Pacheco made use of two pianos which were set up opposite each other in the studio. "*Ernesto Lecuona was one of Cuba's greatest composers and pianists. It's an absolute 'must' for every Cuban pianist to play his music. From Chucho Valdés to Gonzalo Rubalcaba and Ramón Valle - we all grew up with and played Lecuona's music. He represents a tradition which to this day still influences the way Cuban pianists play. His compositions are deeply rooted in our African traditions but at the same time are very classically oriented.*"

**La Bikina:** A Mexican folk song. *“Why does a Cuban jazz pianist play a Mexican folk song? Firstly, my family had a strong connection with Mexico. My great-grandfather was Mexican, my grandfather’s sisters spent all their lives in Mexico and there’s a branch of our family there which I don’t really know. What’s more, I love Latin-American music in general - music from Brazil, Argentina, Colombia and Mexico - there’s so much of interest.”*

**YOU:** Marialy goes Pop? So what?! So what!!! We have Max Mutzke to thank for providing Germany’s predominantly white Pop music with just the right amount of black jazz, blues and funk influences and not fading away to be forgotten like so many other Eurovision Song Contest contestants. His soulful pop is extroverted, full of emotion and free of the more common inward-looking self-pity. Yet the title of the song suggests intimacy. *“I have been a fan of Max since I first heard him perform in 2014. These days it’s not easy to find such an original and genuine singer, who sings from the heart and doesn’t try to sound like anyone else. If Max was going to be on the album, it was my wish from the very beginning to play one of his songs. I listened to all his albums. When I heard ‘YOU’, something happened. It was a moment of complete clarity and I knew immediately how much power this song would have if I were to arrange it as a ballad.”*

**Capriccio do Sul:** A flirtation between the 88 keys of a piano and the 10 (!) strings of a Mandolin. Hamilton de Holanda, a huge star in his home country, is rooted in singing and the samba but also incorporates his home-grown instrument with several additional strings within a jazz context. Amongst others he has played with are Stefano Bollani, Omar Sosa, Richard Galliano and Wynton Marsalis. (In 2016 he was singled out for an ‘ECHO Jazz’ award in the category ‘Instrumentalist of the Year - Special Instruments’). *“Hamilton is one of my musical heroes and I definitely wanted to record one of his compositions with him. This piece was a big challenge for me because it was originally scored for the mandolin so I had to rearrange it for the piano. I chose Capriccio do Sul, because it offers a lot of scope for improvisation and the rhythms are similar to some of those found in Afro-Cuban music.”*

**Metro:** Marialy’s dream in sound about an imaginary underground train in Havana which she boards together with Joo Kraus, one of the most versatile, successful and soulful trumpet players in the country, who is a regular guest at Pachecos’ performances and occasional duo partner (also featured on her ‘Introducing’ album). He has long been used to taking part in musical dialogues - he was one half of the legendary duo ‘Tab Two’. *“Metro is a composition which has developed over time and which continually pushes me to create new versions. Because I have played the piece at concerts with Joo we thought that it would be nice to record a duo version, too. Joo also makes use of many electronic effects here.”*

**Burundanga:** 88 keys which occasionally transform into drums in this dialogue with a whole arsenal of diverse percussion instruments. That sounds like fireworks, but not only that. Rhani Krija is one of those percussionists who is great at listening and who reacts and shapes his performance accordingly as he plays. He is creative with a sense for nuances and - yes - let’s just say it - he is downright elegant and tasteful. These characteristics have brought him to play alongside greats like Joe Zawinul, Herbie Hancock, Vince Mendoza, Salif Keita and Sting (and on Marialy’s previous album ‘Introducing’). *“I*

*know this song from my time in Cuba, where it was sung by Celia Cruz. Actually, I never thought of playing this piece until a good friend of mine, my trio drummer Miguel Altamar, encouraged me to develop a version. First of all I wrote an arrangement for my trio, then a solo version and then, following on from a duo concert with Rhani Krija, I wrote a version for percussion and piano. Burundanga has so many tonal colours but at the same time it is very rhythmical - ideal for a percussionist”.*

**La Comparsa:** A duet with one of the most exciting saxophonists from the contemporary ‘Latin Jazz’ world, Miguel Zenon. It was apparently as the result of an analysis of US-American jazz tradition that he decided to neglect his roots. Since then the Puerto Rican, who chose to live in New York, has become an expert on all aspects of Caribbean, Latin-American and African traditions. Of their collaboration on Lecuona’s ‘La Comparsa’, Zenon says: *“Marialy knows the piece very well. For me it was all about submerging myself in this, her world, and contributing in my own way. It was about the moment, about listening intently and being able to react to something. We wanted it to sound new and fresh. And it all felt natural, organic and effortless.”*

The sense of mutual connection between these pairings is equally as audible as the difference between the duos. One complements and completes the other and adds value. A broad spectrum alone, a variety of influences and forms of expression, is not per se of value. There are plenty of eclectic albums which present a little bit of everything and in the end seem like the promotion of a large selection. But here it’s not about *“Look and listen to what a broad range and repertoire I have.”* This is a production by a musician who maintains traditional links but who is also open to new ideas. Joo Kraus, Rhani Krija and Max Mutzke already knew Marialy yet they play with such freshness as though they were meeting for the very first time. The duets with Hamilton de Holanda, Miguel Zenon and Omar Sosa were actually first meetings. The fact that they also sound as if they have been friends for many years speaks volumes. In ‘Duets’, Marialy Pacheco practices the most intimate, direct and intensive form of musical exchange and in doing so, throws the door wide open.