Elio Villafranca Masterclass Solo Piano Festival VT Jazz Ctr 2021

[Eugene Uman]

[00:00:00] Welcome to our second masterclass of the day. I'd like to again thank Harvey Diamond for giving us so much insight on this elusive master with whom he studied: Lennie Tristano. But also on Harvey's own wonderful insights and how he has cultivated and developed Lennie Tristano's language into his own.

Because like Lennie Tristano had told him: “you gotta make it into your own voice and once you've learned a certain language, then you start to develop your own set of vocabulary and sounds”. Harvey certainly has his own unique way of speaking. And so now we're onto a workshop regarding the roots of the combination of [00:01:00] jazz and Cuban music. I'm really pleased and honored to introduce to you Elio Villafranca who is from Cuba and who grew up as a percussionist, that was one of his trainings, as well as very rigorous classical piano training. So without further ado, let's hear “From The Roots Up”, Elio Villafranca.

[Elio Villafranca]

[00:02:00] Thank you so much once again. It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you, Eugene. And I forgot to thank last night this wonderful team of people who's basically making everything possible, it's amazing.

Today I want to be talking about, as Eugene mentioned, I'm from Cuba and my focus, normally my music is not so much about the Cuban root, but also the larger root, which is the Afro diaspora. I have the opportunity to not [00:03:00] only experience the culture of Cuba, but also I've been traveling a lot and every time I travel, my number one thing is understand culture and see how that manifests on people in music and because when I think in terms of culture, I do not only think in terms of music.
Music is just… basically the piano is a tool to expression. Or a trumpet or a sax. It's just that those are tools. But the culture is something that is within, inside, us and then that is manifest in whatever thing we do. Whether we play the piano or we paint, or we dance.

And then normally I like to think of culture like a ball, right? And inside that ball everything is in there, which is just music, food, drinks, you know, language, everything that you can think of. So then therefore, like my [00:04:00] passion is just talk about those things and how can I just basically put it into a musical language.

I have selected a few different videos that I want to share with you so you can understand what I'm talking about a little bit. I'm gonna start with a video of my hometown in San Luis, 'cause I grew up, once again, I grew up in Cuba, in San Luis, in a community that is pure Congolese.

And then, there as a child, I experienced images that have really haunted me all the way through my life. Which was the, you know, the drums, right? The concert of the drums, the tuning of the drums, the playing of the drum, the dancing to the drums, and the singing to the drum. So when I was a kid, I was just seeing these men, you know, carrying these really large [00:05:00] big logs.

It looks like half a tree. And then they would make a fire and they put it around them, you know? And then but of course, as a kid, I was really attracted to the fire 'cause you know, that's what we do when kids, we like 10 years things. But later on I understood, I learned that what they were doing was basically tuning the instrument, which is to me is a fascinating thing.

And then of course they will proceed by playing and dancing and that was the first things I experienced as a form of art. Then from that I went into painting. Because I grew up next to something we call la Casa de Cultura, which is a place where anybody can really go and have access to art for free.

And then I started painting and then after that I [00:06:00] discovered the guitar and then started playing the guitar. Then by that time, I wanted to pursue music. I wanted to join the school as a guitarist, but there was no room for more guitarists. So then I decided, “oh maybe percussion,” because I was thinking in terms of the drum, but I didn't know what percussion meant, yeah, you go to school as a percussion person, classical music, because I didn't know at the time what classical music was.

I was thinking the idea of the drums. And then I got to school and then they gave me these texts and started to do practice rudiments. And I was like, “what is this?” I started to cry. “I don't want to be here.” But then I stick to it and then

I learned all these things about classical music and I was thinking, dreaming, okay, eventually I'm gonna switch to guitar.

But that switch never happened. And then in that process, that's when I really discovered the piano and then fell in love with it. And then by the time I went on to higher education, I was already seeing [00:07:00] myself more like as a pianist, even though I was playing percussion… but that's a whole different thing.

How I got to the piano was actually, by accident because when I was in the school, they were starting –in Havana– they were starting to do all these jam sessions, right? That was like when I first was introduced to jazz and then they were doing these jam sessions and then I always rushed to the classroom where they're having the jam session to grab a percussive instrument.

But there was always an army of percussionists who were already there, so the only thing that was left was the piano and nobody was sitting there. I wanted to play so badly that I just jumped onto the piano. I didn't know what I was doing then of course, but I was just eager to play.

And then eventually whatever I did, it seemed like it worked because they started requesting me to be the pianist for the sessions. [00:08:00] And then that's when I decided, well, then I'm gonna do it seriously, then I'm gonna pursue it very seriously. And then I got into jazz and all these other things.

But let me just start with sharing the video of them tuning the drum. The first thing that I explained to you.

[first video plays]

Okay, as you saw in the video, that's how they tune the drums. They made the fire and then they basically, they wet the skin and then they, you know, they roll it with their foot and then they can always tell, they test it and see when the tune is ready, [00:09:00] the drum is ready, and then we're gonna go to the playing.[00:10:00] [00:11:00] [00:12:00]

[second video plays]
Okay, so you get the idea. So that's, as a kid, that's what I basically grew up with right? Like seeing the drums and seeing this music, and of course I didn't know what it was. And it took me a while actually to really appreciate that. It

was not actually until I came to America (that was in 1995 after I graduated from the school, my heavy classical training in Russian music and everything that when I came to America), that that image was started to haunt me, I guess because I was so far away from my country and that's when things start coming out, right?

Almost[00:13:00] like in wave of images and sound. I decided I wanted to go back and research this music because I didn't want to be, you know pursuing a music without understanding my own music, my own tradition. So I wanted really to understand that.

So, then I went back and I did a series of research and actually that series of research was what led to the creation of my my latest projects called "Cinque", which was basically using, was an investigation of the Congolese traditions, not only in Cuba, but throughout the Caribbean.

So now if you see in the video, I'm just gonna tell you a little bit about the process and how I process this into my music. Often when I talk to my students, I say, "okay, when you hear that, what is your take?" Right? Sometimes people just gravitate toward a specific instrument, right?

They're trying to try to [00:14:00] identify where's the bell, what this drum is doing. I can't understand what the drum is doing. I, you know, what time signature it is, and I say, "no don't think about that, I just listen to it as a whole product" because actually you have many different instruments.

And this is the thing that we have from the legacy that we have from Africa, right? We have a set of different instruments, but that set of different instruments creates a very specific, unique product. It should change that set if you change one different rhythm in one of those three elements, let's call it drums, two drums, a high pitch, a middle pitch, and a low pitch. If you change one little thing in one drum, it brings a different set, a different product, a different result.

And this is what I associate that with what we are calling the "rhythm section", right? You have the bass, the drums, and the piano. [00:15:00] And I always like, really, when I'm thinking about rhythm sections, like what does that mean when I use the word "rhythm section", right? And the rhythm section is because those three units, those three instruments become one unit with a very specific product, a very ending result.

And every change that happens in any of these three elements in this unit creates a complete different music. And that's the beautiful thing of a legacy that we have from Africa that sometimes people don't think about that. If I play something from the Yoruban tradition, where you have three sets of drums, it's the same thing.

Like you have a lower, it's always a low, high, and the middle. That's a basic construction of sound, right? You have it in the piano - lower, middle, and the high. It's just a basic thing in life. Every instrument has that. The only difference is that in the ancient way of seeing music, the lowest drums were [00:16:00] was the one who was carrying the responsibility of communicating with the bridge between us and God. Right?

That's the instrument that we speak of, it's [the bass] called the drum who speaks. That's the instrument that would have the ability to communicate, to speak, to transmit messages. Different from European music, where the highest pitched instruments were the one who would have the responsibility of playing the melody, you know, expressions.

And then the lower instrument had the role of supporting, right? And that's when you can tell in the –this is the thing– when you go to any country in the Americas, whenever you see that change of the higher instrument is doing the melody, carrying the melody of [00:17:00] doing the highest responsibility: that's a European influence. 'Cause African influence is everything that you can see. That is, everything is on the low [instrument(s)]. You know, and that's why, you know, that's why I gravitated towards Ellington, for example, Ellington, when he plays the piano, he has a very clear understanding of that.

Right. So that's why when he plays, he just emphasized the low end. And not only Duke Ellington, you think about also Monk too. It has that kind of like low end thing and kind of thickening of the voices and various expressions on that particular thing.

So back to the sound of it. So when I ask people, "okay, what do you hear?" You know if they start focusing on a very specific thing, then they lose the point. What I hear on that is like [rhythmic vocalizing]… that's the result, right? That's the general result. So how I translate [00:18:00] that into music, for example, I created this piece that I called "Sunday Stomp at Congo Square" and it was the image of what would've, what it was for, you know, Congo Square at the time when the free Africans were only allowed to play the drums one day a

week. And that was a Sunday.

And, in my mind I thought, “oh, that must be so crazy, right?” 'cause that's the day that they can kind of remember their traditions. Because the rest of the week they couldn't play the drums. That was the difference between New Orleans and Cuba. Right? In Cuba, we were allowed to play the drums a little bit more.

But anyway, what I'm thinking is this. I'm thinking. [plays piano] [00:19:00]

So that's what I'm thinking of - like the result and then what do I do with the other instruments. So I'm thinking like, okay, well what did the one who's improvising, communicating, do to it? So then I would do something like… And this is the piece that is called “Sunday Stomp at Congo Square”.

So – and those are like my interpretations, like whose doing the playing and then everybody else is supporting the rhythm. And this is the same, like what Dizzy did with “Manteca”. And obviously like, you know, he saw Chano’s idea, and was like we need a bridge. We need a bridge. We need a bridge, right?

Because of course, coming from Cuba, we solely think, not solely, but a lot of the time, we emphasize everything about the drumming and the [00:20:00] syncopation and stuff like that. And then from that I'm thinking like, okay, if I need a bridge, I'm trying to break out of that.

So I do [plays]

Then [here’s the] bridge.

So, that's how I create the music. I'm thinking like, okay, I take that information that I hear from this music. And then I integrate the jazz elements that I also hear and that I also love. And then in terms of the solo sections, I sometime will say “well, we're just gonna emphasize on this”, [00:21:00] and then based on that, you're gonna be improvising that it's kind of like a free.[00:22:00]

And so on. So basically I am trying to convey the elements of the drumming and then thinking in terms of like, okay, what goes on top of that. Basic thing. What is the main leading percussionist trying to communicate with, you know. I’m trying to bridge what they're trying to establish with that.

But also the way this [00:23:00] music actually got into America wasn't necessarily, wasn't solely in that form. A lot of times Jazz is described and I heard this many times and recently also, it's a union of European and Africa music.

That's normally the general wisdom everybody normally says about these things, right? You hear all the time, "oh yeah, this is a combination of European music and African music". But then always when this is something like that, then I always remember Jelly Roll Morton's "Spanish Tinge".

So then whenever anyone says that, then I think, okay, then where do you put Jelly Roll's "Spanish Tinge"? Because Jelly Roll Morton's "Spanish Tinge" is not necessarily… it's not as simple as a thing as saying like it's an African thing and a [00:24:00] European thing. What he took as a basis for the creation of the style was the Habanera, which is something that came from Cuba, from Havana. Right? And it's a Creole version of European contra dance that was only developed by Cuban composers, like in Cuba, right? In Havana. That's why it's called Habanera. But that music is a result of the union of European and African. But it's not European, and it's not classical and it's not African. It's a pure result.

It's like saying, I don't know, it's like saying Jazz is European or Jazz is African. It's not. The reason why it's not is because it's a product. Yeah. It has those influences, but you can only find it in America.

But now you can find it all throughout the world, but it was kind of created here [in the US]. [00:25:00] It's the same thing with the *Son Montuno*, the same thing with the *danzón*, the same thing with, even for that matter, the same thing with the Rumba. You know, often when they see the *Rumba,* the *Guaguanco* and the *Yambo* and all of that, which is all drums.

People think like, "oh, okay, well that's African." They call it lot of times "Afro Cuban music" and [other people have] said, no, don't call it Afro-Cuban music. Just call it Cuban music. Afro-Cuban music is the music that came, that was brought from Africa to Cuba and evolving Cuba in a very specific way. But it stays for the most part, stays the same.

Yoruba music for example. It changes. Yeah. When I got to Cuba, it changed. It was not the same thing as the *Yoruba* practice the way they practice in Africa, but retains the language, retains the kind of somewhat the instrument. You can still trace it back to Africa. The same theme with arará or the same thing with [00:26:00] Congolese music you can trace it back to Africa.

But when you're talking about *Danzón*, when you're talking about *Guaguanco*, you don't find that in Africa. You can only find that in Cuba and you can trace the, yeah you can see the drums, like yeah, the drums came from Africa.

Yes. But the rhythm and the way they saw the concept of the ensemble it's not just African, it's also European. It's both things. Because like I said earlier, the fact that they're using the highest pitch drum to improvise, that's a European concept that's not inside an ancient African concept, 'cause the lowest drum in Africa was the one who improvised at the time.

So I'm gonna play, I'm gonna play something, actually, I'm gonna play something related to the Habanera. So you can see how I also, [00:27:00] is a piece that I call "Calle Paula", which has a feel of the Habanera to it.

So it goes like this [00:28:00] [00:29:00] [00:30:00] [00:31:00]

Something like that. That's like the Habanera spirit was basically something like, that had like a kind of like a minor kind of tone and then a major kind of tone, in the B [00:32:00] section. But then what Jelly Roll Morton did was basically he took that thing. And then he added the blues kind of lines on top of it. It is based on what he learned from a [Cuban] piece called, "La Paloma" [from the late 1800s] and the reason why he called it the Spanish Tinge was because, because La Paloma was a piece written by a Spanish composer who happened to be, you know, living in Cuba.

He [Jelly Roll Morton] learned the Habanera. Back then going between Havana and New Orleans was basically like going from Vermont to New York. Literally just like that. It was such a Caribbean environment that, as a matter of fact, when after the Haitian Revolution many of Africans when they became free in Haiti after the revolution, many of [00:33:00] them went to Cuba and then went to Louisiana. And that was exactly the same trajectory. Like it was around the same time when jazz was starting to be cooked, right?

And then at the time there was a lot of traffic, people traveling here and there, and then he {Morton] heard the "La Paloma" for the first time by this Spanish composer. And then of course, back then there was not a clear understanding of what Cuba was, because it was the time where we [Cuba] were a colony of the Spanish people.

So it was either aSpanish territory or it was not clear. Like oh, this is Cuba, it's a new nation. Right? So Morton saw this piece performed by a Spanish composer and was like (well this is my guess) -, oh [that is the] “Spanish Tinge.” He thought that it was from a Spanish person, but it was a Spanish person playing the Habanera, which is a Cuban product. Okay. [00:34:00]

Now I'm gonna play a different video from a different tradition. This one is the tradition of Arará, which is from another tradition that is mainly based in Matanzas. You can find it in Havana, but it's mainly based in, in Matanzas. The first video that I played is from a tradition that is mainly based in Pinar del Rio, my hometown.

This is in Matanzas, and this is Arará.

[video plays] [00:35:00] [00:36:00] [00:37:00] [00:38:00]

Okay. Yeah. So ddagain, you know, when I listen to things like that, I always try to think about what is the main result of this combination? You noticed this was a change of time change, of rhythm. And that change of rhythm is provoked by, you know, by a variation of one of the parts, right?

You change the time, you change the variation part, and it creates a whole different feel. [00:39:00] But it's the overall thing. I ask people to kind of like look at and to listen to and be able to sing it because focusing on very specific things sometimes is not very helpful.

That's only helpful when you want to really dive in and learn it. But the first thing, when you see it, it's like, okay, what, what is the main theme? And once again, before, what we played before was, let's put it in musical term, western musical terms was the 4/4, and this is more like a 12/8 or 6/8 kind of time signature.

So the result of the music would be different. So in this case, what I would do with something like that, I would do,[00:40:00]

That's what I'm thinking, right?[00:41:00] [00:42:00] [00:43:00]

[plays]

[00:44:00] So, yeah, that is kind of like the way I see and hear. Like things like how do. I translate it into the music. I quoted Mongo Santamaria's "Afro Blue" in there just 'cause I wanted to give it a tribute to him
a little bit. 'cause he was one of the other influencers in music that brought this tradition to the attention and into American music.

And then I'm gonna close… maybe I play one more video that's short and then I can do a closer. I'm gonna play something that is actually a very unique experience that I have had. I had the opportunity to visit Haiti many times and then kind of like to go into the culture and then experience in the, either the Congolese, let's put on the Congolese tradition in Haiti.

So, I had some also Voodoo, but I'm not gonna do that. It's gonna go to the Congolese tradition because it's very similar [00:45:00] to my tradition in Cuba. So.[00:46:00] [00:47:00]

[video plays]

Yeah, so basically that's… [00:48:00] all these videos that I showed you today are some videos that I've taken. I travel to places and then I investigate because I like to talk about scenes like this that are reflected in my music, I always try for these things to be real, not just to be just talking in general terms, but also to be specific about what I'm talking about.

So, yeah, I mean, and that's basically the world that I live in and kind of like how I see jazz as a bigger thing than just one specific thing, you know, from the roots of the music, Because this music was before jazz, and then of course all this music came to America, or was brought to America. And then it evolved in different ways, you know, throughout the Americas. And then that created the formation of many different things, but the root… the root of the [00:49:00] music is still the same, it's the same root. And that's the reason why I called this "From The Root Up". Because I always like to tell people like, you know, just go back to the root and then see what was there before. It's the same like, you know, before understanding Herbie Hancock or whatever, you have to kind of like listen to, I don't know, Duke or Louis Armstrong, or Ben Webster or you know, Coleman Hawkins, you know, like go back to the roots of the music. I think that's it for today. Right? Thank you.

Thank you so much, Elio.

[Elio Villafranca]

You're welcome. Thank you.

[Eugene Uman]

Beautiful. Elio Villafranca.