SONO LUMINUS
THE YEAR
THAT NEVER WAS
Matei Varga

1. Andalucía (from Suite Española)
Ernesto Lecuona (1895 - 1963) **[2:29]**

Trois Ecossaises, Op. 72 No. 3
Frederic Chopin (1810 - 1849)
2. No. I **[0:58]**
3. No. II **[0:51]**
4. No. III **[0:51]**

5. I Got Rhythm
George Gershwin (1898 - 1937) **[1:18]**

6. Bagatelle in A minor (WoO 59) "Für Elise"
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 - 1827) **[2:29]**

XIXth Century Cuban Dances (selections)
Ernesto Lecuona (1895 - 1963)
7. La Cardenense **[1:23]**
8. Arabesque **[1:08]**
9. La Mulata **[0:50]**
10. Al Fin Te Vi **[0:52]**
11. Minstrels **[1:49]**

12. Impromptu No. 3, Op. 51 in G-flat major
Frederic Chopin (1810 - 1849) **[4:39]**

13. Zambra Gitana, from "La tierra de Venus"
Ernesto Lecuona (1895 - 1963) **[2:49]**
(transcribed and arranged by Thomas Y. Tirino)

14. Keyboard Sonata K 380, in E major
Domenico Scarlatti (1685 - 1757) **[2:27]**

15. Keyboard Sonata K 135, in E major
Domenico Scarlatti (1685 - 1757) **[2:05]**

16. Rondo alla Crazy
Andrei Tudor (b. 1983) **[3:16]**

17. Spanish Melody
Mily Balakirev (1837 - 1910) **[3:24]**

18. Fantaisie-Impromptu Op. 66 in C-sharp minor
Frederic Chopin (1810 - 1849) **[5:25]**

19. Danza Lucumi, from "Danzas Afro-Cubanas"
Ernesto Lecuona (1895 - 1963) **[2:19]**

20. Etude Op. 10, No. 12 in C minor (The Revolutionary)
Frederic Chopin (1810 - 1849) **[2:53]**

21. The Man I Love
George Gershwin (1898 - 1937) **[2:04]**

22. Impromptu No. 1, Op. 29 in A-flat major
Frederic Chopin (1810 - 1849) **[4:08]**

23. Yo te quiero siempre, canción
Ernesto Lecuona (1895 - 1963) **[2:03]**
(transcribed and arranged by Thomas Y. Tirino)

24. Vals Azul, from "Lola Cruz"
Ernesto Lecuona (1895 - 1963) **[2:44]**
(transcribed and arranged by Matt Van Brink)

Total Time: ***[55:28]***

THE YEAR THAT NEVER WAS

To paraphrase Tolstoy, all happy memories feel more or less the same; but the unhappy times are experienced differently by each one of us. We've all had some really tough weeks, which sometimes turned into months, and (with a bit of bad luck) into years... I like to think that "off" years help us grow and prepare for the beautiful things that will undoubtedly come our way (I am an optimist at heart), but living through dark times is a complicated process.

The year 2020 was complicated indeed. The world was put on hold and we hardly remember what we did in February, or May, or September... Many suffered from isolation and the inability to socialize - and they probably prefer to think back to 2020 as a year that never happened... I, on the other hand, felt liberated by the lack of schedules, appointments and the pressure to be productive - that horrid word which is killing our souls, slowly but surely. Instead I embraced seclusion and enjoyed the time off which was forced upon us. Yes, I did miss performing in front of a live audience and traveling to beautiful places, but I found that staying home, with my piano, offered me a better view towards my inner self and a chance to experience the joy of a new discovery. That was for me the Cuban master Ernesto Lecuona.

In spite of a popular career as pianist and composer, Lecuona is considered to this day a less "serious" musician and is rarely given credit for his extraordinary talent. Much like Chopin, Lecuona was a "salon virtuoso" who excelled in the short form and who carried throughout his life a strong musical link to his native country. He elevated Cuban music to a refined, almost "classical" status, and was often dubbed the "Chopin of the Tropics" and the "Cuban Gershwin"...

Over the confinement months, he became for me “the man I love” - and the raison d’être for this recording. I decided to bring forward some of my favorite pieces from Lecuona’s catalogue, intertwined with other short works by well-established composers such as Scarlatti, Chopin, Balakirev and Gershwin - all of them masters of the miniature genre and proud exponents of their own national style. The roots of their musical language are obvious, but the metamorphosis that happened once they truly found their voice is something to behold, and which can be best described as completely universal. I am presenting these works as a continuous flow, with complete disregard towards conventional timelines or preconceived ideas as to who belongs to which musical period.

As I was putting together the pieces of this hour-long musical puzzle, one day the supremely gifted Romanian composer Andrei Tudor Facebook Messenger-ed me his new piano piece. As soon as I’d read it, I fell in love with the little Rondo, aptly titled *alla Crazy*, which makes such a strong case for salon piano pieces in the 21st century and for new music as being still reliant on melody, harmony and rhythm...

The ebullience and sparkle of Andrei’s piece, along with the richness found in the works of his predecessors, made me forget that we were supposed to feel angry and anxious. Actually I didn’t have these feelings at all, because I was finally given the chance to breathe and recharge, to fully enjoy “singing” this music (in Romanian, my native language, we don’t *play* a piano piece, we sing it!)

Two years later, the pandemic isn’t over and neither is the collective anxiety - but at least I can offer you this very personal recording, which I hope will take your mind away from the current realities. This is music’s most phenomenal power - to bring joy when we really need it!...

Matei Varga is the 2021 recipient of the Romanian - American Fine Arts Award. His artistry has garnered superlative reviews from critics around the world, who have found his performances “magical” (Süddeutsche Zeitung), “colorful, vivacious [and] engaging” (Le Diapason). A top prizewinner at the “Maria Canals” and “George Enescu” piano competitions, Mr. Varga has appeared as a soloist and recitalist in many of the world’s leading concert halls, among them Carnegie Hall and Alice Tully Hall in New York City, Konzerthaus Berlin, Palau de la Música Catalana in Barcelona, Victoria Hall in Geneva and the Auditorium du Louvre, Salle Cortot and Salle Gaveau in Paris. He was invited by Gian Carlo Menotti to appear at the “Festival dei Due Mondi” in Spoleto and was awarded the “Salon de Virtuosi” Career Grant in New York. At the 2003 Vendome Prize, Elisabeth Leonskaja gave Mr. Varga her judging fee as jury member of the competition, when the rest of the jury failed to select him as a finalist. Varga holds degrees from the Romanian National University of Music and the Mannes School of Music. He studied with Ana Pitis, Ioana Minei, Sandu Sandrin and Pavlina Dokovska. He now lives in New York City and is Artistic Director of the Vendome Prize Piano Competition.

My gratitude goes to:

Rafael de Acha, who was the first to suggest I explore salon music repertoire

Jim Furlong, who first introduced me to the music of Ernesto Lecuona

My partner Missi, who I adore and who provided this album's title

Sally and Howard Lepow, for their treasured friendship and continued support

The Sono Luminus team: producer Dan Merceruio, sound engineer Daniel Shores, piano technician John Veitch, designer Josh Frey and, of course, the one and only Collin J. Rae

Composer Matt Van Brink who transcribed the Vals Azul

My Kickstarter backers, whose help was essential in making this project come alive. They are, in alphabetical order: Margarita Anthoine, Anca Bereanu, Judith Brown Meyers and Michael Meyers, Elena Buruiana, Vanessa and Maiquel Carrasco, Raluca Cimpoiasu, Cristian Fatu, Ioan Filip, Cathy Gibbs, Raluca Gold, Gregory Harrington, Suejin Jung, Erica Lubetkin, Mary Rose Main, Laura Metcalf, Judy and Marv Nierenberg, Gabriela Olaru, Diana Rotaru, Sofia Serrano, Nina Tichman, Robert and Patti Titley, Andreia Toma.

This disc is dedicated to my mother, Monica Ivona Varga.

Recorded in Pyramix with Merging Technologies Horus. Mastered with Merging Technologies Hapi. Recorded in DXD at 24 bit, 352.8kHz in Native 7.1.4

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Producer: Dan Merceruio
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