

**BELA MAVRAK & THE STARS OF BUENA VISTA**
**“UN SOPLO EN EL AIRE (A BREEZE IN THE WIND)”**
**CD plus Bonus DVD.**
**\$19.95. MVD Entertainment Group**


World-famous Hungarian tenor Bela Mavrak has chalked up a formidable list of professional credits, ranging from accompaniment of Yehudi Menuhin, world-wide concert appearances with star violinist Andre Rieu, and operatic performances in Germany, Japan, Argentina, Brazil, Italy, Belgrade, Asia, and the United States. Subscribing to a belief in the warm, heart-touching power of music, he has expressed a strong urge to familiarize himself with the origins of culture in diverse regions of the world, but especially Cuba, where the nature of life has changed dramatically because of politics and economics.

Mavrak has come to recognize—as anyone with a genuine love of Caribbean music has—the authentic sound and rhythms of the Buena Vista Social Club, and this CD is his tribute to that music. Complemented by a brief DVD documentary of his visits to Cuba, his interaction with its ordinary people and extraordinary musicians, and the making of this anthology, the album is handsome. The DVD gives us a chance to see some of the great Buena Vista musicians, and Mavrak’s informal and formal interaction with them. It also offers video clips of such numbers as “Besame Mucho,” “Dos Gardenias,” and “My Little Pretty.” Mavrak describes his album like this: “The original music of Cuba combined with gentle references to modern western pop music and music from home country, supported by Indian tables, Turkish drums, and electric guitars in Latino sound have given the classics and evergreens of this CD a very special unmistakable character.”

He is both right and wrong, alas. His handsomely produced CD (with his introduction in English, Spanish, and German) has nineteen numbers and can certainly be called cosmopolitan and eclectic, but the overwhelmingly tone is operatic in a way that needlessly calls attention to Mavrak’s classical vocal power while riding roughshod over the more delicate romanticism of certain songs. In “Veinte Anos,” the tenor’s middle plane is pleasant, and its high notes are easily hit, without working against the music. But the very next piece, “Only One Time,” is affected adversely by his heavy European accent, at least as far as the lyric is concerned. Mavrak seems intent on demonstrating his power even when not called for, and when that power issues from his chest or head rather than his heart, it seems extravagant. “Anniversary Song,” that sentimental creation of Al Jolson and Saul Chaplin, is blurred by his accent and the lyric is ultimately damaged by his power, for in a bar that requires a murmuring romanticism, Mavrak raises the decibel level unconscionably. “Amado Mio” lacks modulation of tone because he insists on showing off his power rather than animating the lyric by phrasing that comes from the heart or soul. His heaviness of phrasing and tone also affects his renditions of “Brunette” and “Charade,” and his version of “Lili Marleen” changes the blue-black mood of the song without ever challenging Marlene Dietrich’s great phrasing in this wartime classic.

Sometimes his operatic tenor suits the music admirably—as in “Bela’s Song,” “She,” or even the imperishable “Torna a Surriento”—and Mavrak also scores in numbers such as “Damisela Encantadora” and “Smile” (except for the final word where he elongates the vowel sound

**unduly. In these instances he demonstrates his excellence, but there is too often a suggestion of a classical tenor dominating the background Latin musicians, suppressing the natural flavours of the Caribbean in order to put his Western stamp on things.**

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