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## Where the Violin Found Its Rhythm

By CORINNA DA FONSECA-WOLLHEIM

*New York*

Gregor Huebner's latest CD is not so much an album as a travel narrative. On "El Violin Latino" (Timba). The German violinist and composer, who makes his home in Harlem, retraces the evolution of a repertoire that spans continents and centuries even as it remains in the shadow of the European canon. By turns sexy and sly, impassioned and dreamy, his collection of well-known tunes, unexpected arrangements and original compositions brings together far-flung members of the fiddle diaspora. In some ways, it's the story of the prodigal violin: of how the most aristocratic of instruments crossed the Atlantic and found itself in the rhythm section of a Cuban *charanga* band, or in a brothel in Buenos Aires.



[www.gregorhuebner.de](http://www.gregorhuebner.de)

Gregor Huebner

For Mr. Huebner, who turns 44 on Monday, the journey is also an examination of his own family roots. Today, he divides his time between composing, playing chamber music with the Sirius string quartet, and collaborating with jazz pianist Richie Beirach. But his earliest musical memories growing up in southern Germany are of his grandfather, who was part Gypsy, playing *czardas* at parties.

"I grew up with Gypsy music," Mr. Huebner said during a recent interview. "My grandfather played first violin in a little orchestra in what is now the Czech town of Krnov. Every Sunday, they played Gypsy tunes and salon music from the Hapsburg era."

It was from him that Mr. Huebner learned to improvise, a skill that would become essential in his work in jazz and Latin music, but which, in Europe, sometimes got him into trouble. In his final exam at the Stuttgart conservatory, improvising saved him when he lost his place in the middle of a cadenza to a Mozart concerto. But in Vienna, where he went to pursue postgraduate studies, he was nearly expelled when his violin teacher found out that he moonlighted as a jazz pianist in bars. "That made me think," said Mr. Huebner with a laugh.

Ironically, it was his decision to move to New York to study jazz piano at the Manhattan School of Music that set him on the path to Cuban violin music. Looking for gigs to earn money on the side, he came to play with Los Jóvenes del Barrio, a band based on the traditional *charanga* ensemble that features a solo flute and two or three violins in place of the trumpets more typically associated

with Cuban music. It was a training ground and meeting point for violinists who improvised, and Mr. Huebner found himself playing alongside jazz musicians such as Regina Carter and Sam Bardfeld. "It was my first exposure to this music," he said, "and I fell in love with it."

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### El Violin Latino

Meadowlands Festival,

Lincoln, Neb.

June 10

Salon Harlem, New York City

June 15, by invitation.

In 1996, Mr. Huebner traveled to Havana to study piano but found himself fascinated by his encounters with members of the Orquesta Aragón, a charanga ensemble founded in 1939 that dominated Cuban music well into the 1960s. (One of Mr. Huebner's resulting compositions, "Cuban Impressions," for string orchestra and percussion, will be performed on Sunday as part of Simone Dinnerstein's "Neighborhood Classics.")

Mr. Bardfeld, who teaches Latin violin at the New School For Jazz and Contemporary Music in Manhattan and has written a book on the subject, says the Afro-Cuban violin tradition is unique in that it did not develop out of a native folk-fiddle tradition. "It's this strange music mixing European classical tradition and African drumming," he says. "Essentially the violin is asked to be a percussion instrument—but at the same time you're supposed to sound like a classical violin. It's a very unusual aesthetic."

Around the same time that Mr. Huebner was learning to "think like a drum" in Cuban music, he began exploring Argentine tango music under the tutelage of Latin Grammy winner Raul Jaurena, one of the most prominent *bandoneón* players today. At tango festivals in Montevideo, Buenos Aires and the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles, Mr. Huebner came to grips with the particular challenge of the tango violin. In addition to requiring "the big sound of the Romantic concerto," according to Mr. Huebner, the music calls for unique sound effects, including a particular kind of rhythmic scratching, whistling harmonics and whiplike accents. But the greatest challenge to a classically trained violinist is the elastic approach to time. "It's about stretching the time in one song to go forward and backward. I don't know any other kind of music that does that," said Mr. Huebner.

The inclusion of Brazilian music on "El Violin Latino" is more unexpected. Here Mr. Huebner focuses on the *choro*, a style of music traditionally scored for flute, guitar and its four-stringed cousin, the *cavaquinho*. Here, too, European melody and African rhythms blend together. Although the violin plays no major part in Brazilian music, Mr. Huebner said, "whenever I play a choro I feel like it should have been written for violin."

What ties it all together for Mr. Huebner is a certain emotional candor and the strong rhythmic role given the violin, very much at odds with its use in classical music. "It's very challenging to a European," said Mr. Huebner. "In Cuban music, for example, the fourth beat of the bar feels like the first for us. In Brazilian music, it's even worse—it's the 16th that's the one." As a result of his travels, he said, his own music has been "infected." Even his recent "Requiem," written for the 2010 Schumann bicentennial, contains traces of Afro-Cuban rhythms. "I don't think anyone can see [that] it comes from Cuba," he said, "but my one is never on the one anymore."

On the other hand, Mr. Huebner sees traces of Gypsy DNA in the Latin violin music he studies. "The sound and the language of that kind of music reminds me of my grandfather," he said. "At least in the case of tango, it may well be true that the violinists who came over to Argentina were Gypsies." The last piece on his album is an arrangement of a traditional song—its title here translated as "Viejo Gitano"—about an old Gypsy violinist who is thrown out of the bar where he has played all his life and is left to wander the woods. It's a song Mr. Huebner remembers his grandfather playing while singing, his elbow resting on the table.

*Ms. da Fonseca-Wollheim writes about music for the Journal.*

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