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Striking Chords

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By Paige Evans

THE REHEARSAL

By the time I meet Zenaida Romeu in person, I've twice seen her conduct, with passionate intensity, the outstanding women's string orchestra she named *La Camerata Romeu* in homage to her legendary family of musicians; I've heard Cubans of all stripes proudly extol her talents, as well as those of the nine young women she masterfully leads; and I've read a stack of rave reviews from around the world lauding her extraordinary string group on their international tours.

When she founded *La Camerata Romeu* six years ago, Zenaida hoped to tumble taboos about classical music and project an image of Cuban women distinct from that usually seen by the rest of the world. She wanted to present classical musicians endowed with youth, sensuality and boldness and Cuban women equipped with strong professional training. She planned to celebrate, through an eclectic repertoire, the richness and variety of Cuban music other than *salsa* — music that moved people's emotions and intellects, rather than their bodies. And she hoped, with all these different elements, to attract a diverse audience.

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Shortly before noon Monday, I arrive at Old Havana's Basilica de San Francisco de Asis, the 16th-century former convent that was a home for destitute workers' widows and a post office earlier in Cuba's communist regime and now serves as La Camerata's base. The domed roof and rounded back wall of the basilica's cupola were blown off 50 years ago by a hurricane; a flat back wall painted with a faux-dome now stands in their stead. On a stage in front of the simulated cupola, two young women, whose fresh faces and blue jeans suggest adolescence rather than professionalism, are gathering chairs and music stands into a semicircle for rehearsal. One of them, a chocolate-skinned, dimple-cheeked lass whom I recognize as a violist for La Camerata, holds up a loaded key chain, selects a key and mutters: "We have not tried this room yet. If we are lucky, we will find one chair there. What a pain!"

A pallid wisp of a violinist with a permanent crimson mark on her jaw practices for the sultry, Mediterranean-featured second violinist, one of the three founding members who remain in La Camerata. The coffee-skinned, frazzle-haired bassist, La Camerata's eldest musician by far at 33, examines a page of the cellist's sheet music and marks her own accordingly. The cellist, who has caramel skin and almond eyes, rubs the upper arm of the pale, pout-mouthed first violinist, as the two gossip about their weekends. And slumped in a nearby chair, her lanky legs and platform boots extending for miles, a spec-

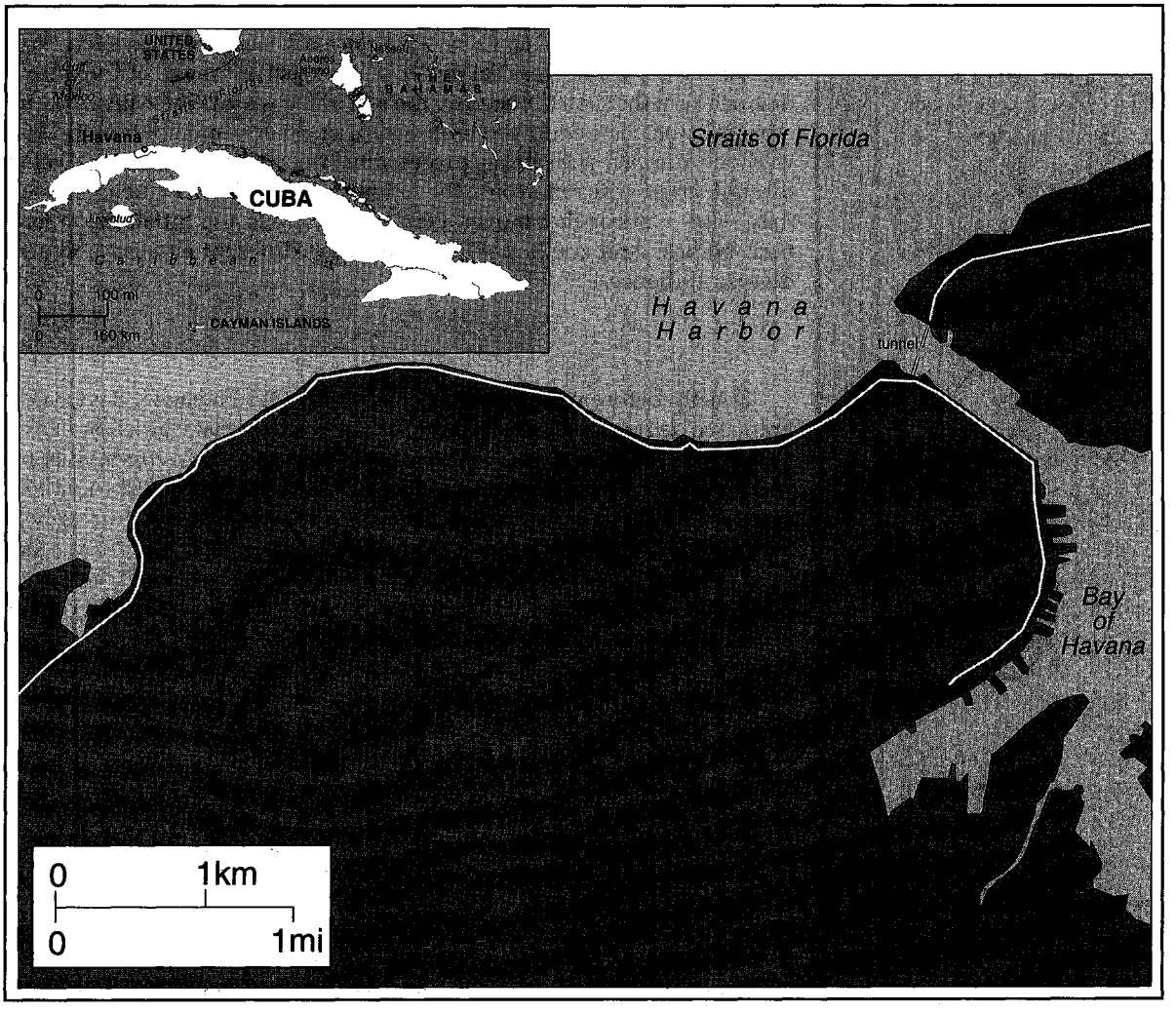
tacled, pitch-skinned violinist grumbles about not having a day off.

Just as the church bell strikes noon, Zenaida Romeu strides into the basilica. I'm relieved to see that, though she exudes confidence and determination, Zenaida seems more approachable without the silk suits and heels she wears for concerts. Her close-cropped blonde hair, pixyish features and bright smile give her an appealing, childlike quality. She introduces herself to me warmly, kisses my cheek and exclaims in a raspy, high-pitched voice: "What a fantastic morning! I went with the Philadelphia Boys' Choir to a music school just outside Havana. The Cuban music students played for the PBC, and the PBC sang for the students. It was a true cultural exchange! Each of them offered something to the other, and all of them were fantastic! Fantastic!"

A matronly lady with a pinched expression approaches Zenaida; in hushed tones, the two have a heated debate. When the woman stalks off, Zenaida gestures disparagingly towards the stage and tells me: "She refuses to move those two big angels! She administers this building, and she says they are very valuable. I would not mind just the paintings, or the Christ alone —" Zenaida waves towards a mammoth crucifix hanging above the stage. Large Christian oil paintings adorn the walls and man-sized winged angels stand on either side of the bleak, bleeding-hearted Christ. Shaking her head in aggravation, Zenaida pronounces: "All of this, though, it is just too much!"

With a shrug, Zenaida's irritation seems to evaporate. Flashing an impish grin, she says: "I cannot complain too much. The *Historiador de La Habana* —" the renowned architect who has masterminded the impressive renovation of historic buildings throughout Old Havana — "has been very generous with us. He offered us this space as a concert hall. The acoustics here are the best in Havana, though they are still not good enough for what we need. They were better originally, of course, before the cupola was destroyed. The Historiador's office also gave the girls motorcycles to ride to and from rehearsal. But he is a human being, like the rest of us, and none of us is perfect. He decided to make this a religious museum, as well as a concert hall, and he put all those things up on the stage."

Pulling her conductor's baton and a sheaf of worn Russian sheet music from a tidy black bag, Zenaida beckons the nine musicians. The young women settle into



In rehersal—Zenada with her baton and the musicians with their instruments.

the semicircle of chairs surrounding her, still chatting among themselves. The cellist hushes the violist beside her, who has been talking ceaselessly; the violist playfully pokes the cellist with her bow. With their divided attention, Zenaida moves efficiently through the day's business: whose friend can make photocopies of a new score, which uniform they will wear in Saturday evening's back-to-back concerts, what pieces they will play. When Zenaida suggests programs, two of the musicians object. While heeding their arguments, Zenaida guides the young women firmly, and they quickly agree on programs for both concerts.

At Zenaida's instruction, the musicians launch into "Pequena Suite Cubana," by the 20th-century Cuban composer Favio Landa. Abruptly, they transform from gangly girls to professionals: they play with formidable concentration, precision and technical skill. But soon after they begin the piece's first movement, a *Habanera* (a romantic song with a tango rhythm), Zenaida hushes them and directs: "This is not a hymn! Give it more life, more movement!" The musicians begin the piece again, this time with a more sensual swing. Zenaida conducts them with a jaunty swoop of her baton and tilt of her head. As the music sweetens and trembles, her forearm quavers, and her features ache with tenderness. During the piece's Afro second movement, which captures the forceful polyrhythms of Afro-Cuban syncopated percussion, Zenaida commandingly claps her hands and stamps her foot, marking the tempo. And in the *Ritmo* third movement she uses precise, sharp gestures to conduct the musicians' crisp plucking of strings.

Next, they practice "Suite Peregrina," a piece written for La Camerata by the Cuban composer Juan Pinera. As they begin the piece's poignant "Minuet" second movement, a jackhammer's machine-gun report blasts through the basilica. Raising her voice above the clamor, Zenaida works through a series of short, echoing solos with the first violinist (who repeats her solo begrudgingly but plays it more masterfully each time), the cellist and a violist. Loudly, Zenaida urges the violist: "Your part is different. You are lamenting. Yours is the most interior of the three." Though she looks at Zenaida blankly and seems not to have understood, the violist manages to infuse her part with a heart-wrenching sorrow.

The jackhammer's din grows even louder, more insistent. Exasperated, Zenaida spins around and protests: "This is intolerable!" One of the basilica's staff shuts the building's heavy front doors. This muffles but does not completely block out the construction racket. Using formidable concentration, the nine young women play Suite Peregrina's four movements through with flair and finely calibrated emotion. At the piece's end, dropping their instruments from chins and chests, they exchange satisfied grins and glances.

When the rehearsal breaks, the young women talk animatedly and start to put away their instruments. As they prepare to head off for the Cupet, a nearby corporation that feeds them lunch free of charge, I remind Zenaida I need to photograph them for my article. A flurry of primping ensues: the women borrow mirrors, apply mascara and rouge, trade lipsticks. I hover, mortified they're making such a fuss for me and my rinky-dink instamatic camera. Centuries later, when they've finished preening and unpacking their instruments, Zenaida and the young women line up beneath the looming crucifix. I try to fit Christ into the frame but can't manage it and so shoot a quick series of photos without him. Before the final photo, a violinist calls out "Cheese!" This inspires a joking volley of English words and phrases ("Hello!" "Come on, baby!" "My friend!" "One moment, please!"), as the musicians head off to lunch.

THE INTERVIEW

Seated on a pew in the basilica's tranquil courtyard, I ask Zenaida a series of questions about herself, Cuban music and La Camerata Romeu. She is friendly, direct and articulate in her responses. This is what she tells me:

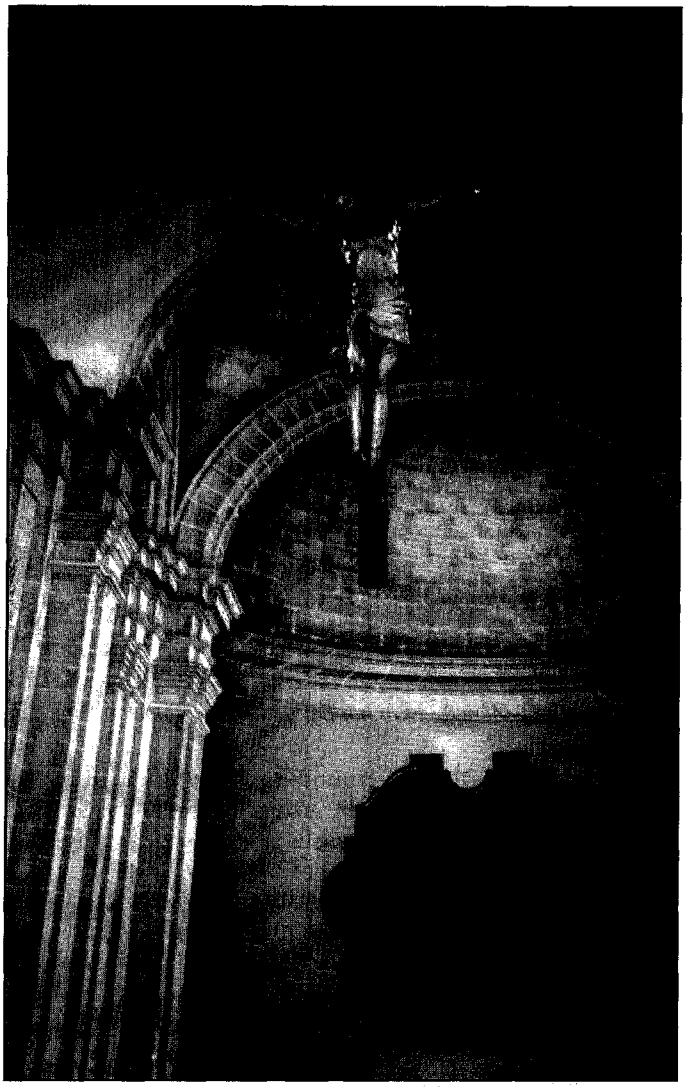
"These early rehearsals are for getting to know the

pieces, laying the groundwork. The creative part comes later in the rehearsal process, when we can enjoy the different things the music inspires in us. These feelings are then communicated to the audience when we perform. If you want the audience to receive something, you must create it beforehand. Sometimes rehearsals are more relaxed and disorganized, like today's. But sometimes, I carry a knife. It depends how much pressure we are under.

"We have three new members in the orchestra. Each time a new girl joins, we have to start over again, rehearsing all the pieces in our repertoire. It is hard for all of us. Later this afternoon, one of the more experienced girls will work with the new violinist on pieces for Saturday's concert.

"I have lost many orchestra members over the years. When we travel to other countries, the girls get good offers, and they stay. I have to replace them. Two years ago, I lost my first violinist when she married a man who lives in New York City. I was terribly worried, as I did not only have to find a girl who played well, I had to find a leader. I was lucky. The girl I found to replace her is working out fine.

"When I am looking for a new member of the orchestra, I hold a public audition. I do not just listen to the musicians. I watch them. I believe an audience comes to see musicians perform, not just to hear. I look for girls who carry themselves well, who are confident. I ask them to play both Cuban music and universal music. I mix La Camerata's programs, between classical music from around the world and more contemporary music from Cuba and other parts of Latin America. My audience likes to hear familiar pieces. And I want to show them the great wealth of Cuban music.



Christ looms above them in the Basilica

"There is no single idea or aspect that distinguishes Cuban music. It is a combination of rhythms, accents and sonorities. Cuban culture has many different roots and influences. Spain is the primary European influence, of course. And Africa. These are the two most important elements. But there are also elements of French culture, and Italian, English, Chinese. Cuban culture combines these origins, but it has a new, distinct quality — a quality all its own. Like a son. He can be something like you, but he will never be exactly like you. He is a combination of his parents and an individual in his own right.

"Oftentimes, when the girls come to La Camerata, they have not played much Cuban music. They are well-trained in classical music, but they are required to play just one piece of Cuban music by the time they graduate the *Instituto Superior de Arte* [ISA]" — Cuba's most important university-level arts' school. "Can you imagine that?! Only one piece of Cuban music in their entire educations! Many girls come to us straight from the ISA. And two of our musicians are still in the Escuela Nacional de Arte" — Cuba's most renowned high school for the arts. "Sometimes, they have played in school orchestras. But the discipline of a professional orchestra is entirely different. It is much more rigorous.

"I was the first woman to graduate from ISA in orchestral and choral direction. No one made it difficult for me. As you know, there is no discrimination against women in this country. People were more curious about me than threatened by me. They said 'Oh, a woman. I wonder how she will do.' I decided to be a choral director at age 18. I was lucky to have an excellent teacher from Hungary. She taught me how to express myself with my hands. I studied with her for four years. I studied orchestral direction for five years in the university after that. Eight or nine women have graduated in orchestral direction since I did. Being a woman conductor is no longer unusual here in Cuba.

"I started out as a pianist. Most of us in our family are musicians. When I was little, I heard my uncles, my

cousins and my grandfather playing music. I heard all sorts of stories involving music and musicians. Of course, this had a big influence on me. My mother was a piano teacher. One day, when I was five years old, I asked her: 'Why are you giving classes to everyone and not to me?' She began teaching me that same evening.

"Cuban musicians are better trained than many musicians in other countries, because there is a system for musical education here. We have good arts schools, which begin at a very young age. This system of arts schools was set up after the Revolution, but there were also excellent private conservatories here in Cuba before. Unfortunately, the quality of the musical education here has suffered in recent years; many of our best teachers have gone to other countries. Many of our best musicians have also left the country. There is a symphonic orchestra in Spain that is 90 percent Cuban. So many Cuban artists were moving to Mexico that the Mexican government stopped granting visas to Cubans.

"Today our music schools do not have teachers, they do not have instruments and they do not have other materials. But they have students! During the *periodo especial*" — five years of austerity that began in 1990, when hefty Soviet subsidies to Cuba collapsed — "we began to have more and more music students, who were determined to learn. This determination helps make them good. It is as if you clear a section of bare, dead earth, and you say: 'I dare anything to grow here.' And yet things grow. It is incredible how things grow!

"Concert audiences also changed during the special period. Before the Revolution, only older, wealthy people went to hear music like ours. Then all those people left the country. Still, only older people went to this kind of concert. You would look across the audience and see only gray heads. But during the special period, younger people began going to our concerts, in search of alternative ways of living. You do not know how these people feed themselves, how they manage to find clothing. But they come to see concerts. I cannot tell you how many people have come up to me after a concert and said: 'I feel so good now. You have helped me to keep on living.' It is very moving, to hear that.

"I find this a testament to the strength of life. With the material necessities facing us every day here in Cuba, spiritual life is essential. Before people solve their material problems, they turn to the spiritual. The arts fulfill a very real, profound need for them, a need to find an alternative way to survive.

"La Camerata, too, has very real necessities. We have difficulties getting the basic things we need in order to perform. For example, it is almost impossible to get sheet music here in Cuba. Friends and other people who want to help send it to us from other countries. When we do manage to get a new score, it is difficult to make photo copies. We cannot afford it! So we rely on a legion of friends with photocopiers in their offices to make them for us.

"Our cellist, Maylin, who is in her final year at the ISA, hitchhikes 40 kilometers every day between school and rehearsal, because the motorcycle the Historiador's office gave her broke down six months ago, and still they cannot get the new parts for it. Her cello, which the Music Museum kindly lent us, cracked when we played in Bolivia last year — and still it has not been repaired. Three of the girls are now playing instruments of inferior quality. One of the violists has a particularly bad instrument, a Chinese-student viola. She needs a new instrument. But a good viola, if we can find one in Cuba, costs around four thousand dollars. That is a low price internationally — it would be a joke in the rest of the world. But we do not have that kind of money.

"I dream, too, of having a fund for commissioning new works. Now, when a composer writes a piece for La Camerata, he does so as a gift. For our fifth anniversary concert last December, all the pieces we performed were written for us as gifts. I would like to pay the composers, but we do not have the financial resources needed for commissions.

"Our salaries, as you know, are very low. For the month, the girls make one hundred forty pesos [about $7.]. We can make more money performing internationally, but even then we make less than we might because the group or institution sponsoring us has to pay our airfares. Often, when an orchestra travels, an airline will donate their tickets. But Cubana cannot afford to do this. So the people producing our performance have to cover our airfares as well as our accommodations and food. It is very expensive for them. And our pay is reduced as a result. We have traveled twice to the United States, but there we are paid only enough to cover our daily expenses. Because of the embargo, we cannot earn dollars to take back with us to Cuba."

While recounting these significant problems and challenges, Zenaida's tone remains matter-of-fact, her disposition surprisingly chipper. It is only when I ask whether their gender affects how La Camerata's women play and create together that she scowls, and her tone turns dour. She growls: "The fact that we are women does not influence our art. This is an artistic thing. It is not a sex thing." I have confoundingly received this same response from every woman musician I've interviewed in Cuba — a country where, though gender discrimination was officially abolished with the Revolution, machismo still rules.

THE CONCERT

Shortly before La Camerata's first concert Saturday, I find Zenaida in the courtyard of the Basilica de San Francisco, peering anxiously into the half-empty concert

hall. "I did not do any promotion for this concert," she laments. "We have the other concert at the Amadeo Roldan later tonight, and I figured the radio and television were already saturated, with all the performances we have done recently. And now look — there is no one here!"

Glad to be bearing good news, I tell Zenaida that a friend and patron of the arts who saw La Camerata perform while visiting Havana will donate 4,000 dollars for a new viola. Zenaida's face lights up beatifically, and she intones: "What wonderful news that is! What wonderful, wonderful news!" Then, looking at me intently as if fully registering me for the first time, she questions: "How much longer will you be here in Cuba, Paige? Do you have many friendships? Do you feel alone?" This Cuban ability to touch deep emotional chords stuns me: how can she tell? Though not usually prey to homesickness, I've felt a potent yearning to visit home since my sole close friend here, Clarice, was expelled from the country. "Look!" Zenaida cries happily, nodding towards the now-full hall. "We have an audience!"

La Camerata Romeu takes a stand

The house is filled with Cubans and foreigners of all kinds: college students, professionals, young parents with toddlers, elderly couples and their adolescent grandchildren. The audience breaks into appreciative applause as Zenaida enters, and the musicians — looking older in stylish cream-colored suits and heels, their hair pulled neatly back — settle into their semicircle of chairs. Stepping forward, Zenaida announces: "For Mother's Day, we would like to dedicate this concert to the mothers. The women who bring us up and lead us through the world, not just in our childhoods, but until we are men and women." Her voice, projected through the hall without a microphone's amplification, rings with understated emotion.

The concert begins with classical pieces by Bach, Albinioni and Vivaldi, which the musicians play with rigor and impressive technique. As always, they perform from memory, without music stands or sheet music. This opens them up to each other and their audience. Coupled with their youth and lovely appearances, it gives them a striking stage presence.

In the program's second half, La Camerata performs more contemporary works by Cuban and other Latin-American composers. During Rafael Landestoy's vibrant "Danza Loca" ("Crazy Dance"), the musicians tap their feet, slap their instruments' bellies and backs and vocalize percussive sounds. While thwacking her inferior instrument, the dimple-cheeked violist catches the cellist's eye, and the two break into merry grins. Conducting them, Zenaida moves more freely than she did earlier, her body seemingly loosened by the music's heat and spirit. She smiles, then laughs. Three musicians giggle in response. I've never before seen an exchange like this between conductor and orchestra.

At concert's end, the audience springs to its feet, cheering and applauding enthusiastically. Zenaida and the musicians at first look pleased, then embarrassed by this reception. They play four encores, each of which inspires an extended standing ovation. La Camerata finally leaves the stage just 10 minutes before their second concert is scheduled to begin.

On the street, as her husband struggles to stuff the bass into the back of the mini van that will carry them to their next engagement, Zenaida tells me: "We do not have time to sound out the room before this next concert. Amadeo Roldan is a smaller hall, and the musicians must adjust the way they play accordingly. It is as if you have made yourself up for a large theater, and then you perform in a small space. You look ridiculous. You look like a clown."

As I watch them cram an incredible number of people and instruments into a too-small vehicle, circus-style, I'm sure that, though they certainly know how to entertain, La Camerata Romeu will be anything but clownish. ❑