

Cleveland Cello Society: music & art with Santiago Cañón-Valencia (Apr. 14)

by Kevin McLaughlin



On Friday, April 14, a packed LatinUs Theater audience in Cleveland's Clark-Fulton neighborhood enthusiastically greeted Columbian cellist Santiago Cañón-Valencia. They in turn were treated to an unforgettable evening of music and art in a compelling black box venue.

The concert, titled "Ascenso," is also the name of Cañón-Valencia's latest recording — copies of which the cellist graciously signed in the lobby

after the performance.

The experience of each of the five musical works was enhanced and enlarged by the projection of paintings onto a wall at the back of the stage. Each picture, rendered by the cellist himself, served as a kind of commentary on, or in some cases, visual representation of the music, done in the performer's own abstract, mostly black and white style ("I'm not really a painter," he declared, modestly). Musicians who paint may not be an unheard-of concept — composers Arnold Schoenberg and George Gershwin and cellist Aldo Parisot all painted, as does pianist Stephen Hough — but seeing the artwork on display while the music that inspired it is being performed makes for a special occasion indeed.

Damián Ponce de León's *La ruta de la Mariposa* ("The route of the butterfly") is a silken, contemplative work, and Cañón-Valencia's painting suggests the same. The cellist

immediately quieted his audience with several harmonics and slowly moving double stops, setting the tone of the concert and the sense of mystery. A quickening of wings comes and goes: maybe the butterfly thought better of her outing after all? But the cellist knows to let her rest before leading — or more likely following — her on a frenzy of beautifully controlled, animated flight.

The performer's explanation for Jorge Humberto Pinzón's *Mesonoxian* ("of or relating to midnight") enhanced our appreciation to be sure, as did the painting behind him, but the performance of the piece, arresting and evocative, made the sale. Commissioned by Cañón-Valencia (the composer was the cellist's first theory teacher), the work begins with long Bach-like strokes followed by plucked responses. Mercurial movement follows, high and low, allowing the cellist to demonstrate technical prowess and to stimulate nighttime thoughts in the listener.

Cañón-Valencia's own arrangement of *Asturias* followed. The cellist captured the lyrical attributes of Albéniz's music — originally for piano and often played on guitar — delighting in the "Andalusian copla" (Spanish popular song) section and infusing the music with a fiery flamenco spirit. Sounding Romantic and natural on the cello, it makes you wonder why you haven't heard the piece adapted for cello more often.

Leonardo Federico Hoyos's *Urban Rhapsody*, which was written for Cañón-Valencia as the last in a trilogy of solo cello pieces, is a kind of postcard of the cellist's home city of Bogotá. The music and the painting matched the composer's sentiment of Bogotá as "a city that contains multiple and indefinite cities within itself, a place which is both 'heaven and hell.'" There are many suggestions of city life in the music and the painting: graffiti, imitated radios, car horns, and tender lullabies from open windows. Cañón-Valencia played it all with assurance and obvious affection.

The final work, *Ascenso hacia lo profundo*, the title track of the concert and the album, was written by Cañón-Valencia in 2021. He introduced the music by saying he had never composed a work before this, though he had made recordings of brief "sound patterns and disconnected ideas" for years, a catalog from which he drew when sitting down to compose. It is a lovely and imaginative piece, full of attractive encounters and surprising turns. I can't wait for opus 2.

Combining art and music in a theatrical setting can sometimes fall flat — and seem more like a relic of a groovier time than an entwining of aesthetic elements. But there was something about the darkened chamber, the masterful playing of the performer, and the haunting images that worked to exponentially boost the pleasure of Friday's concert.

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