

Cleveland Cello Society: a conversation with Santiago Cañón-Valencia

by Mike Telin



While growing up in Bogotá, Colombia, cellist Santiago Cañón-Valencia knew from an early age that he wanted to be a musician. “My dad plays bass clarinet and other clarinets in the Bogotá Philharmonic. My mom used to play the cello, and my sister plays the violin, so the house was always full of music and people practicing all the time,” he recalled during a Zoom conversation from Bogotá.

“I picked up the cello as a suggestion from mom. I wanted to play the

bassoon but I was four and that’s an impossible instrument when you are that age. So they bought me my first little cello and I was completely in love with it, and I kept going from there.”

Kept going indeed. His many awards include being named a 2022 BBC Next Generation Artist, and winner of the Silver Medal and the Audience Favorite Award at the 2019 International Tchaikovsky Competition.

On Friday, April 14 at 7:00 pm at LatinUS Theater at the Pivot Center for Art, Dance, and Expression, Cañón-Valencia will make his Cleveland debut in a concert presented by the Cleveland Cello Society. His program features works from his latest recording, *Ascenso*, released on the Sono Luminus label.

The program will begin with Damián Ponce de León’s *La ruta de la mariposa*. “I’ll follow that with Jorge Humberto Pinzón’s *Mesonoxian*. The title means something related

to midnight — the whole album has a dark aura. I commissioned him to write the piece and I've known him for a very long time. He's one of the most important composers here, and he was my first theory teacher when I was very small, so he and I go way back. I've premiered a few of his other pieces for cello, so I knew I wanted to have him be part of the album.”

Next up will be Cañón-Valencia's own arrangement of Isaac Albéniz's *Asturias*. “My uncle is a guitar player and he would play that piece a lot, so I kind of grew up with it. Every time I hear it, I have a nostalgic feeling. And the overall color of the work fits the album because it's — especially at the beginning — dark, driving, and full of energy. It's fun to play, and quite hard on the cello, but it's the type of piece that is rewarding.”

The cellist said that Leonardo Federico Hoyos's *Urban Rhapsody*, which was written for him, was inspired by the city of Bogotá. “It's a huge city with lots of different things going on. Lots of different cultures and different sounds and colors.”

The final work is by Cañón-Valencia himself. “I wrote *Ascenso hacia lo profundo* in 2021 during a funny period. I knew that I would be recording the album, so I was in touch with the label and said that I wanted to include a piece of my own. I had never properly written any music, although I had toyed with the idea for a lot of years.”

Cañón-Valencia said that he is a person who needs to have the pressure of a deadline to get something done. In this case, he wrote the piece in under three weeks while on tour in Japan. “It was during quarantine and of course there was no going out. I was just in the hotel unless I was in the hall playing, so I had a lot of free time and that's kind of when the piece came alive,” he said.

“I built it like a little puzzle — I would record bits and pieces of myself improvising, and whatever I liked, I recorded on my phone. So I had this whole library of 20-second snippets. I thought about what would fit with what, and ended up with the piece. It's also inspired by two songs that I was listening to during that time, which are not at all classical music. One is by a metal band called Meshuggah and the other is by a metal band from Ohio.”

Cañón-Valencia said that all of the works on the album — and the recital — are very personal to him. “And Friday will also be the first time I play it live in its entirety.”

Turning our conversation to the Tchaikovsky Competition, I asked him which is more meaningful, the second prize or the audience prize? “I think that given the reputation the competition has with the musical world, the second prize is a pretty nice thing to have. But ultimately I feel the audience prize is what speaks more to people. That is what

you're going to be doing if you want to have a successful career — connecting with your audience. They both meant a lot to me, but I felt happy that I was chosen from among all those people, because the audience prize was not just within the cello division, but the entire competition including piano and violin. So it felt very special and reassuring.”

Before concluding our chat, I was curious how he ended up studying in New Zealand. “My teacher in Bogotá decided to move back to Poland. So I went to New Zealand because the cellist there [James Tennant] was one of my mom’s previous teachers, and she thought it would be a good option.” And after a three-month trial period, Cañón-Valencia said they absolutely clicked.

“From 2007 until 2009 I would go for three months at a time — I was doing virtual school so that made it easier. In 2010 I started my bachelors, then I was there for three full years. New Zealand is an incredible place and I still consider it to be my second home.”

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