

# AHMED DICKINSON CARDENAS

By GUY TRAVISS

BORN IN HAVANA, Ahmed Dickinson Cardenas set out on his musical journey playing drums and percussion at the age of four, progressing to classical piano and guitar by nine years old. Graduating a year early from Havana's Superior Institute of Art with a first-class honours degree in Guitar, he moved to England in 2005 to study at the Royal College of Music. Later that year, with the support of The Kramer-Chappell Scholarship and the Mad Hatters Club, he undertook further studies for a Masters degree at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama.

Ahmed has performed at numerous prestigious venues in the UK including the Wigmore Hall, Institute of Contemporary Art, St James' Church Piccadilly, Kings Place, The Sage Gateshead, and Bolivar Hall among others. Festival appearances include: The London Guitar Festival, Bolivar Hall International Guitar Festival, Bath International Guitar Festival, Ards Guitar Festival (Northern Ireland), and abroad at the Hispano-American Guitar Festival (Mexico) and Dublin Guitar Week. In 2008 he performed works by composer Judith Weir, in a series of concerts broadcast by BBC Radio 3.

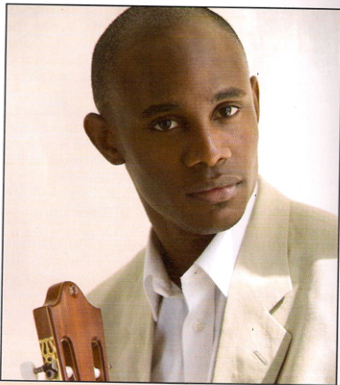
Ahmed has enjoyed regular collaborations with outstanding musicians from across the musical spectrum, including Eduardo Niebla and Laura Mitchell. He had the privilege to work closely, for almost a decade, with the late Cuban guitarist-composer Jose Antonio (Nico) Rojas. Over this period he single-handedly transcribed and performed most of Rojas's unpublished works, enabling access to an incredible cultural legacy for future generations of guitarists. This work was to form the basis of his first album.

In 2008 he founded Cubafilin Records, a London-based label intended to promote works for guitar by contemporary Cuban and Latin composers. His album, the label's first release in the same year, *Ahmed Dickinson plays Nico Rojas* (a partnership with Havana Masters) won Best Instrumental Soloist & Best Instrumental Album at Cubadisco 2009, the prestigious Cuban Music Record Industry Awards. The same album, which pays homage to the late acclaimed Nico Rojas, was also nominated for Best Artist & Best Newcomer in *Songlines World Music Magazine*, and Best Album & Best Single at the Latin American Music Awards UK.

Ahmed is a Concordia Foundation and Live Music Now artist.

*To what extent do you see yourself as an advocate of Cuban music?*

When I left Cuba I didn't know what I was going to find here; what I did know was that I had spent 15 years of my life playing a vast repertoire by Cuban and South American composers. I presumed that I had an understanding of Latin music that many



Ahmed Dickinson Cardenas.

guitarists probably wouldn't have here. My initial plan was to share this knowledge as well as to learn from my new experiences in the UK, and to further develop my classical repertoire.

*For someone with your insight into South American musical culture, do you identify differences in the way European players interpret music from this region of the world?*

This is a very interesting subject. European classical performers often do have a valid approach to South American repertoire. However I think that classical musicians can detach themselves from the music-making process if they think about it so much without any real exposure to the music. Exposure to any form of art is the best recipe. Most of the music written for guitar by Latin American composers recreates rhythmical cells taken from traditional styles. For a serious performer it is imperative to recognise the roots of these rhythmical cells.

Nowadays with tools like YouTube everyone can easily obtain information on where music comes from. I think that for European players and performers in general it is sensible to do some research about South American styles, instrumentation and rhythms if they are about to embark on a performing project with this kind of repertoire. When I lived in Cuba, because of limited access to the internet, I had to rely on the scores, live performances or a few available recordings in order to gather information about music. Until my arrival in London, I didn't have the opportunity to listen, for

example, to several performers' interpretations of the same pieces, or several groups playing traditional music. Research in this way is truly enlightening.

*Do you think that by minimising exposure to materials found on the internet, we can be benefiting ourselves in any way, since online publishing doesn't have any feature of quality control?*

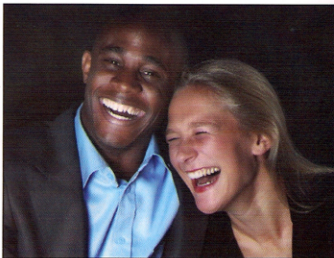
The internet is a blessing. Being able to watch videos and recordings by almost everybody in the music business is a luxury. However, there is always a risk with online publishing and media in general. Many people can get confused when discerning between a popular performer and a truly great one. Sometimes it is easy to notice a popular performer over a great one simply because the first one is more familiar with the rules of marketing and is better promoted.

*How do you process all the materials available to you when you are studying a piece?*

I believe in cross-examination; my father is a scientist and he always taught me that this is the way forward. One score might have several editions, so which edition is the closest to the composer's ideals? The score is just one possible version of a piece anyway. So you have the score, you read a little bit about the composer, you have an idea. If you can access other information then you can begin to fill in a little more detail. I also believe in listening to musicians that you respect. If you listen to a recording by a player of your liking - even if you don't fully agree with all the aspects of their performance - the process would help you in creating your own musical Frankenstein. I think you have to start with the score, but if you just play according to that alone you don't really leave space for your own interpretation. Competitions are interesting in this respect; is the jury looking for accuracy or creativity? I'm not saying that you have to disregard the score in any way, but in a sense you have to see it as a blank canvas. If you take a composer like Leo Brouwer for instance, he doesn't really write much in the score, not much about fingering which is interesting because he writes in a very idiomatic way. He doesn't show you much about dynamics and so on. He gives you space, he just puts his music out there and is hoping to be surprised by you. That's what it is all about.

*And how do you feel, then, about the approach taken by composers such as Takemitsu who supply their scores with very fine detail?*

With Takemitsu in particular, I would say that the reason he works in the way he does stems from his Japanese heritage. The Japanese culture is very structured. They believe in tradition and detail. There is risk involved in using this level of detail of course. If people respect the score too much then you can end up with a piece that doesn't breathe. Still, even with someone like Takemitsu you can get away with things if you are creative. When you see a fermata on the page: how long? When vibrato is



**Ahmed Dickinson Cardenas with soprano Laura Mitchell.**

marked: what kind? There are many subjective details. If you are willing, you can follow every detail in the score and still find ways to make the pieces your own.

*A significant influence on your musical studies has been time spent with the late Cuban guitarist-composer Jose Antonio (Nico) Rojas. What did you learn from him?*

Many things. Firstly, a different technique; he never had formal guitar lessons. So he pretty much played the guitar trying to decode what was going through his mind, just trying to release his musical ideas. He never thought about the guitar technique. That approach developed into a unique way of using his fingers, and I had to copy him while I was writing out and practising the pieces. I also learned a lot about the history of Cuban music. In most of his work he recreates the sounds and styles of many popular bands and singers in Cuban music. He had been part of the 1950s era and for me it was a privilege to hear first-hand all these vivid stories about people who shaped the Cuban musical culture.

*Your 2008 recording, Ahmed Dickinson plays Níco Rojas, is part of a larger project in which you have scored a number of Rojas' works. What was your reason for doing this?*

His music had to be written. I just fell in love with his works. Once I realised that I could transcribe his music I just jumped on the boat and never looked back. It hadn't been played properly and I had an opportunity to get it out there and give it the exposure it deserved. I knew as soon as I started to write his works that I had to record them. Additionally, I was very aware that Níco was unwell and that his health was deteriorating; it was very important to me that he would be able to hear a recording of his beautiful works before he passed away.

*How did you set about doing this?*

Through the years Níco only kept his music alive by playing it every time he could. Usually very late at night when his family was asleep. Since he could

improvise with ease one piece would sound differently in two separate recordings or performances. What I did was to write every version down and then show them to him to try to find a final one.

Usually the harmonic structure and the melody remained the same, but the coda or the intro might have been longer, or various elements of the accompaniment and voicings might be different. He recorded two LPs, one in 1964 and the other in 1977. They were commercial recordings so there was nothing to be edited. But the recordings that were made at home on informal occasions, those were the tricky ones. There were always a few versions and on some of those tapes you could even hear passing buses and dogs barking in the background.

*And how did he feel about having to make these decisions?*

It's interesting because he never said to me 'this is the version I want'. He was always so grateful for the work I was doing that he would allow me to edit the versions I preferred. He was so modest and humble that it put me in a difficult situation. I wanted him to tell me exactly what to do in every step of the process. If he was the hand I could be the pen.

I always said to him that this music was his. When I had to choose between alternatives, I would usually go for the more non-improvisatory version, because he could improvise and would often get lost in his own world. So if I wanted to make a valid edit I would just go with the essential structure. There is an interesting point here. Rojas didn't know that his first recording was going to be made into a commercial album. He went to the studio to have the music written, but the person who was supposed to transcribe it died. Later he found that his album was commercialised and he hadn't been told. By the time of his second album he was already suffering from arthritis and he wasn't playing as well as he would have wanted. Unfortunately we don't really have a recording in which he felt comfortable about saying 'this is the one'.

*How should people treat these scores?*

I think that people should treat them like a blank canvas. I would only recommend that players should be very precise with the rhythmical cells. This is vital otherwise the music would not truly be Nico's. He was renowned for having a very acute sense of rhythm. Nico himself played things differently. I don't think it is fair to say that there is a definitive way of playing his music, there is no one way that you have to do it. The most important thing for me now is for the music to be out there. I can let people choose what they want to do with the scores as Nico would have done had he been alive today. And there are always the recordings

for reference. At present I am preparing a series of books which are going to be released firstly in Cuba, and then here.

*You have also worked collaboratively with performers including Eduardo Niebla, Ben Wragg, and Laura Mitchell. What have these projects been about?*

I have always enjoyed collaborations, and in that respect I have been very lucky to work with very talented musicians. These projects have flourished

based on mutual recognition, a particular interest in chamber music and again the mutual necessity of bringing something fresh to our audiences. Laura Mitchell and I have been working on an album with a selection of some of the most beautiful Latin music for voice and guitar. We are delighted to feature rarely performed works by Cubans Leo Brouwer and Eduardo Martin, and Puerto Rican Ernesto Cordero among other composers. I also have a trio, Mestizo, with percussion and violin (Hammadi Rencurrell Valdes and Emma

Blanco) with whom I enjoy arranging and rearranging Latin music. Again, what we are playing couldn't be classified as classical or world music or traditional. We have been performing at many classical festivals and in addition will very soon be touring the UK as part of a world music project.

*You adapt solo guitar music for your trio and various duos, how does this process work?*

I enjoy arranging, and for me it is a reflex to think about what else can be done to the music I already play or the repertoire that I would like to play next. For example, I am currently playing most of my Cuban repertoire with percussion. When you hear a Cuban solo guitar the rhythms can be implicit and by adding percussion you get a wider picture of the rhythmical cells and styles that have been recreated; it's a way to facilitate the musical assimilation process for the listener.

*You have set up a record label intended to promote works for guitar by contemporary Cuban and Latin composers. Why did you feel the need to do this?*

When my 'Plays Nico Rojas' recording was ready I felt that most labels wouldn't know how to promote my work. In terms of marketing, Nico Rojas' music could fill many boxes and none. I always have people asking me whether this repertoire is classical, world, jazz or traditional. I had to set up Cubafin Records because I wanted to have some control over my career, and also because there is a great number of Latin composers with very interesting work worth being promoted. I want to put that repertoire out there without compromising on anything.

**"I wanted him to tell me exactly what to do in every step of the process. If he was the hand I could be the pen"**