

Stride

Tania León

Having studied piano since the age of four and earned bachelor's and master's degrees in music (plus a certification in accounting!), Tania León left Cuba as a refugee in 1967, transported to Miami on one of the Freedom Flights that expedited the mass migration from that country. She settled in New York City, where she studied with composer Ursula Mamlok and received bachelor's and master's degrees again, this time from New York University.

León staked her place in New York's cultural scene as a founding member and music director of Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969. Five years later, she instituted the Brooklyn Philharmonic Community Concert series. From 1994 to 2001 she served as Latin American music adviser for the American Composers Orchestra, where she co-founded the groundbreaking Sonidos de las Américas festivals in response to the increasing importance of Latin America in the cultural life of the United States and to encourage US orchestras and ensembles to broaden their repertoire to reflect that development. She is also the founder and artistic director of Composers Now, which is dedicated to empowering living composers and celebrating the diversity of their voices.

At the New York Philharmonic she was New Music Advisor from 1993 to 1997. During those years she conducted the Orchestra and appeared as an onstage moderator for pre-concert events. Conducting engagements have also taken her to the Beethovenhalle Orchestra (Bonn), Gewandhaus Orchestra (Leipzig), Santa Cecilia Orchestra (Rome), National Symphony of South Africa (Johannesburg), New World Symphony (Miami), and Netherlands Wind Ensemble, among many other ensembles.

A professor at Brooklyn College and at the CUNY Graduate Center, she was named Distinguished Professor of the City University of New York in 2006. In 2010 she was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her many honors include the ASCAP Victor Herbert Award and the New York Governors' Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2012 she received both Grammy and Latin Grammy nominations for Best Contemporary Classical Composition.

León's catalogue extends to almost 40 chamber works, 10 orchestral pieces, and 6 ballets, in addition to numerous vocal compositions and pieces for piano. Her opera *Scourge of Hyacinths*, based on a radio play by Wole Soyinka, was awarded the BMW Prize for Best Composition of the Munich 1994 Biennale for New Music Theatre when presented there in a production staged by Robert Wilson and conducted by León herself; since then, it has received many performances in Switzerland, Austria, France, and Mexico. She is currently at work on another opera, *Little Rock Nine*, to a libretto by Thulani Davis (consulting with historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr.) about the integration of Arkansas's public schools.

In Short

Born: May 14, 1943, in Havana, Cuba

Resides: in New York City

Work composed: 2019, on commission from the New York Philharmonic, Jaap van Zweden, Music Director; and the Oregon Symphony, Carlos Kalmar, Music Director, dedicated "In honor of Susan B. Anthony" and "to the visionaries Deborah Borda and Jaap van Zweden"

World premiere: these performances

Estimated duration: ca. 15 minutes

Her music has been performed widely around the world, but Cuba proved a tough nut to crack. Not until 2010, 43 years after she emigrated, was León's music heard in her native country. That year she was officially invited to travel to Havana to hear two of her compositions presented as part of the Leo Brouwer Festival of Chamber Music. In 2016 she again returned to Cuba, as both a composer and conductor, leading the National Symphony Orchestra of Cuba in her large-ensemble work *Indígena*.

When she was invited to write a piece for the New York Philharmonic's *Project 19*, which has commissioned 19 women to compose works marking the centenary of the 19th Amendment (which gave American women the right to vote), León started researching the pioneering feminist Susan B. Anthony. She said:

I read her biography, her statements. To me it was tremendous to see the inner

force that she had. Then I started looking for a title before starting the piece — not the way I always do it. [It reflected] the way that I imagined her as a person who did not take “no” for an answer. She kept pushing and pushing and moving forward, walking with firm steps until she got the whole thing done. That is precisely what *Stride* means. Something that is moving forward.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, three clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, marimba, tubular bells, bass drum, tom-toms, bongos, vibraphone, roto-toms, cymbals, sand blocks, crotales, small bass drum, djembe (a tuned drum originally from West Africa), timbales, tambourine, sizzle cymbal, harp, and strings.

In the Composer's Words

In a recent interview, Tania León considered how *Stride* reflects her engagement with American music:

For example, there is a section where you can hear the horns with the wa-wa plunger, because it reminds me of Louis Armstrong, getting that growl. It doesn't have to be indicative of any particular skin tone. It has to do with the American spirit.

When I discovered American music, Louis Armstrong actually was the first sound that struck me. When I came here, the only composers I knew anything about were Leonard Bernstein and George Gershwin. I didn't know anything else. The night I arrived at Kennedy [airport], I was picked up by a Cuban couple from the Bronx, who allowed me to stay on their sofa. I looked at the stairs outside of their building, and I started crying “Maria!” They were confused, and I explained that in Cuba I'd heard the song by Bernstein. I later worked with Bernstein, and until he died we were very close. But when I first arrived here I couldn't speak English . . . but I knew how to say “Maria.”

