

Classical KEEPING SCORE



by Heidi Waleson

CUBA LIVES: The music of Cuban composer/pianist **Ernesto Lecuona** (1895-1963), who was dubbed the "Cuban Gershwin," has been having something of a renaissance, fueled by a six-CD series from Swedish label Bis. The series compiles all the composer's piano music, played by **Thomas Tirino**.

Vol. 1, released in 1995, has sold 8,000 copies in the U.S., according to Qualiton, the label's U.S. distributor. Vol. 2, released last spring, is at 4,000 copies, and Qualiton has 1,000 orders for Vol. 3, which is expected in stores Sept. 20. The label says it is hoping for big things from Vol. 3, since it contains "Rapsodia Cubana," Lecuona's schmaltzy orchestral arrangement of the popular Cuban tunes that are apparently played at every Cuban confirmation party in southern Florida. (The piece is a sharp contrast to the composer's more virtuosic solo keyboard works.)

Lecuona got attention from NPR's "Performance Today" on his Aug. 7 centennial (celebrated on the anniversary of the composer's baptism), and Qualiton, aided by Lecuona's publisher, E.B. Marks, is planning some radio spots for New York, San Francisco, and Miami in the fall.

Another pianist has donned the Lecuona mantle: **Félix Spengler**, whose debut album "Two Spheres" came out Aug. 1 on New York label Piu Mosso (212-732-7424). The recording features works by **Manuel Samuel Robredo** and **Ignacio Cervantes Kawanagh**, as well as Lecuona, and is a toe-tapping journey through Cuban salon music that has the complexities of **Chopin** and **Rachmaninoff** tied to the dance rhythms and exotic sonorities of Cuba.

Spengler, born in Cuba, studied violin but switched to piano and, in 1980, at 20, fled Cuba during the Mariel boatlift. He studied at the Manhattan School of Music and at Juilliard in New York, taught in public schools in Harlem, N.Y., and is getting a doctorate of musical arts at Rutgers University.

Melvin Jahn, former classical manager of Tower Records in Berkeley, Calif., and now head of the classical division of Bayside Distribution, says that **Reza Jeddy**, Spengler's manager and the CD's executive producer, called him out of the blue and asked him to distribute the CD. "Once I heard it, I wanted it," Jahn says. "Now, the

stores in the Bay Area can't keep it in stock."

Jahn thinks the Spengler disc could be a phenomenon similar to that of Brazilian composer **Ernesto Nazareth**, who broke beyond the ethnic market a dozen years ago. "Two Spheres" is already getting heavy airplay in the Bay Area and in Florida (where it made page 1 of *The Miami Herald* in Spanish), and an hourlong program on the disc was featured on American and Northwest Airlines' classical in-flight audio channel in July and August.

NEW SOUNDS: Have you ever heard of a contemporary opera where the audience stands up and cheers when the composer takes his bow? That's what happened at the **Santa Fe Opera** this summer after the final performance of "Emmeline" by composer **Tobias Picker** and librettist **J.D. McClatchy**. "Emmeline," based on a novel by **Judith Rossner**, is a 19th-century American version of the Oedipus story from *Jocasta's* point of view (he doesn't kill his father, he just marries his mother). It boasts lovely writing for voice; a poetic libretto; streamlined, dramatic pacing; vivid orchestration; and a title role that any soprano would kill for (at Santa Fe it was **Patricia Racette**, and she was terrific). This work should make it to many more opera houses.

SHORT TAKES: "Hush" (Sony Classical), the 1992 collaboration between cellist **Yo-Yo Ma** and vocalist **Bobby McFerrin**, has been certified gold by the Record Industry Assn. of America. It is Ma's first gold album and McFerrin's first classical gold album... It's the silly season in New York: Publicist **Jay Hoffman** has circulated a press release announcing the first Earth tour by the **Martian Symphony Orchestra**, which is to appear at sites that include Lincoln Center, Suntory Hall in Tokyo, and several undisclosed sites in Nevada, with each program "scheduled to last 20 hours (a mere chronological blip to Martians, whose subscription concerts back home normally last decades)." The orchestra's principal cellist, %&@(), apparently came to New York for the **Kronos Quartet** performance of the six-hour **Morton Feldman** String Quartet No. 2, which was canceled. The Martian cellist told **John Rockwell**, the Lincoln Center Festival's director, that he should "let us do it instead, but he was inflexible. He has us scheduled for the festival in 2001 and was afraid that our chance for a feature in *The [New York] Times'* arts and leisure [section] would be ruined for 2001 if we played this year."



SPENGLER