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THREE WALTZES FROM MY CHILDHOOD

An ode to the musical “event markers” in life that linger in one’s mind as stark reminders of childhood...



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“Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent.”

— Victor Hugo

The days of my childhood were mostly spent in self-imposed solitude. Apart from sharing some play time with a few friends from school and even fewer from my blue-collar neighborhood, I was

generally alone. I occupied my time reading, doing homework or studying, playing Solitaire or other card games, listening to the radio or, in later years, watching TV.

In the 1940s and 50s, the airwaves of Havana, my hometown, were inundated by broadcasts from a multitude of radio stations. In my house, the radio was on most of the time, with some or all of us listening to a variety of programs: newscasts, variety shows, comedies, music, game shows, and soap operas. The five women who were part of my household (my mother, three aunts, and my paternal grandmother) religiously followed several soap operas which were broadcast following lunch, in the late afternoon, and after dinner.

There were also programs aimed at young people, mostly action and adventure serials. Those were run at the times children were home from school for lunch (which in Cuba ran from eleven-thirty am to one) and the early evening (six to seven thirty). With one or two exceptions, I never listened to the soap operas but was a devotee of action serials ranging from pseudo-science fiction (styled after Flash Gordon), adventure shows, and oaters. The heroes in most of these serials were adolescents or young men. I was particularly attracted to one that featured an indomitable boy named “Jacky el Pecos” (Freckle Face Jacky) and his brother Willy, who were always getting into all sorts of trouble from which they extricated themselves through cunning, brawn, luck, or a combination of all three.

Each show was ushered in by the playing of a musical theme, which remained constant, serial after serial, over the years. In many cases, the introductory music was a classical piece, excerpted or adapted to fit the nature of the show. I did not know, growing up, the names or authors of the compositions that were being played, but they represented a sort of musical clock that told me what time it was and what was in store for me in the immediate future. Three of the most important of these “event markers” have remained present in my mind to this day, as stark reminders of my childhood.

1 pm: Baron Ochs’ Song (*a waltz from Richard Strauss’ opera Der Rosenkavalier*)

The school bus dropped me at home about noon, so I could join the rest of the family in having lunch (a great Cuban custom that I discovered, with regret, to be missing in the United States). The bus returned to retrieve me shortly after one. As I walked out the door to wait for my transportation back to school, I would hear a very catchy tune that has remained one of my musical favorites — the self-absorbed waltz that Baron Ochs sings to himself in the second act of the opera *Der Rosenkavalier*. Despite its attractiveness, Baron Ochs’ waltz had unwelcome connotations for me. After sitting in school for three and a half hours in the morning, I was not in the mood for spending about the same time there in the afternoon, not to mention the boring bus trip home. School generally bored me and I thought I could make better use of the afternoon by reading or doing something else that gave me pleasure.

I was an obedient and dutiful boy, thus I never rebelled against the school’s demands on my time and never missed a day of class, but the *Rosenkavalier*’s waltz always elicited some regret in my heart. Now, that regret is compounded by the memory of all my gone relatives, for whom the early afternoon soaps were a welcome escape from their dull existence.

6:30 pm: Saturday Night Waltz (from Aaron Copland's ballet "Rodeo")

Right after dinner, I would run to the radio, for it was time for me to listen to my favorite adventure show, *Leonardo Moncada, El Titán de la Llanura* (Leonardo Moncada, the Titan of the Plains), a show that narrated the brave deeds of a trio of cowboy brothers (Leonardo, Machito and Miguelón Moncada) who spent their life fighting evil-doers, rescuing young ladies in distress, and galloping away into the endless plains of their country. The melody employed to usher each night's episode was a fast-tempo version of the beautiful Saturday Night Waltz section of Aaron Copland's ballet *Rodeo*. In the same manner that I dreaded listening to Baron Ochs' soliloquy, I loved the Copland waltz, because it sounded cheerful and hopeful, and was the harbinger of pleasures about to be experienced: an enjoyable story to listen to, an hour or two of playing or leisure reading to cap the day.

9 pm: La Valse (a ballet by Maurice Ravel)

Alas, as I was enjoying my free time, my relatives were glued to the radio, listening to the evening programs, which were capped by consecutive highly-rated soap operas. The last of those soaps, which aired from nine to nine-thirty or so, was announced by a very assertive and lush waltz melody: the start of Maurice Ravel's tone poem / ballet *La Valse*. As a child, I was unaware of the ending of *La Valse*, in which the music disintegrates into chaos, but without having listened to it I likened the music to an enticing overripe fruit, appealing but dangerous. It was the signal for me to do my homework and get ready for bed, so it always spoke to me of a completed step in a journey whose ultimate outcome was always in doubt.

As a youth, I never connected any of the waltzes with the others, or considered that they combined to paint a succinct portrait of my life. In retrospect, they show how well regulated, if not repressed, I was. It would be decades before I freed myself from living in three-quarter time.

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in paying anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts, including Across the Margin. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" is available on Amazon and other outlets