

# barbican

Sat 11 Nov 2017

Please note there will be no interval in this afternoon's concert

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## Chucho Valdés and Gonzalo Rubalcaba Part of EFG London Jazz Festival

**Jane Cornwell introduces a musical meeting between two greats of the Cuban piano tradition, and two old friends.**

They are the grand masters of Cuban Jazz, each man a force to be reckoned with: Chucho Valdés, a five-times Grammy, three times Latin Grammy-winning icon, the maestro who changed the shape of Latin Jazz with bands including Afro-Cuban phenomenon, Irakere. Gonzalo Rubalcaba, no slouch in the Grammy stakes himself, a prodigy who grew up listening to the music of Valdés before bursting onto the world Jazz scene in the '80s and carving a niche as a purveyor of music that reinvigorates traditional Cuban forms.

As pianists and composers in their own right, Valdés and Rubalcaba regularly sell out international concert halls from Carnegie to Sydney, Cardiff to Seattle. Together? Well, it simply doesn't get any better. This wish list duo, this inspired collaboration, is a musical conversation between two friends linked by opinions and references and an admiration for each other's shimmering virtuosity. Not to mention a love of risk-taking, a knack for musical one-liners and a desire to push boundaries as far as they can go.

First, Chucho Valdés, son of the late, wonderful Bebo Valdés, pianist and musical director of Havana's iconic Tropicana Club, accompanist of choice for Nat King Cole and bandleader of Orquesta Sabor de Cuba, all before leaving Cuba in 1960 and not recording again for another three decades. His son Chucho – or if you like, Jesus Valdés Rodríguez – had his eye on a musical future from the get-go, leading the likes of saxophonist Paquito D'Rivera, drummer Guillermo Barreto and trumpet player Arturo Sandoval in the all-star Orquesta Cubana de Musica Moderna as they backed singers such as Elena Burke and Omara Portuondo.

'I was 15 when I started playing the piano in my father's orchestra,' Valdés, 76, has said. 'I was Bebo's pianist and student at the same time. In my first albums there is a lot of influence from him. He always told me, "I am your dad but look for yourself", and eventually I found myself.'

Bebo's influence on Chucho's early albums is palpable: 'In the '50s my dad used bata drums in the big bands, who up until then were using ordinary percussion. My dad joined with a *batalero*, Trinidad Torregosa, who gave him the idea for the batanga rhythm. Then, with Irakere' – who to this day remain

one of Cuba's best known, most active Latin Jazz bands – 'I took up all of that with [percussionist] Oscar Valdés to make [the smash hit] 'Bacalao con Pan'. The rest is history.'

As indeed, is Valdés's solo career, which saw him sign to the illustrious US Jazz label Blue Note in the late 1990s and lead a series of ensembles including his current backing band Afro-Cuban Messengers to wild acclaim: 'I do what I can think of at each moment, in different situations and moods,' he says. 'It's unpredictable, but that's how it works.'

Rubalcaba also has music in his DNA: his grandfather, Jacobo, was a conductor, brass player and respected composer of dreamy danzons. His father Guillermo, a friend of Valdés's, was a pianist who specialized in danzons and cha-cha-chas, played with the ubiquitous Buena Vista Social Club and directed the orchestra Charanga Rubalcaba until his passing two years ago. The young Gonzalo, however, got into music through percussion, before taking up classical piano aged eight at school in Centro Havana, a district filled with rough, tough street people who liked to fight and party: 'A strange picture,' Rubalcaba has said, 'because I was living that reality but getting Mozart and Beethoven at school.'

Rubalcaba spent his evenings playing with such Cuban behemoths as Orquesta Aragon and Los Van Van and salsero Isaac Delgado; he fell for timba, with its chewy, percussion-friendly chords ('Timba represents the dynamic of Cuban society, the way people think, look at things, make love'). Via his dad's vinyl collection he fell, too, for Jazz: Charlie Parker, Art Tatum, Monk. He was 21 when he played with Dizzy Gillespie at a Jazz festival held at Havana's Hotel Nacional and 22 when he played in Havana with the American rhythm section for Charlie Haden, who helped introduce him to the

world via festivals at Montreal and Montreux. There was a contract with Blue Note, and global praise for his deft blending of traditions, breathtaking technique and dense improvisations.

In 1996 he relocated to the United States, where he worked in a series of all-star trio formats and further articulated an aesthetic that recalled the harmonics of Bill Evans, the spontaneity of Herbie Hancock, while always acknowledging his Cuban roots. His shining body of work (and attendant Grammys) is as much result of hard graft and curiosity as it is talent and imagination: 'You have to always stay fresh, always try something new, take risks,' says Rubalcaba, 54.

'A lot of my reference and influence comes from Jazz, but I am looking for something beyond that. You have to feel the need to say things your own way. There must be spirituality, instinct, conversation.'

So sit back in your seat – or forward, on its edge – as you prepare to experience music at its most profound. The Cuban piano tradition as interpreted by two greats possessed of respect, talent and daring, playing two pianos that – especially if you close your eyes – will very often sound like a single instrument.



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