

Chucho Valdés

Winner of six Grammy and three Latin Grammy Awards, the Cuban pianist, composer and arranger Chucho Valdés is the most influential figure in modern Afro-Cuban jazz. In a rich career spanning sixty years, Chucho has pushed boundaries in pursuit of new expressions in Afro-Cuban music. His influence in the genre is immeasurable, his work establishing the standard by which younger generations set out to create their own.

Chucho's musical education includes formal studies and countless nights on the best stages in Cuba as the pianist with his father, Bebo Valdés, and his orchestra Sabor de Cuba, and with the seminal Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna. Chucho is perhaps best known as the founder, pianist, and main composer and arranger of Irakere, a landmark ensemble in Cuban music. Chucho led Irakere for more than 30 years, but since 2005 he has focused on his personal career, highlighting his work as a pianist and leading small ensembles, like the Afro-Cuban Messengers, Jazz Batá, and his acclaimed Quartet.

Celebrating his 80th birthday in 2021, Chucho's technique and creative output are as prodigious as ever. He is a recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Latin Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences, has been inducted into the Latin Songwriters Hall of Fame, and received a DC Jazz Festival Lifetime Achievement Award, his name joining an illustrious list that includes Kenny Barron, James Moody, Ellis Marsalis, George Wein, and Dave Brubeck.

The creation

The great Cuban pianist and composer Chucho Valdés presents *La Creación, The Creation*, his new work for big band, Afro-Cuban percussion, and vocals. *La Creación* is a suite in four movements that explores the story of creation according to the Regla de Ocha, the Afro-Cuban religion known as Santería. It is also an extraordinary summation of an extraordinary career.

"This new work represents the accumulation of all my experiences and everything I've learned in music," says Valdés, who will celebrate his 80th birthday in October. "This is a moment of full maturity, personally and musically, and I feel prepared to do this work."

If Irakere indicated a turn in his musical quest, leaving large ensembles behind, *La Creación* represents a return to big-band sonorities – but "with the experience of the road travelled," says Valdés. "I felt I could return to this format now and with my own language, take it to a higher level than I had reached."

Thematically, in *La Creación*, Valdés delves into concerns he has explored in works such as *La Misa Negra*, an early milestone in his career, and *Canto a Dios*, a more recent composition in which he fused jazz with symphonic music.

The beliefs of the Catholic religion and the Regla de Ocha have coexisted in Cuba for centuries. Whether it was a survival strategy or a simple adaptation to a new context, the orishas, the African deities, assumed early on the identities of Catholic saints. "*Canto a Dios* looks at certain themes from the point of view of the Catholic faith," says Valdés. "*La Creación* focuses on Olodumare, the Creator, God in the Yoruba universe. It's the other part of my roots, of my family, and my history."

Musically, in his new work, Valdés uses a sonic palette that includes elements of *Santería* ritual music, African music, the blues, and what he describes as "an atmosphere in the style of Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew*."

"This work is very significant to me," Valdés concludes. "I think it's my masterpiece – so far."

This work was co-commissioned by Adrienne Arsht Center Trust, Inc., the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Symphony Center Presents Jazz – Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association, the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association – Gustavo Dudamel Artistic Director, and Cité de la musique – Philharmonie de Paris.