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MIGUEL ZENÓN

Yo Soy la Tradición

An ambitious concert-length work for string quartet and saxophone, drawing upon the rich cultural-folkloric traditions of Puerto Rico and expressed through the modernist lens of Zenón's compositions

**ALBUM TO BE RELEASED SEPTEMBER 21, 2018
ON MIEL MUSIC**

With his eleventh release as a leader and fourth for Miel Music, saxophonist and composer **Miguel Zenón** has produced a work of startling clarity, synthesizing and building upon Puerto Rican folkloric forms through his unmistakable, multilayered compositional approach.

Yo Soy la Tradición, commissioned by the David and Reva Logan Center for the Arts and the Hyde Park Jazz Festival, is a collection of eight works for alto saxophone and string quartet which feature Zenón and the Chicago-based, internationally renowned Spektral Quartet. These chamber works reach far beyond the formula of a horn backed by strings, with the Spektral Quartet taking a central role in both driving and navigating the intricate compositional forms that are a trademark of the saxophonist's music.

Zenón set out to compose a series of chamber pieces taking both creative inspiration and formal patterning from his native Puerto Rico's cultural, religious, and musical traditions. The results are thrilling, and defy neat categorization with their emergent contemporary sensibility: structural beauty paired with emotional urgency.

The traditions Zenón takes as his points of departure include some he has explored in depth before such as *Jibaro*, a major musical genre of rural Puerto Rico and the namesake of a groundbreaking album by Zenón in 2005. Other inspirations include traditions, both musical and not explicitly musical, that he had not studied in depth previously.

"My goal is to identify the elements that make each tradition unique," says Zenón. "If these elements are musical in nature, I'll extract them and use them as the main seed for a new piece of music—not trying to emulate the original, but using the original source as inspiration."

Another musical tradition informing *Yo Soy la Tradición* occurred as a result of Zenón's extensive preparation in string quartet writing. Although he has previously written music for string quartet on *Awake*, his fourth album released a decade ago, this new hour-long work led him to revisit works by the masters of the Western canon.

"I studied many chamber works from various periods," Zenón says, noting the collaborative aspect of working with Spektral as part of his compositional process. "As I was writing and revising, I was also able to integrate feedback from the members of the quartet, whom I would send sections and passages to."

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In one sense, *Yo Soy la Tradición* is a culmination of Zenón's study of the cultural traditions of Puerto Rico. For over a decade, his regular trips to the country and his ongoing field research has granted him uncommon insight into the artistic resources afforded by the culture of the Island—in his words, a “seemingly endless well of information and inspiration,” which is continually replenished by the families and communities who carry it forward as it evolves over generations.

The album begins with “**Rosario**,” whose title references *El Rosario Cantado*, a tradition related to the Holy Rosary of the Catholic Church. The ceremonial quality to this opening of the suite—variations on a theme framed in variously contrapuntal and contrasting episodes which move between the lyrical and the animated—echoes the format of traditional *rosarios*, settings of the Rosary to music typically reserved for funerals and religious occasions. This accompaniment is passed down by musicians and has developed striking formal qualities due to the functional nature and specific context of the music.

“It’s one of those things that’s very folkloric, but can be very complex,” says Zenón. “Some of those songs might have a bar of five beats followed by a bar of seven and a bar of three, because the composers and songwriters were trying to accommodate a lyric or a phrase within a specific harmonic sequence.”

“**Cadenas**,” a lively work that features the Spektral Quartet in expansive rhythmic layering, evokes the work of recent Minimalist composers while harkening to the origins of *las cadenas*, traditional Puerto Rican music that takes its name from a chain-like dance formation (*cadenas* means “chains”). With alternating passages of expressive verse statements and propulsive string interludes, “*Cadenas*” exemplifies Zenón’s uncanny ability to juxtapose rhythmic complexity and melodic directness in honor of this tradition with deep roots in Spanish and African music.

In “**Yumac**,” Zenón takes the listener on a suspenseful ride as the strings produce interwoven bursts of pizzicato while the composer improvises a delicate, virtuosic solo statement. Named after the town of Camuy (with the letters spelled backwards), where singer Germán Rosario originated this style in the mid-twentieth century, “Yumac” comes out of the *Jibaro* tradition in its structural organization, but its jagged harmonies and breathtaking unison passages for violin and saxophone are unmistakably Zenón’s.

“**Milagrosa**” begins with an unabashedly futuristic introduction, where nimble melodic shapes played by the strings filter through modern harmonies, before settling into a flowing feature for Zenón’s elegant, melodic playing. The inspiration for the work comes from the religious practice of *La Promesa*—making a promise to a Catholic deity in return for a favor; specifically, the title refers to a promise made to *La Virgen de La Milagrosa* (“The Miraculous Virgin”), a traditional song upon whose foundations Zenón crafted an entirely new and vital work. The ending is perhaps worth the price of admission for the breathless, extended soli passage with saxophone and the entire Spektral Quartet in lockstep—a tour de force of melodic invention that sets the stage for an unadorned statement of a folkloric melody that is frequently related to “*La Virgen de La Milagrosa*.”

Moving into an elegiac register, “**Viejo**” highlights Zenón’s mastery of traditional musical expression, conveying emotional impact through the tonal shifts between major and minor. In this pensive movement, the saxophone is incorporated more as an ensemble voice as the string quartet moves into the spotlight. The majestic and dignified melodies in “Viejo” are fitting as an allusion to *Aguinaldo Viejo*, a genre of *Jibaro* believed to be the tradition’s oldest example, with a harmonic cadence traced by some historians to medieval times.

Harmony also provides the organizing principle for “**Cadenza**,” a brooding exploration of two fundamental cadences found in Puerto Rican traditional music, *La Cadenza Jibara* (from the same *Aguinaldo Viejo* in the preceding movement), and *La Cadenza Andaluza*, which suggests tinges of Flamenco, with *Andaluza* referring

directly to Andalucía, Spain. The latter presents an opportunity that Zenón embraces with a clever, surprising coda of accented handclaps, which through aural sleight of hand slowly morphs back into a chorus of plucked strings before concluding.

The longest piece in the hour-long suite is “**Promesa,**” which presents an imaginative rendering written from the same inspiration as “*Milagrosa.*” In this case, it alludes to the most famous *promesa* of all: *La Promesa de Reyes*, in reference to the celebration of the Three Kings. Beginning with a haunting, accompanied statement in the cello, the work cycles through repetitions of varied melodic elements whose even, steady elaboration reveals the patience underlying Zenón’s approach—a cinematic sense of pacing that rewards the attentive listener.

Yo Soy la Tradición concludes with “**Villalbeño,**” named after a variant of *El Aguinaldo Jibaro* from the town of Villalba. With a self-assured sense of forward motion, the Spektral Quartet lays down a restrained but infectious groove over which Zenón holds forth; this builds until a sudden breakdown section, where a repeated figure gains momentum over shifting rhythmic subdivisions leading to the climactic ending.

In this momentous work, Zenón succeeds in finding common ground between various traditions—jazz, classical, and folk musics—while continuing to elevate, honor, and extend the cultural heritage of Puerto Rico as he has done over the course of his career. “Puerto Rican music is an integral part of who I am,” Zenón writes, “and my ultimate goal as an artist would be to synthesize and express everything it means to me.”

With *Yo Soy la Tradición*, Zenón has attained another milestone in his musical development, music that stands at both the intersection and forefront of the musical traditions that he has studied and now made his own.

PERSONNEL

Miguel Zenón, alto saxophone

Spektral Quartet: Clara Lyon, violin / Maeve Feinberg, violin / Doyle Armbrust, viola / Russell Rolen, cello

About Miguel Zenón

A multiple Grammy® nominee and Guggenheim and MacArthur Fellow, Zenón is one of a select group of musicians who have masterfully balanced and blended the often-contradictory poles of innovation and tradition. Widely considered one of the most groundbreaking and influential saxophonists of his generation, Zenón has also developed a unique voice as a composer and as a conceptualist, concentrating his efforts on perfecting a fine mix between Latin American folkloric music and jazz. Born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Zenón has recorded and toured with a wide variety of musicians including Charlie Haden, Fred Hersch, Kenny Werner, Bobby Hutcherson and Steve Coleman and is a founding member of the SFJAZZ Collective.

<http://www.miguelzenon.com/>

About Spektral Quartet

Spektral Quartet actively pursues a vivid conversation between exhilarating works of the traditional canon and those written this decade, this year, or this week. With its most recent album described by Gramophone as “highly-interactive, creative and collaborative...unlike anything its intended audience—or anyone else—has ever heard,” Spektral is known for creating seamless connections across centuries, drawing in the listener with charismatic deliveries, interactive concert formats, an up-close atmosphere, and bold, inquisitive programming.

<http://spektralquartet.com/about/>