

# About the Music.

by Ahmed Alom

This program is a musical journey through the cultural traditions of Latin America. Its concept is rooted in a supergroup of musicians from different parts of the world: Cuba, Venezuela, and Puerto Rico, among others. When curating this program, the guiding ideas were creativity, originality, connection, and unpredictability. Collaborating with Yuja — a true musical force of nature, rooted in classical music yet possessing a fascinating imagination and curiosity to expand and integrate other musical structures into her playing — the challenge is to find common ground between different musical worlds and put them together in genuine service of the music.

Latin music is built on improvisation as part of its identity. Spontaneity is a key element of this cultural language, and we thrive on structures that leave room for creative imagination. Every concert sounds different, and every piece will depart from what is written on the page. With Yuja, we approach structure, virtuosity, and musicality, but always within a free spirit that takes the music beyond notation.

The opening selections feature People of Earth's original music and arrangements, representative of its character. Each player is a compelling hybrid of performer, singer, composer, and arranger, carrying multiple roles and responsibilities in the show. Bernstein's **Mambo**, from the iconic *West Side Story*, is arranged here in

a way that pays homage to the mambo traditions of the 1940s and '50s, the era of Benny Moré and Dámaso Pérez Prado, among other legends. True to tradition, the arrangement weaves in related styles: son, guaracha, and cha-cha-chá, all present in this fresh, electric reimagining of the work.

The solo works performed by Yuja Wang draw from Cuban piano music by Ernesto Lecuona, one of the most prominent composers for the piano in Latin America. Lecuona's **La Comparsa** evokes a procession that culminates in the sounds of campanas (bells), voices, and driving rhythms, unifying traditions between Cuba and Spain. A compelling point of comparison is Albéniz's *El Corpus Christi en Sevilla*, another work inspired by religious procession; remarkably, both pieces share the same key of F-sharp minor.

**Sugar Rush** is an original experimental work, first conceived as part of my second album and written for a Latin jazz ensemble. In this new arrangement for the touring ensemble, it blends elements of Cuban music, baroque fugue, modern sonority, and electronic effects, an exploration of what contemporary Cuban music might sound and feel like.

**Displaced Etude**, one of my *Three Etudes for Piano*, is dedicated to Yuja Wang, who premiered it in 2025 at the New York Philharmonic in a piano recital featuring Tiler Peck. The étude draws inspiration from Cuban rumba

traditions and takes its structural cues from György Ligeti and Steve Reich.

The four-hands piano selections, which I arranged, explore Latin jazz and the musical influences of the 1970s and 80s, drawing from Pete Rodriguez, Camila Cabello, Nikolai Kapustin, and Dizzy Gillespie.

One of the most beloved works in Yuja's repertoire, Márquez's **Danzón No. 2**, takes its name from the "national genre of Cuba," though the tradition flourished most fully in the Veracruz region of Mexico, rising to international prominence during Mexico's Golden Age of Film. *Danzón* derives its structure directly from the classical rondo form, familiar from works by Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, and Chopin. In this arrangement, I seek a hybrid between Márquez's writing and the broader *danzón* tradition absorbed through oral history and figures such as Antonio María Romeu and Miguel Failde, who is credited with performing the first *danzón* in Matanzas on January 1st, 1879. The instrumentation is brought closer to the genre's origins: violin, timbal, güiro, claves, piano, and trumpet (the latter introduced through Cuban son and later modernized by Arsenio Rodríguez).

The program closes with a work that brings this entire vision to life. ***La Diáspora***, a newly commissioned piano concerto I have dedicated to Yuja Wang, distills all of the traditions explored throughout the evening into something freshly, unmistakably New York. The chamber nature of the concerto gives it the spirit of

a concerto grosso, in which every performer has pronounced moments of virtuosity and collaboration. Two recurring themes weave through the entire structure, lending it the coherence of a single-movement work. Throughout, the compositional language bridges classical music, jazz, and Latin American tradition, with every musical element tailored to each member of People of Earth. The piece calls for electronics, violin, trumpet, percussion, and piano, and traverses a wide range of styles: son montuno, bolero, rumba, cha-cha-chá, timba, and merengue, the last an energetic rhythm from the Dominican Republic. With Yuja Wang as soloist, the music breathes organically, embracing her virtuosity and musicality while foregrounding the collaborative spirit and human empathy at the heart of this project.

Any meaningful artistic process must be grounded not only in musical skill but in cultural curiosity, and it is that curiosity which makes projects like this one so alive, for the musicians and the audience alike. By forging connections between stylistic traditions that might seem worlds apart, we don't just create new artistic possibilities; we evolve, together, through art. We are thrilled to share this program with you. We hope you feel its energy, its joy, and its cultural resonance. This is a journey about music, empathy, and humanity, and we are thrilled to invite you to come along.