

manuel valera

PIANIST COMPOSER BANDLEADER



“It may be rare to hear a 23-year-old with the exploratory interests and tender touch of Valera, but it's an unalloyed pleasure to discover a young man so accomplished that his potential seems boundless. Pianist-composer Manuel Valera is, indeed, prime mover of this *Forma Nueva*.”

HOWARD MANDEL

*President, Jazz Journalists Association
Writer for Down Beat and Jazz Times*

INTRODUCTION Cuban pianist, bandleader, composer and arranger, Manuel Valera is in the forefront of contemporary modern jazz. He represents the next generation of great performers and composers.

His sound is fresh, inviting and evocative, and his goal is to forge innovative sounds that bring a vitality and newness to the idioms of jazz and Latin jazz. He is constantly workshopping musical ideas to develop new composition and arranging techniques that bring together Cuban, Puerto Rican, Brazilian and various jazz styles and forms.

CURRENT PROJECTS Valera's current projects include: a Cuban quartet with drummer Dafnis Prieto, saxophonist Felipe Lamoglia and bassist Charles Flores; and a trio with bassist James Genus and drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts performing music from the upcoming MaxJazz release *Currents*.

RECORDINGS In today's jazz scene, it is not easy for a new piano player to get noticed. In 2004, shortly after his 23rd birthday, Manuel Valera released his debut recording, *Forma Nueva*. It got noticed. JazzTimes writer Thomas Conrad, in his monthly column on piano recordings wrote, “What is impressive about *Forma Nueva* is not—Valera's command of the keyboard, which approaches Brad Mehldau-levels of completeness—it is rather the elegance with which he shapes his high-energy expressiveness into intricate, flowing musical wholes.”

Forma Nueva was such a mature work from a player so young that Manuel Valera seemed to have come out of nowhere. In fact, like so many interesting voices on the current jazz scene, he came out of Cuba. But his history is uncharacteristic, because he studied European music and classical saxophone at the Manuel Saumell Conservatory in Havana.

Indeed, what made *Forma Nueva* so fresh was its creative eclecticism. The metric sophistication and urgent energy of Hispanic music was present, in rhythms from Cuba and also from Venezuela and Puerto Rico and Brazil. But the rhythmic content was implicit rather than primary. Valera's compositions for trio and quartet, and his own piano work, showed he had internalized sources within the great jazz piano tradition (Bill Evans, Wynton Kelly, Oscar Peterson), and also revealed his reverence for and study of composers like Debussy and Ravel.

Forma Nueva created a buzz on the street. Valera became busy as a sideman with artists such as Brian Lynch, Dafnis Prieto, Yosvany Terry and John Benitez. But he was committed to pursuing a career as composer and bandleader and within the year he recorded two more albums: his second, *Historia* (Fresh Sounds New Talent 2005) and his

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“He leaves no doubt that he’s destined to play a role in the future of jazz. Valera shows a keen jazz vocabulary, a gift for creating grooves that invite stellar solo flights from his collaborators and the nerve to romance a melody when it suits him.”

PHILIP VAN VLECK
Billboard Magazine

third, *Melancolía* (MAVO 2006). Thomas Conrad wrote in *JazzTimes*, “*Melancolía* verifies that Manuel Valera’s 2004 recording debut, *Forma Nueva*, was what it seemed: the introduction of a major new talent.” Valera’s recordings continued to explore the trio and quartet formats, and continued to attract the best young players in New York. *Melancolía* also employed a string quartet on several tracks opening up new vistas of compositional colors and textures across the full range of Valera’s sources, from Rachmaninoff to Silvio Rodriguez and revealing a deepening interpretive sensitivity as a pianist.

Vientos is another step forward in Valera’s career as pianist, composer, and bandleader. It represents a new label affiliation; a new working quartet with Joel Frahm, James Genus and Ernesto Simpson, twelve original compositions, a new complementary woodwind quintet ensemble format, an infringement upon the barriers of category to create a new synthesis of jazz, Latin, and European classical musics.

Valera discovered his fascination for the “richness and sonority” of this instrumentation in woodwind sections within orchestral pieces by Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, and Shostakovich and looked at compositions written specifically for woodwind ensembles, like Elliott Carter’s “Eight Etudes And A Fantasy” for Wind Quartet and Darius Milhaud’s *La Cheminée du Roi René*.

Valera’s latest recording—*Currents* featuring James Genus on bass and Ernesto Simpson on drums—will be released on MaxJazz label in September 2009. The cd is a collection of originals and standards in a trio format.

BACKGROUND Valera is the son of saxophonist Manuel Valera (from the bandstands of Paquito D’Rivera, Chucho Valdes, Gonzalo Rubacaba and Tito Puente). Valera studied at The New School in Manhattan, and by the time he graduated he had started composing, studying under Bill Kirchner, Reggie Workman, George Garzone and Jane Ira Bloom.

Valera is a current member of the bands of Arturo Sandoval, Paquito D’ Rivera, Dafnis Prieto, Brian Lynch, Samuel Torres and John Benitez. Manuel won second place in the 2004 and 2006 Great American Jazz Competition. Manuel is a recipient of the 2005 and 2006 ASCAP Young Composers Award and a final nominee in the Up & Coming Musician of the Year category of the Jazz Journalists Association Awards. He recieved a commission for the 2007 Chamber Music America New Works Award.

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what they're saying

IN THE PRESS

The New York Times

"The blending of Latin music with jazz harmony and improvisation has produced more than a mere hybrid, as a survey of New York's younger players would reveal. Manuel Valera, a Cuban pianist in his mid-20's, illustrates that evolution handily: postbop and classical romanticism are as integral to his vocabulary as Latin folk forms, and they all find natural expression in his music.." By Nate Chinen

JAZZIZ

"His Forma Nueva heralds the arrival of an important latin jazz pianist." By Nat Chediak

"Valera is a surprisingly mature soloist, avoiding the kind of showy, rhythmically grounded style that has become the calling card of an older generation of cuban keyboard maestros. His solo work is precisely crafted and unhurried." By Mark Holston

JazzTimes

"What is impressive about *Forma Nueva* is not—Valera's command of the keyboard, which approaches Brad Mehldau-levels of completeness—it is rather the elegance with which he shapes his high-energy expressiveness into intricate, flowing musical wholes." By Thomas Conrad



"He is a deeply thematic player, often building longer lines from small motifs. But as much as *Forma Nueva* is a vehicle for his playing, it is also a showcase for his fine writing. Valera's personal incorporation of Cuban and other ethnic Latin styles into a contemporary post bop context assures him a distinguished place." By John Kelman

Billboard

"He leaves no doubt that he's destined to play a role in the future of jazz. Valera shows a keen jazz vocabulary, a gift for creating grooves that invite stellar solo flights from his collaborators and the nerve to romance a melody when it suits him." By Philip van Vleck

JazzTimes

"Valera's sophisticated compositions, and his deft, light touch with strings, stimulate consistently intriguing solos." By Thomas Conrad

DOWNBEAT

Vientos deserving of artistic praise... is a jazz outing with enlightened arranging and unorthodox instrumentation... and features superb soloing over the reinforced lushness of the ensemble. Valera's keyboard work can dazzle with its virtuosity. But his surprising subtlety and grace is most impressive. By Michael Point

allmusic

"This cd serves proof that Manuel Valera is a brilliant and potential great pianist." By Scott Yanow



"He is endowed with a profound talent and rich progressive jazz-latin ideas... and offers the portrait of an exceptional young artist emerging as a leader."

By Jesse Varela



"Here's a Cuban pianist who lives up to all the buzz..." By Jim Macnie

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bio: www.manuelvalera.com

inside vientos

FROM THE COMPOSER AND THE JAZZ CRITIC

NOTES FROM VALERA

The compositions on this record for the most part feature my jazz quartet plus a modified woodwind quintet. By modified, I mean that there is a bass clarinet instead of French horn. I felt that sonically the bass clarinet mixed with the ensemble with more ease than the French horn. Also, there were more compositional possibilities with the bassoon and bass clarinet together.

The idea for this project started out of my love for the woodwind section in the orchestra—especially in some of my favorite orchestral pieces by Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky and Shostakovich. As I did more research on woodwind quintets, I realized that there was not as vast a repertoire as say for string quartet. Therefore, there was a lot of trial and error involved, but once everything worked out, the richness and sonority of this ensemble is unmatched by any other ensemble of its size. In Spanish, the word *vientos* means winds. Not only is the record called "vientos" because of the obvious woodwinds, but also because the music has a flowing wind-like feel.

VIENTOS REVIEW

Valera is still young and still developing as an artist, and it would not be appropriate to describe his new album, *Vientos*, as any kind of culmination. But it is a breakthrough to a new level. There is an important new label affiliation (Anzic), an exciting new musical relationship (with saxophonist Joel Frahm), and a brand new means of expression (the woodwind quintet).

Valera says that he discovered his fascination for the "richness and sonority" of this instrumentation in woodwind sections within orchestral pieces by Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, and Shostakovich. He also looked at compositions written specifically for woodwind ensembles, like Elliott Carter's "Eight Etudes And A Fantasy" for Wind Quartet and Darius Milhaud's *La Cheminée du Roi*

René. The quintet that Valera uses on seven of the 12 tracks of *Vientos* is "modified," in that there is a bass clarinet instead of a French horn. The ensemble includes Anne Drummond (flute, alto flute), Anat Cohen (clarinet), Charles Pillow (bass clarinet, English horn), Aaron Heick (oboe, English horn), and Michael Rabinowitz (bassoon). Most of them are fully fluent jazz improvisers, but none of them solo on *Vientos*. Valera wanted the woodwinds to remain "true to the classical sound."

The remark is telling. In the early 1960's, there were several highly publicized but (by critical consensus) unsuccessful attempts to merge classical music and jazz into a "third stream." Now, nearly half a century later, young musicians of the world like Manuel Valera are achieving that elusive third (or fourth?) stream (without giving it the name) because their musical language draws naturally on the genres in which they were trained and on those they came to love. Such artists do not think in musical categories.

Valera is not wrong about the special richness of the sonorities available from a woodwind quintet. A piece like "A La Interperie" contains ambitious achievements across the board: an indelible melody developed in shifting patterns of shadow and light from the woodwinds; a piano solo in huge swirling spirals (enhanced by the woodwinds' direct reaction or subtle undertow); a soprano saxophone celebration from Joel Frahm that approaches ecstatic release but then curves back into form with the woodwinds' return. Throughout *Vientos*, Valera discovers continuous revelations with the woodwinds, in the inner parts and details, and in the varied parallel doublings and unisons. He also creatively integrates the ensemble with an improvising jazz quartet, with the woodwinds whispering chords behind the soloists, or tracing delicate counterlines. The final track on the album, and the shortest, and the most haunting, is "Vejéz." It has a poised, hovering majesty reminiscent of the Miles Davis/Gil Evans masterpiece, *Sketches*



Of Spain.

Vientos is a work in which solos are elements of an over-arching design. But those solos, when they come, are often extraordinary. Valera's piano playing is more complex and more lyrical than anything in his previous work, and in Frahm he has found the most powerful musical partner of his career to date. The tracks with the woodwinds will get the most attention, but the best of the quartet performances are important additions to Valera's body of work. "Danzón Para Lisa," written for Valera's wife on their first anniversary, is graceful and quietly fervent. "Elegía" has a simple melody so inevitable it should become a standard. It is for Michael Brecker, who died the day before it was recorded.

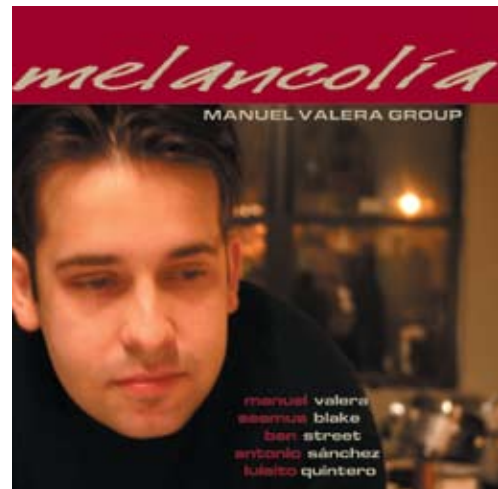
Thomas Conrad is a writer for JazzTimes.

the recordings

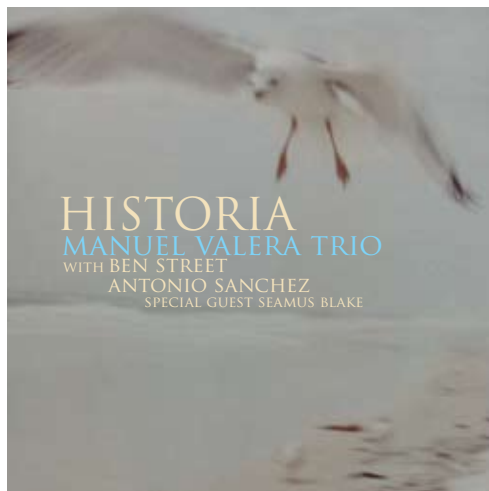
AS A BANDLEADER



FORMA NUEVA
(MAVO RECORDS 2004)
featuring SEAMUS BLAKE, JOHN PATITUCCI,
HORACIO "EL NEGRO" HERNANDEZ & BILL
STEWART



MELANCOLIA
(MAVO RECORDS 2006)
featuring SEAMUS BLAKE, BEN STREET,
ANTONIO SANCHEZ & LUISITO QUINTERO



HISTORIA
(FRESH SOUNDS 2005)
featuring SEAMUS BLAKE, BEN STREET
& ANTONIO SANCHEZ



VIENTOS (ANZIC RECORDS 2007)
featuring JOEL FRAHM, JAMES GENUS &
ERNESTO SIMPSON

notable quotables

WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT VALERA

“Manuel Valera is a remarkable young pianist and composer who is destined to do great things.”

BILL KIRCHNER

Jazz Historian and Saxophonist

“While there are many young pianists out there forging their way, Valera’s personal incorporation of Cuban and other ethnic Latin styles into a contemporary post bop context assures him a distinguished place. Forma Nueva is a strong first effort from an artist who will, no doubt, be heard from again.”

JOHN KELMAN

All About Jazz

“Pianist-composer Manuel Valera is, indeed, prime mover of this Forma Nueva. Valera unveils his intensely lyrical sensibility. His style and taste is informed by something innate -- a deceptively modest attitude toward musical insight and exactitude.”

HOWARD MANDEL

President, Jazz Journalists Association and Writer for Down Beat and Jazz Times

“On the horizon, pianist Manuel Valera is a serious jazz player who knows his Cuban roots... I’m very proud of these young lions. They know the roots of the music and are going to make great contributions to both Jazz and Latin music. I expect excellence, nothing less.”

BOBBY SANABRIA

*Grammy Award Nominee
Percussionist, Bandleader and
Master Class Educator*

“Manuel will emerge as an outstanding professional in his field. As a performer, as well as composer, he has become an artist who is the first call when maturity high level artistry and professional qualities are needed. The future artist’s community will be fortunate to have Manuel as a member.”

REGGIE WORKMAN

*Bassist for John Coltrane
and Art Blakey
New School Faculty*

“Manuel Valera is a flourishing young pianist-composer whose talent and creative drive is destined to make a unique mark in the bloodlines of the Afro-Cuban Jazz tradition, including the likes of Chucho Valdez and Gonzalo Rubalcaba. I have witnessed first-hand his ease and fluency in Brazilian styles as well, which is rare. Anyone who shares the bandstand with him will take note that they are working with a master in the making.”

RICHARD BOUKAS

*Malandro Recording Artist, New
School Jazz Program Faculty,
Director of Brazilian Jazz Ensemble
and Brazilian Music Chair/IAJE
Resource Team*