



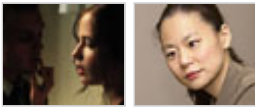
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Saturday, August 07, 2004



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## Personality Profile

By VIVIENNE KENRICK

In its straightforward Japanese transcription, "El Pez Dorado" uses the "kanji" characters for "fish" and "gold." "El Pez Dorado" is the name given to the most recently released CD of Eugenio Toussaint, a musician from Mexico. The CD includes piano pieces that have not been previously recorded, and which were inspired by Japanese music.

"I wonder why I am very attracted to Japanese culture," said the pianist-composer on his recent visit to Japan. He can remember the attraction beginning in his childhood. "When I was about 5, I loved a book of Japanese mythology, which had ukiyoe illustrations," he said. "At 7, I saw the animated movie 'Little Samurai.' The music from that film, probably played on the koto, really impacted me.



Eugenio Toussaint

Now I love Japanese music, especially Toru Takemitsu compositions, and will get some scores to take home with me."

Toussaint was born in Mexico City, a place of

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striking contrasts. Mythology has it that the original city was founded after an eagle landed on a cactus there. Although Toussaint belongs to a music-loving family, he was not encouraged at home to think of making a career in music. He said: "In Mexico there's a strange belief that music is not a profession to take. When I was about 8, I had a very bad piano teacher who didn't realize I had a good ear, and wanted me to learn everything by rote. I didn't want to go for lessons. Fortunately, in my life I had friends who were musical, and I could talk to them." As a pianist and composer, now one of Mexico's most prominent, Toussaint considers himself to be basically self-taught.

With his brothers, one a bass player and one a drummer, Toussaint began a jazz band. He called it Sacbe, and says it became one of the most influential bands in Mexican jazz history. The band lasted in Mexico and the U.S. for about 20 years.

Toussaint moved with his brothers to Los Angeles, where he took private lessons in orchestration. The band made recordings and built its reputation. Over a three-year period, Toussaint worked as musical conductor for popular artists, notably trumpet player Herb Alpert and singer Paul Anka. After having been away for 10 years, Toussaint returned to Mexico City and embarked on a new career in classical composition.

"My parents thought I was a little bit crazy," he said. "I had a weird career, playing the guitar for rock performances, taking up jazz, playing the piano, and then classical composing. My parents are very happy now."

He was helped by grants for composing given by the government. He reports that there are now official opportunities available in Mexico to help artists live by their art. Many Mexican painters, writers and filmmakers compete successfully in the world, and

Toussaint is encouraged by the reception given to his classical compositions. His works, performed by orchestras and groups within Mexico, also command audiences in the United States, South America and Europe. His recording "Gauguin" was nominated for the 2001 Latin Grammy Awards for the best classical recording of the year. It comprised orchestral arrangement featuring the English horn, harp and piano.

Sometimes Toussaint goes to the States to take additional master classes from eminent teachers. Married with three children, he has established his family in the mountains outside Mexico City. Difficulties with high altitude have never affected this native son. He plays tennis as often as he can.

Toussaint has been previously to Japan -- never, he says, for long enough. This time he came to attend a summit of musical academies, as he is a director of Boston-based Berkeley Network, "famous especially for jazz," he said. Commitments took him to the Kansai area, but while he was in Tokyo he gave a concert at the Embassy of Mexico. He said he was "really happy to be here in Japan, and glad to be able to play for Japanese people."

Wherever he goes, Toussaint says that he is "fascinated by wine." In Japan he is interested in visiting vineyards, and getting to know some of the Japanese products. He is knowledgeable about Mexican grapes and methods of winemaking. He said: "I gave a concert about six months ago, and gave a tasting at the same time. That was the ultimate."

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