

Gabriela Montero - 'You don't hear 80 per cent of what goes on in my country'

The classical pianist Gabriela Montero is one of Venezuela's most gifted musicians. But she uses her albums to rail against the regime. Jessica Duchen meets a troubled talent

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Seeing – and hearing – is believing. Even so, it can sometimes be difficult. The pianist Gabriela Montero, after giving a powerful performance of the Grieg Piano Concerto in the Classic FM Live concert at the Royal Albert Hall recently, took the presenter's microphone and explained to the audience that her encore would be improvised. It was, she suggested, a time-machine back to the era when improvisation was a standard art: commonplace, indeed expected, among performers.

The lead cellist duly volunteered a melody on which she was to extemporise; Montero was probably the only person in the hall who didn't recognise it as the signature tune of EastEnders. But after a few moments contemplating the jingle, she set about turning it into an improvised piece that sounded almost as if it could have been a chorale prelude by Bach transcribed by a full-blown 19th-century virtuoso. The EastEnders theme hovered, spiralled and trapezed through rich and colourful textures; it was a dazzling feat of pure inspiration. Throughout the hall, jaws dropped. This critic pinched herself, hard. I've seen many great performances, but nothing like this before.

Backstage, I try to avoid asking Montero how she does it, because she doesn't know the answer.

"It's almost as if I'm in a different state of consciousness when I improvise," she says. "It's not a formulaic or mental exercise at all. I find it quite spiritual. It's like water that gushes out; it's inevitable and always changeable. And it's not really something that I control. I find that very beautiful, because there are so many things we don't know about the brain and about creative energy."

Montero, 40, was born in Venezuela and started out as a child prodigy. Her talent, though, was different from most: not only did she have exceptional facility at the piano, but the ability to improvise came to her, she insists, completely naturally. "From the time I was a small child, at the very beginning of all my musical relationships, I just sat down at the piano and that's what I did: I improvised," she says.

It continued to evolve. I have some recordings from when I was seven to 10 years old – it's incredible because there are improvisations that sound like Prokofiev, Ginastera and Shostakovich, yet at that age I had never heard those composers. Now I've been listening back to them and feeling kind of shocked. Jung used to speak of the universal consciousness; I think there's something in that. When I improvise, I tap into some kind of musical universe that I'm very connected to. I'm like an open vessel. Where does it come from? I really don't know."

She made her concerto debut, aged eight, with the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra, conducted by José Antonio Abreu, the founder of Venezuela's now world-famous music-education scheme, El Sistema. Then she won a government scholarship to study in the US. It was an auspicious start, but after the family moved to Miami, where she studied with a Cuban teacher for 10 years, things started to go wrong.

"Those were 10 traumatic years," she declares. "At the end of that time, I gave up the piano completely for two and a half years. I just closed the lid. I was confident, I could play, but I was missing my reasons for it: I felt that these studies had had everything to do with ego and small-mindedness, nothing to do with making music, and I lost all desire to become a musician." It was only when she came to London to study at the Royal Academy of Music with the pianist Hamish Milne that she began to regain her sense of vocation. "Hamish is such a wonderful artist and person that I started to connect with the possibilities of how to find my own voice."

It still took the intervention of no less a piano luminary than Martha Argerich to persuade her to reveal her secret weapon. "I hid my improvisation from my performing life for a long time," she says, "but then Martha heard me improvise; and seeing that she was so upbeat about it and so overjoyed that I had this gift validated the whole thing for me. At that point I made the decision: I'm a classical artist and if the classical world shuns me because I improvise, then that's a risk I have to take, because I have to show myself exactly as I am."

Of course, the classical world took her to its heart all the faster. And Montero excels, too, in standard, non-improvised repertoire; she frequently programmes recitals with composers such as Schumann and Brahms in the first half and a second half consisting of her improvisations, often on themes suggested by the audience. Her latest CD, *Solatino*, pays tribute to her South American roots, with short pieces by five composers from Venezuela, Brazil and Cuba, plus the substantial Sonata No. 1

by the Argentinian composer Alberto Ginastera; the recording brims over with rhythm, seductive melody and sunshine.

Look closely at the album cover, though, and you might notice that the EMI logo, normally red, has turned blue. It's a political statement on Montero's part about her native land.

"Venezuela is going through a very difficult period politically and socially. I feel so connected to the country that I wanted to help to raise consciousness of it," she says. "You don't hear about 80 per cent of what's going on there. Since red represents communism and it's the colour of the Venezuelan government, I wanted to make a statement that said I don't want that kind of red. I want a red that's peaceful and that belongs to all of us. I want a red that's representative of all the different people in Venezuela, not the kind that represses, that controls, that creates hatred. This was my way of making a stand in support of good consequences, not the realities that we have now in Venezuela. There isn't much of a democracy left there."

Montero herself was not educated via El Sistema – "That is only for orchestral instruments" – but has maintained a close relationship with the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra and has nothing but praise for the system's musically and socially transformatory approach. But she adds: "That is one of the few things in Venezuela that is working."

Today Montero lives near Boston with her two daughters; she's a single mum and is grateful to her mother for helping out while she tours: "The best way I can sum it up is that it's not easy and I'm busy all the time," she says. Her performing career is still soaring upwards: she has scooped numerous awards and two Grammy nominations and performed at President Obama's inauguration. But also she is about to try her hand at composition, writing a work for piano and orchestra that she will tour in Europe with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. It's her first attempt, she says, "but I have a pretty good idea of how the piece will sound and I'm extremely excited about it." If her improvisations are anything to go by, it should be a treat indeed.

Gabriela Montero's latest CD 'Solatino' is out now on EMI.