

# Chicago Tribune

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## CJO puts Cuban jazz in spotlight

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By Howard Reich, Tribune arts critic

For nearly three decades, the Chicago Jazz Orchestra has brought brains and brawn to music of Duke Ellington, Count Basie and other big-band icons.

But who knew that this top-flight ensemble would sway so beautifully to an Afro-Cuban beat?

Taking on one of the more ambitious programs in its history, the CJO over the weekend collaborated with Cuban pianist Chuchito Valdes for an aptly titled "Rendezvous in Havana." Yet this was much more than just an affectionate glance at music with a Latin undercurrent.



On the contrary. CJO conductor Jeff Lindberg dared to address repertoire penned by three generations of the celebrated Valdes family: the aforementioned Chuchito; his father, the piano giant Chucho Valdes, and Chucho's father, Bebo Valdes.

Like the family itself, Sunday afternoon's concert at Thorne Auditorium spanned the decades, starting with the lush, pre-Castro romanticism of Bebo Valdes' scores. Listeners familiar with the "Buena Vista Social Club" film and recording would have recognized the ardent lyricism and refined sensibility of Bebo Valdes' works from the 1950s to the 1990s. Add to this the virtuoso showpieces of Chucho Valdes and the freewheeling piano improvisations of Chuchito Valdes, and concertgoers essentially were hearing a musical dynasty conversing with itself.

Yet the most striking aspect of the concert was not the majesty of the repertoire, which is well known, but the CJO's eloquence in an idiom it does not often explore.

No doubt the band benefited significantly from its collaboration with Chuchito Valdes' small group, which served as the rhythmic engine of the afternoon's performance. Because Valdes' percussionists teamed with CJO drummer George Fludas, there was no mistaking the Afro-Caribbean pulse of every work on the program.

And though Chuchito Valdes can be bombastic as a soloist (as he occasionally proved during this concert), for the most part he tamped down the hyperbole to focus on keeping his band locked in with Lindberg's CJO.

It worked. Whether dispatching a bolero or a cha cha cha, whether dipping into the Valdes family songbook or pushing beyond it, the CJO sounded as if it were born to play Afro-Cuban music. The soloists, too, outdid themselves, with trumpeter Tito Carrillo cultivating a gorgeous tone in Chucho Valdes' "Claudia" and alto saxophonist John Wojciechowski finding shades of blue in much of the Valdes songbook.

When the CJO plans its next recording, it should consider precisely this project--so long as Chuchito Valdes can be persuaded to rein in his keyboard ostentation for the greater good.