

# The Poetic Muse: Piano Compositions by Spanish Women

## Part 1 of a Two-Part Series

MARGARET LUCIA

My first significant introduction to Spanish women composers and their music came, surprisingly, in Cuba, at the Festival Internacional de Música Contemporánea de La Habana, October 29 to November 9, 2011.<sup>1</sup> The festival organizers invited me to perform music by Cuban women (Magaly Ruiz, María Álvarez Ríos, and Gisela Hernández Gonzalo) on one of the evening concerts. I spent the remainder of the week attending the other concerts and lectures, meeting Cuban musicologists, doing research at the National Music Library, and getting to know the participants—a truly international group.

I met Mercedes Zavala Girónes at an informal gathering, and we immediately found common ground. Although none of her extensive solo piano repertoire was performed at the festival, I heard two of her other works, a recording of *El hilo y la trama* (1999), for flute orchestra, and a live performance of *Bestiarium* (2006, revised, 2011), for soprano, mezzo soprano, and percussion. I found these works compelling: viscerally appealing, extremely well-crafted, and unique. I should add that *Bestiarium*, performed entirely from memory by the singers, was met with the only standing ovation during the festival. After the festival, I invited Zavala<sup>2</sup> to Shippensburg University (PA) for a week-long residency, and I asked her to direct a performance of *Bestiarium* at the university. This, in turn, led to my five-month residency in Madrid, in spring 2017, thanks to a Fulbright Senior Scholar Grant. During that time, I performed music by Zavala and other Spanish women (plus works by American women) on several concerts in Madrid and elsewhere in Spain, met with other composers, and conducted research. I am happy to say that I will return to Spain this coming spring on a sabbatical from Shippensburg to continue my research and performances.

### Music Sponsorship and Education in Spain

As is the situation nearly everywhere, women composers in Spain have difficulty gaining access to the most famous concert venues for performances of their work. For example, on July 4, 2017, when Sonia Megías and Eva Guillamón's children's cantata, *Somos Naturaleza* (We Are Na-

ture), was performed in Madrid's famous Royal Theater,<sup>3</sup> it was only the third that a work by a woman had been performed in that prestigious hall. In addition, while the Spanish government sponsors concerts and music education, composers are only able to apply for commissions from the government every few years. On the other hand, Spain has a vital and adventurous contemporary music scene. Contemporary music festivals are frequently held in all the city centers and conservatories.<sup>4</sup> Spain, a country about the same size as Texas, has sixty-one conservatories; the greater Madrid region has fourteen, encompassing music education at all levels. Each of these has a robust program in music composition and frequent concerts of music by students, faculty, and other professionals.

When I was in Madrid, I was especially pleased to learn about a series of concerts held in one of the most prominent venues in the center of Madrid, the Auditorio Caja de Música in Centro-Centro Cibeles. They sponsored a series of four concerts of music by women, with accompanying lectures on music by contemporary women entitled *Límites de la Identidad* (Identity Limits). The first of these concerts featured the music of Germaine Tailleferre ("Memory"); the remaining three, entitled "Conflict," "History," and "Body," were devoted entirely to music by living composers, many of whom were present. And the generous-sized auditorium was nearly full at every concert!

*Compositoras Españolas*, a 2008 publication by the Spanish government, lists the names of 199 women composers past and present.<sup>5</sup> But this catalog, already ten years old, is by no means complete, since it leaves out an entire younger generation of women. Nevertheless, the volume is invaluable; all the composers I met are included, along with their known works up to 2008. In this article, I will focus on the music of four remarkable composers: Mer-



Fig. 1. Margaret Lucia

cedes Zavala, Anna Bofill Levi, Consuelo Díez Fernández, and Marisa Manchado Torres. Both Zavala and Díez are currently professors at conservatories in Madrid. Two of the composers have developed strong ties to contemporary music practice in the United States. Díez earned a doctorate in composition from the Hartt School of Music, and Zavala's works have been featured in performances in New York City, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and California. Taken together, the music of these four composers reveals a broad range of styles, from chromatic, virtuosic romanticism to the use of varying degrees of tonality and atonality, pointillistic or impressionistic sounds, and extended techniques. Many Spanish composers also reveal deep connections to natural phenomena as well as finely nuanced interpretations in sound of a variety of poems.

### Mercedes Zavala Girónes

Mercedes Zavala Girónes (b. 1963) is the Head of Composition at the Teresa Berganza Conservatory in Madrid, where she has taught since 1990. She first studied piano, theory, and composition at the Madrid Conservatorio Superior and then in London with Malcolm Singer (a Guildhall School teacher and headmaster of Yehudi Menuhin School), who was a main figure in her development as a composer. She traveled to Senegal in 1996 to conduct research on African music, studying percussion with professor N'Diaye, and she earned additional degrees in philosophy and aesthetics. Since that time, she has taken a leading position among her colleagues in her activities as a composer and professor and in the preservation and promotion of music by women in Spain.

Since 2002, Zavala has been an active member of the Institute for Feminist Research at the Complutense University in Madrid and was president of the Asociación Mujeres en Música from 2007 to 2010. Her music has been performed at numerous festivals in Spain and at venues in Italy, Australia, New Zealand, England, Denmark, and the United States. Two of her recent solo piano compositions were performed at major events. *Sansueña* (Exile), written in 2016 for the commemoration of the death of Miguel Cervantes, was