

Music

Cellist receives US Ambassador's Award

Albert-G Storage

US Ambassador Molly Bordonaro recently awarded Puerto Rican cellist Emilio Colon with the US Ambassador's Award at the Meridein-Phoenicia.

The ambassador said the award is in line with diplomatic policy wherein serving ambassadors award an American citizen with this special token of appreciation as a result of distinguished cultural activity in countries where the US has an accredited diplomatic presence.

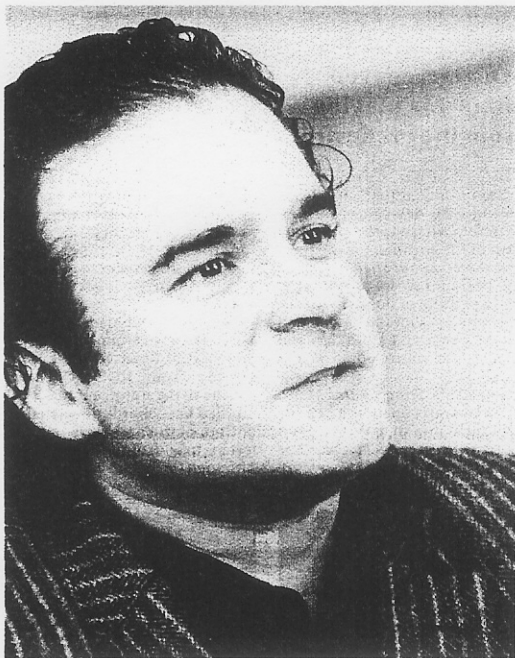
Cultural activities are a means of improving relations between the US and these countries. It helps create and improve mutual understanding, and perhaps this is hardly better achieved by means of music, an art which transcends national barriers and frontiers for it requires no other language than the music itself.

Also present was Japanese pianist Nariaki Sugiura, who the previous evening had accompanied Colon in a recital at the Manoel Theatre. It was, by all accounts, a highly successful performance. Among the works performed were some by Lecuona, Ginastera, Morel-Campos, Mislán, Miranda and Piazzolla. Besides, there were some compositions by Colon himself who also made the arrangements of the other composers' works.

The bubbly and energetic Colon has an immensely creative drive. Talking to the duo it was quite clear who is the more restless one with his typically unmistakably Latino temperament.

"Just as well too," quipped Sugiura "because we thus complement each other." At the same time when at a later stage, in reply to what extent eastern culture has affected him seeing his proximity with an oriental partner, Colon's simple answer was "serenity".

The two have known each other for almost 20 years but have performed regularly as a duo for about the last seven or eight. Even their



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family backgrounds are complementary and to an amazing extent. Colon's father was musical while his mother was not, Sugiura's parents were the opposite. Colon's brother tried hard at the piano without and Emilio's amused grimace said it all. Even as an infant Colon would only sleep if he heard his father practising; Sugiura has a musically-gifted pianist sister who would learn fast and barely practice while he worked hard and absorbed slower but eventually got there. She decided there was no money-making future with music while he decided to embrace his musical vocation come what may.

No wonder that the harmony and balance between the duo must have

four things going on in his mind at one and the same time. He teaches at Indiana University, studies, practices, arranges and wherever he goes, if there is an opportunity he gives master classes.

Among the pleasures of being in Malta was the master class he gave at the Manoel's Sala Isouard. Sleep does not come easily and he doesn't seem to mind.

If he retires with an unfinished project in mind the first thing he does on waking up is to carry on with that project. I also wondered when he could exercise the serenity he says the Orient taught him to achieve. Perhaps during a tornado, one hinted? Well, not even in such a situation one finds out.

"I am lucky to live in practically the only part of Indiana which is tornado-free. I am in a sort of hollow and everything goes above our heads," he says.

Colon likes his good food, likes cooking and preparing meals for friends.

"My house is often a sort of open house," he grins. He also likes gardening and wherever he goes he somehow feels at home, more so when he samples the typical fare a country has to offer in the way of food and drink.

He lauded some of the local Maltese wine he had during his brief stay and a penchant for good food and drink is also something he shares with Sugiura. It is also a good thing that both performers cope well with their performing engagements all over the world and all the stress frequent flying and change of hotels could bring in their wake.

Inevitably, I asked Colon what his preferred role is, whether that of chamber performer or with an orchestra. He replies: "As regards orchestras, I could only perform as a soloist because I can collaborate with the director and be in a position to mould and share in certain decisions.

As section leader one could have some say, but, as rank and file performer, I would find it impossible to cope.

"A few are meant to be leaders while most are followers, and that applies to every sphere in life. I happen to be a leader."

He says this with a sincere nonchalance and calm conviction without the slightest hint of arrogance. Naturally he enjoys playing in partnership as a duo performer, and of course as an absolutely solo performer. Needless to say the rich inner world of the J.S. Bach solo suites for cello he finds of the greatest captivation.

Colon plays the famous Jean Baptiste Vuillaume, a reconstruction of the famous Stradivarius cello once owned by Henri Duport.

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"Duport was once asked to perform for Napoleon. The emperor said that even he could try his hand at playing.

"What he forgot to do was that as the instrument in those days had no spike he put it firmly between his legs, and since he still had his spurs on, he damaged the instrument from both sides.

"Duport must have been extremely mortified but dared not protest. Later, Vuillaume patiently dismantled and restored the instrument hence the name by which it has since been known."

Come to think of it, every time he uses this instrument, he is touching history; perhaps Bonaparte's ghost was reminded of this at the Manoel, where he is known to have attended a performance during his brief stay here in 1798.

I hope this is not the last that Malta has seen of Colon and Sugiura.