



Gabriela Montero, piano, and Calidore String Quartet

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Canaima: A Quintet for Piano and Strings

In environmental news emanating from South America, the Brazilian rainforest tends to take the lion's share of headlines. Right-wing governments are perceived as the flouters of global ecology targets, while the left claims environmentalism as a core concern.

But Amazonia traverses Brazil's northern border into Venezuela, a country whose "leftist" dictatorship shows scant regard for the ecological concerns of progressive movements in the northern hemisphere. In short, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has presided over the criminal destruction of large tranches of the Canaima National Forrest - a World Heritage Site that includes the Angel Falls - and the catastrophic, chemical poisoning of its waterways. Many indigenous people, whom Chavismo swore to represent, have lost their lives and livelihoods in the savage pursuit and trading of Canaima's vast mineral wealth.

The first movement of 'Canaima; A Quintet for Piano and Strings' opens with a quotation from an indigenous Jivi song recorded by the Venezuelan explorer Charles Brewer-Carías in 1970. The song provides the leitmotif for an elegiac homage to the region and its indigenous people, as it winds its way, river-like, throughout the work.

A light, but ambiguous second movement Scherzo suggests both innocence - a people as-yet undisturbed by the outside world, untouched by dark forces - and the ritual, repetitive processes of cooperative work necessary for group survival.

The contemplative third movement evokes the timelessness of the majestic Tepui - house of the Gods to the indigenous Pemón people - a table-top mountain formation that dominates the geological character of the Gran Sabana, and Canaima National Park in particular. We are reminded of the sacred dominion and permanence of nature in one of the world's most ancient landscapes.

Human encroachment dominates the chaotic and violent fourth movement ostinato, as order is disrupted and brutalized. It serves as a clarion call for both acknowledgment and action in one of the planet's most bio-diverse regions, a remote region that has fallen victim to the politically-expedient prioritization of other, competing ecological and political crises.

– Gabriela Montero December 2023