

Fabiola Méndez Interview with Chris Vu (Celebrity Series of Boston)

October 6, 2022

(Chris) Tell me more about yourself, your music, and your background.

(Fabi) I was born in Caguas, Puerto Rico and I started playing the cuatro when I was 6 years old. The cuatro is the national instrument of Puerto Rico and I chose that instrument in particular because my family is all music nerds and all love music and play instruments. I remember growing up and listening to lots of folk music in Puerto Rico in my home, especially during Christmas time. Puerto Rican Is very popular during the holidays.

I was surrounded by all these folk traditions. My dad had a cuatro when I was little. He said I found one in the closet and started trying to mimic the musicians I would see. So he was like, hmmm, let's get you some cuatro lessons and see where this goes. I'm 26 now so it's basically been 20 years that I've been playing the cuatro.

In my case, the cuatro back then was not very popular at all. It wasn't even well-known among the younger audience. It's a Puerto Rican instrument but it's associated with the countryside. It happens in many cultures, where folk tradition is not necessarily mainstream, especially when it comes to music. It was thanks to my family and that background that I was able to appreciate this side of my identity, as a Puerto Rican. Nowadays it's different, there are now pop musicians who have cuatro in their albums and more people know about it on the island. But I remember when I was little and playing the cuatro, people would say "what's that guitar?". I remember thinking, you're from here and you don't know what this is?

(Chris) How was it like studying at Berklee? Were there any cuatro teachers?

(Fabi) No one played the cuatro at Berklee. What they did was they put me in the guitar department since it was the closest instrument. I wasn't the only unique instrument person. I had friends in the department who played ud or other types of lutes from Europe or Asia. I even had a friend who played the Venezuelan cuatro, which is completely different from the Puerto Rican cuatro. Venezuelan cuatro is more like a ukulele and strummed while the Puerto Rican cuatro is more like a guitar and melodic. I had to adapt everything in my studies, especially for juries and tests, because there are certain things the cuatro can't do. For example, it has 5 doubled strings instead of a guitar's 6 single strings. And I remember one of the juries required playing 3-octave scales in all 12 keys, but I can only play 4 of the scales because I don't have all the notes!

My studies at Berklee were awesome. My teachers taught me to play with a harmonic approach like a guitar player, which is very different from traditional cuatro which is mainly a melodic instrument. I started thinking about how many chords I can use instead of simple melodic lines.

(Chris) Although I'm new to cuatro music, I hear a genre bending aspect to your music according to my ears. Am I correct in assuming that?

(Fabi) When my musicians and I were playing at Arlington Street Church and at other concerts afterward, we were asking ourselves, how do we define our genre? It's not jazz and it's not traditional folk. We decided that it's probably contemporary folk. For now, that is the term I use when people ask, because they like to ask, even though I don't like to put music in these boxes. I take a lot of influence of

folk sounds and melodies. I'll use musical terms because you're [Chris Vu] a musician as well but I'll use modal interchange chords, playing with chords not in the key and borrowing from other modes. I have one song in the Lydian scale, which is a little brighter than a major key. I'm just looking for colors to be honest.

I am a harmony nerd. When I was at Berklee, I took a class called Reharmonization. The teacher said that you can play any chord under a melody note – you just define if the melody note is a chord tone or a tension. That changed my life. Now when I'm writing, I usually start with the melody and start playing with chords that fit over that melody note. I'm just looking for colors and this all comes from jazz.

(Chris) Do you do any rhythmic experimentation as well? I think I heard that as well.

(Fabi) I do! I have a couple tunes in 5 and I use polyrhythms, like if we're in duple meter, I use triple meter figures and vice versa. This comes from jazz, along with the improvisational aspect of my music. I'm glad you heard it!

(Chris) I was afraid of sounding ignorant and assuming these were aspects that were just part of Puerto Cuatro music

(Fabi) Puerto Rican folk music is just 1-4-5 chord progression. Very tonal and simple. Usually just 3 or 4 chords that repeat over and over again and the singer sings the melody.

(Chris) Tell me about how you became involved with Celebrity Series and how your experience has been so far?

(Fabi) My first concert with CSB was in 2018 and I was performing as a part of Veronica Robles Mariachi Band. But I had already met Robin through a mutual friend who worked at CSB and at Berklee named Shea Rose. She used to work in Neighborhood Arts with Robin and they were scouting for talent. We had lunch and had a nice chat. Then she saw me perform with Veronica and we started talking about my own concert. My debut with my trio was either in 2018 or 2019. I've been so grateful because this has opened so many doors for me and have given me the opportunity to perform in so many different spaces with different communities in Boston. I love the concept behind Neighborhood Arts because there are all these artists that live here and doing great music and there are all these amazing venues in different communities, so why not partner with different organizations and allow community members to enjoy a variety of genres. Looking at the lineup of the season with so many different artists, instruments, and genres. One of the biggest milestones for me this year is being featured in the Boston Globe, which I would have never imagined in my life, thanks to the Celebrity Series. Just me and my little cuatro!

(Chris) How has the audience reacted to your music?

(Fabi) Every performance with Celebrity Series just keeps getting better in terms of how we feel as a band and how the music is perceived. Especially because we're so honest on stage and I feel that people can feel that. And that this instrument is so new to people, it's different and fresh. I'm just enjoying the ride of this moment.

(Chris) Have you had any problems in your career as a Latinx artist? I interviewed Elsa from Agora Cultural Architects and she touched upon visa and immigration issues.

(Fabi) My experience with problems has been more related to gender and race. I'm lucky that Puerto Ricans are considered domestic residents, so being hired is much easier. It's tough being a woman in this industry, and more so being an instrumentalist. I sing but I'm an instrumentalist first. I have many experiences showing up at a gig and feeling not respected or not treated as an equal because I'm a woman, like can she play? This is not from the audience but from the musicians. There's a lot of machismo in Latin America. You walk into a jam session where people don't know you, and there's this look of "let's see if you can play" and this has happened to me many times. And I know this has to do with me being a woman because I have male friends who don't receive that same energy.

Thankfully it's not as often now as before, at least in Boston. Most places I perform now, I know at least 1 or 2 people.

The race issue almost feels like an advantage now. There are all these conversations and changes of structure people are pursuing. I feel like I'm getting more opportunities now than in the past, but I always question if this is because of my merits or if an organization wants you there to fill a checkmark.

(Chris) The theme of our fundraising letter is to amplify artistic voices. Have you felt seen and how can we do better? How can other organizations do better?

(Fabi) I feel super seen and supported by Celebrity Series, especially with this last concert, where you all were so eager to let me show my documentary at my concert. Especially because it is a risk. The topics the documentary presents are very difficult to swallow for some people. I was so touched that Robin and Israel was like "let's do it!". Most people that come to Celebrity Series are white and presenting this to that kind of audience has been...I feel grateful that Celebrity Series went all in on this. There was no request to censor anything. They were like, this is her piece of art and this is what she has to say and we're just going to facilitate that and provide a space for people to listen.

Other organizations need to be willing to take that risk like Celebrity Series. This is how we celebrate diversity and actually doing it. I feel like other organizations want to take small steps, one at a time, instead of Celebrity Series

The professionalism of Celebrity Series is also astounding. Very organized. Here's the stage plot, here's the schedule, boom, boom, boom.

Celebrity Series embraces risk in a genuine way. It does not feel like Celebrity Series is just checking off checkboxes, meeting some percentage of people of color. It feels like genuine appreciation for all Boston artists, regardless of who they are and how they identify.

(Chris) Is there anything you're looking forward to?

(Fabi) I am in the process of writing for my next album so that's exciting. I'm working with a fellowship from an organization called Whipper Will Arts (Will for Will Arts?). They work nationally and select artists who play folk music, not only Americana but folk music in all its expressions. I will be producing the album through them. I'm currently writing the music and rehearsing with my band mates, working on arrangements. Hopefully early next year, we go into the studio and record the album.

We're going out of town in mid-October to Chicago, Washington state, Maine, and a last concert in Puerto Rico, which will be very exciting.

(Chris) Not to put you on the spot but is there anything you want to say to our donors so they can help giving you and other artists opportunities!

(Fabi) GIVE US MONEY! What can I say. Thanks to these donors, we're able to have a city, where I was not born or raised in, that supports the arts. There are very few places I feel can say that. I know there are Boston artists that will disagree but coming from a background where there's zero institutional support for the arts, we have it here. And I know it's not possible without the donors. Thanks to people like you, like them, Boston artists feel like they can have a career and grow and want to stay here and keep achieving goals.