

KyG THEN AND NOW

'Contigo nada parece imposible.'

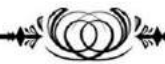
With you nothing seems impossible.

Compilation from the articles in our newsletters from September 2014 to the first half of 2015.

Unedited. By Karen D. Russel de Corrales.

Chapters

1. The story as it began with G: from province to capital.
2. G's Russian adventure
3. A passage to Aruba
4. Romance for the boy who was married to his piano
5. The crossing to the birthplace of the great European composers
6. The challenges of building an international artistic career



CHAPTER 1

The story as it began with G: from province to capital

By K, with some help from G of course

This is the mere skeleton of the story that I sincerely hope he will write himself, fully fleshed out, one day. I've certainly been begging him to write it. Don't worry about me, by the way; I've been in the process of writing my story since 1994...

So. What you will not find in the biography. In communist Cuba it is deemed that all children must get a chance to be whatever they are best equipped for, no matter their background. A group of teachers who presided over entrance exams in provincial capitals was also sent to every municipality, to make sure everyone was tested, down to the last country boy and - girl. Preference counted, so G's inclination towards the guitar was heard but swept aside with the argument that he had perfect hands for the piano.

And so it began, his training aimed at creating a concert pianist. In his hometown Guantánamo in the Southeastern province of Guantánamo, yes – where the Americans have their controversial Guantánamo bay camp. G entered into a path of double education, as of seven years of age: learning math, grammar and other regular subjects in the morning; music theory and practice in the afternoon, having to memorize pieces from the get-go, complete with posture and ear training and regular performances for the other kids, among other things. Double homework of course and not much time for play.



G proved an A-student both on and off the piano. And this was a prerequisite for the consecutive selection rounds. At 14, elementary level had to be followed by pre-university studies, for which there were three possible institutions. The one you aimed for was the elite National School of Art (ENA) in the capital. Those whose scores fell short were routed to one of the two provincial pre-university schools.

While his family would probably have preferred it if G had been appointed to Santiago, a two hour car drive away, everybody was of course thrilled when he was selected for Havana; at a two hour flying distance, almost a day by train. So, as of his 14th, G only saw his family during the summer and year-end holidays, assuming of course that he could get a ticket on the overflowing planes and trains home.

During the four years it took to become a licensed instrumentalist and piano instructor, G studied, practiced, ate, slept and washed his own clothes on campus. The practicing was often in the sweltering heat, in studying rooms with no airconditioning and often poor pianos. The food was not yet as bad as it would become post-Perestrojka. The instruction was the very best and the highest scores were still expected both in regular and music related subjects, particularly in relation to one's instrument.

G was taken under the wing of mentor César López and often spent time at the maestro's house, boasting 4 pianos since the maestro was loathe to part with the older specimens whenever he bought a new one. So the boy from the province was groomed into intellectuality by a man who also took him to museums, gave him books to read, discussed art, literature, politics and philosophy with him and so taught him much more than how to optimally interpret music.

The next rite of passage constituted a national competition that as the highest honor granted two places among all the students in G's year to complete one's university studies by way of a scholarship at the prestigious Tchaikovsky conservatory. Again, G would prove to come out on top and before he knew it, was on his way to Moscow.



CHAPTER 2

The continuing story of G's educational path: the Russian adventure

The triumphant win of a scholarship in the land of Lenin was followed by a less than glorious bout of hepatitis that kept G from embarking with the rest of the first-years by boat, as was custom. Instead – equipped with winter gear bought in a special store in Havana – he was shipped off with the seniors by airplane some time later, to finally join the other freshmen Cuban students of music, engineering, philosophy etc.

For over a year he occupied dorm room 142 on the 1st floor of a poorly heated building that housed showers and studying cells with pianos in the basement, two kitchens on each floor and a couple of sporting facilities in which G learned to play a mean game of ping pong. Because of the great number of students from all over the world, he was allotted a maximum of four hours piano-time a day to practice. If he wanted more he needed to take a tram to the conservatory, where they had better pianos anyway. Food could be bought there as well.

G remembers a couple of dishes he liked: borscht (a vegetable soup), shashlik (marinated lamb on skewers) and Smetana (dairy product similar to crème fraîche) that he liked to eat with grated carrots. If he cooked himself it would usually be a large number of scrambled eggs with cheese and ketchup. No caviar, unfortunately!

The usual weekly routine – besides daily piano study – consisted first and foremost of all manner of conservatory level classes including history of music, harmony, his own piano

class with maestro Mijaíl Leonidovich Meshlumov and the obligatory attendance of others' classes. Some classes were popular because of the fame of the teachers. Contact back and forth with the home front was reduced to a couple of letters a year. Leisure time – which was minimal – was sometimes filled with a video evening courtesy of one of the senior students and sometimes with a visit to the famous state Tretyakov art gallery.

When his student allowance ran out (it usually would), G and his mates would collect empty bottles in the dorm to sell in the nearest supermarket. A desire to attend certain concerts in the great concert hall of the conservatory (Bolshoi Hall) in absence of the economy to pay for a ticket called for similar creative measures. One way was to lose yourself in the concert hall back of the house while the premises were still open to the public during the day. Then you simply waited the four or five hours till the start of the concert to come out, hanging out in the wings to listen. The opportunity to listen to the greatest musicians of our time couldn't be missed!

As it happens, two of the occasions when G legitimately attended a concert proved to be very special. At Itzhak Perlman's historical violin masterclass G was captured by the camera as part of the audience! And another time he found himself standing smack next to Russian piano prodigy Evgeny Kissin, who was evidently lost in thought waiting for the concert hall doors to open, next to the female piano teacher who never left his side. A decade would pass before G finally got to appreciate the wunderkind live at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam.



In the meantime the Russian reformation movement dubbed Perestroika arrived, and the day that the most of the Cuban students were called into the Cuban embassy to be informed that the Cuban-Russian student arrangement would largely be discontinued. Only the most senior students would be allowed to graduate. Everyone else was called back to the homeland.



CHAPTER 3

From the Superior Institute of Art (ISA) to Aruba

Returning to Cuba meant returning to the warmth of G's country and people. It also paved the way for G's knowledge of Cuban visual art. The Superior Institute for Art [Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA)] had been established on the grounds of a luscious, former country

club. Besides the National School of Art [Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA)] it housed the ISA faculties of music, dance, performing and visual arts. G was most interested in the latter and consequently befriended several of his co-students there.

Eventhough the totality of the ambitious architectural project that had been envisioned for the schools of art was never fully realized, it held a great attraction for G. During the in total 13 years he spent on the ISA-ENA campus he roamed the place to his heart's content, describing its fascinating design as 'infinite architecture' since he was delighted to always make new discoveries.

Scenes on campus presented recurring typicalities. If you came across a fellow student dressed in jeans and sneakers in combination with the concert shirt, you knew that it was time for him to do the laundry. It was common for the artists and musicians to wear up all their clothes before resorting to household duties, high as the focus was on classes and study.

You did your own washing in the designated area in the dorm buildings, opposite the showers at the other end of the building from where the common room was with the TV and ping pong table. One slept with four to a room in bunk beds and if it got too hot or you couldn't stand the mosquitoes you dragged your mattress upstairs to catch a few hours of sleep on the roof.



Unfortunately, the Perestroika movement that had accelerated G's return to Cuba also plunged the country into a state of near chaos. There were continuous power failures and public transport was a mess. There was no timetable to speak of and the hot 'camel' and DAF buses overflowed so that G at one point – like others – climbed in through a window in desperation.

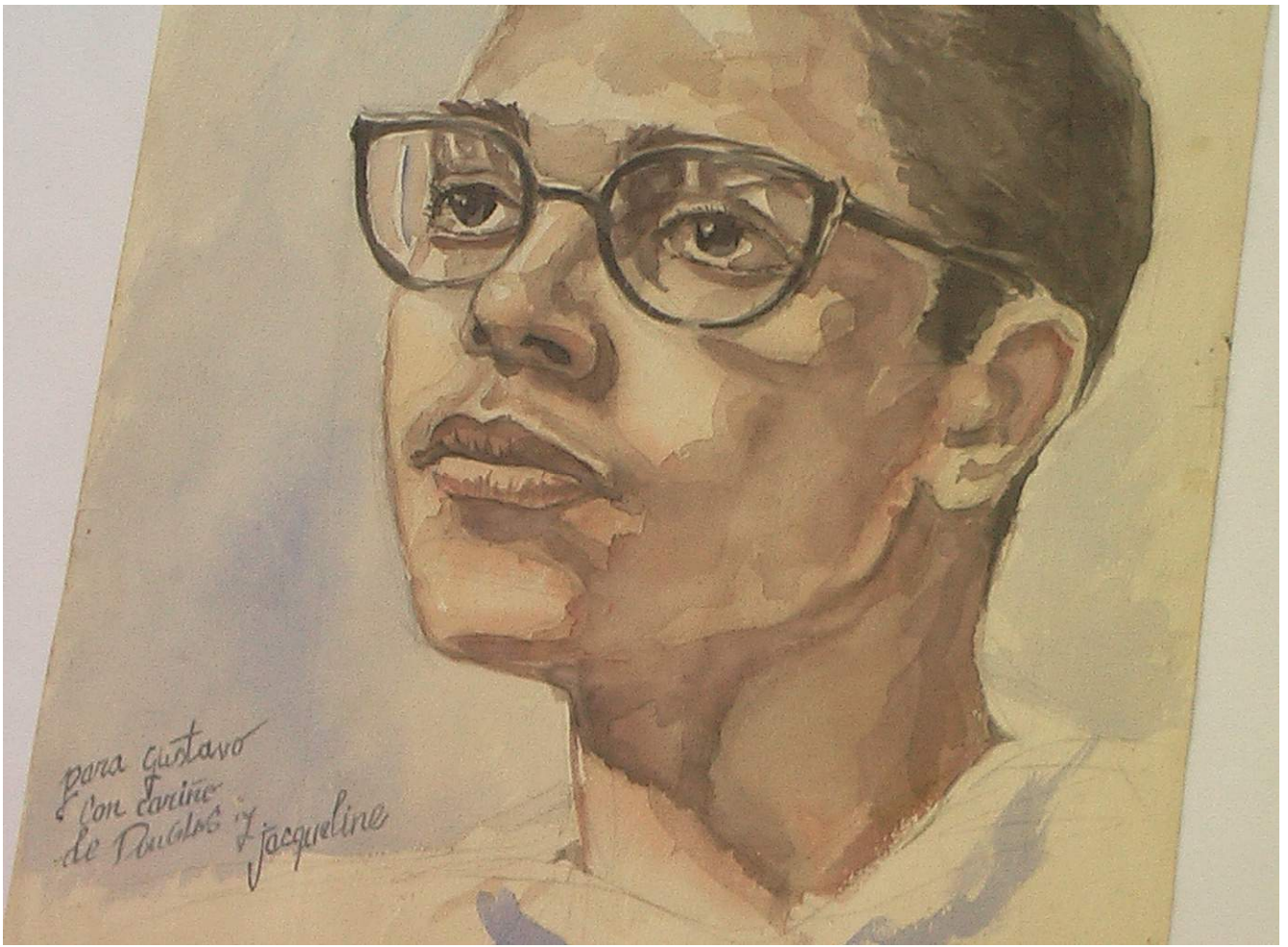
Food was an adventure, to put it mildly, scarce and poor. Objects or beings not belonging in your rice or beans you simply removed and kept eating to have something in your stomach. G and his mates have been known to eat a bunch of bananas, drain a bottle of honey or eat multiple scoops of ice cream (G 25 once!) at the popular Coppelia ice cream parlor to kill

their immense hunger. One time they experimented with tea they made from leaves picked randomly in the campus garden.

Still everyone managed to make it to all classes, study and participate in festivals and competitions. G in hindsight particularly marvels at the resilience of the dancers and wind instrumentalists. A handful of dedicated people including G initiated SODAMC, a UNESCO-sponsored Association for the Development of Musical Contemporary Art, which organized events twice a month featuring lectures, expositions, video demos and concerts. G participated in all except when he was in Colombia. After Russia, it was his first trip abroad which he thanked to Harold Gramatges' invitation to participate in several concerts, radio and TV performances and a CD recording in honor of the composer being awarded the important Tomás Luis de Victoria prize in 1997.

Harold Gramatges and Carlos Fariñas (G's former teachers) and Roberto Valera – all prominent figures in Cuban music history – were three of the people who became colleagues when the dean's office asked him to stay on as a conservatory teacher after graduating and approved him over two older contenders on the basis of a trial masterclass.

For a week during his student years and during all of his years as a professor G had to be creative and careful as to his lodging. While still a student, he and his roommates were evicted for breaching the rules of room hygiene. On this occasion a friend sneaked him into the electroacoustic studio late at night to slip out before everyone arrived early every morning. His prestigious position as a piano and chamber music teacher was curiously complemented by the fact that he slept on campus clandestinely for three years, often having to move, since he didn't earn enough to pay for his own or even shared accommodations off-campus.



Picture above: Painting of Gustavo Corrales Romero by Douglas Perez Castro, contemporary at the ISA

Enter Edwin Kock, the guitar teacher from Aruba who would take a great liking to him, noticing how G was one of those industrious few who studied until late at night in spite of the challenging circumstances, sometimes stepping into the practice room to listen in. This fateful samaritan, who was at the ISA for a course in choral conducting, on the basis of a couple of cassette recordings of G's playing, was able to get G invited by the Aruban Art Circle for a concert in January 1998.

After receiving the invitation letter and securing the dean's and rector's approval, permission had to be obtained from the Minister of Culture and the Minister of External Affairs before a passport could be handed out, along a long route of favors, signatures and

seals obtained through great pains, waiting in line, having to return because the involved individual was not present, across that city in which the time you could catch a bus was always a gamble, dealing with continuous incompetence and disorganization. It really wasn't any wonder that G finally got his second ever passport... three days after the date of the concert. Luckily it had been moved to the end of the month.

Seeing how things stood in Cuba and how much trouble it had taken to get out, when G left he left to stay out (like most who got the opportunity) and no one he left behind expected him to return. Imagine his dismay when – after a great concert enthusiastically received by the Arubans, at the end of a wonderful two week stay – Edwin told him that it was better to return, to give him a chance to arrange for documentation that would allow G to legally remain in Aruba. Eventhough his entire being protested, G left and arrived back in Cuba to the great surprise of friends and family, with lead in his shoes. Had he just given up his one chance to get out?



CHAPTER 4

The boy who was married to his piano finds love on Aruba



To say that G's return to Cuba from Aruba in January 1998 – after being welcomed so warmly there – was an anticlimax is an understatement. It was like being sent back to the darkness after having been in the light. In hindsight his patience would be tested for only about eight months, but he had no way of knowing this at the time. Doubt gnawed at first, after all the majority of people who got the chance to get out of Cuba stayed out, to pursue their career and a hopefully brighter future abroad. G had to dig deep to keep believing, while he observed others around him getting invitations from abroad and leaving for good.

His strength, as always, was related to the fateful instrument he'd made a commitment to at the age of seven. He practiced the piano as if his life depended on it. He trusted in his craft, in the promise of his link with the piano. He embraced opportunities for distraction like participating in the 13th edition of the International Festival for Contemporary Music in

Havana, like he'd done before. He trusted that a new chance would come. And it did. He was invited for another concert in Aruba in November 1998. Edwin Kock, the guitar teacher responsible for getting G invited before, had come through.

Edwin went through great lengths to accomplish this; pulling strings, appealing to the then Minister of Justice (the late Edgar Joaquin 'Watty' Vos), obtaining reference letters graciously given by two great artistic Aruban godfathers (the late Hubert O. 'Lio' Booi and Juan Chabaya 'Padú' Lampe) and creating a foundation (Movemento Pro-Arte Arubano) to be able to issue the concert invitation himself! After another frantic round of ploughing through the bureaucracy in Cuba (described in the previous chapter), G was finally free; arriving back in Aruba where Edwin awaited with the documents securing a legal residency.

More Samaritans stepped up to facilitate the next phase in G's life. Kenny and Nella Haakmeester provided a small apartment on their grounds. Doctor Emile Weststrate provided a piano, clothes, shoes and contacts that would later translate into employment opportunities. He was of course always welcome at Edwin and wife Mayra's home for a meal.

For income G acquired a couple of students which he received in a studio with piano and air conditioning, at Edwin's as well. He also played for the guests of the Casa del Mar Beach Resort during the weekend, thanks to an evening of networking courtesy of Margaret Hage.

Glorious privacy was his for the first time in his life after having spent more than a decade (1985-1998) in dorms. He relished his freedom to divide his time between hours of piano study and his other passion; making collages out of paper scraps. Gradually he began to

pay his own way, getting supplies at a small grocery store around the corner and Chinese food at a neighborhood restaurant. As 1999 progressed he at one point earned enough to begin saving and send much-needed money to his family in Guantánamo.

As for every immigrant, there were tough moments such as one day during the long walk to Casa del Mar under the burning sun, alone, when he suddenly missed his once active concert pianist schedule and wondered how long he'd have to keep up this relative anonymity. But then he was invited for a concert in Curaçao in April and Edwin organized another concert in Aruba in June. A young executive assistant with many artistic aspirations decided to attend this concert with her father. That's when the sun really broke through.

As luck had it, we were seated next to a remote family member of my father's, Bea Burne, who overheard us deliberating if I should approach this obviously great concert pianist for piano classes. She enthusiastically told us that she was one of G's students, that he was very easygoing and to just go ask him. After the concert we were surprised to see a good part of the audience migrate backstage; eager to congratulate the sympathetic, young Cuban pianist, to perhaps show that 'they also knew him'. My father and I were swept behind the curtains with the crowd a bit hesitantly, new at this game.

I looked great in the full bloom of my active Aruban lifestyle which included singing in Amado Rosina's band, running long distance and – until recently – kyokushinkai karate. Just a month after participating in my dance teacher Sonja Geervers' most recent dance production, I was in the best shape of my life and my tan showed off nicely against my bright yellow-orange dress. Luck intervened again as Loly Berkley – a family friend – snapped a picture the moment I faced G for the first time. He says he'd noticed me immediately, was thrilled when I walked up to him and – even though he had not been

planning on more students so as not to interfere with his own piano time – wholeheartedly said yes when I inquired after the possibility of classes.



The rest is history. In the collage featured with this account G captured the moment of our first kiss ‘on the bridge’ on the grounds of then Seaport now Renaissance Ocean Suites; the beachfront hotel and timeshare facility adjacent to the Renaissance Marketplace mall. We will always remember Aruba fondly as my birthplace, home to most of my (large) extended family and the setting for our courting period, which became ever more intense as we gradually discovered how much of a match we were to each other in personalities and interests.

Near the end of 1999 we'd had a most pleasurable dinner at the Hyatt Regency Resort & Casino, my first and most beloved employer where I'd worked for five years till 1997. I remember distinctly standing on the parking lot getting ready to get in the car and G telling me how he'd like to get back on stage; to have more performance opportunities. I felt something very powerful rise up inside of me. I knew I wanted to work towards getting the man I now loved what he desired. This is the moment KyG was born.



CHAPTER 5

The crossing to the birthplace of the great European composers

After that fateful moment on the Hyatt parking lot at the end of 1999 we took our time before deciding to make for Europe. First I left my position at MetaCorp for the Catering Sales Coordinator job at its subsidiary, then Seaport now Renaissance Conference Center. There we succeeded in organizing a rather ambitious first project; a benefit concert in favor of Cas pa Hubentud, a home for disadvantaged teens on Aruba, featuring a guest performer; Hungarian violinist Janos Sandor, at \$100 a seat. Gratitude is due to my former employers at MetaCorp and the Conference Center, Eduardo de Veer and Paul Gielen, as well as Linda Shapiro, for all of their support in realizing this concert.



Next we hooked up with my first piano teacher Connie Canfield for a concert and live recording at Trans World Radio in Bonaire. Back to Aruba for another concert in collaboration with Movemento Pro-Arte Arubano at the end of the year 2000. The decision to get married must have fallen somewhere around that time and wasn't the romantic affair many people envision. To us our being together by now seemed completely logical and natural; something that was meant to be, and marriage mainly an official, practical necessity to facilitate the immigration to The Netherlands for G.

First we moved in together in a small, cozy apartment at the Madurostraat. G often reminisces about the wonderful feeling of relief he experienced in discovering the harmony of our living together and that he could continue to be himself and practice all hours he was used to. I can remember a special night in which we stayed up to see a very late movie about the great dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, having a past midnight snack. Of course we both paid for our celebration of coziness with double desserts by putting on a good number of

extra pounds. While in the beginning I'd been able to persuade G - who was a bit unused to sports – to come jogging with me, after a while I stopped dancing and projects got in the way.

A big wedding celebration was out of the question, with my mother in The Netherlands and G's entire family in Cuba, an absence that caused G a bit of emotion during the administrative proceedings on February 14th, 2001 at city hall in Aruba. Edwin Kock was of course the logical witness for G, as was my mentor Dr. Rev. William (Bill) Buckley both to witness for me and to consecrate our wedding during a simple ceremony at sunrise on the hilltop on Aruba we'd selected for the occasion.

Before I left for The Netherlands ahead of G in September 2001, we succeeded in rounding off a first CD production for G dedicated to his mentor, the late César López. For this project also we received great support from many sides. To name a few. The wonderful Emile Kelkboom did the honors of recording. Invaluable Dr. Weststrate again came through by making his home and grand piano available when the Cas di Cultura grand piano proved horribly out of tune at the time (which constituted a small trauma) and of course the project might not have been realized without help from our friend René Kan.



The eight months we spent apart (the time it took for G's permit to be approved) were first marked by the occurrence of 9-11, shortly after my arrival in The Netherlands. I remember vividly stealing a moment with G by mobile phone while on the tram and G telling me what had happened, which I could only begin to appreciate when I beheld the twin towers on TV when I got home. In hindsight the rest of those long months are now a merciful blur.

To celebrate G's arrival I'd prepared an entire itinerary of sightseeing which of course included a visit to Amsterdam and several of the great museums and seeing the great storm surge barrier in the southwest. For G the arrival in Europe constituted the realization of a great dream. He in fact now lived near the birthplace of the great European composers he'd been playing since age seven and was even able to visit a couple of their resting places when we went to Vienna and Paris.

On the other hand; he was as new to Europe as Europe was new to him. Although many of his contemporaries had preceded him, they lived in different cities or moved in different

circles. The people who knew him for the great concert pianist that he is he'd left behind. However full of possibility Europe might seem, his European career would have to be built from scratch.



CHAPTER 6

The challenges of building an international artistic career

Our very much intertwined trajectory since G arrived in The Netherlands in May of 2002, shortly after my birthday, has been and still is marked by a sometimes invigorating, sometimes confusing and sometimes disappointing combo of triumphs, lessons and let-downs. Both G and I have had to pick ourselves up to be able to move forward more times than we can count. These bouts have been more extended and emotional for me, stuck in a management assistant's career for 20 years that had nothing to do with my artistry. G was of course already trained in dealing with hardship by Cuba.

Before we could even begin to develop G's career away from Cuba there were some priorities to attend to. First G had to go back to school! To eventually obtain his Dutch passport - which would enable him to travel internationally - a naturalization course had to be followed, which included learning the Dutch language.



FRESCO CD with label, as requested by some consignment holders, to facilitate sales.

At the very beginning we camped out at my mother's house in Leidschendam. But then we decided that it would be a good move for G to compete in the Gaudeamus competition, to hopefully be noticed and begin creating a network. And so it was. The 2003 Nijmegen concert can be directly linked to this decision. But it meant a busy time for both G and me because we now needed an apartment with piano short-term. So here I was working, finding a piano, researching rentals and then moving. And here G was, getting the apartment ready; dividing his time between painting, studying and the piano classes to his first students.

Then we of course continued on the long, winding path of learning mainly which doors were closed to us - including the 10 Dutch conservatories most of which never answered our letters - and the over 100 program proposals we sent worldwide, not to mention the endless time and money investment. Slowly, painstakingly we gathered information and began hacking a path of our very own away from the mainstream.

Along the way assorted factors required unrelenting insistence. G's website is a good example. The current edition, courtesy of VistaPrint, is a result of our third try, after twice attempting and failing to get it off the ground through so-called webmasters. Every time the new design (related to the facilities of the various providers) took roughly a full month and the own, periodical upkeep is intense; costing some 4 hours only a couple of days ago.

Of course there were also many rays of hope, inspirers and boosts between 2002 and 2015 (!) to keep us going. Here Cuban composer Keyla Orozco must be mentioned, the trailblazing initiator of projects giving G a stage in The Netherlands on no less than five occasions to date. Keyla is an example in her music as well as in the way she pushes ahead no matter what. And of course we had our own projects to hold on to, many of which were brought to bear under trying circumstances; we count 17 completed productions to date. They've lit up part of the way like shining beacons.



My job allowed for some perks: attending the concert by the Venezuelan Youth Orchestra at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam in 2010, in the presence of José Antonio Abreu, founding father of 'El Sistema', was directly related to my connections with the Erasmus

Prize organization, which collaborated on an event with The Hague Academic Coalition, where I worked in November 2009.

Memorable especially are the year 2011 and the first half of 2012. The former saw the production - in stages - of G's second CD FRESCO, the huge undertaking of the launch concert, the official establishment of the company including search for a home studio and bookkeeper, besides a student concert, next to a demanding full-time job and G's piano classes.

Several things that come to mind over these 13 years in The Netherlands. The 'false alarms'. In the beginning especially we were inclined to think that we were bound to find someone with leverage who could help further G's career. In the meantime pop, jazz and classical mainstream hypes flickered out of nothing and died out again, while we labored on. Businesses came and went in the shop on the corner in the space of a couple of months each, while after 15 years since our actual birth year, 2000, KyG is still here.

And then there's the emergence of a long list of creative ideas, several of which have been worked out and are only awaiting the investment money. The main lessons we have learned here are: If you want something done, do it yourself. To have patience. And that we like, in fact prefer, maintaining control over our projects.

We conclude this account of KyG - for now - asserting our confidence that we will be enabled to share much more of what we do with you; in word, music and imagery.

*

KyG SHORT

KyG stands for Karen and Gustavo in Spanish. We met in 1999, were married in 2001 and almost immediately began developing projects together. We became the V.O.F. (General Partnership) KyG Productions – a Chamber-of-Commerce-registered company – in 2011. Our roles within the company:

Karen D. Russel (artist name KDRdeCorrales) (Aruba)

Management, logistics, administration, content, creative design, translation, webmaster
Writer, composer, pianist, singer, visual artist and choreographer

Gustavo Corrales Romero (Cuba)

Concert pianist, writer, composer/musical arranger, visual artist
Co-management, content, creative design, translation

www.kdrdecorrales.com

www.gustavocorralesromero.net

