

ALBUM REVIEW

Isabel Dobarro's *Kaleidoscope*, Contemporary Piano Music by Female Composers from Around the World: Towards a Politics of Listening

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Spanish pianist Isabel Dobarro goes beyond merely performing a piano piece; she researches and comprehends it, then interprets it in ways that illuminate both its musical essence and political nuance. More relevant to the latter is the recognition that her *Kaleidoscope* album has brought to her performance and women composers, ranging from emerging to world-renowned. *Kaleidoscope*'s recent accolades include a Silver Medal at the European International Music Awards for Best Contemporary Classical Album and Third Prize at the 4th Petricor International Music Competition for Best Album. Still, the stunning recording's 2025 Latin Grammy Award for Best Classical Album marked the first time an album composed and performed solely by women had won in such a competitive category, outperforming prestigious competitors such as Gustavo Dudamel, Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Gabriela Ortiz. As such, Dobarro's artistry with the album's diverse female-scribed compositions also spearheads a political mission to vindicate women creators. "My piano performance career has sought to gain attention for these marvelous women's relevant contributions," asserts Dobarro. It is these contributions this review seeks to explore along two strands of *Kaleidoscope*'s mission—the first, its drawing of attention to a wealth of female composers while unearthing narratives that have remained marginal or even silenced within the classical genre; the second, its providing of a vessel for transnational collaborations that significantly renew the classical piano repertoire in times of war, political division, and ecological devastation. With *Kaleidoscope*, Dobarro achieves both.

Piece by piece, Dobarro curates a repertoire that blends musical, cultural, and geopolitical boundaries while unearthing piano textures beyond the regular piano recital. "A dialogue," as she puts it, "where diverse musical languages merge, synthesize and flourish together." Indeed, Dobarro's creative but precise and reverent performances of the album's diverse compositions deliver the promised musical dialogism across Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Oceania, the United States, Latin America, and the African Diaspora with much splendor and fidelity.

The album's sojourn begins and concludes in Europe. *Kaleidoscope*'s opening track, "Nocturne" by Bulgarian composer Dobrinka Tabakova, deploys a recurring motif to ground the piece before unfolding with quiet intensity, allowing subtle shifts in texture and color to yield its expressive impetus. The track's central section disrupts its contemplative initial surface with a tender left-hand melody that contrasts with the right hand's restless activity. This interplay compels dramatic tension to come. Dobarro navigates these contrasts precisely enough to shape the score's delicate textures while preserving its underlying emotional depth. Similarly, with more clever contrasts from the player's hands, Carme Rodríguez's "Alalá das

Paisaxes Verticais” evokes a more pastoral European aura, which makes perfect sense since Rodríguez and Dobarro both hail from Galicia. Together, the two Spanish women conjure geocultural authenticity laden with a tinge of nostalgia in their mutual tribute to the Galician coast. Drawing on the expressive contours of the traditional *alalá*, composer Rodríguez transforms traditional Galician elements into vividly programmatic piano textures. Dynamic contrasts, shifting formal gestures, and varied sonorities evoke the region’s rugged landscapes with striking immediacy. As the piece’s dedicatee, Dobarro brings an embodied experience to her performance that echoes particular cultural and sentimental values.

Latin America finds expression on *Kaleidoscope* a la Dobarro through the musical compositions of Gabriela Ortiz (Mexico), the late Claudia Montero (Argentina), and Tania León (Cuba). Ortiz’s contribution, “Estudio 3,” calls for a “Latin feel” while also drawing inspiration from the Mexican Revolution and Ligeti. This exemplifies her “ingenious merging of distinct sonic worlds,” as her official website describes her oeuvre’s aesthetic. She crafts an impassioned musical arc whose technical demands of syncopation while minding the sustain pedal are masterfully realized by Dobarro at her virtuosic height. Ortiz’s track honors Jesusa Palancares, a fictionalized character based upon activist Josefina Bórquez, whose experiences during and after the Mexican Revolution inspired Elena Poniatowska’s novel *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (*Until I See You, My Jesus*). Similar to the virtuosic textures Dobarro delivers across the keys, Gabriela Ortiz’s “Estudio 3” unearths (hi)stories of women’s resistance in both literature and history, as one can easily assume the track’s implied deeper inspiration by the novel feeds its profound musical honoring of ordinary women whose struggles, labor, and perspectives have often gone unrecognized despite proving crucial in historical revolutions. Beyond her contributions to *Kaleidoscope*, Ortiz has revolutionized the classical world as one of Mexico’s foremost composers, having received several Grammy Awards herself.

Argentina’s late Claudia Montero also won several Latin Grammy Awards. Her “Buenos Aires, Despierta y Sueña,” pays dreamlike homage to the Argentine capital.¹ Montero’s nostalgic theme unfolds above a gently arpeggiated accompaniment, creating an atmosphere of quiet reflection and longing in Isabel Dobarro’s hands. Her performance captures both the intimacy of Montero’s writing and the enduring appeal of her compositional voice, one that remains a defining presence in Latin American music.

Cuban-born Tania León’s track, “Tumbao,” fuses Afro-Cuban rhythmic vigor with contemporary overtones of striking precision. Here, Dobarro brings exceptional clarity and rhythmic command to León’s score, whose grounding in the venerable tumbao pattern across genres like rumba, salsa and Latin jazz pulses lively contrasts and sharp syncopations. León’s “discrete use of pedal” here aptly represents the piano’s percussive nature, especially the sound of its mallet attack, which, as performed by Dobarro and engineered by Javier Monteverde, sounds remarkably clear and rounded in this recording. The result casts a rhythmically driven performance that challenges the prevalent nineteenth-century Anglo-European tendency to associate musical expressiveness with sustained lyricism.

¹ To appreciate Isabel Dobarro’s performance of “Buenos Aires, Despierta y Sueña,” follow this link: https://youtu.be/aL_iPhRoe5c?si=2Zn_NoqohEMsneOj

“Tumbao” capably upends this notion by illustrating that attack, rhythm, and timbre can yield emotional journeys grounded in Afro-diasporic tenets.

Guggenheim Fellow and American Prize-winning composer Nkeiru Okoye contributes “Dusk,” a movement from her suite *African Sketches*, to *Kaleidoscope*. Drawing from her Nigerian heritage, Okoye transduces her childhood memories into compelling pianistics. The movement unfolds through meditative sonorities that exploit the piano’s full resonance, creating an atmosphere of remarkable depth and introspection. Dobarro approaches this piece with exceptional sensitivity, shaping its expansive textures with delicacy and control, her interpretation allowing “Dusk” to emerge as a self-reliant musical statement of remarkable expressivity even outside the full suite’s context. In doing so, Dobarro hints at Okoye’s contributions to the prosperous African piano literature, a lineage especially vibrant in Nigeria and Ghana, while underscoring a distinctive compositional voice. This year, Okoye released the album *When the Caged Bird Sings* for choir and orchestra, which intriguingly broadens this track’s audibility. Although musically contrasting with León’s “Tumbao,” Okoye’s composition similarly seems to appeal to tenets of African musical form, as Ghanaian musicologist Kofi Agawu has conceptualized in his 2016 book *The African Imagination in Music*, as processes of spontaneous invention, “accumulation,” and “cohabitation of segments or units of thematic materials.”

Kaleidoscope’s geographic reach extends to the Middle East through the work of Jordanian composer Suad Bushnaq, “Improvisation.” The piece draws from the Arabic *maqam* tradition to translate the form’s modal sensibilities into pianistic lyricism. Arpeggiated figures ebb and flow between both hands as they traverse the keyboard in gestures that evoke spontaneity and careful design. Bushnaq’s invitation to performers to freely shape her composition’s dynamics and tempo clearly incites pianist Dobarro’s imagination here, which rises to the challenge with refined artistry, employing delicate touch and bright fingerings to balance freedom and structure, revealing the expressive depth that has made Bushnaq one of the most compelling voices in contemporary classical and film music.

The program’s Japanese contribution showcases two distinct yet complementary compositional voices. In “Hana Wa Saku” (“Flowers Will Bloom”), Yoko Kanno transforms the collective trauma of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and subsequent tsunami into the touching lyricism and sentiments of hope implied by the title.² The interplay of lyrical and hymnal themes here unearths a spirit of renewal that Dobarro captures with sensitivity and warmth. By contrast, Karen Tanaka’s “Water Dance III” evokes the natural world, alternating ethereal arpeggiated textures that mirror water’s fluidity with a darker central section whose low register seems to probe the ocean’s hidden depths. Both Kanno and Tanaka hint at the breadth of contemporary Japanese piano music, offering works that are evocative and grounded in sonic reflections of humanity’s challenges when facing nature.

² Readers can appreciate Isabel Dobarro’s performance of “Hana Wa Saku” by following this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxn4rpwxEyl>

Also drawing inspiration from water, yet across Oceania, Carolyn Morris's "Blue Ocean" summons aquatic imagery while conjuring the composer's childhood soundscape: the Australian coast. With its vast seascapes, Morris captures them via sustained melodies set against arpeggios. Dobarro's remarkably clean articulations cast evolving textures as harmonious transformations embodying ocean waves and tides' serenity and dynamism.

Kaleidoscope rounds out its globally scoped musical sojourn by visiting the United States, as represented by tracks from two Pulitzer-awarded composers: Julia Wolfe and Caroline Shaw. Wolfe's "Earring" presents a study in rhythmic and textural complexity derived from deceptively simple material, whose technical challenges Dobarro exceeds with remarkable control. The track's persistent, samba-like, dissonant figure in the upper register unfolds independently of Wolfe's prescribed dreamlike motion below, creating a compelling tension between movement and stasis.

With her "Gustave Le Gray," the album's longest piece, Shaw brings a contrasting perspective that Dobarro exploits to fascinating effect. Through fragmentation and repetition, Shaw gradually reconstructs Chopin's *Mazurka, Op. 17, No. 4*, from scattered musical traces before deconstructing it into a succession of contrasting soundscapes reminiscent of the Romantic era. Here, the pianist sounds equally comfortable playing both contemporary and Romantic idioms. Together, Wolfe and Shaw, as interpreted by Isabel Dobarro, demonstrate the diversity of contemporary composition in the United States, balancing conceptual sophistication with intricate textures.

Words can only go so far in encapsulating the magnitude of *Kaleidoscope's* overall, global artistry as well as Dobarro's keen, just as artistic performance and choice of repertoires and composers, which resonate as deliberately political. She excels at curating and performing repertoires while unearthing histories of resistance to help reverse the historical neglect of women composers in the classical world. The album itself calls for more volumes or similar projects to be produced and released across different, even more diverse settings, perhaps by highlighting the Global South and its own women-led musical traditions, say, Yelli songs by Baka women near the Cameroon-Congo border, Isitweletwele walking songs in Maputaland, Bullerengue in Caribbean Colombia, or water drums in Cameroon and Venezuela. Highlighting even more diverse, centuries-long lineages and traditions of women composers who have created repertoires undeterred by Western patriarchy would shine a brighter light on the impact women have had on music performance and composition. *Kaleidoscope* goes a long way toward bringing women into that light.

Dr. Manuel Garcia-Orozco

As a music producer, composer, and ethnomusicologist, Dr. Manuel Garcia-Orozco has dedicated his career to producing musical documents that amplify cultures in resistance, under his label, Chaco World Music. Such efforts have garnered accolades, including the 2021 Latin Grammy Award for Best Folk Album for *Ancestras* (Petrona Martinez) and the 2018 Grammy Award for Best Recording

Package for *El Orisha de la Rosa* (Magin Diaz), as well as multiple Grammy nominations. Garcia-Orozco holds a PhD in Ethnomusicology from Columbia University, where he teaches core classes. His dissertation investigates bullerengue music as an aural practice, tradition, and social space through which cantadoras (Afro-descendant elderly women singers) construct and preserve knowledge, memory, and affect, despite multiple forms of oppression in Caribbean Colombia. He has authored two books in Spanish and the digital educational platform Bullerengue.com. Garcia-Orozco has presented his research at the Society for Ethnomusicology and various universities in Colombia and the USA. As a composer/musician, he has been featured in international venues, including Carnegie Hall, Cannes Film Festival, Lincoln Center, Blue Note, and Symphony Space. He is the recipient of the Colombian Ministry of Culture's Award for Music Research, The Latin Grammy Foundation's Music Research Grant, the ASCAP Foundation's Cy Coleman Award, and the Fulbright Research Abroad Grant.