After the 1959 Revolution Cuban composers Harold Gramatges, Juan Blanco, and Leo Brouwer remained in the island and held administrative and advising positions at prominent cultural institutions. These three composers promoted new, avant-garde, and experimental musics by contextualizing them within the reconfigured cultural framework of the revolution. This new framework allowed these composers to disseminate experimental music as long as it supported the revolution’s goals of shaping the hombre nuevo, the Communist New Man, and offered an alternative to the bourgeois, capitalist, imperialist, commercial culture the revolution opposed. Cuban composers’ support of experimental music carried aesthetic meaning in two intersecting ways: first, as part of a long tradition of leftist, vanguardista artists; and second, as part of the revolution’s cultural politics of enacting social change through culture.

While prevailing views of artistic production in socialist regimes are often built on Cold War narratives that connect socialism-communism and totalitarian regimes to artistic conservatism, the Cuban case reminds us of the close ties between avant-gardism and experimentalism and early leftist, communist movements. The much-discussed Socialist Realism of the Soviet Union was a betrayal of the rebellious spirit of the early revolutionary avant-gardism; once the Communist Party came to power, their policies on culture took a conservative turn that condemned techniques associated with the musical avant-garde as formalist and decadent. While Cuban artists did not completely escape state control and censorship, Cuba’s cultural, geographical, and temporal distance from Soviet socialist realism shielded them from the prohibitions imposed on Soviet artists during the 1930s and 40s. This did not mean that Cuban artists were not subjected to state control and censorship, but that the Cuban political leaders did so using criteria other than “formalist” or socialist realism. By 1959 several years had passed since Stalin’s death and Socialist Realism was becoming a thing of the past in the Soviet Union. Moreover, Cuban culture, geographically removed from the Soviet Union, bared the effects of decades of cultural exchanges between Cuba and the U.S., and continued to be shaped by its close cultural ties to their Latin American neighbors.

The rebellious nature of the work produced by the Cuban composers prior to the 1959 revolution challenged the existing norms of art and the traditional musical canon that was upheld by the cultural establishment; this rebellious spirit was at the heart of the revolutionary ideals that challenged the capitalist, hegemonic power wielded by the United States. The composers who stayed in Cuba after 1959 continued to compose and promote music that was more avant-garde and experimental than before the revolution. Encouraging the experience of avant-garde and experimental art in the everyday fulfilled the Cuban revolution’s goal of shaping a socially conscious citizen, because it broadened the access to all cultural forms of expression, instead of restricting access to such art to the intellectual elite. In the early years of the Cuban revolution, Brouwer, Gramatges, Blanco shared the ideals of the revolutionary leaders’—Alfredo Guevara and Fidel Castro—of broadening access to culture and using culture in the service of the revolution. Although the music championed by these Cuban composers may have challenged the
expectations of the traditional concert going audience, its political significance gained its creators the support of the Cuban revolutionary government.

This chapter opens with an overview of the aesthetic views held and circulated before the 1959 revolution by composers Juan Blanco and Harold Gramatges. Their pre-1959 writings and activities anticipate the cultural policies of the revolutionary government, revealing a strong connection between pre-1959 leftist intellectuals and the post-1959 revolutionary cultural agenda. This is followed by a discussion of Blanco and Leo Brouwer’s roles in promoting avant-garde and experimental music after 1959. Three compositions will serve as case studies: Brouwer’s music for the 1968 critically acclaimed film Lucía, his orchestral work from 1967-69 La tradición se rompe...pero cuesta trabajo, and Juan Blano’s 1963 electroacoustic work Estructuras.

The writings of Gramatges, Blanco, and Brouwer present a set of recurring and common concerns among Cuban composers: before 1959, Cuban composers’ struggled to reach audiences due to the established cultural elite’s preference and support of traditional and conventional music, ignoring contemporary music by Cuban and Latin American composers; after 1959, avant-garde music embodied the rebellious spirit of the Revolution and supported its ideology, composers gained access to the masses through government sponsored mass communication, and, according to the composers’ writings, post-1959 audiences were more open and less prejudiced against new music because it becomes part of their everyday lives thanks to the Revolution. In spite of the rupture in political and socio-economic systems brought by the Cuban revolution, Cuban composers continued to promote new music as their predecessors, and themselves, had done in decades prior. Cuban composers engagement with avant-garde and experimental compositional approaches fulfilled the Cuban revolution’s goals of shaping a socially conscious citizen, presented these composers as artistas comprometidos (artists committed to the new political ideology) who engaged with musical means of production prevalent in new music circles throughout the world, fulfilled the Revolution’s internationalist aims as well as Cuban composers’ aesthetic needs for experimentation, all while bringing avant-garde and experimental music to a larger section of the Cuban citizenry.