

**FLEYDO ENGLISH SCHOOL**

Story Material

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# The Midnight Orchestra

*A vibrant story set in Havana about a teenager who discovers her grandfather's hidden jazz recordings in a condemned theatre and fights to save Cuba's musical heritage.*

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**Level:** B1

**Skill:** Reading

**Duration:** ~45 min

**Age:** Teens (11-16)

**Topic:** Music

**Pages:** 14

## The Story

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### Chapter I— The Girl with— the Trumpet

The trumpet had been sitting on the shelf above Sofia Herrera's bed for as long as she could remember. It was old — a Conn Victor from the 1950s, brass worn to a warm gold by decades of hands and breath. It had belonged to her grandfather, Rafael Herrera, who had been, according to everyone who remembered him, one of the finest trumpet players in Havana. He had died before Sofia was born, but his presence filled the house like music fills a room: invisible, unavoidable, everywhere. Photographs of Rafael lined the hallway — on stage, in recording studios, laughing with other musicians in the smoky clubs of 1950s Havana. Her grandmother, Abuela Carmen, spoke of him daily.

Sofia was sixteen and lived in Centro Habana, in a crumbling colonial apartment building three blocks from the Malecon — the famous sea wall where all of Havana came to watch the sunset, fish, argue, flirt, and listen to the ocean. She was a good student, a better musician, and the youngest member of the Havana Youth **Orchestra**, where she played trumpet — Rafael's trumpet — with a tone that her teacher, Maestro Delgado, said was "terrifyingly mature for someone who still forgets to do her homework."

Havana was a city of music the way other cities were cities of traffic or commerce. Music leaked from every window, doorway, and street corner. Son, salsa, rumba, jazz, bolero, reggaeton — the **genres** layered on top of each other like the paint on Havana's buildings, each generation adding its own colour. At night, the clubs along Obispo Street filled with **rhythm**: the crack of claves, the rumble of congas, the bright call of trumpets cutting through the humid air. Music was not entertainment in Havana. It was oxygen.

Sofia loved all of it, but she loved jazz most — the freedom of it, the way musicians could **improvise**, creating something new in the moment, responding to each other like a conversation in sound. Rafael had been a jazz player — part of a generation of Cuban musicians who had blended American jazz with Afro-Cuban **rhythms** to create something entirely original. His music, Abuela Carmen said, was like "a bridge between two worlds." Sofia had never heard him play. But she had his trumpet, his photographs, and his name. And she was about to discover that he had left her something else.

### Chapter II— The Teatro Marti

The Teatro Marti stood on a side street in Old Havana, its colonial facade crumbling with the elegant dignity that only Havana's buildings could manage. Built in 1884, it had been one of the city's great performance **venues** — a place where orchestras, dancers, and singers had performed for audiences of a thousand. Rafael Herrera had played his first professional concert there in 1953. The theatre had been closed since 1998, its doors padlocked, its interior slowly surrendering to humidity, pigeons, and time.

Sofia discovered the sealed room by accident. She had been exploring the building's exterior — something she did regularly, drawn by an attachment she could not fully explain — when she noticed that a section of the upper balcony wall was different from the rest. The

plaster was newer. Behind it, she found a door. Behind the door, accessed by a narrow staircase thick with dust, was a room. And in the room, stacked on shelves along every wall, were boxes. Cardboard boxes, wooden crates, and leather cases, all labelled in faded ink with dates, names, and titles. Inside were reel-to-reel tape recordings, vinyl records, and handwritten musical **manuscripts** — hundreds of them. The **archive** of the Teatro Marti. And on the largest box, in handwriting Sofia recognised from the letters in Abuela Carmen's drawer: *R. Herrera — Original Scores and Recordings — 1953-1965*.

"Dios mio," Abuela Carmen whispered when Sofia told her. She sat in her rocking chair on the balcony, fanning herself slowly, her eyes distant. "He told me he had hidden them. When the theatre closed, he sealed them in a room upstairs. He said the music was safer in the building than anywhere else — that walls have better memory than people." She paused. "I thought they were lost. Sixty years I thought they were lost."

Sofia, with permission from the city's cultural office and help from Maestro Delgado, began cataloguing the **archive**. The scope was staggering: over three hundred recordings spanning four decades of Cuban music, including live performances, studio sessions, and **rehearsal** tapes. Many featured musicians who had become legends — and some who had been forgotten entirely. Rafael's personal collection included forty-seven original **compositions**, handwritten in ink on manuscript paper, with annotations in the margins: "More cowbell here," "Paco plays this section alone," "Slow down — let the melody breathe."

## Chapter III— The Threat

## Chapter IV— Playing Back

The discovery could not have come at a worse time. Two weeks after Sofia found the archive, the Havana city council announced that the Teatro Marti — along with three other historic buildings on the same block — had been approved for demolition. A joint venture with a Spanish hotel group planned to build a luxury resort on the site. The project promised jobs, tourism revenue, and "modern infrastructure." What it did not promise was any form of cultural **heritage** protection.

Sofia felt as if someone had punched her in the chest. The theatre where her grandfather had played his first concert. The building that had protected his music for sixty years. The walls that had "better memory than people." All of it scheduled for demolition in four months. "They cannot do this," she said to Maestro Delgado. "They can," he replied quietly. "They have the permits, the money, and the political connections. What we need is a reason for them to stop."

The reason came from the tapes themselves. Sofia borrowed a reel-to-reel player from the university's music department and began playing the recordings. The sound quality was remarkable — the old analogue equipment had captured the music with a warmth and presence that digital recordings often lacked. She heard her grandfather's trumpet for the first time — a sound so clear, so confident, so alive that she had to stop the tape and sit in silence for several minutes. It was like hearing a voice from beyond death. It was like meeting him.

She played the recordings for Don Ernesto Valdez — an eighty-four-year-old **percussion** player who had performed with Rafael in the 1960s and who still lived three streets from the theatre. Don Ernesto listened with his eyes closed, his fingers tapping rhythms on his knee. When the tape ended, he opened his eyes and said: "That is the sound of Cuba before the world forgot to listen. Those recordings are not just music. They are proof that we were here. That we mattered." He looked at Sofia. "What do you need me to do?"

## Chapter V— The Concert

Sofia organised a concert. Not in a modern hall, not in a tourist venue, but in the Teatro Marti itself — the crumbling, beautiful, condemned theatre where the music had been born. Maestro Delgado arranged the **rehearsals**. Don Ernesto recruited retired musicians from across Havana — men and women in their seventies and eighties who had played in the golden age and who arrived with instruments cases older than most buildings. Sofia's youth orchestra provided the young musicians. Together, they prepared a programme drawn entirely from Rafael's **manuscripts** — music that had not been performed in sixty years.

The concert took place on a Saturday night in March. The theatre was cleaned, lit with borrowed stage lights, and filled with four hundred people — musicians, neighbours, journalists, cultural officials, and tourists who had heard about the event through social media. Abuela Carmen sat in the front row in her best dress. The programme opened with Rafael's most famous **composition**, "Havana at Midnight," and from the first note — Sofia's trumpet, clear and golden, rising through the old theatre like a flame — the audience was silent. Then they were crying. Then they were dancing. The music did what music always does in Havana: it made the walls disappear.

Don Ernesto played the final piece — a slow, heartbreaking bolero that Rafael had written for Carmen in 1958. His hands shook on the bongos, but his **rhythm** was perfect. Abuela Carmen pressed her hands to her face and wept. When the last note faded, the theatre erupted. A standing ovation that lasted twelve minutes. The sound echoed off the walls — the same walls that had heard Rafael's trumpet sixty years ago — and Sofia thought: the building remembers.

The concert was filmed by a documentary crew and broadcast on Cuban national television. International music blogs covered it. A recording of "Havana at Midnight" was uploaded to YouTube and viewed two million times in a week. The hashtag #SaveTeatro trended across Latin America. The hotel developer, facing unexpected public opposition and international media scrutiny, agreed to "review" the project. The cultural ministry, suddenly aware that it was about to demolish a building containing one of Cuba's most significant musical **archives**, launched a formal heritage assessment.

## Chapter VI— Havana Sings

## Chapter VII— The Unfinished Song

Between the drama of the campaign, daily life in Havana continued with its usual irresistible energy. The Malecon at sunset was packed with families, couples, fishermen, and

musicians playing for tips. American vintage cars — Chevrolets, Buicks, Cadillacs from the 1950s, kept running through decades of ingenuity and improvised repairs — cruised the seafront boulevard in a slow parade of chrome and colour. Street vendors sold paper cones of roasted peanuts. The smell of coffee, tobacco, and salt water mingled in the air.

Sofia's neighbourhood, Centro Habana, was loud, crowded, and alive. Balconies overflowed with laundry and conversation. Domino games occupied every available corner. Music came from every direction — a son band practising in a courtyard, a teenager beatboxing on a doorstep, a woman singing to her baby on a balcony. Food was simple and shared: black beans and rice, fried plantain, *ropa vieja* — shredded beef slow-cooked with tomatoes and peppers. Sofia's mother, Mariel, cooked *arroz con pollo* every Sunday, and the neighbours came, and the table expanded, and nobody left hungry. "In Cuba," Abuela Carmen said, "the table is always bigger than it looks."

Among Rafael's manuscripts, Sofia found one that was incomplete. It was titled "La Cancion de la Luz" — The Song of Light — and it was dated 1965, the last year he performed at the Teatro Marti. The first two movements were complete: a jubilant opening full of Afro-Cuban **rhythms** and cascading trumpet lines, followed by a slow, reflective second movement built around a **melody** so beautiful it made Sofia's throat tighten. The third movement was sketched in pencil — fragments, ideas, arrows connecting phrases — but never finished. A note in the margin read: "I will finish this when I know how the story ends."

Sofia decided to finish it. She worked for three weeks, sitting at the kitchen table with Rafael's manuscript, her trumpet, and a pencil. She studied his style — his use of Cuban rhythms, his love of unexpected harmonies, his habit of leaving space in the music for musicians to **improvise**. She wrote a third movement that was hers and his at the same time — a conversation across sixty years, a granddaughter answering a grandfather's question. When she played the completed piece for Abuela Carmen, the old woman listened with her eyes closed and said, simply: "That is exactly how he would have ended it."

## Chapter VIII— The Theatre Lives

The heritage assessment took two months. Its conclusion was decisive: the Teatro Marti was classified as a Protected Cultural Monument. The demolition order was cancelled. The hotel project was relocated to a different site. An international **philanthropy** fund, combined with contributions from Cuban musicians worldwide, provided funding for the theatre's **renovation**. The work would take two years, but when complete, the Teatro Marti would reopen as a performance space and living **archive** — a place where Havana's musical past and present could coexist.

Rafael's recordings were professionally digitised and made available through the national music library. His **compositions** were published for the first time. "La Cancion de la Luz" — completed by Sofia — was performed at the reopening ceremony, with Sofia playing her grandfather's trumpet in the theatre where he had first played it. Abuela Carmen sat in the front row. Don Ernesto played bongos. The audience included musicians, officials, journalists, and four hundred ordinary Habaneros who had come to hear a dead man's music made alive by his granddaughter's hands.

"Music does not die," Don Ernesto said after the concert, holding Sofia's hand. "It waits. Sometimes it waits in a sealed room for sixty years. Sometimes it waits in a trumpet on a shelf. But it waits. And when someone is brave enough to play it, it comes back — as alive as the day it was born." Sofia looked around the restored theatre — the same walls, the same stage, but filled now with light and sound and people. She thought about Rafael, about the notes he had written in the margins of his scores, about the trumpet that had sat above her bed for sixteen years, waiting for her to be ready. His **legacy** was not just the music. It was the belief that music mattered — that a song could outlast a building, a government, a lifetime. That rhythm was stronger than concrete. That **melody** was the longest memory of all.

## Key Vocabulary

Term	Definition
<b>Orchestra</b>	A large group of musicians playing different instruments together
<b>Rhythm</b>	A strong regular repeated pattern of sounds or movements
<b>Melody</b>	A sequence of musical notes that form a recognisable tune
<b>Rehearsal</b>	A practice session for a performance or concert
<b>Improvise</b>	To create music, speech, or actions spontaneously without preparation
<b>Venue</b>	A place where an event or performance is held
<b>Restoration</b>	Returning something damaged or old to its original condition
<b>Archive</b>	A collection of historical records, documents, or recordings
<b>Heritage</b>	Cultural traditions, music, or objects valued by a community
<b>Acoustic</b>	Relating to sound, especially natural sound without electronic amplification
<b>Composition</b>	A piece of music that has been written by a composer
<b>Genre</b>	A category or style of music, literature, or art
<b>Percussion</b>	Musical instruments played by being struck, such as drums
<b>Manuscript</b>	A handwritten or original version of a piece of music or text
<b>Philanthropy</b>	Giving money or time to help others, especially through donations
<b>Renovation</b>	The process of improving a building by repairing and updating it
<b>Testimony</b>	A formal statement about personal experience or knowledge
<b>Repertoire</b>	The collection of pieces that a musician or group can perform
<b>Resilience</b>	The ability to recover from difficulties and keep going
<b>Legacy</b>	Something meaningful left behind for future generations

## Comprehension Quiz

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### 1. What did Sofia discover in the sealed room above the theatre?

- A) A collection of old costumes
- B) Her grandfather's hidden archive of original recordings and handwritten musical scores
- C) A stash of valuable paintings
- D) Old furniture from the colonial period

### 2. Who was Abuelo Rafael?

- A) A famous Cuban politician
- B) Sofia's grandfather, a legendary trumpet player who had performed at the Teatro Marti
- C) The owner of the theatre
- D) A music teacher at the university

### 3. Why was the Teatro Marti in danger?

- A) A hurricane had completely destroyed it
- B) The building was crumbling and the government planned to demolish it for a hotel development
- C) It had been sold to a foreign company
- D) Nobody remembered where it was

### 4. What made the recordings historically significant?

- A) They were made using modern digital technology
- B) They captured original performances by musicians from Cuba's golden age of music that existed nowhere else
- C) They were recordings of European classical music
- D) They were very short

### 5. How did Sofia use music to save the theatre?

- A) She sold the recordings to a foreign collector
- B) She organised a concert using her grandfather's scores, attracting media attention and public support
- C) She hired a lawyer to sue the government
- D) She wrote a letter to the president

### 6. What role did Don Ernesto play in the story?

- A) He was the main villain
- B) He was an elderly musician who had played with Rafael and helped Sofia understand the music
- C) He was a government official
- D) He was a tourist

### 7. Why was Cuban music described as a 'living heritage'?

- A) Because it was played by robots
- B) Because it was constantly evolving, passed from generation to generation, and part of everyday life
- C) Because it was only played in museums
- D) Because it never changed

### 8. What was the outcome of Sofia's campaign?

- A) The theatre was demolished anyway
- B) The theatre was designated as a protected cultural site and restored with international funding
- C) Sofia moved to another country
- D) The recordings were destroyed

**9. What did Sofia learn from completing her grandfather's unfinished composition?**

- A) That she had no musical talent
- B) That music connects generations and that finishing his work was a way of continuing their conversation
- C) That old music is not worth preserving
- D) That composing is easy

**10. What is the main message of the story?**

- A) That Cuban music is only for professional musicians
- B) That music, memory, and the places where culture is born are worth fighting to preserve
- C) That old buildings should always be replaced with new ones
- D) That young people cannot make a difference

## Answer Key

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#	Ans	Question
1	B	What did Sofia discover in the sealed room above the theatre?
2	B	Who was Abuelo Rafael?
3	B	Why was the Teatro Marti in danger?
4	B	What made the recordings historically significant?
5	B	How did Sofia use music to save the theatre?
6	B	What role did Don Ernesto play in the story?
7	B	Why was Cuban music described as a 'living heritage'?
8	B	What was the outcome of Sofia's campaign?
9	B	What did Sofia learn from completing her grandfather's unfinished composition?
10	B	What is the main message of the story?

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