

## Listening to the Gender Identity in Audio Visual Media: Latin American Women throughout *West Side Story* (1961)

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### Abstract

Art is inseparable from history because plastic and musical expressions are a part of societies. This circumstance has to do with the power of the arts to expand ideas and to create identities. Around this fact, this article tries to analyze the image of Latin American women through film music, with a special attention to the American film *West Side Story* (1961, Jerome Robbins, Robert Wise). In this movie music plays an important role to recreate different Latin American identities through characters as Maria (Natalie Wood) or Anita (Rita Moreno). The musical numbers in the film and the different musical styles associated to these two characters –with the dialogues and the image– can be understood as an audio-visual element to represent different women stereotypes.

**Key words:** Audiovisual Media, Film Music, Gender, Latin American Women, Sixties.

### 1. Introduction

Nowadays studies about audiovisual media have increased substantially, especially around the film industry. This is because of the recognition of audiovisual media as a cultural element of the contemporary society. In Christopher Small words: “In the twentieth century, however, the vision of the potential society gained strength and cogency through the forging of a new language, in poetry, in painting, music and drama as well as the new art of the film” (Small, 2011, p. 95). Therefore we can study a specific movie as well as an analysis of the formal elements (as literature, plastic art, music, choreography, etc.) but the artistic expressions can involve the use of complex symbols to communicate meaning and understanding, too. Besides, many of these symbols are rooted in a particular social and cultural context and therefore may have meanings.

In response to this situation, the objective of this paper is to demonstrate the relevance of film music and how music styles can be used to illustrate various gender stereotypes in *West Side Story* film. Thus, this text takes a new interdisciplinary semantic approach to the analysis of different identities of Latin American women from the union of music and image in the movie mentioned.

### 2. Music and Audiovisual Media as Contemporary Arts

In recent decades Musicology has started to pay attention to contemporary topics with the main goal to offer answers to cultural expressions of the modern society, as cinema (Olarie Martínez, 2005, 2009). We can consider that a film perfectly fulfills the idea of "Total Work of Art" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) already conceived from Richard Wagner in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century by integrating the most important performing arts, such as literature, architecture, scenery, recitation and music. Despite the importance of visual arts in cinema, film industry was never silent because music accompanied to the image even in the early projections of silent movies: there were big orchestras in important theaters and pianists in small rooms who played live music in a synchronic way to the images.

In a first moment musical discipline was introduced into the cinema to make the primitive and noisy cinematograph quieter; but quickly directors realized that musical element could help to the spectator to concentrate on the filmed story, besides to magnify the spirit of a movie:

“Most of us can recall instances in which film music tipped the balance, bringing out or amplifying the spirit of the drama. Music has the power to open the frame of reference to a story and to reveal its inner life in a way that could not have been as fully articulated in any other way. In an instant, music can deepen the effect of a scene or bring an aspect of the story into sharper focus.

It can have a telling effect on how the characters in the story come across –on how we perceive what they are feeling or thinking– and it can reveal or expand upon subjective aspects and values associated with places and ideas intrinsic to the drama. Further, music being a temporal art, an art that takes place in time (as does film), it can have an enormous impact on the pacing of events, moving things along when needed, dwelling on something that requires attention, accenting this or that instant or event to help bring out the various connections and divergent points of view” (Burt, 1994, p. 5).

Despite the initial introduction of music for technical reasons, suddenly musical sound was conceived as a fundamental structural and emotional element that could help the viewer to concentrate and engage in story created (Wierzbicki, 2009). As we say, the initial goal of introducing music into the film intended to mitigate the sound of cinematography and involve public to the film; but the musical sound can also determine a scene psychologically and dramatically. In this sense, we can consider that the inclusion of music in a film can add new semantic codes (Donnelly, 2001; Dickinson, 2003) when sound interrelates with other elements as dialogues, costumes or architecture. And, moreover, the musical element can contribute to recreate of a particular social image of the culture where a movie was born.

But this article is concerned with the understanding of music as a part of contemporary culture, specifically focused on the study of film music as a reflection of the circumstances of a human being group in a particular historical and social context, which in our case has to do with the status of Latin American women in the sixties musical film *West Side Story*. This approach is not a new procedure but has its origin in Alan Merriam (1912-1980) methodological approaches that conceive the study of music as a culture element in *Anthropology of Music* (1964). The main contribution of Merriam to the ethnomusicology discipline in this book is the consideration of music as an ethnicity piece, based on the fact that music is a part of human traditions and customs that interacts with other aspects of culture. Merriam says:

“Music is a product of man and has structure, but its structure cannot have an existence of its own divorced from the behavior which produces it. In order to understand why a music structure exists as it does, we must also understand how and why the behavior which produces it is as it is, and how and why the concepts which underlie that behavior are ordered in such a way as to produce the particularly desired form of organized sound” (Merriam, 1964, p. 7).

From this point of view, music can reproduce cultural aspects of a society. The Merriam model is based on an approach where sound, behavior and ideas are interrelated concepts in a specific context. Merriam believed that sound is the result of a human behavior that, in turn, is the result of the ideas shared by a social group. Therefore, the structure of a musical sound for Merriam is the result of a specific human behavior, so sound structures are the result of a conceptualization of music in which a group of people share a same semantic codes or "rules". Besides, we can consider that music transmits better the ideas than other arts because of his immaterial origin: “Of all the arts, music, probably because of its almost complete lack of explicit verbal or representation content, most clearly reveals the basic assumptions of a culture” (Small, 2006, p. 8).

Attending to all these ideas, in this paper we propose the study of film music as an art that reflects the contemporary society in a determinate context, in this case the Latin American women in the North American Society in the early sixties. In order to do this, we propose first a musicological analysis of film music in *West Side Story* and finally we focus on the study of soundtrack in union to other elements in the film, as dialogues and costumes, to extract ideas associated to Latin American female characters.

### ***3. West Side Story and the Musical Differences between North and Latin American***

*West Side Story* (1961) is an American musical film directed by Robert Wise (1914-2005) and Jerome Robbins (1918-1998). The movie was the winner in the 1961 Oscars Academic Awards: *West Side Story* was nominated for 11 Academic Awards and won 10 of them, including Best Film Editing, Best Directing, Best Picture, Best Sound and Best Original Score. The plot was inspired by William Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet*, but in the film the story is developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Besides, the family clans in the Shakespeare novel, Montagues and Capulets, are substituted by North Americans, called Jets, and Puerto-Ricans, under the Shark nickname. According to the argument, the movie explains the love story between Maria (Natalie Wood) and Tony (Richard Beymer), members of different clan whose relationship is difficult because of stereotypes, social conventions and racism of the American society in the 50’s and 60’s.

Film speaks about ethnic and social problems as corruption (Lankevich, 2002; Ellis, 2004), racism and the differences between men and women. In connection with aesthetic aspects, the movie is a true delight for the eye and ear thanks to the original music score composed by Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990), the lyrics by Stephen Sondheim (1930), the choreography by Jerome Robbins and the elaborate and coloring costumes and staging.

As *West Side Story* is a musical film, the original score has the same importance as the argument (Williams, 2001; Wells, 2011); moreover, music is an essential part of the plot. On the one hand, from a stylistic point of view the movie combines academic music based on symphonic style music –characteristic of classical American cinema– with a style closer to popular music.

The more academic style compositions in form and instrumentation live together with rhythms and popular musical shows, specially those developed by Puerto-Rican population; in this sense we can associate that two different styles with certain ideas and situations, as we will explain later. On the other hand, music score acts as a conductive thread throughout story, with the presence of this sound element in 89 of 152 total minutes of the film in 37 interventions corresponding to musical numbers and non-diegetic music inserted with the expressive predominant meaning. So, 58.55 % of the total duration of the movie presents music as a central element.

Moreover, as we have pointed out, the musical discipline is not included as a simple addition to the visual elements but is comprised as a cohesive art. This is confirmed by music that starts during the first seconds in the film accompanying the credits with “Prologue”, a musical theme based on the principal themes of the Soundtrack. Moreover, the musical numbers, composed of 13 false diegesis shows, share relevance with other nondiegetic blocks. Otherwise, the perfect insertion of musical element into the movie is evident, absolutely synchronous with respect to what is happening in the image.

From a stylistic view, as we have noted previously, one of the predominant musical styles into the film is the symphonic one, typical of American classic cinema emerged as a result of the work of a large number of composers who came from Europe to Hollywood attracted by the political stability of the U.S. and the economic advantages of the film industry. That is, in a first moment scores were composed by classical musicians (created works called «concert music») who were immersed in a world of huge artistic and financial possibilities as cinema. However, we can show a musical style confrontation in *West Side Story* between this symphonic classical musical styles and the reminiscent of Latin rhythms, a sound opposition presented parallel to the rivalry between Sharks and Jets. Bernstein was inspired by the social difficulties:

“During the 1950’s, Puerto Rican immigration was an important issue in America’s largest cities. It was an article in a Los Angeles paper that Laurents and Bernstein always claimed was the spur for setting the story among rival gangs of Puerto Ricans and native New Yorkers. Gang violence was a frightening reality at the time, and in 1950 a news report painted a grim picture of gang warfare in the Bronx” (Simeone, 2009, p. 4).

On the one hand, the symphonic style dominates the non-diegetic blocks, as well as the musical numbers with a lyrical and expressive melody focused on the love story between Maria and Tony. The musical numbers “Somewhere” or “Maria” show these features. On the other hand, the most popular contemporary style appears into musical scenes pertaining to national identity through North American structures, related to Jets, versus the Latin rhythm reminiscences, as “America”, typical of Latin American sound and related to Sharks. Leonard Bernstein, the composer, recreated these national identities thanks to the music and the lyrics by Sondheim that speaks about confidence in a better future around illusions of minorities to integrate into the land of opportunity.

In any case, music illustrates the social differences in the U.S. and racism that Native Americans professed to those who did not have the same place of origin or skin color. That fight identity is also shown by the choreography of the two band members: dance uses steps choreographed of their own ethnic groups. This social distinction is presented early into the film, during the mambo dance on the scene where Maria and Tony were known, the “Dance at the Gym”. In that musical show Jets interpret a twist and swing dance movements, a typically American music, in front of flamenco and Latin rhythm aesthetic dance steps interpreted by Puerto Ricans, referring to their Spanish roots. Also dancing, as a physical element, can also be understood as a sign of union between Tony and Maria and choreography also serve as an excuse to physical contact between lovers (figure 1).

Also the lyrics of the songs are illustrative of the differences between Sharks and Jets. The most representative musical number about confrontation bands is “America”.

The text is a symbol of contradiction that Latin American population suffer when they go to the U.S: first they have hopeful and illusions to join a new society as the American but then they realize the difficulty of integration for immigrant people in a city with high levels of racism as New York in the 50's. "America" present a formal rhythm structure inspired by Latin rhythms such as Guajira or Petenera with combination of 6/8 (binary measure) and 4/4 (triple measure) time signature, with a rate of Mexican Huapango form (figure 2).

So music can be study as a cultural element because in this case identity and differences between these two social groups are shown by the beat and the rhythm of the songs. In his sense sound and beat reflect the diversity of American society in the 50's and 60's, composed by the North American native people and the immigrants. But the difficult of integration in the U.S. from different ethnic groups is illustrated in the *West Side Story* music score throughout the lyrics. "America" confirms these two feelings: the positive thoughts about the American dream in the land of the opportunity in the face of the troubles of integration and social harmony.

Having said that, *West Side Story* illustrates –thanks to the dialogues, the music and the choreography– the troubles of coexist between Jets and Sharks and discrimination against woman, in general, and in particular against Porto-Rican females. But Latin American women don't present a homogeneous image but the various principal characters show different personalities. And music associated to each female character could emphasize these differences. Attending to this point of view, we focus below on the musical numbers and sequences which women are the center of attention in the story and where several physiologies are illustrated through musical elements or step dances.

#### **4. Film Music and Female Stereotypes in West Side Story**

The variety of Latin American stereotypes of women in *West Side Story* is represented by two female characters as Maria (Natalie Wood) and Anita (Rita Moreno). Both are Puerto Rican friends and work in a sewing workshop, but each one represents a female opposite ideals to other in the musical numbers where they starring. On the one hand, Maria is sweet, dreamer and romantic and she sings unforgettable musical numbers with Tony, proving that love has no borders in "Somewhere" or "Tonight". The lyrics show her dreams and optimistic thoughts about a common future with Tony. For Maria, love is able to break down social and ethnic borders. That is shown in the lyrics contained in the extract below (Figure 3).

Maria and Tony love scenes are filled with optimism and hope: they think that a life together is possible thanks to the love; music style and lyrics underscore these feelings. Musical interventions around the character of Maria present a symphonic musical style with melody accompaniment texture by string instruments in "Somewhere" (Figure 4): the female sings the main melody and the orchestra go with her. The expressive function is the most frequently in Maria musical scenes, as the identical sense than arias in the Operas. At the same time, optimism and joy are around other Maria musical number shows as "I feel pretty", where the coquetry of Maria and the importance of physical appearance is shown throughout lyrics, gestures and staging. In the patriarchal societies of the 50's and 60 women physical image was more important than intellectual capabilities. But this situation wasn't exclusively associated to female immigrants, but North American women also feel concerned about this matter. American native citizenship and Maria appear in the argument always linked to men: in the Maria's case, her attitude is presented submissive and she feels safe and happy assuming the conventions of the patriarchal society and protected all the time by a man; first by her brother Bernardo, then by Tony, her boyfriend.

Instead, Anita's psychology (Rita Moreno) is different from Maria's. Anita is passionate, a shameless person and tenacious Latin American woman who no doubt place facing to men to avoid the final fight that will cause the tragic ending of the story. The costumes, gestures attitude and lyrics that Anita interprets mean a female more realistic than Maria. First Anita is optimist with the American dream opposite to the difficulties in Puerto Rico, this idea is shown in the lyrics of "America" (Figure 5), a musical show number with Spanish music and dance references (Figure 6). But then Anita recognizes the difficulties of Latin American women in North America. Additionally in "A Boy Like That" Anita tries to explain to Maria the differences between Jets and Sharks in order to break that relationship. The Anita's song isn't as lyrics as Maria's one: the rhythm in "A Boy Like That" is really strong and underlined by the completed orchestra (Figure 7) versus the melodious music in "I Have a Love" interpreted by Maria at a later time in the same scene.

Besides, Anita is a victim of racism and sexual attack by Jets in a scene in which, after the death of Bernardo, she tries to give a message to Tony from Maria.

Orchestral music in a non-diegetic insertion underlines her feelings and fear. Facing that situation Anita performs a well prepared choreography composed by violent gestures and struggle between Jets and the female character. The tense scene and the Anita's angry bring about concoct a falsehood: she says everybody that Maria has committed suicide and this fact determines the tragic fate of the story.

Therefore, there are many divergences between Maria and Anita characters. The Anita's thinking about American society is opposite to Maria's opinion, as well as the specific music associated to those characters. On the one hand, Maria's songs present a classical symphonic style with lyrics about her love affair with Tony. On the other hand, music around Anita speaks about Latin American roots and her strong personality.

## 5. Conclusion

It is paramount that we can consider movies and film music as two speaking expressions about societies in the past. *West Side Story* is a work of art that shows the American society of the 50's and 60's. In this updated Shakespeare's play, Robbins and Wise show the difficult of coexistence between natives and immigrants in a neighborhood of New York City and how love between Maria and Tony is able to cross racial borders. In this context film music composed by Bernstein, with lyrics by Sondheim, represents the two ethnical groups, but the spirit of the story is not an issue of the past:

"While the plot of *West Side Story* was motivated by contemporary social problems, the result is a piece of theatre, not a documentary; Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein and Sondheim aspired to move, to shock and to thrill, not to preach a sociological tract. This is perhaps the reason for the show's continuing success today: a half a century later, the precise circumstances that inspired it may have changed, but the value of human life –and the simple power of love– have not" (Simeone, 2009, p. 6).

In relation to music, on the one hand the presence of various musical styles represents two national identities in *West Side Story*, the Natives New Yorkers called Jets and the immigrants called Sharks. On the other hand, Latin American women are important in the plot and have associated different music to Maria and Anita. While Maria is connected to lyrical music, Anita is represented by ethnic style music with Latin rhythms. So, film music demonstrates two nationalities thanks to the sound, rhythm and choreography and the Ibero-American women have different features highlighted by music.

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### Figures



Figure 1: Maria and Tony in “Somewhere” scene, photogram.

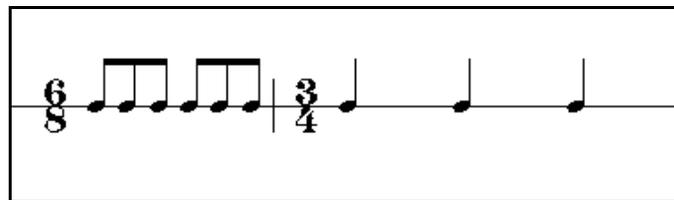


Figure 2: Latin American rhythmic structure, 6/8-3/4 time signature.  
Source: Virginia Sánchez Rodríguez.

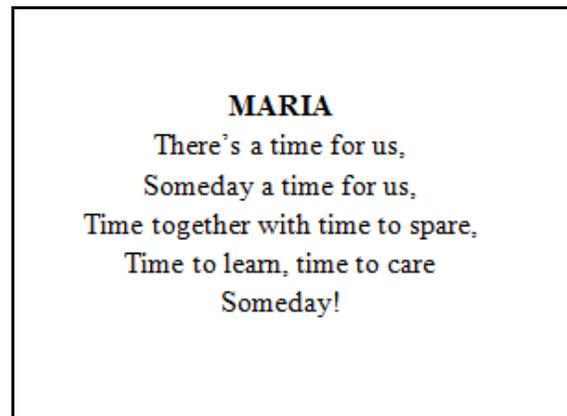


Figure 3: “Somewhere”, lyrics.

Source: <http://www.westsidestory.com/>

Figure 4. “Somewhere” lyric style: voice with the strings accompaniment, Measures 1-6.

Source: West Side Story (Full Score) by Leonard Bernstein (1994). Leonard Bernstein Music Publishing Company.

**ANITA**  
 Puerto Rico,  
 My heart's devotion--  
 Let it sink back in the ocean.  
 Always the hurricanes blowing,  
 Always the population growing,  
 And the money owing.  
 And the sunlight streaming,  
 And the natives steaming.  
 I like the island Manhattan,  
 Smoke on your pipe and put that in.]

(...)

**ANITA AND THREE GIRLS**  
 Life can be bright in America.

**BERNARDO**  
 If you can fight in America.

**ALL GIRLS**  
 Life is all right in America.

**ALL BOYS**  
 If you're all white in America.

Figure 5: “America”, lyrics.  
 Source: <http://www.westsidestory.com/>



Figure 6. Anita’s dance steps in “America”, photogram.

Figure 7: “A Boy Like That”, the aggressive musical style associated to Anita’s character, measures 1-4. Source: West Side Story (Full Score) by Leonard Bernstein (1994). Leonard Bernstein Music Publishing Company.