



Puerto Rican Art Song and its Stylistic Influences

Dr. Rachel J. Holland
Christopher Newport University
1 University Place
Newport News, VA 23606

rachel.holland@cnu.edu

The art song music of Puerto Rico has a history as diverse as its culture.¹ Currently a territory of the United States, Puerto Rico struggles to maintain its own national identity in many areas of culture, including vocal music. This study will explore the musical and social influences in modern Puerto Rican art song composition in relation to the island's struggle for a national musical identity.

As music is often a reflection of or a reaction to the culture from which it stems, it is important to examine at length the important historical and musical events of Puerto Rico. Unfortunately, very little is known about the music and culture of the aboriginal inhabitants of the island as very little information from the reports of the Spanish conquests contained direct observation of the indigenous culture, nor have those reports survived.² Our recorded musical knowledge begins with the discovery of the island by Christopher Columbus and the settlement by the Spanish as a colony in 1510. The Spanish forced the island's native inhabitants, the *Taíno*, into hard labor on the plantations and the musical culture that ensued was primarily European.

Puerto Rico was a passageway for discovery among the Caribbean islands and the Spanish settlements in Central and South America. It was coined "Rich Port" and was used not only for purposes of trade and commerce, but, for the transport and trade of slaves, which brought a large African population to the island.

The 1530's and 40's brought a time of hardship to the island, as the discovery of gold in Mexico prompted an exodus from the island by those seeking the riches that the new colonies in central America had to offer, reducing the population of the island by

¹ Maya Hoover, *A guide to the Latin American Art Song Repertoire* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 198.

² Donald Thompson, *Music in Puerto Rico: A Reader's Anthology* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2002), 1.



half. Puerto Rico no longer remained commercially important and all goods brought to the island were second-hand. Although a time of financial devastation for the island, this period would become vitally important to the nationalistic identity of Puerto Rico in the coming centuries.

The population that remained on the island was an eclectic mix of the cultures, which ranged from Spanish settlers, freed or escaped African slaves, and pre-conquest indigenous people. Those who wished to escape hard labor on the plantations or slavery fled to the mountains and became known as the *jíbaro*. These rural villagers isolated themselves and began a culture of their own, which mixed their musical and social traditions to create the creolization of Puerto Rico.³ A distinct separation of cultures was then formed between the city, which consisted almost entirely of European settlers and culture, and rural populations of Puerto Rico.

The *jíbaro* musical tradition is deeply rooted in the dance. The most popular, and therefore most inherently Puerto Rican, form of dance is called the *seis*. As Peter Manuel points out, "Of the Hispanic-derived rural folk musics, the most important are the various forms of *seis*."⁴ The *seis* refers to a very specific type of music that consists of names, rhythms, instruments and possible singing styles.⁵

The 19th century saw some new musical development in Puerto Rico with the influx of classical European musicians, the establishment of national orchestras and the construction of professional theaters. The San Juan Municipal Theater was constructed in 1832 and was vital in attracting touring opera companies and performers from Europe. In turn, these touring companies would sometimes employ local orchestral musicians, who would assimilate these new musical genres to the dance bands that were important in the island's social scene. Interestingly, the exchange of musical ideas not only infused the island's musical tastes with European Classical music, but, as the companies made their way to and from the Americas, they carried with them both Latin American and Caribbean music, which created a cross-pollination of styles and genres.

³ Drouet.

⁴ Peter Manuel, *Popular Musics of the Non-Western World* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 39

⁵ Drouet



In addition to opera and orchestral performances, the island became an interesting destination for classical musicians on performance tours. In 1857, the renowned pianist and composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk and the young soprano Adelina Patti spent a year touring the island. The tour was important in that it lasted an entire year and was not only centered in the large cities of Ponce and San Juan, but, extended to the villages and towns throughout the island.⁶ While the *jíbaro* culture of the island remained almost exclusively rural, many villagers would travel to the towns for important festivals and events, thereby assimilating European styles into their already existing musical traditions.

As Jose Enrique Pedreira points out, “The Puerto Ricans have at all times been fully aware of musical trends outside the Island. A few composers were able to study music in Europe during the 19th century.”⁷ This knowledge seems essential when trying to discern what constitutes the true Puerto Rican style in light of the nationalistic movement.

Much like the United States, Puerto Rican culture has become a mix of the cultural traditions that have shaped its history, which is vast and diverse. It should be noted that this assimilation of styles has become the crux of the debate between Puerto Rican nationalists as to what elements indicate a genuinely Puerto Rican musical style. The mix of *Taíno*, Hispanic and African elements that has constituted the folk music of Puerto Rico has also led to many debates and disagreements in the Island’s search for a musical character which can be defined as belonging to the Puerto Rican people, free from European, Caribbean, American or African influences. However, just as it would be impossible to separate the “American” style of classical music from the Italian, French or German elements which it possesses, it would be impossible to define a musical genre in Puerto Rico that is free from this mixture of national styles. It is that very mixture which makes Puerto Rico unique.

If the *seis* was the most important type of music for the rural *jíbaros*, the danza was singled out as the most important national music of the upper-class rebels in the

⁶ Thompson, 31

⁷ Pedreira, 5



cities.⁸ Around 1840, many composers took interest in the *danza* and began to assimilate its elements into their compositions, refining the form into its present construction. Don Felix Astol was one such composer who composed the most important *danza* entitled “La Boriqueña.”⁹ During the most famous revolution attempt in the Island’s history, the *Grito de Lares* of 1868, composers began to write words for the song form, inspired by the island’s bid for independence. It was at this time that Manuel Fernandez Juncos wrote a poem adapted to the “La Boriqueña” which “encapsulated growing revolutionary and nationalistic sentiments.”¹⁰ In fact, the popular tune and text was so inflammatory to its people that the Mayor of Ponce outlawed its performance in 1892. Combined with the seis of the *jíbaro*, the *danza* supplied a musical soundtrack for the nationalistic and revolutionary sentiments on the island which still exist today.

After the American invasion, Puerto Rican intellectuals enshrined the *danza* and decided that *jíbaro* music constituted a genuine national expression. Lacking political power, island thinkers and cultural leaders drew cultural boundaries by acting defensively against the onslaught of music from the United States and Cuba...they used music to define Puerto Rican culture as white and Spanish-derived.¹¹

Clearly, music was the medium through which the Puerto Rican people separated themselves from the rest of the Latin Caribbean nations, and from its European and American roots. Music has become one of the most important means of nationalistic expression and is therefore much debated as clearly the island struggles for a national identity, even within the eclectic mix of styles that has become their cultural identity. In her essay on nationalism amongst the Puerto Rican community in New York, Ruth Glasser observes:

Rather than serving as a unifying force in a dividing or dissolving United States ethnic community, music itself was an ongoing source of diverse definitions for Puerto Rican ethnic identity and an arena of contention. Just as the music they created and were exposed to was complex and mediated, so were the responses to it of people with varying and ever-evolving ideas about their cultural identity.¹²

⁸ Glasser, 27.

⁹ Pedreira, 5.

¹⁰ Glasser, 27.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 11.



The ongoing debate amongst Puerto Ricans, and Puerto Rican-Americans as to what constitutes genuine, or authentic, Puerto Rican music exists in musicological discussions today. In spite of the differences of opinion in this arena, it is clear that the Puerto Rican people do agree upon at least one point: that music is forefront in their efforts to define Puerto Rican culture as unique. Frances Aparicio summarizes this point by saying, “The political value of this musical form as a vehicle for resistance against imperialism, against tyranny, and against hegemony has been systematically silenced through Puerto Rican history” (Aparicio, 8).

Regardless of form, style and elements, music is clearly one of the most important defining factors in Puerto Rico’s nationalistic movement and in the struggle to define a nation. In her book, *My Music is my Flag*, Ruth Glasser details the heart of the dissent as thus:

Music also played a vital role in shoring up the nationalist impulses sporadically given form within the nineteenth century and continuing with the change of sovereignty in 1989. As hacendados and merchants struggled for greater control of the island’s political and economic development, they became increasingly concerned with the components of their national identity. Music was an important part of the cultural arsenal that made these rebels feel they had the right to claim an identity that was not just not-Spanish by some accident of geography, but affirmatively Puerto Rican.¹³

In bringing the discussion of Puerto Rican song styles to its conclusion, this author would be remiss not to mention some of the other important song forms such as the *bomba* and the *plena*, which are heavily influenced by the African musical tradition, the *villancicos* and the *Aguinaldo*, which have their roots in 14th century Spanish sacred music, and the *criolla* and *mapelle*, which originate from other countries within the Caribbean Latin America such as Venezuela or Colombia. However, these forms have not had the impact on Puerto Rican art music in the 20th century, and are therefore not relevant to this dialogue.

As a segue into Puerto Rican art song as a genre, a short introduction seems necessary to identify the difficulties when researching this particular subject. The challenges seem threefold. First, most research and writing on the subject of music in

¹³ Ibid., 26.



Puerto Rico exist almost entirely in Spanish. This encapsulates all genres and forms, with the exception of Puerto Rican-based popular music of the 20th and 21st century, of which a plethora of information can be found. Second, a challenge exists in the accessibility of the existing material. As Thompson points out, “Little of the early writing is easily accessible through the more accustomed routes of bibliographic search. It thus escapes the notice of many of those who might profit most by its study; Anglophone scholars, teachers, students, members of the Puerto Rican diaspora, and others interested in this vital aspect of Puerto Rican life.”¹⁴ Third, there exists no definitive source on the subject of Puerto Rican art song. Great strides have been taken with the publication of Maya Hoover’s book, *A Guide to the Latin American Art Song Repertoire*, which was intended to serve as a research guide for singers and teachers of singing to the Latin American repertoire. However, the book is a research guide to 22 different countries and therefore possesses neither the depth nor the scope needed to analyze Puerto Rican style as it applies to art song as a whole.

As previously discussed, Puerto Rican nationalism is an extremely important idea in the composition of art song. Puerto Rican composers have been heavily influenced by its “folk and traditional music, often through the use of native instruments such as the cuatro and tiple and forms such as the *décima* and *seis*.”¹⁵ The influence of the traditional folk themes can be evidenced not only in the musical elements which constitute the Puerto Rican art song style, but, first, by the importance of songs scored for voice and guitar and second, by linking its textual themes to patriotism and traditional Puerto Rican life, which relies heavily on a romantic depiction of its countryside, love and yearning, and self-identity.

In her essay entitled, “The Poetry Heritage of Puerto Rico,” Pamela Gray summarizes the elements which influence Puerto Rican poets as stemming from Spanish and African influences, as well as the nationalist movement, which began in the mid-19th century and continues to be of significance in the modern poetic movement.

¹⁴ Thompson, viii.

¹⁵ Hoover, 198.



For instance, early Spanish influences on the poetry of Puerto Rico include the decima and ballad. Similarly, immigrants from Africa brought a distinctive vocabulary and musical rhythm that transformed poetry and verse. Later, political and national themes were stressed in the poetry as the island debated independence.¹⁶

Some of the most important and influential Puerto Rican poets are: Luis Llorens Torres (1876-1944), Luis Pales Matos (1898-1959), Juan Antonio Corretjer (1908-1985), and José de Diego (1866-1918). It is interesting to note the dates of the above poets, and while this list is certainly not exhaustive, it is an indication of the more contemporary nature of the evolution of Puerto Rican poetry as an art form from the folk histories which permeated the traditional forms such as the *décima*.

The development of art song as genre is heavily reliant upon the development of poetry in the culture for which the genre is composed.¹⁷ In light of this universally accepted fact, a few observations about the art song genre by Puerto Rican composers becomes clearer. The relatively recent development of Puerto Rican art poetry is the most reasonable explanation for the realization that the art song genre in Puerto Rico is largely a 20th century phenomenon. When researching the genre, it cannot escape notice that some of the most prolific composers in the genre are rarely born before the turn of the 20th century and explains why the textual and musical influences upon the genre are largely folk and nationalistic in nature. This presents some difficulties when seeking to locate scores and recordings in the genre.

Considering that the genre is relatively new to Puerto Rican composers, the body of literature is quite small. Whereas art song has been an important genre for German composers since Schubert, art song has not necessarily become an important genre in Puerto Rico, and therefore when compared to the expansive amount of literature from countries such as Germany, France, England, Russia and the United States, the selection of songs from the genre is limited and somewhat difficult to access. Thus begins a vicious cycle: the songs and recordings can be difficult to access and research and are therefore abandoned for other literature that is better-known and more easily

¹⁶ Pamela Gray, "The Poetry Heritage of Puerto Rico." Exxonmobil Masterpiece Theater's American Collection Educators, 5 May 2011 <http://www.ncteamericancollection.org/aaw_poetry_essay.htm>.

¹⁷ Ivey, 96.



accessible, and because they are not widely performed, research and publication in the genre is minimal at best.

In 1986, the *Asociacion Nacional de compositors de Puerto Rico* published a volume of art song compositions by composers of the genre from Puerto Rico. The volume includes 29 songs by 13 different composers who are important to the genre on the island and represents the most comprehensive collection of art song scores available. In the prologue, Leonardo Egurbida states that the volume “constitutes a significant effort for the enrichment of our musical heritage. More than an effort, it becomes an achievement without precedent.”¹⁸

In conclusion, it is clear that the musical style of the island of Puerto Rico is culturally diverse, yet singular amongst the Latin American art song repertoire. As Perdeira points out, “Puerto Rico, the smallest of the Greater Antilles, is, after four centuries of Spanish influence and two generations of North American ways of life, a mixture of patterns which have made the Island unique in its development.”¹⁹ The folk elements, which were created through a combination of several different nationalities and styles, are essential to defining what makes Puerto Rico unique. The blending of the elements from the *Taíno*, Spanish, African, and most recently American, have combined to create a new style that is distinct to the island and its people. While one cannot separate the Puerto Rican style from its influences, it is the blending of all these elements that constitute the nationalistic style of Puerto Rico.

¹⁸ Leonardo Egurbida, Prologue to *La canción de arte en Puerto Rico* (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Asociación de Compositores de Puerto Rico, 1986).

¹⁹ Perdeira, 2.



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