

**BAMBUCO, TANGO AND BOLERO: MUSIC,
IDENTITY, AND CLASS STRUGGLES IN
MEDELLÍN, COLOMBIA, 1930–1953**

by

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This dissertation explores the articulation of music, identity, and class struggles in the production, reception, and consumption of sound recordings of popular music in Colombia, 1930–1953. I analyze practices of cultural consumption involving records in Medellín, Colombia’s second largest city and most important industrial center at the time. The study sheds light on some of the complex connections between two simultaneous historical processes during the mid-twentieth century, mass consumption and socio-political strife. Between 1930 and 1953, Colombian society experienced the rise of mass media and mass consumption as well as the outbreak of *La Violencia*, a turbulent period of social and political strife. Through an analysis of written material, especially the popular press, this work illustrates the use of aesthetic judgments to establish social differences in terms of ethnicity, social class, and gender. Another important aspect of the dissertation focuses on the adoption of music genres by different groups, not only to demarcate differences at the local level, but as a means to inscribe these groups within larger imagined communities. Thus, bambuco articulates contradictions and paradoxes brought about in the way *Antioqueños* (the regional community) related to the idea of the Colombian nation. Tango articulates an important difference between the regional whitened ethnic identity, the so-called *raza antioqueña* (Antioqueño race), and the *mestizo* (mixed ethnicity) associated with Bogotá, the nation’s capital. Finally, the local adoption of bolero embodies the aspirations of the middle classes to gain access to transnational and cosmopolitan ideals of modernity. During a period of turmoil, bolero’s middle-class listening practices engendered a certain depolitization of the space of

social struggles that characterize popular culture of the period. Using a diachronic approach, the dissertation illustrates the variations of musical practices and habits of musical consumption according to particular social and political circumstances. The discussion includes the musical and textual analysis of a few representative pieces of the repertoire.

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“Entre los cantos montañoses sobresale el bambuco: copla y tonada, gesto y movimiento, patrimonio común y común denominador de la raza colombiana, pedazo de la patria hecho música.”

José Ignacio Perdomo Escobar, *Historia de la Música en Colombia*.¹

[Jairo:] “Aquí cantó la última canción, aquí nació de verdad. En Medellín nació Gardel, no me aleguen.” Una cosa fregada que nos dijo el profesor hizo quejarse a mi hombre, oigan: “La patria del mito no es el lugar donde nace sino el lugar donde muere: Gardel es colombiano, para él morir fue un nacimiento al revés.”

Manuel Mejía Vallejo, *Aire de Tango*.²

“El Café era el sitio público de mayor importancia en el barrio; vedado por supuesto a mujeres y niños, los muchachos vivíamos allí momentos inolvidables de una formación que se gestaba a partir de Tangos y Boleros.”

Orlando Mora P. *La música que es como la vida*.³

¹Among the highland songs the bambuco stands out: verse and tune, expression and movement, common patrimony and common denominator of the Colombian race, part of the fatherland made into music. José Ignacio Perdomo Escobar, *Historia de la Música en Colombia* (1963, 214)

²[Jairo]: “He sang his last song here, he was really born here. Gardel was born in Medellín, don’t argue with me.” A striking thing that professor told us made my pal moan, listen: “The homeland of the myth is not the place where it is born but the place where it dies: Gardel is Colombian, for him to die was like a reverse birth.” Manuel Mejía Vallejo, *Aire de Tango* (1979, 154)

³“The Café was the neighborhood’s most important public place; of course forbidden to women and children, we young men lived there unforgettable moments of a formation that sprang from Tangos and Boleros.” Orlando Mora, *La música que es como la vida* (1989, 36)

1.0 INTRODUCTION

It was already my second week in Medellín when I found the Salón Málaga. Curious about the city's celebrated status as a stronghold for tango and other genres of Latin American popular music that enjoyed a golden age in the 1940s, I decided to spend a couple weeks of my summer vacation there, looking for clues to understand such passion for musical oldies. I had gone for a lone day-long walk in the crowded downtown, what I consider the best way to get to know a city, and something that I love to do whenever I have the opportunity. My friend Adriana had warned me that morning before leaving her apartment: "Be careful, this is a dangerous city." "I know," I replied smiling, "but I have survived long walks in larger and crazier cities such as Bogotá and New York, so it cannot be that bad," and then I left. As I closed the door, I thought she was right to put me on alert; Medellín has the unpleasant precedent of having reached one of the world's highest metropolitan murder records during the 1980s and 1990s. So I decided to be careful and follow her advice to try to avoid dangerous places like the old market district of Guayaquil.

I wasn't expecting to find such a small and dense downtown. I had just walked a couple of blocks to the south of the central plaza, and all of a sudden I found myself in the middle of Guayaquil. I was petrified. Holding my breath, I began walking toward the closest metro station I saw, the bulky San Antonio's elevated main terminal. When I got to the corner of the small plaza where the towering terminal rises, I heard a very old song coming from a café located just underneath the high metro rails. I gazed through the wide door, and then I felt as if I had discovered the gates to the past I was looking for. Salón Málaga is a huge room with a bar and tables in the front and many billiard tables in the back, but all I saw when I first entered the place were the walls completely covered with old photographs. Singers, guitarists, composers, poets, a multitude of stars of the 1930s and 1940s smiled at me

from their impeccably framed posters, many of them autographed by the artists themselves. Totally astounded, I walked deeper into the room to find the source of the music: seven fifty- to sixty-year-old jukeboxes, still operating with their original 78-rpm records. I was so excited with my discovery that I completely forgot the anxiety with which I was rushing toward the metro station a few minutes ago. Meanwhile, my presence in the place had all but passed unnoticed. It took me some time to realize that everybody was staring at me, and just then I remembered where I was. Even though Sal3n M3laga is nowadays a social club open to everyone, for many years it was no more than a drinking hole and a prostitution house where no decent woman would dare enter. Female customers are still rare, and they always come in accompanied by a male. Although the atmosphere and the function of the place may have changed in the last fifteen years, many of the same over-fifty male customers were still there, gaping at this unaccompanied, attractive, evidently non-Medell3n-native young woman looking at the pictures. Two young waitresses dressed in neat red uniforms that intend to distinguish them from the traditional *coperas*, who besides serving drinks also trade sex, observed me with a certain mixture of distrust and curiosity.

My out-of-place feeling arose from having trespassed, somewhat accidentally, several apparently invisible though very real boundaries. Crossing over the borders between districts and entering the traditional caf3, I had also trespassed lines of class, gender, and age. Fortunately, my venture into the world of old-music aficionados in the Sal3n M3laga and other similar places was a pretty successful story, even though I still wonder whether it would have been better if I had been a mature male researcher rather than a young woman. But beyond gender issues affecting my role as researcher, and despite all precautions and fear, I was drawn by the possibility of witnessing social tensions involved in local music-listening practices.

My interest stemmed from the fact that I had always been puzzled by people's nostalgic remembrance of Medell3n's popular music golden age between the 1940s and 1950s, quite a tragic period in Colombian history. Beginning in the mid-1940s and well into the 1950s, partisan antagonism and governmental repression resulted in a deep social breakup that brought about a surge of violence that killed around 200,000 people in the countryside, in one of the worst conflicts ever in the Western Hemisphere. Not surprisingly, memory is always

a selective process that helps people make sense of their own personal story. Few people choose to remember tragic events rather than good ones. Yet, how to reconcile contradictory readings of the same historical period? And, what does music have to do with memory? The three quotations heading this introduction provide some glances of the meanings associated with popular music practices of the period, underlining the “Colombianness” of bambuco, the appropriation of an Argentinean tango singer, and the life at Medellín’s neighborhood cafés. How is it possible that we do not see any traces of the terrible social unrest that was afflicting the country?

Indeed, I think such contradictions in what appear to be different perceptions of the same historical era actually conceal a complex connection between mass consumption and the apparent lack of collective memory about tragedy. Here I will elaborate on those paradoxical connections, noting that the purpose of this examination is not to find a single answer or define an explanatory model, but to illustrate the complex relationship between mass consumption and social turmoil. Colombian society underwent two very significant simultaneous processes between the 1930s and the 1950s: first, the outbreak of a sociopolitical strife that unchained a period of terror and violence in the countryside, and second, the rise of a mass consumption society in urban centers across the nation. The historical coincidence of those processes, however, does not imply the existence of a causal relationship between them. In spite of that, the rise of media and mass cultural consumption were indeed factors contributing to the eclipse of rural violence in urban people’s imagination. In other words, although the analysis of cultural consumption might shed some light on the social dynamics operating in Colombian society during the period, it cannot fully explain the rationale behind the explosion of rural violence.

The previous argument is important to understand how I devised my approach to analyzing the connections between music consumption and social turmoil. When I began to work with the music of the period, my initial impression was that urban audiences placidly engaged in popular music consumption as a way to mask feelings of anxiety and frustration brought about by social and political unrest. That view, however, would imply that music is no more than mere entertainment, and its practice would be confined to a space outside social struggle. Yet as Stuart Hall notes (1981), popular culture, music included, is

the very field where social struggles between hegemonic and subordinated classes are articulated. Therefore, mass media became a new arena for social struggles, opening new spaces for cultural expression and transforming the ways in which people ascribed meanings to art forms like music. The creation of new technologies, including sound recording and radio broadcast, was also an important aspect fuelling the crystallization of new identities. Radio broadcast, for example, allowed that different people, possibly living in distant places from each other, would have access to the same information or the same music. In this way, radio broadcast and recording technology not only granted the appearance of new audiences, but also triggered struggles over the meaning of certain musical forms. The evolution of mass media in the early twentieth century and then the dissemination over the century of what we can label a “mediatic modernity,” accompanied the multiplication of struggles over identity and meaning all over the world.

In order to add more nuances to Colombia’s complex case, it seems important to mention some arguments dealing with a crisis of national identity affecting Colombian society during the first half of the twentieth century. For historian Marco Palacios, the historical weakness of the Colombian central state made it unable to consolidate the nation: “the absence of national symbols, myths, and institutions through which it would be possible to attain citizenship, giving room to the sense, even the illusion, that all fit together into the country in an equal standing, facing the law and the administration of justice” (2001, 19). His claim might explain why urban citizens barely recall the mid-century rural conflict. For them, it was something that did not happen to an imaginary “us,” and hence the history of rural violence cannot be inscribed in a non-existent, all-embracing, “national” narrative. More importantly, however, his claim coincides with Jesús Martín-Barbero’s remark about the lack of a unique national narrative in Colombia (Martín-Barbero 2001).

Both Palacios’ and Martín-Barbero’s remarks have to be read in the context of Colombia’s own peculiar sociopolitical situation and against the geopolitical backdrop of other Latin American nation-states. An uninformed reader might think Palacios’ and Martín-Barbero’s stances backing national narratives betray an appeal for the renewal of nationalist agendas; in fact, their purpose is to historicize the reasons for the country’s chronic instability throughout the twentieth century. A comparison with historical processes in other large

Latin American countries might help to understand their point. In his exploration of musical nationalism in three Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, and Peru), Thomas Turino explains that those post-World-War-I nationalist agendas unfolded over a very different model from the nineteenth-century European paradigm (Turino 2003). Unlike the Europeans before, twentieth-century Latin American nationalist movements sought a clear correspondence between the nation, namely the people, and the state, the governmental apparatus. A crucial factor for this was the expansion of capitalism that fuelled the emergence of a new class of industrial workers and the formation of a middle class. Members of the middle class made political use of struggles for labor and political rights of the working class, launching populist political movements that helped them seize power, hitherto exclusively in the hands of a traditional oligarchy.

Colombia's case, however, stands in sharp contrast with Turino's depiction of power struggles involving populist movements in those countries. Unlike most Latin American countries of its size, Colombia never underwent a populist era. Although the same type of social and political struggles did take place in the country, first in the 1940s and later in the 1970s, the upper classes successfully thwarted the lower classes' aspiration for political power. The strongest of those local populist movements, led by Liberal *caudillo* Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, was completely broken after the leader's assassination in 1948. For Marco Palacios, Colombia's lack of a populist phase, which helped shape symbols and institutions in similar nation-states, is one of the sources of the constant social and political unrest that has characterized the country over the last fifty to sixty years (Palacios 2001). In other words, the alleged lack of national coherence and Colombians' poor sense of nationhood stem from the impossibility to solve a political and cultural crisis, the unsuccessful negotiation of power between the hegemonic and subaltern classes.

In addition to class struggles frustrating the consolidation of the nation and the absence of a populist era, Colombia has always suffered from a deep regional fragmentation that has made its cohesion even more difficult. Colombia's uneven topography creates many problems for communication between regions. The Andes mountain range cuts across the territory, dividing the country in five large natural regions: the Atlantic Coast in the north, the Pacific Coast in the west, the Andean region in the middle, the Orinoco plains to the east, and the

Amazonian jungle to the south. Such geographic configuration has favored the provinces' isolation, resulting in the crystallization of strong regionalist allegiances detrimental to a unique national one. Struggles for regional hegemony have characterized Colombian history ever since the wars of independence in the early nineteenth century. Probably the most important dispute during the first half of the twentieth century engaged the political center in Bogotá and the wealthy industrial province of Antioquia, of which Medellín is the provincial capital.

In the framework of the weak nation-state described by Palacios, any trend toward national homogenization would meet a great deal of resistance from different sectors of society. Conflicts over identities would proliferate, whether they are articulated as national, regional, ethnic, gender, or related to social class. Therefore, attempts to create a style of national music (for example by using radio broadcast, as in Brazil or Mexico; see [McCann 1999](#) and [Hayes 2000](#)) would be highly contested. Competing forms of nationalism or alternative narratives of the nation would arise in this scenario, taking different shapes in accordance with the position of the subject within the social structure. In short, the arena of cultural consumption became a privileged space for the appropriation or rejection of different cultural artifacts that expressed different forms of being a citizen. Nevertheless, such potential for experimentation is not totally free because cultural consumption would always be regulated by conventional social standards.

The present study is an exploration into the subjective values and meanings ascribed to different genres of popular music in order to identify breaking points and rifts between diverse social groups during a troublesome era. It examines values expressed about three musical genres as represented in the written media, mainly in the press and the popular print media. Value judgments will involve aspects such as aesthetics and musical taste, the respectability of certain practices involving music, and the existence of social divisions according to those practices. The study employs a diachronic approach, showing how the tension between those general tendencies manifested itself through changes in practices involving music. Each chapter unfolds a narrative about a particular musical genre, identifying variations in listening practices according to the advent of particular events and circumstances, whether cultural, economic, or political.

The present investigation aims at fulfilling three objectives. First, to help construct a historiography of popular music in Colombia through the examination of sources and a critical approach to non-academic texts dealing with the subject. One of the main problems confronting popular music scholarship in the country lies in its short academic tradition, in contrast to a quite copious non-academic and more empirical production. In spite of their shortcomings in methodology or documentation, most texts are valuable sources of information, and sometimes are valuable by themselves as historical documents. In this way, the work combines both new and old data to expand our historical knowledge from a perspective that accounts for a wider range of cultural, political, and economic aspects affecting musical practices.

A second objective is to propose a different approach to the analysis of social conflict in Colombia, moving beyond the usual examination of the concrete expressions of violence. Violence has become almost a trademark topic in the literature of social sciences in Colombia, establishing a sort of foundational myth in the terrible mid-twentieth-century period referred to simply as *La Violencia*. The majority of the studies about this topic have dealt with the political analysis of violence, leaving other interpretations of the subject aside. Literature in the humanities and the arts, especially in literary criticism (see for example [Tittler 1989](#); [Williams 1991](#)), have begun to explore the symbolic manifestation of violence, but no analysis has been carried out in the field of music. The scope of this study covers a period of about fifteen years preceding the break up of the conflict as well as its worst years towards the late 1940s and early 1950s, in an attempt to shed some light on how musical practices articulated social tensions.

A third purpose of this dissertation is to contribute new ways to deal with music and identity, and the barely explored topic of music and class struggles in the field of ethnomusicology.¹ Unlike many contemporary studies dealing with the subject of music and identity, this research does not focus on musical traditions preserved by minorities or immigrants in alien environments. It analyzes cultural consumption within a community comprising a rather homogeneous population, which nevertheless was very attentive to demarcate inter-

¹On music and identity (including nation, race, and gender) see [Austerlitz 1997](#); [Radano and Bohlman 2000](#); [Chuse 2003](#). On music and class struggles see [González 1991](#); [Brennan 1999](#).

nal differences. Not confronted with major ethnic or religious differences among themselves, locals constructed their own subjective barriers of exclusion, which might presumably be less fixed and hence sometimes more difficult to define. Indeed, the very elusiveness of the lines dividing social classes according to certain cultural practices—social classes that, in any case, were objectively differentiated in terms of status, affluence, and access to power—might be one of the reasons to explain the aggressiveness with which, for example, middle classes judged musical practices of the lower classes. The theoretical model proposed aims to overcome the challenge created by the difficulty of tightly demarcating groups and fixing identities, which are not exclusive among themselves and often overlap one another. This approach avoids falling into a reductive essentialism on either the musical genres or the groups associated with their practices as much as possible, deconstructing instead the variable meanings social groups put on musical genres at certain historical moments.

The dissertation is organized in six chapters. The first chapter discusses general aspects of the study, and introduces the theoretical model, establishes the methodology, and presents the historical framework of the investigation. The second chapter presents Medellín in its status as capital of a regional power, and illustrates the significance of regional narratives on ethnicity, colonization, economic development and local entrepreneurship, and the weight of religion in the formation of a strong regional identity. The last part of the chapter describes class divisions, gender roles, political allegiances, as well as the church's power for controlling several aspects of everyday life in the city, and traces the main trends in the evolution of the nineteenth-century small town to the twentieth-century metropolis.

Chapter three initiates the analysis of the articulation of struggles in popular music genres, starting with bambuco and the narratives of the nation involved in both its production and consumption. The discussion emphasizes how members of the intelligentsia from a peripheral power understood and negotiated their inception into the idea of a modern centralized nation, following the evolution of local agendas promoting bambuco as national music. The difficulties encountered by those projects—whether ideological, aesthetic, or financial—and their partial accomplishments reveal the loose coherence of bambuco's symbolic significance during the 1930s and 1940s. Paradoxically, the chapter finishes by pointing to the reaf-

firmation of bambuco's national myth in the early 1950s, the most repressive years of the Conservative rule, on account of the association of bambuco with a white ethnicity.

In chapter four I analyze the reasons and the processes through which tango was adopted as an intrinsic part of Medellín's urban culture. It begins considering the impact of a tragic event taking place in the city in the mid-1930s, the accidental death of Argentinean singer Carlos Gardel (1891-1935), tango's most important idol ever. From there, the discussion unfolds exploring the identification that local audiences, comprised mainly by males from the lower classes, found during the 1930s with narratives of immigration, colonization, and resistance originally embedded in the Argentinean genre. The arrival of Argentinean cinema during the early 1940s marked a shift in tango's reception within the upper classes, because the images associated with tango and their lyrics made it more acceptable for middle-class males and females. Muted resistance was articulated in lower-class listening practices associated with the genre during the period of censorship that started in 1949, a circumstance that also coincides with the massification of its local consumption and a certain degree of trivialization because of its use as mass entertainment.

In Chapter five, the idea of cosmopolitanism brought about by the emergence of new middle classes all over Latin America crystalized in musical practices associated with the Cuban-Mexican bolero. The first section explores how bolero was introduced locally through radio broadcast in the 1930s as a product aiming at middle-class audiences, emphasizing its refined poetry and disguising other troublesome features, like bolero's Afro-Cuban origins and its veiled sensuality. In the 1940s, local prejudices against blackness articulated the elite's rejection of cultural manifestations deemed as "tropical" or Caribbean, hence endorsing instead the reception of whitened Mexican and Argentinean bolero styles. Bolero's bourgeois individuality and detachment from social issues made it a great medium for keeping in place class boundaries and gender roles while maintaining the impression of being a classless musical style. Those features explain the small disturbance felt in bolero practices, apart from the repression of dancing in the late 1940s and early 1950s, during the worst years of the rural conflict.

The study concludes with chapter six, which comprises some final ideas and establishes connections between the three previous chapters.

1.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1.1 The Problematic of Identity

The constitution of social identities has become a central topic of exploration in the social sciences on account of what Kobena Mercer defined as late-modern society's "crisis of identity" (Mercer 1994, cited in [Negus 1996](#) and [Hall 1996b](#)). The crisis stems mainly from the processes of change characterizing the globalized postmodern world, changes "dislocating the central structure of modern societies and undermining the frameworks which gave individuals stable anchorage in the social world" ([Hall 1996b](#), 596). Labels categorizing people (man, woman, English, Latin American, middle-class, and so on) give only partial readings of individuals, and there is always the danger to generalize and fall into essentialism. A critical examination of the notion of an integral unified identity, inherited from the Enlightenment, has been advanced from different disciplinary areas including philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and feminism. The fragmentation of identity brings into question the accuracy and pertinence of collective identities and the conceptions of community, class, ethnicity, gender, and nation.

Introduced first in the scholarship of popular music, the issue of identity has eventually come to the fore in ethnomusicology as well. Its impact has somewhat dislocated previous approaches to the study of music cultures, and challenged the very concepts of culture used in ethnomusicology up to the 1980s. New conceptions that see identity as a continuous and unfinished process in which individuals have some agency, clash with, for example, a structuralist analysis emphasizing a synchronic approach and privileging collective instances on account of understanding the culture as a whole. In spite of that, ethnomusicological literature has fully included the issue of identity in its agenda. Several approaches have been used, including focusing on the rise of identity politics in cases of minorities, immigrants, and diasporic communities—for example, Latins in the United States²—or dealing with the use of music in the construction of national agendas³ Other studies, mainly grounded in fields like popular music and sociology, examine the configuration of identities around ideas of ethnicity and class within particular societies.⁴

²See [Peña 1985](#); [Loza 1993](#); [Sánchez 1993](#); [Aparicio 1998](#); [Aparicio and Jáquez 2003](#).

³For example [Austerlitz 1997](#); [Turino 2000](#); [Askew 2002](#).

⁴For example [Vila 2000](#) and [González 1991](#) in the cases of Argentina and Chile, respectively.

Such a great interest in the connections between music and identity has resulted in many theoretical approaches drawing from different sources. The study of modern collective identities as “imagined communities” stems from the work of historians like Benedict Anderson (1991) and Eric Hobsbawm (1991) exploring the origins and evolution of nationalism. The examination of youth subcultures by Dick Hebdige (1991) and other authors associated with the school of British Cultural Studies, provide another important analytical model for studying smaller groups confronting a cultural mainstream. Language-based analysis of culture, including Foucault’s notion of discourse and Ricouer’s emphasis on narrative, provide new tools to explore the role of power and the constitution of causality and meaning for the construction of identity (Vila 2002). The contributions of psychoanalysis introduced a new layer of complexity, confronting the problem of identity from the perspective of the individual. Subjectivity is created from within, and according to Judith Butler, discursively constructed and even materialized in the body through time (Butler 1993, cited in Hall 1996a). Althusser’s notion of interpellation (1971) has originated new models, explaining how discourses and practices “hail” individual subjects. Stuart Hall, for example, advances a new definition of identity as “a meeting point, a point of *suture*” between (social) discourses and practices which interpellate the subject and the (individual) processes which produce subjectivities (Hall 1996a, 5).

My own approach to identity draws elements from several of the previous ideas. I take as a point of departure the configuration of imagined communities around collective bodies that articulate ideals of the national, the local, and the cosmopolitan. I explore the construction of collective identities around these imaginaries as embodied in discursive practices associated with particular musical genres. In this model, there is no univocal relationship between musical genres and social classes or gender roles, hence there is no attempt to find homologies between subcultures and musical styles.⁵ The analytic model draws ideas from Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of aesthetic consumption as a marker of social class (1987), but aims more at fluidity in an otherwise extremely rigid structure. Class-conscious elites constantly tried to enforce markers of distinction in the consumption of a mass-mediated

⁵In spite of its advantages for delimiting groups and cultural practices, Hebdige’s concept requires justifications for stylistic variations and cannot account for exceptions—for example, why some people sharing the same cultural traits do not use music in the same way. See Vila 2002.

cultural mainstream; the difference, therefore, was not as much in the repertoire itself but rather in the practices through which different groups appropriated the same cultural artifacts. Hegemony was discursively articulated in the form of value judgements sanctioning musical practices positively as “proper,” “decent,” “civilized,” and “elegant,” or negatively as “vulgar,” “wild,” “dangerous,” and “cheap.”

The model does not attempt to account for the configuration of subjectivities at the individual level, since the purpose is to examine social tensions within a cultural group. However, it acknowledges the existence of a certain degree of individual agency and autonomy to decide on aesthetic matters and to build individual identities around them. Identities associated with socioeconomic status or gender were not obligatory but contingent; nevertheless, the strength of social conventions, usually articulated as moral regulations, gave little room for independence or resistance. In this view, identities are rather repertoires of—mostly unconscious—codes and behaviors, and although all individuals have the potential to assume different positions, options were greatly determined by the individual’s social rank and gender. As a result, privileged (male) individuals might easily engage momentarily in lower-class or gender-segregated practices, while underprivileged (and female) individuals would rarely have any possibility to access his/her opposite.

1.1.2 Collective Identities: the National, the Local, and the Transnational

The construction of modern collective identities is closely linked to the constitution of a framework for the concept of nation. A notion created in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, the nation emerged to answer both a philosophical and a political problem, the problem of sovereignty. The removal of the figure of the king called for the configuration of “the people” as a new, modern collective body capable of self-government (Negri and Hardt 2000). The mechanics through which this collective body materializes as such constitute a process analyzed in depth by scholars on nationalism including Benedict Anderson (1991), Eric Hobsbawm (1983, 1991) and Terence Ranger (1983).

As Stuart Hall puts it, the nation is not only a political entity but also a notion able to produce meaning, a system of representation (Hall 1996b). People are citizens of a nation

not only in a legal sense; they participate in some way in the idea of the nation, and what we call national culture is precisely the representation of that idea. The imagined community of the nation is constituted by a series of images, stories, uses, and practices that form the narrative of the nation. The nation is narrated as it is told in memories, stories, myths, and symbols, national history books, literature, the media, and popular culture. Diverse musical expressions are likely to become vehicles for such a narrative. In addition to the nation, there are other ideas of collectivity above and below the national framework.

For example, the region might be the subject of an imagined community as well, and the region's system of representation is subordinated to the nation's one. Regional identity coexists with and, more often than not, overlaps the idea of the nation, but sometimes there might be divergences or serious contradictions between both ideas. Governments everywhere try to gain some control over this aspect: the higher the level of redundancy between the national and the regional, the lower the degree of tension in the constitution and administration of the state apparatus. The inhabitants of the region most likely conceive themselves as members of both the region and the nation, but regional identity may be closer to the cultural experiences of everyday life. Actually, national culture is usually but a regional identity, or a set of regional traditions, which achieved an hegemonic position as the nation's legitimate representation due to the agency of particular groups or individuals.⁶

The realm of the local encompasses a smaller community which is probably no less imagined because of its size, as Anderson concludes when theorizing about any community larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact ([Anderson 1991](#), 6). The existence of local-level social structures and class hierarchies certainly predate modernity, and they would be considered one of the most rudimentary sources, if not the oldest, of collective identification.⁷ The superposition of the modern concept of the nation does not alter a great deal such an initial picture, but rather adds new layers of complexity to this original social construct. Not confined to local repertoires of cultural practices anymore, groups or classes might seek new means of identification drawing from external cultural sources. In this way, they re-

⁶For examples analyzing the role of music in struggles for hegemony in the constitution of national cultures see examples in Tanzania [Askew 2002](#), Mexico [Hayes 2000](#), and Indonesia [Weintraub 2004](#).

⁷The exception to this might be non-urban classless societies such as the Kaluli from New Guinea, see [Feld 1988](#).

articulate difference through the adoption of cultural practices that better fit their original ways of marking social differentiation.

The idea of the transnational comes to the fore here as one of the possible sources where local groups may obtain new cultural repertoires. The practice of borrowing foreign or even exotic cultural artifacts to denote class differentiations is not necessarily modern (that was the case, for example, of the Italian aristocracy and the wealthy bourgeoisie eagerly buying Chinese silks during the Renaissance). What is truly modern is the adoption of those cultural practices not only as a way to differentiate among themselves, but to denote as well the participation of such local groups into wider imagined communities such as the national and the transnational—the Latin American cosmopolitan in this case.

1.1.3 Class Struggles, Ethnic Difference, and Symbolic Violence

As mentioned previously, political and social tensions affecting mid-century Colombia were common to other Latin American societies at the time. Then all societies confronted difficult transitions from nineteenth- to twentieth-century approaches to maintaining political power. Colombian society had some particular features that further complicated that process. First, since colonial times, the New Granada's territory (present day Colombia) had always been much more fragmented than any other large political entity in the continent; after independence, that crystallized in a loose national cohesion and a deep regional fragmentation exacerbated by antagonism between provincial elites. Second, the tight social and ideological nets established by those elites better withstood the opposition of the lower classes that threatened their traditional hold on power.⁸ I will elaborate here on the second aspect by exploring the relevance of notions like knowledge, ethnicity, and social class embedded in the project devised by the elites for the construction of the Colombian nation during the nineteenth century. This discussion will provide a framework for analyzing the close connections between notions of class and ethnicity in Colombia.

In his analysis of the impact of the ideals of the Enlightenment in eighteenth-century New Granadan society, Santiago Castro-Gómez (2005) illustrates how upper-class *criollos*

⁸For detailed studies on the problems for the consolidation of a national project in twentieth century Colombia, see [Bushnell 1993](#) and [Palacios and Safford 2002](#).

(Creoles, namely, whites born in the New World) used the language of science to legitimize their domination. For Castro-Gómez, the barrier between enlightened science and traditional knowledge was equated to an ethnic frontier: the former, was the *criollos*' dominion, while the latter marked the inherent ignorance and superstition of both Indians and Africans. From this observation, he argues that the elites leading the wars of independence validated and maintained the hierarchical social structure of castes established by Spanish colonial rule, based on a system of ethnic classification known as *pureza de sangre* (literally, blood's purity). A taxonomy classifying people according to the "amount" of their Spanish white blood, the system was an attempt to rationalize and control a population descending from the mixture of ethnic Indians, Europeans, and Africans. According to this taxonomy, someone labelled as *mestizo* (born from a Spanish father and an Indian mother) would be able to "clean" his/her lineage over three to four generations by urging his or her sons and daughters to marry Spaniards; individuals of lower castes, however, would never be able to clean up their blood enough due to the higher ratio of Indian or African blood.

Castro-Gómez's explanation of the overlapping spheres of class, ethnicity, and knowledge at the outset of the national project is of key importance for my argument about the articulation of aesthetic judgment as a form of symbolic violence from the upper to the lower classes. For Castro-Gómez, the discourse of the Enlightenment supposed not only the superiority of some citizens over others, but also the superiority of some forms of knowledge. Therefore, from the perspective of the colonial habitus of *pureza de sangre*, the quest for epistemological purity becomes a foundational symbolic violence against other (ethnic) forms of knowledge as a way to impose the hegemony of a particular social class.⁹ In Castro-Gómez's words, "[the discourse] worked as an apparatus of epistemic expropriation for the construction of the *criollos*' cognitive hegemony in the social space" (Castro-Gómez 2005, 18).

My contention is that the articulation of aesthetic judgements, regarding mass-produced music during the first half of the twentieth century, operated in a similar way, by asserting a "tastefulness superiority" exclusively owned by a white upper class. In this view, the aesthetic choices of the lower classes would be deemed indications of their poor taste and

⁹Castro-Gómez uses Bourdieu's term "habitus" to denote the way in which individuals incorporate into their psychological structure a series of cultural values pertaining to their "class condition;" those are the values that identify the individual as a member of determined social class.

ignorance, and therefore, of their epistemic and ethnic impurity. The colonial habitus of *pureza de sangre* appears as a determining factor in the constitution of collective identities around musical genres. Since the sixteenth century, as Castro-Gómez demonstrates, to be “white” was not a problem of skin color; it had to do with the staging of a cultural backdrop in the form of religious beliefs, social behaviors, clothing, and of course, musical practices. Music genres deemed white would be recognized as proper, decent, and civilized, hence the constant effort to clean them up from any kind of African or Indian vestiges. The whitening of a musical genre would mean it had become appropriate and had successfully moved up the social ladder.

Although the colonial habitus can be easily traced in twentieth-century practices of cultural consumption, it would not be accurate to transfer the notion exactly, from the late eighteenth century to the 1930s, without acknowledging the changes in the historical setting. Indeed, those historical transformations might help explain why the transition from nineteenth- to twentieth-century politics was so traumatic in Latin America. As mentioned before, the rise of a mass consumption society opened new possibilities to express citizenship by using different cultural practices. Such a potentially unrestricted approach to cultural expressions challenged the very foundations of the hierarchical order imposed by the colonial habitus. Thus, the convoluted political Latin American scenario in the early twentieth century would be read as a cultural battle between hegemonic and subaltern classes to either maintain or overthrow their distance in the colonial habitus’ hierarchical social structure.

1.1.4 Considerations on the Usage of the Term “Popular”

A remark has to be made about the use of the term “popular” in the present study. As George Yúdice notes in the introduction to the English edition one of García Canclini’s most recent books (2001), the terms *cultura popular* or *música popular* have traditionally been used by Spanish-speaking scholars to denote sets of practices performed outside the media circuits, clearly opposed to the common usage of the word “popular” in English. The confusion has created some conceptual untranslatability between authors writing in one or the other language. One possible solution to this problem would be to split musical expressions

according to their degree of mediation, using *música popular* only for those unmediated manifestations. Probably the Spanish term that more closely conveys the meaning of the English “popular music” is the expression *música comercial*, mostly used for genres of Latin pop like *balada* that are widely spread throughout Spain and Latin America from the 1960s on (Pacini Hernández 1998).

To replace *música popular* by *música comercial*, however, poses other problems that go beyond a simple concern with terminology. The expression *música comercial* usually has a negative connotation, meaning that the music is not “authentic” and its aesthetic value is rather doubtful. Furthermore, my informants in the field as well as most written sources use *música popular* to refer to genres like bolero and tango, which are undoubtedly mass-mediated musical styles. The issue becomes even more complicated when it comes to define the status of bambuco, which may be considered either a folk or a popular music genre.¹⁰ Differences in terminology express divergent points of view related to key aspects, such as legitimacy, aesthetic value, and music ownership, which cannot be overlooked. For most Spanish speakers, *música popular* denotes a “music of the people” (which is not necessarily the same as “music of the folk”) and its recognition as such frequently has affective as well as political connotations. In light of these considerations, the virtually universal acceptance of tango and bolero as *música popular* in the Spanish-speaking world indicates those mass-mediated genres had indeed undergone a long process of appropriation by the public, reaching a level of transcendence few commercially-driven musical genres ever attain.

The use of the term “popular” I am using throughout the study aims to convey both the English meaning, which include aspects of mass mediation and its commercial motivations, and the Spanish meaning that emphasizes the affective and the political aspects of its appropriation. The discussion on the ultimate meaning of the expression *música popular* will constantly be present in the narrative as an indication of its significance for the definition of boundaries between social classes.

¹⁰Conventional folklore anthologies like Abadía Morales (1977) classify bambuco as *música folclórica* disregarding any kind of mediation. Hernán Restrepo Duque, an author familiar with media and recordings, used the no less ambiguous term *música terrígena* (music from the land) to describe bambuco and other genres of Andean music in the limits between the folk and the popular (Restrepo Duque 1971). The conflict between different viewpoints on bambuco will be addressed in length in section 3.2.2.

1.1.5 Regional Versus National: Narratives of the Nation in Colombian Music

My interest in analyzing how musical practices articulate collective identities stems from my own revisionist approach to the emphasis on narratives of the nation in Colombian music historiography. In contrast to many studies analyzing music nationalism, whether in popular or in art music, carried out in large Latin American countries like Brazil or in Mexico (recent scholarship in popular music history in those countries include [McCann 1999](#); [Hayes 2000](#); [Turino 2003](#)), the topic of nationalism has received relatively small attention in Colombia. The reason for this apparent indifference derives from inner intricacies of the Colombian case. Unlike Mexico or Brazil, in Colombia scattered efforts never crystalized in the creation of a national art-music school of composition. With no major figures like Carlos Chávez or Heitor Villalobos, musicologists have payed little attention to the subject of nationalism and music. Efforts to include the topic of nationalism in art-music scholarship include Ellie Anne Duque's articles ([1984](#), [2000](#)) exploring the impact of the nationalist paradigm in Bogotá's National Conservatory during the early twentieth century; Jaime Cortés's work ([2000](#)) analyzing conflicts between academic and popular musicians in the 1920s and 1930s; Susana Friedmann's study ([2002](#)), a study focused on repertoires published in a Bogotano newspaper in the 1930s; and Fernando Gil Araque's study ([2003](#)) examining nationalism in Colombian music contests sponsored by Antioqueño industries between 1948 and 1951.

One of the main difficulties these studies have to confront stems from the lack of consensus about the limits between folk, popular, and art music, a conflict never really solved by intellectuals during the early twentieth century—and barely solved nowadays.¹¹ During the first half of the century, Western art music institutions such as the National Conservatory in Bogotá tenaciously opposed giving room to non-academic practices, to the point of banning the entry to students engaged in folk music practices. The academic musicians' inflexible attitude did not stop non-academic musicians from composing pieces, mainly inspired by Colombian Andean folk genres, according to art music aesthetic ideals but with little technical knowledge. In the 1930s, Bogotano art-music composer Emilio Murillo proposed adopting the Andean folk song as a vehicle for a nationalist agenda, an idea also furiously opposed by

¹¹On disciplinary problems in music scholarship in Latin America, see [González 2001](#).

the musical establishment, but to some extent adopted by some people in the middle classes and the media. This was, nevertheless, a concern occupying small social circles in hegemonic Andean cities, mainly Bogotá and Medellín, which passed largely unnoticed in provincial cities, whether located on the Andes (Popayán, Bucaramanga, etc.) or on the Caribbean Coast (Cartagena, Barranquilla, etc.). Such convoluted musical milieu had always been a problem for music historiography until recently, but also a problem of disciplinary boundaries for musicologists, folklorists, ethnomusicologists, and popular music scholars alike: it was never clear whose subject of study the music was supposed to be.

Only two books on Colombian art music history circulated during the twentieth century, and neither of them managed to adequately deal with the problem of defining cultural and disciplinary boundaries in music scholarship. José Ignacio Perdomo Escobar's book (1963), for years the only widely available study on the history of the music in Colombia, gives a very general historical overview beginning in the colonial period, but pays no attention to the topic of nationalism or to the disputes over national music occupying composers during the first decades of the century. Andrés Pardo Tovar's work (1966) has remained virtually unknown due to its limited circulation; it does provide a very short though insightful treatment of nationalism, but the author limits his view to the work of a few art-music composers and he does not problematize whether the music of non-academic composers would be properly labelled national or not. Books dealing with aspects of popular music history, on the other hand, including Jorge Añez (1951) and those by Hernán Restrepo Duque (1971, 1986), criticize the contempt with which academic musicians and institutions treated popular musicians, but are unable to explain the reasons for the dispute beyond the level of personal quarrels. Heriberto Zapata's catalog of Colombian composers (1962), a laudable effort to compile dispersed biographical data, has no criteria for distinguishing between conservatory-trained composers with a recognized output and amateur songwriters authoring a single popular song.

The troubles brought on by the absence of well-documented scholarship on the first half of the twentieth century are heightened by the well-intentioned but not very objective work of folklorists during the 1970s. Texts such as Davidson 1970, Mazuera 1972, and Abadía Morales 1977, compile musical traditions following the models of nineteenth-century

European folk anthologies. Imbued by romantic and nationalist ideals, they emphasize the stillness and continuity of folkloric traditions, and provide a rationale for the hegemonic position of Andean musical genres, especially bambuco, by means of linking them with Independence Wars' historical milestones and crucial characters.¹² The establishment of this folkloric canon coincides with the period known as the *Frente Nacional* (1958–1974), a time of tense peace marked by a spirit of reconciliation. The strategy of evoking history and traditions was also a way to downsize the impact of the mid-century violence by building a harmonic non-conflictive past.¹³

There are few studies on bambuco and other Andean music genres in either musicological or ethnomusicological literature, and they barely deal with historical matters, including the problem of nationalism. For example, Dick Koorn (1977) analyzes and accurately describes some folk Andean genres—bambuco, *guabina*, pasillo, and *danza*; Ana María Ochoa (1996) explores new transformations in Andean genres' music and lyrics, and the conflicts between tradition and change brought about in modern folklore contests; William Gradante (1999) studies music practices in the context of a popular Fiesta in the Tolima province; John Varney focuses again on a simple description of bambuco's style and history, taking for granted its national prominence (1999, 2001). Ana María Ochoa's article (1997) is probably the first serious exploration on the complicated relationship between bambuco, gender, and nation.

In spite of the lack of good historical sources and against what popular books on folklore assert about Andean music's national status, many Colombians would not accept folklorists' narrative as a historical narrative. Folklore texts themselves recognize the overwhelming significance of regional traditions within the national context, and it is well known that Andean music has rarely been practiced in any of the non-Andean regions (the Caribbean and Pacific coasts, the Orinoco's eastern plains, and the Amazon jungle). Even some natives of the Andean interior would find that bambuco's national symbolic importance has just

¹²For example, they carry stories about battles fought with the musical background of a Caucaño-Indian band playing bambucos (Mazuera 1972); General Francisco de Paula Santander (Simón Bolívar's forces' highest officer) is presented as a superb *tiple* performer and pasillo dancer (Davidson 1970); the Comuneros Insurrection's heroine Manuela Beltrán is featured as a *bundelera* (*bunde* dancer) (Perdomo Escobar 1963).

¹³I have to thank historian Gabriel Gómez for his valuable remark on the politics behind Frente Nacional's historiography (personal communication, April 19 2003).

been overstated. Although certainly some members of the middle class in Andean cities did try putting forward a nationalist agenda placing bambuco as a national symbol during the first half of the twentieth century, the idea never took shape completely.

The relatively small impact of that nationalist enterprise is crucial to understanding the drawbacks of Peter Wade's hypothesis on how music helped to articulate transformations in racial politics in Colombia during the second half of the twentieth century (Wade 2000). An expert in blackness and race in Latin America, Wade carried out an enlightening analysis of the shift in the representation of the nation in Colombian popular music, following the acceptance of Costeño *música tropical* (from Colombia's Caribbean coast) in the country's Andean interior. According to Wade, Andean Colombians' whiter identity (a *mestizo* identity, namely, the mixture of European and Indian cultures) symbolized by bambuco as a national icon, was transformed progressively to include a more ambiguous-though-modern blackness at the mid-century, symbolized by the rise of *música tropical* in the 1950s and *vallelenato* in the 1990s. The notion of national culture changed, and the Caribbean cosmopolitan identity permeated the traditionally dominant *mestizo* Andean identity. Wade's argument is based on a clear correlation between geography and race: Andean-white/*mestizo* and Caribbean-black. Although Wade may be correct in his argument about how music mirrored the particular circumstances after the mid-century, his analysis seems to take for granted two important points. First, that Andean identity was monolithic, and second, that there was a wide acceptance of bambuco's status as a national symbol. Although to some extent Wade acknowledges the drawbacks of both premises, he still builds his case based on them.

This dissertation aims to question Wade's premises using the notion of an unresolved conflict of hegemonic struggles as a key to problematize the firmness of the Colombian nation's representation in the sphere of music. Although I do not disagree completely with Wade's binary Andean-Caribbean opposition, I will explore the problematic nature of a unique Andean identity by showing the efforts of Medellín's elites and middle classes to mark their difference with Bogotá's. In the framework of struggles for hegemony, between both the two Andean powers and the local elites and the lower classes, I will discuss the limited success of agendas focused on establishing bambuco as a national symbol. With the purpose of reinforcing this situation, I will contrast the overriding popularity of recorded

foreign musical genres—tango and bolero—to bambuco’s somewhat sympathetic but rather indifferent reception. In the analysis of listening practices involving tango and bolero, I will explore the articulation of local and transnational collective imaginaries respectively, aiming to show how they ultimately outshined the authority of the bambuco’s national imagined community. The ultimate ineffectiveness of bambuco’s symbolic power illustrates the unfeasibility of the idea of national homogenization in a period of social unrest, and functions as a metaphor of the nation’s profound fragmentation and the historical weakness of the Colombian central state.

Demonstrating the conflictive nature of bambuco’s symbolic representation of the Colombian nation will certainly add new levels of complexity to Wade’s original hypothesis. In light of this situation, the transformations in racial politics Wade analyzes during the second half of the century appear to be less negotiated and much more aggressively resisted and contested than presented in his book.

1.1.6 Urban Musics: Tango and Bolero

Like many other Latin American metropolis today, Medellín is a city where many musical traditions have their own niche. Musical diversity, however, has a long and particular history in this city. For almost fifty years, from the late 1940s to the late 1990s, Medellín housed most of the country’s music recording businesses. Many musicians from other regions and from nearby countries settled in the city, awaiting an opportunity to enter the catalog of artists recording for the local labels. Ranging from genres of tropical music such as *cumbia* and *vallenato* to a local blend of Latin American genres known as *carrilera*, not leaving aside rock, pop, and heavy metal, the dynamic recording industry has catered to all kinds of music for several generations of Colombian aficionados.

In the middle of today’s multi-musical Medellín there are many people that keep alive a special fascination for old records and for certain genres of popular music that may be considered completely out of date in other places. It is normal to find informal groups of friends meeting once or twice a week after work either at private residences or at cafés to talk about music and records, and some of the groups have become legally-constituted memberships or-

ganizing conferences, spectacles, and concerts, and regularly issuing their own publications. Both formal and informal groups come together to discuss passionately particular musical genres (like the tango clubs *Asociación Gardeliana*, *Amigos del Tango*, and *Comité Cultural Tango Niquía*), specific performers (like the *Corporación Sonora Matancera de Antioquia*, fans of the famous Cuban ensemble), or certain very old popular music repertoires (like the *Club de Coleccionistas de Música Popular de Antaño*).

Medellín is a city of popular music connoisseurs effortlessly displaying an encyclopedic knowledge about singers and orchestras, about specific dates of recording and production, a city where many know by heart the lyrics of every old song. Such an overwhelming passion, driving incredible specificity on data regarding every song in a huge repertory, can very easily intimidate an ethnomusicologist interested in learning more about their enthusiasm for popular music oldies. Specialists, who are real authorities in particular repertoires, have their own radio shows devoted to their passion in one of the many local radio stations. That is the case of Gustavo Escobar Vélez, hosting a program in *Radio Bolivariana* and Omaira Rivera, with a show at *Latina Stereo*. It is not by chance that Medellín holds one of the largest collections of records of Latin American popular music in the world.¹⁴

Wherever one browses through the crowded streets, one notes the city is full of old music memorabilia. The smiling picture of the famous tango singer Carlos Gardel decorates the walls of many small bars and cafés, more often joined by the image of the Holy Virgin Mary, or by the photo and the banner of either the DIM or the Nacional, the local soccer clubs. Those numerous small shrines, however, cannot compete with real temples to the old songs' idols: places like Salón Málaga, Casa Cultural del Tango Homero Manzi, Patio del Tango, Taberna de Diógenes, and the Casa Gardeliana (see Figure 1). Many corners of the noisy downtown and crowded commercial boulevards such as the Calle 80 resonate with echoes of classic boleros in the voice of Puerto Rican star Daniel Santos, or with sorrowful tangos by Argentinean Oscar Larroca, interspersed with newly released *vallenatos* and 1960s' salsa tunes. Humble buses, transporting people back to their homes in the late afternoon when the working day is over, provide their passengers with a heartbreaking selection of old tangos

¹⁴The archive of the Fonoteca Departamental de Antioquia preserves the collection of the late researcher Hernán Restrepo Duque (1927–1991), considered one of Latin America's main experts on the topic.

on the radio; travellers usually hum the melody or sing the lyrics—certainly, it is worth pointing out that at the stations of the metro, the utmost symbol of pride and civilization for Medellín inhabitants, there is always European art music playing. In any case, those old popular music songs, most of them born in other places of Latin America, have become part of the local scene.



Figure 1: Framed images at Casa Gardeliana, Medellín, June 24 2004, on the commemoration of the 69th Anniversary of Carlos Gardel's death. Photograph by the author.

Tango and bolero enjoyed a golden era during the 1940s and 1950s, stimulated by the apogee of the driving Argentinean and Mexican recording and film industries. From the late 1920s to the 1950s, the Spanish-speaking market was inundated with Mexican and Argentinean cultural products that challenged, and sometimes even replaced the predominance of European and North American industries as suppliers of recorded music and movies. In Medellín, both genres, but above all tango, were appropriated in a process of consumption that started in the late 1920s and reached its peak in the 1950s. The details of this process and the meanings ascribed to the music in different moments will provide a picture of how a multilayered local identity was constructed.

Clearly, bolero and tango were not the only musical genres available in the mass-media market at the time in Medellín. I have chosen them for the present study, along with bambuco, with the purpose of analyzing their role in the symbolic construction of meaning

for Colombia's citizenry. Through processes of consumption in the city, these genres came to symbolize certain places and mind-sets that resulted in processes of distinction, drawing lines setting apart diverse groups and specific spaces in the urban landscape. Bambuco came to be a symbol associated with the land, the peasantry, and the nation. Tango emerged as an insignia of Medellín and its area of influence, the coffee-production region. Bolero became the symbol of a urban, shared cosmopolitan Latin American identity, and more recently, a very powerful marker of nostalgia.

1.1.7 Methodology: The Challenge of Reconstructing the Popular Past

Being mainly rooted in oral tradition, popular culture's historical dimension is a real challenge for the researcher, who has to find the way to solve the uncertainties of the oral and the randomness of any related written documentation. Sarah Thornton, whose article (1990) I am paraphrasing in the title of this section, provides some strategies the researcher might apply according to the nature of the sources, whether press articles, records sales, advertisements, or concert reviews. Whatever the strategy, the main problem stems from the irregularity and heterogeneity of the documentation, which varies enormously depending on the place, the historical moment, or the type of musical practice involved. For example, musical activities including dancing, listening to records or to radio shows, or even attending concerts, might leave few traces behind. The role of the researcher, therefore, is to evaluate and reinterpret critically the available data.

In this dissertation I am using three main types of data from primary sources: written accounts unfolding a narrative (articles and columns in newspapers and magazines; journalistic accounts; reviews of concerts, records, and radio shows; fiction writings), non-narrative printed advertisements (newspaper ads for records, concerts, movies, and radio shows; catalogs of recordings and songbooks or *cancioneros*, and oral history (recorded interviews, personal communications). Instead of using narratives simply as direct accounts of reality, I consider them "opaque" sources rather than "transparent" (Thornton 1990, 93). By this I mean that I do not assume journalistic accounts convey truth, but partial interpretations of reality in which omissions may be as important as what they actually say. My purpose

is, therefore, reading in between the lines of hegemonic discourses in order to locate and analyze regulations not only classifying and giving account of musical practices, but also marking class differentiations. Since this is not intended to be a comprehensive history of musical practices in Medellín during the period, my own narrative privileges events and trends related to each of the musical genres under study.

Secondary sources include non-academic popular music histories and accounts, many of them produced locally ([Restrepo Duque 1971,1986,1998](#) and [1985](#);[Rico Salazar 2000](#)); biographies of popular singers ([Lamarque 1986](#); [Ramírez 2004](#)); collection of essays on Medellín's popular culture ([Mora 1989](#) and [1986](#)); unpublished academic sources ([Silva 2003](#); [Gil Araque 2003](#); [Ocampo Vásquez 2001](#); [Londoño 2004](#)); histories of the radio ([Téllez B. 1974](#); [Pareja 1984](#); [Pérez Ángel and Castellanos 1998](#)); and histories of media and cultural industries in other Latin American countries ([Manrupe and Portella 1995](#); [Hayes 2000](#)). I conducted 16 recorded formal interviews, 6 non-recorded informal interviews, and many more informal conversations with aficionados when attending venues as a customer, or as spectator in some of the many activities organized by the music associations.

A general overview of four major local newspapers (*El Colombiano*, *El Diario*, *El Heraldillo de Antioquia*, and *La Defensa*) helped me build a chronological framework on which I hang three narratives dealing with the practice and appropriation of each of the genres. For the sake of organization, and aiming at facilitating a cross-examination of the three simultaneous historical processes, I divided each chapter in three major sections according to the decades: 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Certainly, the continuity of musical practices was not necessarily interrupted with the turn of the decade, but I believe such an arrangement gives the reader a better grasp of the whole picture.

For the historical reconstruction of each process I used different combinations of sources. In the chapter on bambuco, I relied on numerous written sources in newspapers and magazines, owing to the importance given to nationalist agendas among some members of the upper-middle classes, to which most columnists, critics, and commentators belonged. In the case of tango, I worked with fewer written reports but much more data coming from interviews and collected memories of local tango aficionados; in this case, the real challenge was separating a legendary mythical past from a historical past. A constant checking of dates

regarding advertisements helped me determine the significance of particular events. For the chapter on bolero, I worked mainly with radio-show reviews published in newspapers, ads from concerts and radio performances, and a series of interviews. I am especially grateful to my main informant in the field, bolero aficionado and collector of autographs Hernando Vélez Sierra, whose amazing memory and passion for the music helped me to put the whole picture together.

I include also the analysis of song lyrics and music excerpts to illustrate storylines, mind-sets, emotions, and images associated with each of the genres. Those analyses aim at providing the reader with concrete examples supporting my main points. Not being it the purpose of this dissertation, the small number of musical analyses are not attempts to typify different musical styles characterizing each genre. I acknowledge, however, the need for further musicological analyses of the bambuco, tango, and bolero repertoires. Although the survival of the genres seems all but endangered—old songs are nowadays constantly performed, recorded, transformed, and reinterpreted by young musicians as fusions with jazz and rock—they have mainly been studied in their lyrical content, leaving aside for the most part their musical features. Their constant popularity over the years, not only among old people but also among younger audiences, shows their permanent impact over collective memory and calls for closer attention by music scholars.

Visual materials like photographs and comics offer windows into the images of a long-gone historical past. Historical pictures come from the Archivo de Memoria Visual de Antioquia. Those archives hold the great collections of photographers Melitón Rodríguez (late 1800s to the 1930s) and Carlos Rodríguez, also known as Foto Reporter (early 1930s to 1970s), who recorded the visual history of a town in the process of becoming a city. All translations from Spanish included in this dissertation are by the author, unless specified otherwise.

The research was carried out during two 3-month visits to the field during the summers of 2003 and 2004, of which nearly half of the time was spent in Medellín and the other half in Bogotá. I consulted diverse types of archival material held at several depositories in both cities: in Medellín, the Fonoteca Departamental de Antioquia, the Archivo Histórico Departamental, and the Archivo de Memoria Visual housed at the Palacio de la Cultura Rafael Uribe Uribe; the newspaper and magazine collection at the Universidad de Antioquia's

central library, and the special archives of the Grupo de Investigación Valores Musicales Regionales at the same institution; the Sala Antioquia at the Biblioteca Pública Piloto; and the Archivo del Consejo de Medellín. In Bogotá, the newspaper collections of the Hemeroteca Luis López de Mesa at the Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango, and the Biblioteca Nacional; and the Centro de Documentación Musical, held at the latter.

1.2 HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK: COLOMBIA 1930-1953

The years 1930 and 1953 frame a difficult period in the history of Colombia, but also a time of economic growth and prosperity in cities like Bogotá and Medellín. Social and political unrest triggered the terrible years of partisan violence in rural areas known as *La Violencia* (1948–1953),¹⁵ which propelled the displacement of large populations of peasants into the urban centers. Medellín’s industrial peak (1940–1956) roughly coincides with *La Violencia*’s most tumultuous years.

The year 1930 marks a turning point in Colombian history due to a significant shift in politics and to the introduction of new technologies in mass communications, such as aviation and radio broadcasting, which stimulated the expansion of the notion of citizenship and increased the working-classes’ political awareness. In that year, the Liberal Party rose to power after more than forty years of Conservative hegemony. Conservative governments had maintained a rather unsteady peace after the end of the War of the Thousand Days (1900–1903), the last and greatest of the numerous nineteenth-century civil wars. By the end of the 1920s it was becoming clear that the prosperity reached during the decade was coming to an end, and the Conservative regime was troubled by the appearance of a new caste of agrarian and industrial workers that was starting to organize and to demand political participation.

Liberal Enrique Olaya Herrera, the first presidential candidate to campaign by touring the country in an airplane and by using the still precarious radio broadcasting, won the 1930 elections over a divided Conservative Party. The sixteen-year period that followed, from

¹⁵Different dates are given for the beginning and the end of *La Violencia*. According to historian Marco Palacios (2002), it started in 1946 and lasted until 1958 or 1960, but the intensity of the bloodshed declined after the military coup of 1953.

1930 to 1946, is known as the era of the *República Liberal*. It comprises four presidential periods characterized by the alternation between radical and moderate leaders of the Party, and a tense social and political atmosphere, both within the ranks of the Liberal and the Conservative Parties.

The economic effects brought by the Great Depression of 1929 and the growth of organized labor movements, among other factors, made it necessary to undertake drastic reforms that destabilized the pillars of power and affected the interests of the elites on both sides of the political spectrum. Liberal administrations put great emphasis on centralization by strengthening control over the collection of tax revenue and other economic regulations of the sort. These adjustments affected the autonomy of regional elites, used as they were to little or no state intervention in their affairs. Predictably enough, these policies were uneasily received in regional capitals such as Medellín, the center of Antioquia, Colombia's wealthiest *departamento*.¹⁶

As the axis of the coffee trade in a country whose national economy was almost entirely dependent on that business, Medellín was a hub of commercial activity and the headquarters of powerful family-owned trade businesses. Local elites had embarked on new industrial ventures since the beginning of the century, and the regional capital was undergoing an accelerated process of industrialization and urban expansion. In the 1920s, 48% of Colombia's external debt was invested in Antioquia, paying for infrastructure and other business-related issues (Reyes Cárdenas 1996a). By the mid-1930s, textile manufacturing plants, tobacco and chocolate factories, and breweries, had become an important part of Medellín and its satellite municipalities, attracting a large influx of former rural laborers in search of jobs.

Although regional antagonism was a pretty common issue in Colombia during the nineteenth century and perhaps even before, the rise of Medellín as the country's most important industrial center during the first decades of the twentieth century certainly stirred up the rivalry between *Cachacos* (people from Bogotá) and *Paisas* (people from Medellín, but in general from Antioquia; see section 2.2 for an explanation of this term). As the nation's capital, Bogotá was the center of political power, but its real control over the whole Colombian territory was actually very limited, as it continues to be even today due to its vastness

¹⁶A *departamento* is an administrative section in Colombia's centralist government model.

and its unique geographical characteristics. Along with this tension between center and periphery, replicated over and over again in different dimensions between the capital and other regional powers, the ardor of partisan allegiances and the conflict of interests within the parties themselves made it progressively difficult to manage the country. Both parties eventually split up between moderates and hard-liners, and a divided Liberal Party lost the presidential elections of 1946; Conservatives returned to power in the hands of the moderate leader Mariano Ospina Pérez (1946–1950).

The Conservative's takeover, far from ending turmoil and political instability, intensified even more the polarization of the country. Radical Conservatives initiated a strategy of continual harassment of Liberal workers aiming at “conservatizing” as many voters as possible and to expel all members of the opposition from jobs in the public sector. Political violence, already a problem under the authority of Liberal governments since the beginning of its rule, became more intense and brutal in the countryside. The period between 1946 and 1953 comprises the worst years of *La Violencia*. There are many interpretations of that tragic episode in Colombian history, and in fact, the topic has received so much attention that scholars in Colombia often refer to it as an entire field of study: Violentology. Mary Roldán offers a concise review of the different theories devised since the 1960s to explain this phenomenon (Roldán 2002, 22–29). According to Roldán, recent studies coincide in pointing out that “the escalation of partisan conflict between Colombia's two parties provided the catalysis for latent regional and local conflicts to come to the fore in the 1940s and created unprecedented opportunities for previously marginalized sectors to pursue divergent struggles in their pursuit of power.” For Roldán, “*La Violencia* represented a fundamental struggle—and ultimate failure—to impose a hegemonic regional project of rule predicated on notions of cultural, ethnic, and racial difference.”

The climax of the partisan confrontation came in 1948, after the assassination of Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, the radical Liberal leader whose populist agenda divided the party for the 1946 election. The incident ignited the fury of the masses who reacted by setting fire to Bogotá's downtown in an episode known as *El Bogotazo* (April 9, 1948). The aftermath of this event was harshly felt in every city and rural community, as the amount and viciousness of the killings increased everywhere. In November 1949, president Ospina Pérez declared the

State of Siege that brought to an end the guaranties of the democratic government. Official censure was imposed upon radio and newspapers, and the Congress was closed until new order; it remained shut down for a period of nine years.

Radical Conservative leader Laureano Gómez reached the presidency in 1950, after a remarkably violent election in which Liberals abstained on account of a pervasive sense of insecurity felt all over the country and the evident governmental repression against the exercise of free democratic participation. Under Gómez's regime (1950–1953), state-directed partisan violence became the rule. Conservative death squads known as *pájaros* or *contrachusmas*, armed by the police to fight back Liberal guerrillas resisting conservatization, started assaulting and massacring civilians indiscriminately in the countryside. By 1952, the government had completely lost any kind of control over the situation. Concerned with the rampant carnage in rural areas and Gómez's authoritarian rule, which had tried eradicating every kind of opposition, the leaders of both parties orchestrated a military coup that put General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla into power as the head of state (1953–1957).

At the end of this complicated era, Colombia had undergone striking changes; it went from being predominantly rural at the turn of the century, to becoming a “nation of cities” around the 1950s (Palacios and Safford 2002). Both violence and industrialization were important forces that drove thousands of people to the urban centers, and it was an intricate mixture of those two forces that, quite paradoxically one may say, brought certain economic prosperity during the period.¹⁷ As a key regional power in the country, Antioquia was profoundly shaken by all those changes. The next chapter will introduce historical and cultural particularities of the region and its capital, in order to illustrate the impact of contemporary issues including social unrest, political polarization, and rural migration in local society.

¹⁷The economic growth of the early 1950s may not be understood only in terms of the internal conflict, but in relation to current tendencies in the world economy. Governmental repression reduced labor-related actions such as strikes and then favored capitalist concentration. Nevertheless, public order disturbances in the countryside also affected the accumulation of capital (Vega Cantor and Rodríguez Ruiz 1990).

2.0 THE CITY AND THE REGION

Recent historical studies on Medellín consistently point out the profound contrast between the narratives about the city produced pre-1970s and post-1980s.¹ Historical records, chronicles, and private correspondence from the first period describe a city characterized by high standards of living and harmonic coexistence between social classes, fuelled by the thriving economic prosperity of the Antioqueño industry. This earlier Medellín is the so-called “Industrial capital of Colombia” and the “South-American Manchester.” It was also called “the city of the eternal spring,” alluding to its wonderful climate, and “la tacita de plata” (the little silver tea-cup), an ordered city, the home of a fervent Catholic society highly regarded for its entrepreneurial spirit. By the late 1980s, however, such an optimistic tone had disappeared from the narrative in the face of an acute social crisis. The city that appears in the stories and accounts of the 1990s is that of the fantastically wealthy and violent drug lords and their youth-assassin gangs, the sadly infamous *sicarios*, teenage killers raised in the miserable northeastern districts.² Nowadays, in the dawn of the twenty-first century, Medellín is a large, modern, and alluring metropolis of nearly 4 million inhabitants (see Figure 2), but also the place with the highest rate of non-political, economically-driven kidnappings in the world, where until very recently large sections of the city remained territories fought over by diverse guerrilla and paramilitary factions.³

“When did it all start to go so wrong?” is a question that has puzzled many observers inside and outside Medellín, and that has become a fundamental dilemma for scholars inquiring

¹For example Reyes Cárdenas 1996a, Botero Herrera 1996, Melo 1996, Betancur Gómez 2000, and Londoño-Vega 2002.

²For example Salazar 1991 and several films: Victor Gaviria’s *Rodrigo D: no futuro* (1989), Barbet Schroeder’s *Our Lady of the Assassins* (1999), and Emilio Maillé’s *Rosario Tijeras* (2005).

³Bogotá’s potentially explosive social situation, for example, has never reached the same levels of crisis.



Figure 2: Panoramic view of downtown Medellín, June 3, 2004. Photograph by the author.

into the city's history during the twentieth century. There is not a single nor simple answer, however, that can fully explain such a sudden shift both in the city's everyday reality and in its image. In trying to find some explanations, recent scholarship shows a new tendency to go beyond the nostalgia over the prosperous and peaceful old Medellín. For example, in her study on everyday customs during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (1890–1930), historian Catalina Reyes Cárdenas challenges the myth of the neat “*tacita de plata*” by demonstrating the insalubrious conditions of the city, exacerbated by factors such as the rapid growth of the population due to immigration, and the lack of adequate housing to receive large numbers of people (Reyes Cárdenas 1996a). Likewise, in his study of the history of the market district of Guayaquil (1894–1934) historian Jorge M. Betancur Gómez explores the district's uncleanness and impurity, but goes further by provocatively interpreting them as acts of resistance and rebellion against the rigidity of the establishment (Betancur Gómez 2000). What is at stake in these two examples is the existence of a long-disregarded history of potentially explosive social conflicts that for years remained subsumed under the sense of comfort and social welfare provided by the economic success of the coffee business and the local industry.

The history of Medellín cannot be fully appreciated without an examination of Antioquia's regional history. According to historian Marco Palacios, both the history and the culture of

this region have received far more attention from scholars than those of any other region or human group in Colombia (Palacios 1995). The rationale for most historical studies during the 1960s and 1970s was to explain the causes of its rapid economic development, presenting Antioquia as an example of successful modernization in a society of the so-called Third World. As in the case of Medellín, Antioquia's history has to be read critically to account also for the less positive aspects of that modernization process. Historians like Mary Roldán and Nancy P. Applebaum, for example, provide more realistic approaches by pointing out the inherently violent nature of capitalist-driven development (Roldán 2002; Applebaum 2003).

In the next section I will introduce the region through an overview of Antioqueño historiography. My purpose is to show the main threads of regional history that weave together aspects of the region's singular geographic setting, its patterns of colonization, and its population's ethnic origins that constitute a regional narrative of Antioqueño identity. It has often been argued that the particular geographical characteristics of the region were important factors in the development of certain cultural features that define Paisa identity. In addition, issues of ethnicity inscribed in the patterns of regional colonization have also come into play in the analysis of Antioqueño economic development. Therefore, more than a description of geography and customs, I will use historical data and studies on Antioqueño culture to illustrate how they are woven into a regional narrative.

2.1 ANTIOQUIA

The modern departamento of Antioquia is located in north-western Colombia, in the corner of the South American subcontinent and very close to the Panama isthmus. Its territory comprises the highlands of the western and the central Andean ranges or cordilleras, the lowlands of the valleys, including a section of the tropical rainforest over the Atrato river to the west, and the territories of the Urabá gulf on the Caribbean coast (see Figure 3).

Antioquia was a relatively unimportant province under the administration of the Spanish colonial government because its mountainous terrain posed an obstacle to the establishment of new settlers: the production of food in the steep slopes of the cordillera and the construction of roads for communication were very difficult. The value of this isolated region



Figure 3: Antioquia's location in Colombia's territory. Map by artist Diego Mendoza.

lay in the exportation of its mineral resources, especially gold. By the end of the sixteenth century, most of the native population had already been eliminated either by the Spaniards or by European diseases, and the survivors congregated in several centers under the control of the Spanish governors. By then, the scarcity of the native labor had already led to the importation of African slaves, introduced around 1550 to work in the mines. Extensive racial mixture occurred from 1550 through 1851, the year of manumission, when the number of slaves amounted to only 0.7 per cent of the population. Population records show less evidence of black presence in the province during the nineteenth century than during colonial times ([Patiño Millán 1988](#), quoted in [Londoño-Vega 2002](#)), but they most likely overlooked the assimilation of blacks through racial mixture. Nevertheless, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present, Antioquia's population has been acknowledged as predominantly white.

Antioquia became much more important after the wars of independence. During a short period in the nineteenth century in which the country experimented, rather unsuccessfully, with federalist administrations (1858–1885), it enjoyed the status of a sovereign state. The numerous civil wars that characterized the Colombian nineteenth century were mostly fought in battlefields outside the region, and the relative calm and peacefulness of the province facilitated its economic development. In 1825 the capital of the province was changed from the old town of Santa Fe de Antioquia, located in the Cauca valley, to the relatively new city of Medellín.⁴ The change responded to economic pressures: by the end of the eighteenth century, Santa Fe had lost its strategic position due to a modification in the trade routes, while Medellín had evolved into an important and dynamic urban center located at the crossroads of new routes penetrating into recently occupied territories. The settlement of large sections of the province dates precisely from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century migrations. A slow but constant influx of peoples, especially into the southern frontiers, populated the steep slopes of the central cordillera that until then had remained empty or barely occupied. This migratory current, by far the most studied and celebrated process of expansion of agricultural frontiers in Colombian historiography, is commonly known as

⁴The city was founded in 1675, quite late compared with other important urban centers such as Cali (1536) and Bogotá (1538).

the *colonización antioqueña*.⁵ In 1905 some of those new territories were kept apart to form the new departamento of Caldas, which in 1966 was subdivided again to create two other departamentos, Quindío and Risaralda. The term *Paisa* is commonly used to identify all inhabitants of the territories of the Antioqueño expansion.⁶

The soil of the newly settled lands of the *colonización antioqueña* turned out to be superb terrain for the cultivation of coffee, which was introduced in the country around the middle of the nineteenth century. The businesses created around the production and trade of the coffee bean became the engine of the local economy, stimulating the further expansion of the cultivated lands, the creation of new settlements, and the opening of new bridle paths cutting across the cordillera. Eventually the construction of a railroad connecting the region more effectively to the seaports on the Caribbean (and years later to Buenaventura, on the Pacific coast) became indispensable for the coffee trade. The rough topography of the region created so much trouble for the engineers and builders that it took more than fifty years to complete the entire line of the Ferrocarril de Antioquia (1874–1929). Although a first section of the line, connecting Medellín with nearby towns, was working as early as 1914, it wasn't until 1929 that the opening of a huge tunnel in the site of La Quiebra established the connection between the city and Puerto Berrío, the closest port on the Magdalena river.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the bulk of the coffee production in the country came from the large haciendas of Santander and Cundinamarca, located in the eastern cordillera. Slowly, at the turn of the century, the map of the coffee economy started to move towards the west, and by the 1920s the Antioqueño region had become the new center of production and trade. In this area, now commonly known just as the *zona cafetera*, the Coffee Region, small and mid-size properties predominated over large haciendas, and small landowners were the main coffee producers. This circumstance placed Antioqueño peasantry in a relatively better

⁵Historian Nancy Appelbaum correctly observes that the simple translation “Antioqueño colonization” is somewhat misleading because the meaning of the Spanish term *colonización* is closer to the English “settlement.” This is not a minor point, because “colonization” has some negative undertones that are for the most part veiled in the Spanish use of the term. Applebaum notes that there are two different positions in both popular and scholarly accounts of the *colonización antioqueña* that she calls the “white legend” and the “black legend.” The former sees the process as a conquest of a forested wilderness, while the latter notes that there were other people occupying the areas before the civilizing impulse of Antioqueños. The use of white and black by the author deliberately denotes the importance of race in the analysis of the subject (Applebaum 2003, 12).

⁶Hereafter I will use the terms Antioqueño and Paisa interchangeably.

economic and social condition compared to that of other agrarian workers in different regions, still subject to their masters under contracts of semi-servitude (Palacios 1995). Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the health of the coffee business has always been rather uncertain because it depends completely on fluctuations in the international market. The regional economy has been severely affected many times by abrupt variations in the price of coffee, and today it is still trying to recover from a crisis that started in the mid 1980s. During the first half of the twentieth century, the counterbalance to this riskiness was Antioquia's industrial development, which helped to compensate for the coffee trade's inherent instability until the 1970s and 1980s.

The accumulation of capital in Antioquia, which had started with extensive gold mining and continued with coffee, allowed the formation of important trade channels that helped to establish numerous industrial businesses. Starting in the early 1900s and going on well into the 1950s, factories and industrial plants mushroomed in the suburbs of Medellín. Large textile factories were established in small towns of the narrow Aburrá Valley (nowadays incorporated into Medellín's metropolitan area), becoming the region's main industrial sector, which by the late 1960s was ranked as the most modern and efficient in South America. Breweries, chocolate processors, soft-drink and cigarette factories, cement plants and other smaller businesses completed the industrial panorama that attracted thousands of jobless workers to the region when the frontiers of settlement began to close to new migrations or in the many periods in which the coffee business went through hard times.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the dynamics of regional economic development had prompted a process of industrialization and urbanization of the Aburrá Valley. The modern city that emerged there was populated by a half-rural, half-urban population facing rapid and profound changes. Before moving further into the history of the city and the changes its society underwent during this critical period, I will briefly discuss regional traditions and stories that define Antioqueño cultural identity. The risk is, of course, stereotyping Paisa identity unnecessarily, but I think it important to point out the images and ideas Antioqueños and non-Antioqueños generally associated with this human group. Looking into the origins of historical accounts rationalizing virtues and biases attributed to Paisas will help to later locate the conflictive relations between the region and the nation and within certain sectors of local society.

2.2 NARRATIVES OF PAISA'S REGIONAL IDENTITY

Many of the elements that identify contemporary Paisa identity probably appeared during the nineteenth century as part of the narrative of the *colonización antioqueña*. Images and ideas associated with the colonization enterprise and the coffee production and trade have acquired a certain epic tone that permeates many accounts and constitutes an important thread of the regional history. The figure of the *arriero* (muleteer), who travels with his beasts loaded with coffee sacks across the hazardous paths carved on the edges of the cordillera, resembles other mythical stereotypes like that of the Argentinean gaucho, the Mexican charro, and the North American cowboy. In fact, the worldwide-known figure of Juan Valdéz, trademark of the Federación de Cafeteros de Colombia (Colombian Federation of Coffee Producers), is precisely a standardized personification of the Antioqueño *arriero* accompanied by Conchita, his loyal mule. The iconic image of the *arriero* (see Figure 4) is present everywhere in Antioqueño culture and constantly celebrated in many different ways. One celebratory venue is the Festival de la Trova, an annual competition of improvisational folk poetry held in Medellín, in which all participants, wearing the *arriero* outfit, demonstrate their skill to answer the versified challenges improvised by their opponents.

Proud of their cultural heritage and highly aware of their distinctiveness within the country, Paisas define themselves by asserting certain good qualities as well as marking their difference against the backdrop of other Colombian regional identities. Antioqueño culture and traditions are the subject of numerous accounts describing distinctive uses and regional customs such as their local accent and particular vocabulary, their cuisine, their folklore, and their distinctive sense of humor. Paisas characterize themselves as friendly, uncomplicated, witty, and good-humored people, resilient in overcoming obstacles. Both insiders and outsiders contend that Paisas are notorious for their driving entrepreneurial instinct, which supposedly comes out in the form of a quite incredible ability to do business under any circumstance. In Colombia, Antioqueños are known for being very pragmatic people, allegedly much more interested in trade and commerce than in politics or partisan affiliations, and confident in their long tradition of efficient technocratic administrators who run public offices as if they were private companies. In the sphere of gender politics, Antioqueño



Figure 4: “Pedro P. Arenas,” photograph by Melitón Rodríguez, 1900. Archivo Foto Rodríguez. Archivo de Memoria Visual de Antioquia, Palacio de la Cultura Rafael Uribe Uribe, Medellín.

society has the reputation of being strongly patriarchal. In spite of some positive changes in the relationship between gender and power in Colombia during the last fifty years, it is a common complaint among women that machismo, so widespread among Colombian males in general, remains a very pronounced flaw among Paisa men.

Paisas’ archetypical depiction has some dark sides too, especially vis-à-vis their alleged natural talent for money-making. For example, they are sometimes accused of being inherently unscrupulous and crooked, with the success of some Antioqueños in the illegal business of cocaine trafficking in the last twenty years being used as a case in point. After making clear that not only Antioqueños but many individuals with different cultural backgrounds have benefited from the same business, Paisas usually defend themselves by arguing that those claims come from *Cachacos* and *Costeños*’ envy and contempt.⁷ Although this is a contemporaneous example, questioning the sources and the strategies through which Paisas have

⁷The labels themselves are very telling about the tensions among these three different regional stereotypical depictions. Cachacos or Rolos are names usually given to Bogotanos, but Cachaco generally means someone very educated and well-dressed though rather pretentious and dim-witted. The term Costeños is used to identify the inhabitants of the Caribbean coast, but as Peter Wade observes (Wade 2000), it also implies black descent and thus it has all the negative connotations commonly attached to blackness.

acquired their business wealth has been a strong pattern tendency since the early twentieth century.

Another common topic in the regional narrative, sometimes connected to the Paisas' mercantile spirit, deals with the constitution and origins of the *raza antioqueña*, the Antioqueño race.⁸ Until the 1950s Antioquia was considered socially and ethnically much more homogeneous than any other region in the country, and it was common to find references to the *raza antioqueña* as a distinctive, predominantly white, ethnic stock. The myth of whiteness and race purity has always been particularly strong in Antioquia, even if grounded in *mestizaje*, a term that denotes that notion of racial and cultural mixture defining most societies in Spanish-speaking Latin America. African and aboriginal heritages are reduced to almost nothing in the Antioqueño imaginary of *mestizaje*. The absence of racial mixture is evidently impossible, according to both historical records and simple common sense; nonetheless, the existence of the myth in itself reveals a process of extensive miscegenation that whitened the black component dominating the region during the colonial past (Wade 1997). Aside from disregarding blackness as a chief constituent of the *raza antioqueña*, there is an aspect commonly addressed in the discussion on ethnicity and race that tries to find in them the origins of Paisas' money-making talent. For example Everett Hagen's classic study *On the Theory of Social Change: How Economic Growth Begins* (1962) includes an essay speculating that the entrepreneurial spirit comes from Antioqueños' Basque descent. Other scholars have raised the possibility of a Jewish ancestry in this context, triggering intense debates (Twinam 1980; Mesa Bernal 1988).

Strong religious beliefs and a keen sense of moral values are other important aspects traditionally ascribed to Antioqueño culture. Around the second half of the nineteenth century, Antioquia became an important stronghold for the Catholic church. Indeed, up to the 1960s Antioqueños were seen as the most Catholic group in a country itself considered as one of the most Catholic in South America (Londoño-Vega 2002). Some attempts to conciliate material and spiritual aspects in Antioqueño culture include Gutiérrez de Pineda's discus-

⁸On the problem of the use of the term race in Colombia and in Antioquia in particular, see the introductions to the books by Wade (1997, 2000) and Applebaum (2003). It is clear that by *raza antioqueña* what is meant is not race but rather ethnicity; however, it is important to note that it has always explicitly been discussed in terms of race.

sion on how Christian values are compatible with Paisa mercantile mentality (1975); other scholars such as Luis Fajardo move further along the same line, connecting values, beliefs, and entrepreneurship by describing Antioqueño pragmatism in terms of a Protestant ethic (1966). In a related insight, geographer and historian James Parson identifies Antioqueños as those who call themselves “the yankees of South America” (Parson quoted in Wade 1997, 104). This parallel underlines the high value attributed among Paisas to the North American style capitalist free enterprise and its intrinsic white-civilizing endeavor. It also sheds some light on the dynamics behind the accusations of Paisas’ sense of superiority in relation to other, less economically developed or darker-skinned human groups in Colombia.

2.3 MEDELLÍN: FROM THE SMALL VILLAGE TO THE INDUSTRIALIZED TOWN (1900-1930)

Well up into the second decade of the twentieth century, thanks to the habitual coexistence of farming estates and city houses, Medellín’s elements of rural life blended easily together with urban features. After all, the city had emerged as an agricultural enclave in one of the few flat locations to be found between the peaks of the central cordillera. The fertile Aburrá Valley sits in a rather narrow canyon that runs north to south irrigated by the Medellín river. It is an irregular terrain located at 1,538 meters above sea level (5,046 feet), marked by scattered hills and framed by stunningly steep green mountains, with a pleasant average temperature of 24° C (75° F) all year round. The city emerged progressively from a network of small townships disseminated across the valley, and larger municipalities came after the mid century to integrate what it is now Medellín’s metropolitan area (Medellín, Itagüí, Sabaneta, La Estrella, Caldas, Bello, Barbosa, Copacabana, and Girardota).

The city consolidated as the regional enclave for commercial activities during the nineteenth century. Population statistics from the 1880s to the late 1920s show that the city’s population increased in a dramatically fast pace, tripling over a period of less than fifty years (Table 1).⁹ Such a demographic explosion was the outcome of a sustained migratory flow of peoples, most of them moving from Antioqueño small towns and rural estates into the

⁹Costanza Toro gives a slightly different figure for the 1905 census: 59,815 (Toro 1988).

provincial capital. The small town rapidly became a city, and the traditional network of social relations expanded as it was compelled to receive those new citizens.

Year	Population
1883	37,237
1905	54,093
1928	120,044

Table 1: Population growth in Medellín, 1883–1928. Source: [Reyes Cárdenas 1996a](#) and [Reyes Cárdenas 1996b](#)

Medellín’s elite basically comprised tradesmen, entrepreneurs, and high ranks of the local clergy. The region’s gold-mining wealth, extracted first by slaves and later by poor miners, had ended up in the hands of family-run commercial houses and local traders, some of whom later became the capitalists behind the industrial explosion. The connections traders established with European and North American commercial houses to bring commodities to the region were used as channels for coffee exportation as well. That is how traders easily became coffee barons at the end of the nineteenth century. Contrary to other urban elites in the country (such as those from Bogotá, Popayán, or Cartagena) with a stronger hierarchical social structure inherited from traditional Spanish-colonial blood ties, Medellín’s elite was to a certain extent open to anybody who had forged a fortune. New wealthy people were certainly accepted into the elite with no small misgivings, but the local entrepreneurial mentality allowed old aristocrats to include them in their social circle. Moreover, the economic instability of the first decades of the twentieth century jeopardized many old fortunes and spurred the creation of new ones, a circumstance that triggered an important process of social mobility so wittily described by Tomás Carrasquilla in novels such as *Grandeza* (1910). Rich newcomers legitimized their admission into such privileged circles by renouncing their own *campesino* (folk) manners in order to adopt those from the “elegant and Europeanist local elite” ([Reyes Cárdenas 1996b](#)).

Apart from wealth, making a successful career in the clergy was a passport of entry into the city's upper ranks, because the Catholic church was powerful and extremely influential. It played the role of guardian of the city's moral conventions, deciding on what was or was not accepted as proper behavior. For Antioqueño families, traditionally very large, it was a matter of great pride to have priests or nuns among their members. Until quite recently it was very common to find several priests and nuns among a single household's offspring.

Another good way to climb the social ladder was to pursue a good education. Useful knowledge and technical skills were highly appreciated in the city as fundamental tools for industrial and economical development, hence the prominence of the Escuela de Minas, the local school for engineers.¹⁰ Its pupils were also expected to develop a managerial expertise to be able to run their own engineering firms, and the school's low tuition fees and the availability of several scholarships made education relatively affordable to poor but ambitious students. These champions of progress, together with doctors, lawyers, and other professionals, began to consolidate a narrow but important middle class around the 1930s.

Instability characterized the life of the middle classes, however. If adversity could hit hard the lives and properties of the elites, it definitely dealt a more severe blow to those beneath them. Middle-class families managed to survive with meager resources to educate their children, follow the latest fashion, and maintain an adequate standard of living, always trembling on the verge of falling from their recently acquired position. More than a few looked for protection by making political alliances, seeking recommendations for employment or scholarships for their children in return for their support of certain politicians or parties. This new social group came to share a social space, between the elites and the lower classes, earlier occupied exclusively by local artisans, whose social position was lowered, especially after the 1940s.

In 1906, artisans constituted 10.6 % of Medellín's total population ([Reyes Cárdenas 1996a](#)). Cabinetmakers, metallurgists, stone carvers, shoemakers, and tailors among oth-

¹⁰Writing about architecture and urbanism in the city, historian Fernando Botero points out the predominance of engineering and local pragmatism regarding non-profitable matters. For decades, engineers were in charge of planning and building; the school of architecture (Universidad Nacional, 1946) was established more than sixty years after the Escuela de Minas (1887). The famous architect Karl Brunner, who in 1940 laid out the city's urban planning, had courteously recommended the formation of the school on account of the chaotic outline and unattractive appearance of many buildings ([Botero Herrera 1996](#)).

ers constituted a group of recognized and respected craftsmen, who were appreciated as artisans. More economically and politically independent than the new middle class, some of them openly declared themselves anticlerical freethinkers and freemasons, claims that irritated church officials and caused artisans more than a little trouble. Literary and artistic gatherings formed around artisan workshops, such as those created at the turn of the century in Melitón Rodríguez's marble-carving studio and Camilo Vieco's carpentry shop.¹¹ Both Rodríguez and Vieco were to become the founders of important dynasties of photographers, musicians, architects, and sculptors. Many small workshops were reduced or simply disappeared after the introduction of industrialization, and their owners either became salaried workers or helped to swell the ranks of the unemployed. Around the 1920s several former craftsmen began to embrace socialist ideals that drew them closer to working-class members, still unprotected by labor laws and vulnerable to the new industrialists' voracity.

Most of the city's emergent industrial proletariat population had a *campesino* background. During the first years of industrialization, the working class maintained strong connections with the countryside, manifested in labor statistics recording high levels of absences on Mondays, following weekend visits to their families in the countryside.¹² By the mid-1930s, lack of discipline, irregularity, and labor rotation were already under control thanks to an effective paternalist system of benefits and moral checks on codes of behavior in which the church's power played a key role. Antioqueño entrepreneurs established a solid network of group activities in and outside the workplace through the foundation of institutions called *Patronatos*. The workers' morality and proper behavior were strictly supervised, especially in the case of females, who accounted for the majority of the labor force in textile factories until the mid-1940s.¹³

The church exerted a more direct regulatory force by its role in the creation of labor organizations, which enjoyed the enthusiastic support of Conservative workers. Acción Social Católica (Catholic Social Action), a collection of institutions that touched upon diverse

¹¹Unfortunately there is no comprehensive study that analyzes Medellín's artisans as a class as Catalina Reyes briefly does in her history of everyday life between 1890 and 1930 (1996a, 79–94). Interesting studies have been done though about particular members of the group including photographer Melitón Rodríguez Escobar (the sculptor's son) (Escobar and Arango de Méndez 1985).

¹²Botero Herrera 1996.

¹³On moral controls and gender issues in Antioqueño industries see Arango 1991 and Farnsworth-Alvear 2000.

aspects of the labor world, was established by episcopal conferences held in 1908, 1912, and 1913 under the Vatican's patronage. Its purpose was to put the clergy closer to the life of the working classes, as a way both to counteract modern individualism and to neutralize the diffusion of socialist doctrines, deemed dangerously anticlerical and hostile to the preservation of private property.¹⁴ Following the leadership of diverse religious orders, mainly the Jesuits, organizations such as night-time schools, savings banks, labor exchanges, libraries, labor unions, sport groups, were set up. These associations had a stronger impact on workers in manufacturing than on those in the workshops and transportation, who preferred to join secular associations. Such a combination of religious beliefs, tradition, politics, and labor-related organizations characterizing Medellín's industrialization has led historians to say that the city experienced a "traditional modernization" or a "modernization without modernity" (Reyes Cárdenas 1996b, 429).¹⁵

As a regional capital dominated by entrepreneurs and priests, Medellín—and Antioquia for that matter—was predominantly Conservative when it came to politics. Three Antioqueños served as presidents during the period of Conservative Hegemony: Carlos E. Restrepo (1910–1914), Marco Fidel Suárez (1918–1922), and Pedro Nel Ospina (1922–1926). The fall of the República Liberal brought to power another Antioqueño, Mariano Ospina Pérez (1946–1950). Yet in accordance with Paisa traditional bipartisan pragmatism and technocratic approach to power, most of them were moderate Conservative leaders. Liberal Antioqueño politicians, nonetheless, had also played important roles in national political affairs. For example, that was the case with the most important Liberal leader in the War of the Thousand Days, Rafael Uribe Uribe, senator of the republic until his assassination in 1914, and of journalist Fidel Cano, the highly respected head of the Liberal newspaper *El Espectador*. Socialist and Communist ideas had some success among certain sectors of the organized workers until the late 1920s, but the strength of the two traditional parties and the pressure of the church proved more powerful; Liberal radicals absorbed most militants of the left in the course of the 1930s.

¹⁴Archila Neira 1988.

¹⁵The same idea of "modernization without modernity" has been advanced by Consuelo Corredor Martínez for Colombia as a whole in the context of social conflict and economic modernization. Daniel Pecault defines Colombian modernization as "modernity in a negative way" (Corredor Martínez 1992 and Pecault 1990 cited in Martín-Barbero 2001, 250).

Antioqueño patriarchal society had rigorously defined roles for women and worked hard to control the female body. Women were taught that chastity and purity were their most important and cherished possessions, without which they would be permanently excluded from living a decent life. The most important role was that of the virtuous Catholic wife, the center of the family, who had to stay at home taking care of household chores and the children's education. Motherhood was the foundation of society, and the nurturing mother was the keystone, the central figure around whom the family came together. If for any reason motherhood was not the chosen option, then the alternatives were secluded spinsterhood, holy orders, or prostitution. With the introduction of industrialization, the appearance of a female worker unable to fulfill those traditional roles became a matter of great concern, hence the establishment of moral controls and *Patronatos*.¹⁶

In contrast, male sexual freedom was not only tolerated but also celebrated and implicitly encouraged as a demonstration of manhood and healthy free will.¹⁷ Although Catholic doctrine taught otherwise, men without female friends outside the home could be subjected to scorn and suspicion. Some men with strong religious convictions stayed away from public women; others opted to “become serious” and stop attending brothels after getting married.¹⁸ Nevertheless, many male gatherings took place in cafés and bars where prostitutes offered their services. The bohemian night, for example, involved respectable men coming together in an underworld inhabited by homosexuals, prostitutes and other people excluded from society through inflexible gender roles or extreme poverty. Alcohol consumption was a keystone of male socialization; moreover, immoderation in drink was often used to demonstrate virility and independence from female influence. Men, therefore, were allowed to be transgressors, to mix even if momentarily and to drink and talk with men and women of other social strata during the night. Numerous commercial establishments located in different districts of the

¹⁶Antioqueño industries imposed tight regulations over the female body since the *mujer obrera* (female worker) was classified as a creature in danger who needed to be protected. With the intention of preserving both morality and discipline, textile mills like Fabricato required their workers to remain unmarried and childless in order to keep their jobs (Arango 1991). A worker who failed to comply, like the heroine of Jaime Sanín Echeverri's novel (1985), not only lost her job but often had no way to redeem herself vis-à-vis society.

¹⁷See for example the congratulatory tone with which male licentiousness is recalled in Jorge Franco's autobiographical essay (Franco Vélez 1984).

¹⁸I frequently heard expressions like “to become serious” (*volverse serio*, *ajuiciarse*, *aquietarse*) in interviews and informal conversations held with men in Medellín.

city, such as Guayaquil and Lovaina, were the meeting places of those encounters, allowing men to transgress boundaries while keeping the sanctity of the household untouched.

2.4 THE BLOOMING OF THE MODERN CITY (1930–1953)

Between 1930 and 1953, the processes of urbanization and industrialization made the city expand at an even faster rate than before. If at the turn of the century the city had tripled its population in a period of approximately fifty years, it tripled again in the course of a little more than twenty years (see Table 2).

Year	Population
1928	120,044
1938	168,000
1951	358,000

Table 2: Population growth in Medellín, 1928–1951. Source: [Reyes Cárdenas 1996b](#) and [Roldán 2002](#).

The appeal of salaried jobs in the industrial sector still attracted people to the city, but the impact of violence on peasant populations in the countryside began to play a significant role in strengthening the flow of urban immigration. Although Medellín’s industrialists followed Fordist policies in maintaining good wage levels that allowed their workers to participate even if modestly in a modern consumer economy, unemployment skyrocketed and labor became inexpensive; between 1939 and 1945, workers’ salaries were at their worst. And predictably, there was a huge contrast between these wages and the capitalists’ profits. At the end of the 1940s, only one tenth of 1% of the Colombian population controlled 44% of the earnings received during a period that contemporary observers consider the most profitable in the history of the national economy ([Roldán 2002](#), 53). The gap that separated the rich from the poor widened to obnoxious proportions. In any case, businesses were at their best in Medellín and, at least on the surface, the city enjoyed a radiant era of happiness and prosperity.

Even at the beginning of the century, when Medellín was still a small city lost in the middle of the mountains and isolated from the rest of the country, it had quite a remarkable intellectual life. Numerous local magazines and literary supplements, such as the periodical published by the literary movement known as *Los Panidas*, provided for a small but highly sophisticated and well-educated minority. Most of such independent publications were ephemeral, however, due to the poor sponsorship given to non-commercial publications. In contrast, newspapers progressively increased readership and were printed and distributed much more regularly. Several newspapers were launched in the 1910s and 1920s to keep the ever-growing audience of new city-dwellers informed. As the main form of partisan propaganda, each newspaper had a clearly defined political affiliation: Medellín's most influential and widely read newspaper was the moderate-Conservative *El Colombiano*; the confessional newspaper *La Defensa* was the organ of radical Conservatives and church officials. Liberal newspapers played an even more important role for the Party, since they did not have the privileged stages of the school and the church for their ideas. Among the most influential Liberal newspapers were *El Diario*, *El Heraldo de Antioquia* and the satirical weekly *El Bateo*. Workers' associations published their own bulletins (for example, Acción Social Católica's *El obrero católico*) and private companies such as Coltejer and Fabricato, the largest textile factories, issued journals aimed either at their own employees or at the general public (*Lanzadera* and *Gloria*, respectively).

The arrival of the cinema at the end of the nineteenth century marked the onset of mass entertainment in the city. Several attempts to create a local film industry died out after disastrous economic results. The only local production to have some success was *Bajo el cielo antioqueño* (*Under Antioqueño's Sky*), a silent movie filmed in 1925 by a rich maverick who convinced the city's elite to participate as cast members. Rather than a movie, it was a compilation of social gatherings in the countryside, masquerade balls at the exclusive Club Unión, and horse parades. Cine Colombia, a local company established in 1927, became the country's largest distributor of North American movies. Notwithstanding its failure as a Latin Hollywood, Medellín became a wonderful place for the consumption of foreign films. By 1945, high movie attendance had made motion pictures the most profitable cultural

spectacle in the city.¹⁹ Medellín's most important theater was the Teatro Junín (Medellín's tallest skyscraper, Torre Coltejer, stands today in its place); when inaugurated in 1924, it was the seventh largest roofed theater in the world, a testimony to Antioquia's economic power and great appreciation for mass entertainment (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: Teatro Junín around 1950. Photograph by Foto Reporter (Carlos Rodríguez). Archivo de Memoria Visual de Antioquia, Palacio de la Cultura Rafael Uribe Uribe, Medellín.

The introduction of radio broadcasting in the 1930s was a major improvement in the communication between different regions of the country, isolated as they were due to the formidable natural barriers of the Andean peaks. Experimental radio transmissions had started in the late 1920s, but Bogotá's official HJN was the first formal station, inaugurated on September 5, 1929. Licenses to commercial stations were promptly issued, and in 1931 Medellín's first station, HKO, initiated operations. In 1935, while two other stations were launching their services in the city, a pool of local industries entered the business. Local entrepreneurs had rightly recognized the new medium's potential for advertisement, and by the early 1940s the industrialists' drive had positioned Medellín as the country's Mecca for commercial radio broadcasting.

At the beginning of 1940 there were seven radio stations operating in the city, three of

¹⁹See [Duque Isaza 1992](#).

them transmitting on both long- and short-wave frequencies. In the late 1940s the most powerful local stations, *La Voz de Antioquia* (Antioquia's Voice) and *La Voz de Medellín* (Medellín's Voice), became the foundations of the country's two major media networks, Caracol and RCN. For Medellín's inhabitants, radio became a main source for entertainment and news combined with commercial interests and political propaganda. Stations set up free-admission, small- to medium-size theaters as radio studios from which to transmit their live music programs. During the 1940s and mid 1950s, large radio stations had enough money to support their own orchestral ensembles, similar to, though smaller, than those big-band orchestras used at the time for radio broadcasts in the United States, Mexico, and Cuba. Star singers poured into the city from all corners of the Spanish-American world, performing in glamorous radio programs with the accompaniment of their own ensembles or the house orchestra. After the national introduction of television in 1954, aired exclusively from Bogotá, radio broadcast lost some of its initial attractiveness and the focus of show business moved to the capital.²⁰

Local entrepreneurs began breaking into the recording business in 1949, and numerous record labels were founded by former agents of large international companies such as RCA Victor and Odeon. Record labels such as Lyra (Sonolux), Atlantic, Verne, Zeida, Silver, and other firms based in Bogotá, Cartagena, and Barranquilla either negotiated licenses with transnational labels to reprint old records or hired local musicians to produce new material. Lyra-Sonolux, for instance, reached agreements to reissue vinyl discs originally recorded in Puerto Rico, USA, Venezuela, and Mexico,²¹ while other labels such as Zeida, Silver, Ondina, and Victoria started recording diverse genres of the so-called *música de carrilera* (locally-produced hybrids of Mexican ranchera, tango, bolero, and other Ecuadorian genres) and Colombian tropical music.²² Specialized reviewers such as Hernán Restrepo Duque earned their living by commenting about new releases in newspapers, daily radio programs, and magazines. By the mid-1950s, Medellín had consolidated as one of South America's most important centers of the music recording industry.²³

²⁰On the history of radio broadcasting in Colombia, see [Télez B. 1974](#); [Pareja 1984](#); [Pérez Ángel and Castellanos 1998](#).

²¹"Sobre la guerra de los discos," article by Hernán Restrepo Duque, in "Antena," *El Diario* June 6 1952, page 2.

²²Interview with Jesús Vallejo Mejía, Medellín, July 3 2003.

²³For a short but detailed account of the development of Antioqueño recording industry in the early 1950s, see [Wade 2000](#), 149–153.

The economic growth of the late 1940s and early 1950s stimulated the arrival of world-class spectacles to the most important theaters in town. Celebrities and important ensembles, among them French pianist Alfred Cortot, North American opera star Marian Anderson, the New York Philharmonic, and Xavier Cugat's orchestra, included the city in their concert tours, especially after 1950 when the Colombian peso and the North American dollar had an exchange rate of one to one.²⁴ Although the strength of the peso deteriorated after 1952, by then the city had already become an important venue for touring music stars.

This picture of economic wealth and prosperity, however, stands in sharp contrast to the simultaneous evolution of partisan violence in rural areas. Perhaps not evident at the surface, social tensions and class struggles unfolded in the performance of cultural practices of popular entertainment, music included. The next chapter will introduce the conflicts brought about in the periphery by the configuration of bambuco as a symbol of the nation emphasizing the weight of a centralized nation-state.

²⁴Interview with Hernando Vélez Sierra, Medellín, July 5 2003.

3.0 NARRATING THE NATION: BAMBUCO AND ANTIOQUEÑO NATIONAL IMAGINATION

3.1 PRELUDE: BAMBUCO'S ORIGINS, EVOLUTION, AND STATUS

The origins of the different genres of Colombian Andean music such as bambuco are uncertain, as happens with all musical practices rooted in the oral tradition. Although the term bambuco itself has appeared regularly in texts since the 1840s, little or nothing had been written about its particular musical characteristics.¹ After the Independence wars, but particularly in the course of the second half of the nineteenth century, members of the local aristocracy came across various folk genres, including bambuco, and incorporated them into their *música de salón* or ballroom music. Conceived as a minor type of entertainment music, *música de salón* was not intended to be art music. For nineteenth-century Colombian upper classes, such a repertoire of light music, which included dances of European origin such as mazurkas, polkas, and *contradanzas* (from the English country dance), had a symbolic value. Their adoption and performance constituted “an act of civilization that linked them to European civilization, and furthermore, the acceptance of folk-based bambucos, *torbellinos* and *pasillos* became a symbol of difference and national identity.”²

Around the end of the nineteenth century, bambuco began to play an important role in the construction of Colombian identity, as recognized writers including Rafael Pombo and José María Samper helped to make it a foundational myth of the nation.³ Inevitably, its

¹On the earliest references to bambuco in written accounts and to the places in which its performance was observed, see [Miñana Blasco 1997](#). Apparently bambuco originated in the southern province of Cauca and from there expanded northward throughout the Andean region.

²[Gil Araque 2003](#), 146.

³On the construction of Colombian identity around bambuco in the work of late-nineteenth-century authors, see [Cruz González 2002](#).

status as a symbol of national identity provoked controversy over its origins throughout the twentieth century. Most writers agreed that bambuco was a *mestizo* genre, a local adaptation of Spanish folk music brought from the Iberian peninsula by the conquistadors, blended with a few aspects from the native-American musical heritage. Authors Hernán Restrepo Duque and José María Bravo Márquez, for example, considered bambuco too “civilized” to have evolved from aboriginal music’s “inferior rhythmic and melodic traits.”⁴ As proof of bambuco’s Spanish origin, authors including Davidson and Añez offered evidence of its harmonic structure, its poetry, and its performance with stringed instruments.⁵

In the minds of those authors, bambuco’s *mestizo* identity fitted well with the ethnic configuration of the country’s population, even if it was representative only of the peoples inhabiting the central Andean zone. That mindset explains why a great debate ensued from novelist Jorge Isaacs’ suggestion in 1867 that bambuco’s musical tradition was originally of African descent. The main argument used to contest this hypothesis was that black people had historically been much less numerous in the center of the country than in the coastal regions, a claim that tacitly acknowledged two facts: first, that bambuco was indeed only an Andean expression, and second, that those many Afro-Colombians inhabiting the coasts were barely recognized as an integral part of the nation. Refutation of Isaacs’ assertion continued to be a central issue in the literature on the genre at least until the 1980s, a pattern that underscores a racist denial of blackness’ significance in Colombian culture.⁶ Behind such negation there was a process of creolization of the genre, namely a cleansing which, according to Ana María Ochoa, appears to be a necessary step to make it acceptable as a symbol of the nation.⁷

The Venezuela-born pianist and composer Manuel María Párraga (1826–1895) was the first professionally trained Colombian musician to produce stylized versions of bambucos and *torbellinos* for piano (1859), in what can be considered the first attempt to create an art-music style modelled on musical nationalism inspired by Romantic ideals. Bambuco’s initial progress towards the status of art music included the formation of a chamber ensemble called

⁴Restrepo Duque 1986.

⁵Davidson 1970; Añez 1951.

⁶For an account of the writers that entered the debate and their different positions, see Davidson 1970; Restrepo Duque 1986; Varney 1999. On the negation of blackness, see Wade 2000.

⁷Ochoa 1997.

lira or *estudiantina*. Also known generically as *orquesta colombiana* (Colombian orchestra), it was a small ensemble combining strings and winds. It did not have a fixed format, but usually included flute, clarinet, violin, cello, bass, guitar, two *bandolas*, and *triple*.⁸

In addition to the purely instrumental kind, an urban version of bambuco-song appeared in Bogotá and Medellín at the turn of the century. Composed and performed by members of the artisan class accompanying themselves with guitars and *triples*, the lyrics of these bambuco-songs were frequently authored by local poets and writers from the upper classes. The urban-oriented bambuco-song found its niche in the context of the bohemian male gathering, which diluted bambuco's original function as music to accompany outdoor festivities and dances in rural communities. "Cuatro preguntas" ("Four Questions") is a classic example of an early-twentieth-century urban bambuco-song, which depicts romantic love in an atmosphere of sadness and poetic refinement (lyrics by Eduardo López, music by Pedro Morales Pino, 1913):

Niegas con él lo que hiciste,	You deny you did anything with him,
Y mis sospechas te asombran.	And my suspicions astound you.
Pero si no lo quisiste,	If you never loved him though,
¿Por qué te pones tan triste	Why do you seem so sad
Cuando en tu casa le nombran?	Whenever his name is mentioned at home?

Bambuco-song's conventional ensemble is the *dueto bambuquero*, a duet of two voices singing in parallel thirds or sixths accompanied by a guitar and a *triple*. The format of the instrumental trio, whether including another guitar or a *bandola*, is mostly used only for the performance of the instrumental repertoire, but occasionally it also accompanies bambuco-song. The repertoire of a traditional *dueto bambuquero* encompasses several genres including bambucos, *pasillos*, *torbellinos*, *bundes*, *rajaleñas*, *guabinas*, *sanjuaneros*, and *danzas*. The practice of these other genres has been historically circumscribed to certain regions, while bambuco is considered the most widespread genre throughout the Colombian Andes.⁹

Bambuco's wide distribution and its characteristic rhythmic complexity are the main factors used to support arguments about its national status. Bambuco's rhythm appears

⁸Bandola is a small fourteen- or sixteen-string mandolin used in Andean Colombia. There is also an instrument with the same name from the Western Plains that is usually called *bandola llanera*. *Triple* is a small guitar with four three-string courses, which characteristically serves as a percussive chordal accompaniment (Gradante 1999).

⁹The *rajaleña*, *bunde*, and *sanjuanero* are commonly found in Huila and Tolima *departamentos*, while *guabina* is widespread in Santander and Boyacá.

to be quite distinctive, unlike pasillo, for example, which is one of several Latin American adaptations of the European waltz, and very common in Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador.¹⁰ In contrast, bambuco's rhythmic uniqueness grants it a particularly strong symbolic efficacy because it can be constructed as exclusively Colombian. For a discussion of bambuco's rhythm, see section 3.3.2.

This chapter explores the discussions surrounding bambuco as a symbol of the nation, and the interests of different individuals working to achieve that goal. The first section introduces the debates among musicians in Bogotá and Medellín, starting with an analysis of two cartoons published in a Bogotano newspaper in 1930. The narrative goes back momentarily to the previous decades to provide some background for interpreting the cartoon's episode and the antagonism between Bogotano and Antioqueño intelligentsias. It later explains the circumstances of the imminent decline of bambuco-song by the 1930s, after a short climax during the previous decade. Efforts to save bambuco-song come to the fore in the second section, presenting a new generation of advocates for bambuco's national status in the 1940s. My discussion of this period focuses on the standardization of bambuco's rhythmic transcription, and strategies concentrated in convincing local entrepreneurs of the genre's potential for advertisement. The section concludes with the accomplishment of national music contests under the sponsorship of Antioqueño industrials. The last section explores the reaffirmation of bambuco's mythical stature during the early 1950s, at the peak of the most repressive Conservative rule.

3.2 BAMBUCO ON RECORD: THE RISE AND FALL OF BAMBUCO-SONG'S GOLDEN ERA IN THE 1920S AND 1930S

Bogotá, May 1930. A caricature by Ricardo Rendón appeared in the prestigious Bogotano Liberal newspaper *El Tiempo*. Rendón, a Paisa born in Rionegro (Antioquia) but resident in Bogotá since 1918, was the country's most respected caricaturist of his time. Admired for his

¹⁰Ecuadorian pasillo, known for the sadness of its poetry, is slower than the Colombian variety, which is a festive genre suitable to dance.

incisive ability to interpret the political atmosphere of the moment with sarcastic sharpness, Rendón was both adored by the public and feared by politicians, especially Conservative officials. Not all his caricatures, however, were directed at political figures. In fact, from time to time Rendón also made fun of local intellectuals who were his comrades in the colorful nights of the local bohemia. Such was the case on this occasion, when he joked about the comments made by two well-known musicians in his “Escena chibcha” (“Chibcha Scene,” see Figure 6).



Figure 6: “Escena chibcha,” by Ricardo Rendón. In *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, May 14 1930, page 1.

Chibchas or Muiscas were the native inhabitants of Bogotá's high plateau. Against the background of Monserrate and Guadalupe, Bogotá's two landmark heights, Rendón placed a very incongruous scene. In the foreground, Beethoven puts aside a bottle of beer to take a guitar (or perhaps a *tiple*) and accompany himself singing a bambuco in vogue during those days, "Tiplecito de mi vida" ("Little Tiple of my Life").¹¹ Behind the German composer, a group of Athenian spectators observe a strapping athlete ready to throw a discus, we assume, yet Rendón subtly informs us that we are not attending a match of the classical Greek competition but a match of *turmequé*: the contestant is throwing not a discus but a *tejo*, a piece of metal. A game inherited from Chibchas, *turmequé* requires players to detonate a wick, placed in a sand box several feet away, by throwing the *tejo*, which is a disk-shaped heavy piece of metal.¹² As the only explanation for such an unlikely episode the caricaturist included a caption with two brief phrases and their presumed sources, two local art-music composers: "In the scherzo of a Beethoven string quartet we find the same rhythmical drive of the bambuco" (Antonio María Valencia) and "It is thought that the game of *turmequé* has Athenian roots, most likely from Pericles' century" (Emilio Murillo). Apparently the scorn was so successful that days later Rendón made another caricature with the same topic: "Alto turmequé: el discóbolo" ("High *Turmequé*: The Discus Thrower," see Figure 7),¹³ in which an unknown *turmequé* player throws a RCA Victor sound recording labelled "Murillo, Bambuco."

¹¹Actually "Tiplecito" is labelled a *torbellino* and not a bambuco. As Dirk Koorn explains, in Colombia the word "torbellino" (whirlwind) does not refer to any one specific rhythm or musical form. Commercial *torbellino* is a relative of commercial forms of pasillo and bambuco, and resembles only superficially a folk *torbellino* from the town of Vélez (Santander) (Koorn 1977).

¹²As an anthropologist friend wittily explained to me, the main purpose of the game is to determine who pays for the beer: there are two teams, and the one scoring fewer points, pays the bill.

¹³The expression *alto turmequé* means "highbrow." The incident provoked other reactions; musician Jorge Añez composed the bambuco "Si la mar fuera de tinta" ("If Seawater were Ink") that included a verse with the names of other composers and poets: "If bambuco comes from Germany/ or from the Greeks comes our *turmequé*/ then Morales Pino is a Turk/ Julio Flórez is Danish;/ Quevedo Zeta, Murillo,/ Valencia the pianist/ from China they should come from/ Asunción Silva, a Hebrew/ and Uribe Holguín is French." Quoted in Añez 1951, 43.



Figure 7: “Alto turmequé: el discóbolo,” by Ricardo Rendón, 1930. From [Colmenares 1984](#).

Most likely Rendón's commentary was a joke to be understood by a quite small intellectual clique. Those who were regular participants in the gatherings of the Bogotano literary circle known as the *Gruta Simbólica* may have heard both musicians' remarks any night, perhaps while partying with beer against the musical background of a *dueto bambuquero*, and awaiting their turn to play a match of *turmequé*. But the scorn was also meaningful for many other well-informed observers outside this small crowd. Rendón touched a nerve with his cartoon, because he was mocking what seemed an endless debate among both musicians and aficionados about the aesthetic values embedded in bambuco and its acceptability as national music. The composers' strategy to achieve legitimacy by asserting bambuco's noble European origin was a matter of mockery even among intellectual circles. Yet more importantly, by linking bambuco with a Chibcha tradition—restricted to Bogotá's plateau and not practiced either in Medellín or other provincial capitals—Rendón's cartoon was pointing out the centralist agenda of this alleged “national endeavor,” and Murillo's personal interest in its development.

3.2.1 The musician as agent of civilization

The targets of Rendón's first cartoon, art-music composers Valencia and Murillo, belonged to different generations at the time the cartoon was circulated. The young composer and gifted pianist Antonio María Valencia was new in Bogotá. Recently returned from Paris after seven years as an exceptional student at the Schola Cantorum, he had been appointed Inspector of Studies in Bogotá's National Conservatory. He did not stay there for long, though, because disputes with the staff and the director, composer Guillermo Uribe Holguín, forced him to quit and return to his native Cali, where he founded the local conservatory. The figure of Emilio Murillo, on the contrary, was familiar among Bogotano intellectuals and in the pages of newspapers. Celebrated as the champion of national music, Murillo tirelessly advocated for the recovery and “improvement” of old tunes as well as for the development of a national music movement. His personal crusade had led him to establish bonds of friendship with prominent figures who defended similar ideas in and outside the country. For example, at the time of the cartoon's publication, Murillo had been seen serving

as host for Mexican José Vasconcelos, former minister of education of his country and the champion of Mexican nationalism. A photograph in a local newspaper shows Murillo engaged in teaching Vasconcelos how to play *turmequé*.¹⁴

The caricature was likewise meaningful to other observers outside Bogotá. Although Rendón had an exclusive contract with *El Tiempo*, occasionally his caricatures found their way into Liberal provincial newspapers. Days later, on May 14 1930, Medellín's newspaper *El Heraldo de Antioquia* reproduced "Escena chibcha" on its front page. Jesús Tobón Quintero, *El Heraldo's* director, most likely decided to publish the caricature because of his newspaper's involvement in musical issues. Just two years before, a fiery debate had taken place in the pages of Medellín's *El Heraldo* and in Bogotá's *El Espectador*. In 1928, Emilio Murillo and Gonzalo Vidal, Medellín's most respected composer, exchanged an angry correspondence arguing about what constituted national music. The argument started when Murillo sent a letter to a notable citizen of Medellín, the director of the Sociedad de Mejoras Públicas (Society of Public Improvements), inviting him to become the advocate of national music in the regional capital. Murillo called him to "oversee a way to persuade Antioqueño composers to write [based on] the people's musical airs, good music or tolerable enough, classic or popular, but. . . that they do compose."¹⁵ Olano, the addressee, thought it better to leave the issue in the hands of the musicians themselves, and promptly sent Murillo's letter to Vidal. Not surprisingly, Vidal's reply was anything but sympathetic to Murillo's request.¹⁶ After stating his unwillingness to become an apostle of any kind—as he had already made clear to Murillo in the past—Vidal asserted that the real need was to make sure that musicians learned music theory before producing more cheap "*pasillitos, dancitas, guabinitas, and bambucos*."¹⁷ It was evident that he considered Murillo and the records he had made in New York years before (1910) a discredit to the profession and a betrayal of the reputation of the musical art. For Vidal, national music was simply inconceivable in Colombia unless musicians avoided the effects of advertisement and easy success based on their artistry.

¹⁴Photograph in *Mundo al día*, May 20 1930, page 1.

¹⁵Emilio Murillo, letter to Ricardo Olano. "El caso musical" in *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, April 9 1928, page 2.

¹⁶"El caso musical" in *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, April 9 1928, page 2. Several letters dealing with the debate published in *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, in its original Spanish version, appear in Appendix A.

¹⁷Vidal's public reply to Murillo, in "El caso musical" in *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, April 9 1928, page 2.

The discussion went on for a couple of months in the pages of both newspapers, arousing somewhat irritated responses from diverse correspondents both in favor of and opposed to the opinions expressed by Murillo and Vidal. The tenor of the debate indicates that there were at least three issues at stake. First, the controversy showed the urgent need to define the boundaries between the “popular” and the “aesthetic” as *El Herald*’s editor put it in a brief introduction for the readers the day the initial letters were published (April 9 1928). Second, it urged a clear demarcation between musicians’ social status and artistic competence—middle-class art-music composers like Murillo should be writing symphonies and piano sonatas but not be writing folk songs, argued Vidal. And third, it made evident a widespread sense of distrust between Antioqueño and Bogotano intelligentsias.¹⁸

The debate was far from being new. In fact, the discord between Vidal and Murillo was just another round in the disagreement’s long history. We need to go back a couple of years to see the sources of the argument. Since the beginning of the century, musicians had argued over the nature and scope of what was the proper form of national music. The controversy had become particularly bitter around the 1910s, after the appointment of Guillermo Uribe Holguín as director of the National Conservatory in Bogotá. An aristocratic composer educated in France, he introduced institutional reforms that had practically banned the study and practice of any musical expression outside the realm of art music.¹⁹ Yet in societies with almost no Western art music institutions such as these in Bogotá, Medellín, or any other urban center in the country, that meant banning most music that made up the practice of professional and non-professional musicians. Only Bogotá had a small symphonic orchestra, comprising a few professionals and many amateurs. Medellín had only small ensembles such as the one conducted by Vidal, organized to perform music during silent movies or in the parties at the exclusive Club Unión. Foreign troupes of operetta or Spanish *zarzuela* occasionally visited the cities, and in some towns local military bands performed in the central plaza on Sundays. The traditional practice of church music, so important during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had become almost insignificant after independence.

¹⁸Interestingly, in his account of the thorny development of Colombian rock between the late 1950s and 2000, Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste calls the attention over the same problem in the constitution of “the national” due to a rivalry between Bogotá and Medellín (Fernández L’Hoeste 2004).

¹⁹For a detailed account of Uribe Holguín’s reforms and the reactions they provoked, see Cortés 2000.

According to Uribe Holguín, all other musical activities had to be judged as simply unrefined entertainment.

Although educated people, especially the small privileged minority who had visited Europe, probably agreed that *música de salón* and sheet music performed at home were not high art, that was the only music they had at hand. So, what was the alternative for the public? Since Uribe Holguín's arrival to Bogotá, the Conservatory's orchestra had offered symphonic concerts presenting pieces by Wagner, Debussy, Brahms and other European masters. But, why were there almost no compositions by local musicians? Uribe Holguín's works, composed under the influence of the French school of D'Indy and Frank, demanded too much from a public with almost no experience listening to early-twentieth-century art music. Besides, his aversion to incorporating into his work musical elements from local traditions made him very unpopular;²⁰ several voices urged him to leave the Conservatory, arguing that he was an enemy of Colombian music and Colombian musicians.²¹

In contrast, Murillo and other supporters of a popularly-oriented national music progressively received more and more attention during the 1920s. Their major achievement was the governmental commission to represent Colombia in the World Fair of Seville in 1929, in which Murillo took part with other members of the Bogotano musical scene, namely the duet Wills and Escobar, conductor Jerónimo Velasco and *bandola* player Francisco Cristancho. Bogotano newspapers including *Mundo al Día* frequently included accounts of this official tour and other unofficial journeys around the continent on which small musical ensembles had embarked since the end of the nineteenth century.²² At the turn of the century, the pilgrimage of Pedro Morales Pino's *Lira Colombiana* across Central America and the United States had inspired many others to set off on similar adventures. What attracted the attention of the musicians was not only the tour of concerts but also the real possibility of being hired by record companies overseas. Two Antioqueño ensembles were among the first

²⁰After 1924, however, Uribe Holguín's production shows musical patterns derived from bambuco, *pasillos*, and other genres. Some observers noted this contradiction and judged that since he despised Colombian folk music, his works could not have any "Colombian flavor" (Cortés 2000, 10).

²¹I found it interesting to hear the same claim about Uribe Holguín in a meeting of Andean music performers I attended recently as a spectator in Envigado, Antioquia (July 3, 2004). I was surprised to realize that after more than eighty years the quarrel is still remembered strongly.

²²For example, "Los maestros Murillo y Velasco propagaron con gran éxito en España la música colombiana" by Manuel Góngora Echenique, *Mundo al día*, January 27 1930, page 13.

groups to obtain record contracts: the *dueto bambuquero* of Pelón Santamarta and Adolfo Marín (Columbia, Mexico City 1908) and the *Lira Antioqueña* (Columbia, New York City 1910). Celebrated as key accomplishments in the diffusion of Colombian music outside the country's borders, the recordings also strengthened the legitimacy of both the music and the performers within the country itself. Unlike Uribe Holguín, most of these musicians came from the middle and lower classes (for example, Pelón and Marín were modest tailors), and their recognition as performers of international stature secured their approval back home and perhaps a better standard of living in the future.

As the correspondence with Vidal suggests, however, Murillo faced resistance from several sectors of the art-music community. A student at the National School of Music (later the National Conservatory) and later Morales Pino's friend and pupil, Murillo was an intellectual of the new middle class, a professional musician with an artisan-class upbringing and good connections with Bogotano capitalists.²³ His collecting of old tunes, intended not so much to preserve the music as to disseminate it through new channels, raised many suspicions. In the recordings Murillo made in New York, his name appeared in the credits as the author of several traditional folk tunes, such as "El guatecano" or "La cabaña." Although he constantly repeated that he considered himself only the arranger of the songs and not their author, many thought he received all the benefits and profits from such a convenient misunderstanding. The problem was not a question of copyright (in the 1910s that was yet an unknown notion) and went beyond the issue of folk music's ownership. It had deeper connotations regarding the artist's responsibility to civilize, namely, to transcribe music of the oral tradition for use as a source for art-music compositions. That had been the main purpose of many folk anthologies accomplished in the Old World during the nineteenth century. In its place, Murillo's urge to record maintained the oral nature of the folk tradition with no manifest contribution to the musical establishment's needs. Murillo not only had received some money for it, but also wanted the public recognition of his achievements.

Murillo's active participation in politics might have disturbed some of his colleagues as well. It was no secret that he was an ardent Liberal, editor of a clandestine pamphlet during

²³Murillo was acquainted with the owners of Bavaria, Bogotá's largest brewery. Rendón highlighted the association in "Alto turmequé;" note the man holding a bottle with the name of the beer company.

the War of the Thousand Days, and fervent supporter of presidential candidate Enrique Olaya Herrera. During the presidential campaign, his arrangement of the song “El guatecano” was used as a proselytizing anthem with his tacit or explicit approval.²⁴ Nevertheless, the problem went beyond partisan affiliations: the rivalry between Bogotá and Medellín complicated the scene. For example, Medellín’s liberal *El Heraldo de Antioquia* differed with Bogotá’s liberal *Mundo al Día* in their position on constructing a popularly-oriented national music. In the course of the Vidal–Murillo debate, *El Heraldo* clearly backed the position of the Antioqueño composer and the detractors of the popular faction.²⁵ Furthermore, Medellín’s newspaper reaffirmed its position later in an editorial note concerning the activities of another esteemed local musician, choral director and composer José María Bravo Márquez. The editor praised the musician because, “like our eminent compatriot doctor Guillermo Uribe Holguín, he [Bravo Márquez] is a declared enemy of what is popular and unsophisticated. He analyzes and brilliantly executes the most difficult pages of the foreign masters.”²⁶ Professor Bravo Márquez was also a recognized Conservative who had briefly served as director of the ultra-Conservative newspaper *La Defensa*. Such a positive manifestation in support of a political opponent shows that the Liberal newspaper preferred overlooking local partisan differences rather than accepting Murillo’s style of Bogotano centralism.

The disagreement was, therefore, the consequence of both an aesthetic problem and a class-based conflict. As in the case of other Latin American musical elites confronting the ideals and challenges of modernity, the crucial difficulty was how to produce music within the limits of the Western European canon but different enough to be recognized as uniquely Colombian.²⁷ In order to find their own artistic voice, composers might expose themselves to folk music seeking distinctive music elements suitable to be transformed, modified, and “improved.” According to his colleagues, Murillo was merely reproducing the raw folk songs,

²⁴ “Guatecano” means “natural of Guateque,” a small town in the Tenza Valley in the Boyacá departamento, where Olaya Herrera was born. Apparently it was Alejandro Wills (member of the duet Wills and Escobar and author of “Tiplecito de mi vida”), not Murillo, who promoted the use of the song as an anthem (Restrepo Duque 1971).

²⁵ Gonzalo Vidal was not originally from Antioquia, however. He was born and raised in Popayán (Cauca departamento) but moved with his family to Medellín when he was still young. He was honored as an Antioqueño for his contribution to Medellín’s musical life and for being the author of the *departamento’s* anthem.

²⁶ *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, Editorial note, July 23 1930, page 5.

²⁷ Similar debates occurred in Argentina and in Mexico, see Schwartz-Kates 2002; Saavedra 2002.

hence neglecting his duty as educator of the uncultured lower classes; in that sense, he was a traitor to the civilizing endeavor of the upper classes.

3.2.2 Art Music, *Música Popular*, and *Música Populachera*

To art-music composers like Vidal, the development of recording technologies appeared as a threatening aspect of modernity. For him, the recording of non-academic music had become a justification for performers who did not want to improve themselves, musicians who had chosen not to “civilize” local music. He lamented that people outside Colombia would have access to listening to “something derived from Indians, from aborigines, from Chibchas; something naive, primitive, and untamed (*selvático*).”²⁸ Yet his remarks were not aimed at criticizing aboriginal or folk music themselves—particularly the latter, generally considered by contemporary intellectuals to be the source of the national spirit. For him, it was important to mark the difference: national music had to be a form of art music, while *música popular* indicated “the music that emanates from the folk, *guabinas*, *pasillos*, bambucos.” A third category was the urban-based imitation of the latter, composed by “ill-prepared authors who do not offer any confidence [for the listener], not even in what we would call the clothing of their compositions.” For him, that artificially-created folk music “should be labelled *música populachera* (literally populist, vulgar, cheap music).”²⁹

Vidal was reacting against the production of music for mass consumption. His position on what constituted “the popular” was not far from the approach nineteenth-century Colombian thinkers and politicians had about “the folk,” which was something to be collected, not so much for its beauty or its meaning for the nation, but for its contribution to philological studies or other intellectual endeavors of the sort.³⁰ This exclusively philanthropic interest simply ruled out production, especially the commercially-oriented kind triggered in the twentieth century by what Walter Benjamin labelled the advent of the “age of mechanical reproduction.”³¹ Reservations toward production and reproduction have to be understood

²⁸“Música Nacional” in *Progreso* Volume 2 Number 36, October 31 1928, page 578.

²⁹“Música Nacional” in *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, July 11 1928, page 3.

³⁰On the nineteenth-century ideology behind the collection of folk traditions in Colombia, see the introduction to [Silva 2003](#).

³¹See [Benjamin 1973](#).

in light of the legitimacy of nineteenth-century nationalist ideals, and against the backdrop of struggles among the musicians. The presumed authority of folk sources arose from their untraceable origins and evolution in a legendary past providing a rationale for the historical continuity of the nation. The veracity of such a distant past is not a requirement though, and according to Hobsbawm and Ranger, it might be overlooked when it comes to inventing a functional tradition, in this case, a newly-composed type of folk music aimed at mass consumption.³² Excusing that Murillo's newly-invented bambuco tradition lacked the requirements of anonymity and legendary past needed that both intellectuals and musicians agreed with his agenda, something most academic musicians did not.

In spite of Uribe Holguín's and Vidal's personal antipathy toward Murillo, they feared lowering the standards of art music knowledge in the country. It was not necessarily that they challenged bambuco's appropriateness as a symbol of Colombian music, as some of their opponents furiously claimed. Rather, they thought that national music—meaning art music—had not yet developed because non-elite musicians' foundations of musical knowledge did not comply with the demands of “civilization.” Uribe Holguín and Vidal confronted the challenge in different ways. The former closed the doors of the Conservatory to popular musicians who were not interested in the production and performance of art music. The latter shut himself away from academia with the purpose of concentrating his efforts on his own musical improvement, and devoted himself to the private instruction of a few talented students.

The issue of musical illiteracy was a major concern for many academic musicians. It was not only because they saw the need to move from an oral tradition to a written one. Knowing how to notate music was an especially delicate matter in a society that has always given tremendous importance to grammar.³³ That explains why Vidal was so shocked to learn that untrained musicians were allowed to participate in a contest sponsored in 1928 by a Bogotano commercial firm: “[...] even the aficionados, the illiterate, the musicians by

³²See [Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983](#).

³³Several observers have noted Colombian politicians' and intellectuals' fascination with language and grammar. Most presidents and political leaders from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were poets, novelists, philologists, or Latinists. The alleged purity of Castilian-Spanish spoken in Colombia, particularly in Bogotá, is even today a matter of great national pride. On the relationship between power and grammar in Colombian history, see [Deas 1993](#).

ear, can employ someone to write down a simple melody and send it as it is, in treble clef, without harmonization. That work is to be later carried out by a technician from the high plateau.” He was referring to Murillo, of course. Then, he sarcastically finished his claim with a biblical image, the foretelling of a universal flood of bad music: “Thus, as winds flow by, it is going to rain music of that kind without compassion, God takes us already absolved of our sins” (*Dios nos coja confesados*).³⁴ Academic musician’s claims against popular musicians’ illiteracy and lack of technical skills troubled the transition from the oral to the written tradition. Over the years, it became a real obsession over accuracy in notating the inner complexities of bambuco’s intricate rhythm.³⁵

3.2.3 The Crisis of the Recording Industry

Vidal’s apocalyptic predictions about a torrential rain of “music of that kind” came to only partial realization. After a spectacular worldwide expansion of the recording business during the 1920s, by the end of the decade the market of records was rapidly shrinking. When the production of commercial recordings started at the beginning of the century in North America and England, the industry focused on musical genres that pleased a small wealthy minority: symphonies, operatic arias, string quartets, and other genres in the sphere of Western art music. As the demand increased, the production of recordings of other kinds of music grew exponentially. Interested in the expansion of their lucrative business, North American and European record companies turned their gaze to the south, and sometime between 1908 and 1916 sent engineers with movable recording devices to explore possibilities of recording throughout Latin America.³⁶ They soon recognized the enormous potential of the market and launched the production of recordings aimed at Spanish-speaking countries. This rash of recordings resulted in a frenzy between the mid-1910s and the early 1920s. By the end of the decade, however, the economic crisis and the arrival of radio broadcasting

³⁴“Sobre música nacional” in *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, May 15 1928, page 5.

³⁵See section 3.3.2 for an explanation of the difficulties with notation. Finding a solution was also crucial because until the 1950s bambuco recordings were made in other countries by non-specialists, as I will explain later.

³⁶Unfortunately, there is not much information about those journeys made by North American, British, and German engineers during the first years of the century; an interesting exception is [Vernon 1997](#). For short accounts on the earlier movements of the music industry in Latin America see [Quintero Rivera 1998](#); [Rico Salazar 2000](#).

had deeply affected the recording business worldwide. Colombian musicians benefited from the initial boom and later suffered the effects of the economic depression. Around 1930, the supremacy of bambuco and the short-lived golden age of Andean folk song records were coming to an untimely end.

Yet Vidal guessed right when considering the phenomenon's dimension and the huge impact recordings had already had on domestic consumption. For him, instead of being instruments of culture and progress, phonographs and records had become "carriers of contagion [with which] large foreign companies sow the wrong."³⁷ Abundance and anarchy were in part consequences of the way the recording business operated. Initially, all recordings produced for Latin American consumption were made in New York, but in the mid-1910s new recording studios were also located in Buenos Aires, and in the early 1920s in Mexico City.³⁸ Touring musicians like Pelón and Marín were occasionally hired to record their own music, but it was more efficient and cheaper to appoint local agents to request that sheet music be sent directly to the two studios in Latin American capitals or to a studio in New York. Spanish-speaking singers performed the music, and the records were quickly shipped back to be sold all over the continent. Performers who recorded in New York, for example, came from different places in Latin America or from Spain and knew almost nothing about certain genres, local performance practices, or particular vocal styles. Singers specializing in opera, in Spanish *zarzuela*, or in any local tradition recorded all kind of songs, whether Argentinean tangos, Panamanian *tamboritos*, Ecuadorian *valse*s, or Colombian bambucos. The labels on the recordings were quite imprecise regarding the musical genre of each song, its provenance, and the name of its composer. Since copyright laws for sound recordings had not yet been formulated, there was considerable confusion about the authorship and the right to make new renditions of the songs.³⁹

A good way to illustrate what was offered in Colombia by retailers in 1930 is to examine the contents of a local record catalog. A small *cancionero* (song book) published in Cali by

³⁷ "Música nacional" in *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, December 28 1928, page 3.

³⁸ According to Jaime Rico Salazar ([Rico Salazar 2000](#)), the first portable recording devices were set in Mexico in 1908, but the business moved out of the country during the time of the Mexican Revolution, and did not resume operations until 1922. For a description of the recording business in Latin America during the first decades of the century, see also [Restrepo Duque 1971](#) and [1992](#).

³⁹ In Medellín, those recordings from the 1920s are generally known as *música de antaño* (music of the old times). On the importance of this repertoire, see section [4.2.1](#).

Victor's local agent shows some of the records available at the store that year: for example, a new rendition of Alejandro Wills's hit "Tiplecito de mi vida" performed by Alcides Briceño and Jorge Añez (Victor #46672) and the bambuco "Los promeseritos" (Victor #46725) performed by Margarita Cueto and Jorge Añez.⁴⁰ Other records in the catalog include *zarzuela* and operetta arias ("Lamento esclavo" from *La Virgen Morena*, Victor #46781 and "Oh dulce misterio de la vida" from *Naughty Marietta*, Victor #1451), two songs, most likely tangos, in the voices of Argentineans Libertad Lamarque and Rosita Quiroga ("Sol de mi tierra," Victor #47144 and "Has cambiado por completo," Victor # 47181) and many other songs by performers such as Tito Guizar, Juan Arvizu (both Mexican singers), and Juan Pulido (a Spanish opera singer), with no indication whatsoever of musical genre or source.⁴¹ By matching years and names we know that, with the exception of the two tangos recorded in Buenos Aires, all the songs were recorded in New York.

Proliferation, disorder, and chaos. How did elites attempt to maintain a certain degree of control over such unruliness? Was it possible to preserve the boundaries separating good music from bad music, *música popular* from *música populachera*? These and similar questions tormented persons like Vidal. Modernity had brought multiplicity and diversification of tastes, not order, aesthetic appreciation, or civilizing regulation of any sort. Part of the blame belonged to the record business and the local agents who hired poets and musicians to compose the songs for mass production, including firms like Félix de Bedout e Hijos, representatives of Victor, and David Arango, Columbia's agent in Medellín. Yet Bedout and Arango, in Vidal's opinion, were just honorable businessmen earning their living. Therefore, the musicians themselves had full responsibility for producing good music and not selling themselves cheaply according to the fancies of the market.

Musicians and intellectuals were therefore divided into those who wanted to keep a certain level of control over artistic expression, and those who did not pay so much attention to the details and instead adapted their artistry to the new conditions created by the market. The latter musicians acted as cultural mediators between the literate and the illiterate,

⁴⁰Añez was a Bogotano musician recording for both Victor and Columbia in New York between 1922 and 1933. He later wrote about bambuco and his experience in popular music in his much cited book *Canciones y Recuerdos: Conceptos acerca del origen del bambuco* (1951) (on the importance of this work, see page 108). Briceño was Panamanian popular singer and Cueto a Mexican opera singer.

⁴¹*Cancionero Victor*, Cali 1930.

between the few whose world was dominated by the written word and by the mysteries of Western staff notation, and the many who lived in a world of orality and were just discovering the enchantment of recorded sound.⁴² By collecting and reconvertng old songs, composing new ones, and sending this repertoire to be recorded abroad, figures like Murillo were indeed inventing a new tradition. Even if based on old musical practices rooted in the rural world, bambuco's new urban version was in fact a distinct cultural artifact designed for mass consumption.

Almost certainly Murillo was not conscious of being the advocate of a new standardized type of mass-produced music. His first aim was to rescue a musical practice that was probably fading out in the countryside. Through the legitimization provided by "tradition," he aspired to initiate a nationalist artistic movement, most likely inspired by the same ideals expressed by figures like Vasconcelos or Manuel de Falla, whom he befriended during his visit to Spain in 1929. To make a distinction between art music and popular music was just a minor point in his agenda, even though his sympathies with Liberalism made him favor a popular-oriented national music rather than one governed by an elitist art-music school. He crusaded through both governmental and commercial channels, whether lobbying politicians or promoting bambuco records. But Murillo's project did not flourish as much as he and other musicians engaged in the same venture expected. Indeed, chroniclers like Añez and Restrepo Duque report that by 1933 this "national music" was almost completely out-of-date.⁴³

The causes of this downfall were many. First, as seen above, the recording industry was in the middle of an acute crisis and the production of new records had diminished dramatically. Secondly and more importantly perhaps, the social basis from which most performers and aficionados emerged had shrunk considerably. The number of artisans had diminished in the cities during the first decades of the century and their influence in the urban context

⁴²The concept of the cultural mediator has been extensively developed in Manuel Bernardo Rojas' work on figures including poets Libardo Parra Toro (Tartarín Moreira), León Zafir, and Julio Flórez, who were also lyricists of popular songs (Rojas López 1997; 1998). A cultural mediator is a literate and knowledgeable person whose artistic output can be easily understood by non-literate audiences. Such person is in contact with high culture which is transmitted to the masses due to the mediator's ability to express himself in simpler forms and an easy language.

⁴³Añez and Restrepo do not distinguish between terms such as *música nacional*, *música típica* or *música terrígena* to refer to bambuco and other genres of Colombian Andean music (Añez 1951; Restrepo Duque 1986). As Varney notes, the label "Andean" to identify this music became current only in the 1960s (Varney 1999).

had faded significantly—so much so that, at least in Bogotá, those habitual places where intellectuals and popular musicians had come together to enjoy nights of bohemia had almost disappeared by 1933.⁴⁴ Thirdly, the urban version of bambuco was usually a sad song expressing an uprooted migrant’s nostalgia for the countryside, hence their theme was somewhat incongruous with the urban setting. Bambuco lyrics usually depict the mountainous landscape, the virginal *campesino* girl, the sound of the creek, and other images of an idealized bucolic past that has little to say about new experiences, challenges, and excitement of urban life. See, for example, the lyrics of “Tiplecito de mi vida” (first performed in public in 1928, lyrics by Víctor Martínez Rivas and music by Alejandro Wills):

Tiplecito de mi vida	Little tiple of my life
Pedazo de mis montañas	Piece of my mountains
Cómo suenan de sentidas	How sensitive they sound
Tus notas en tierra extraña	Your notes in a strange land
Y cómo riman de bien	And how well they rhyme
Tus cromáticas escalas	Your chromatic scales
Con el gotear de mi llanto	With the dripping of my tears
Sobre tu bruñida caja	Over your polished case
Caja que a mis se me antoja	Case that I fancy
Una gigante crisálida,	A giant chrysalis,
De la que son mariposas	From which emerge as butterflies
Las canciones de mi patria	The songs of my fatherland
Canciones que por sentidas	Songs that for being deeply felt
Bien merecen ser copiadas	Well merit to be copied
Son golondrinas por notas	With swallows for notes
Y alambres por pentagramas.	And wire for musical staves.

There was another crucial factor for the crisis in the production and consumption of bambuco. With its relocation to the city, bambuco’s practice lost one of its original and more functional attributes in rural societies: it was no longer a courtship dance. This was a real disadvantage if compared with genres that allowed the contact of gendered bodies in dance as an appropriate form of socialization between men and women. And finally, bambuco had become only one of the many genres offered in the market of recordings, which was swamped with many other types of music. During the next two decades, other Spanish-language musical genres, such as tango and bolero, would be widely promoted by

⁴⁴Añez 1951.

the Argentinean and Mexican film industries. In contrast, Colombian cinema, with few resources and a weak distribution network, barely managed to survive and, aside from short news bulletins, no commercial sound-film was produced in the country until the early 1940s. The only way to maintain the prevalence of national music, or rather just to keep it alive, was to wage intensive advertising campaigns through new mass-mediated channels.

3.3 BAMBUÇOS ON THE RADIO: THE ENDEAVOR TO RESCUE BAMBUÇO IN THE LATE 1930S AND THE 1940S

According to Añez, “the advent of radio saved our *música típica*,”⁴⁵ as we will see, such pronouncements became increasingly common among commentators who believed bambuco needed to be rescued from oblivion. The endurance of the genre, indeed, continued to be a rather uncertain matter during the whole decade. No doubt, the trendiest vehicle for diffusion available in the country in the 1930s was the new medium of radio broadcasting. Accordingly, for several years, Murillo and other musicians of his circle struggled to maintain a national music program on the official radio station HJN in Bogotá, but its countrywide impact was rather modest. The signal was weak and difficult to receive beyond the heights surrounding Bogotá’s high plateau. Besides, the cultural policies of the República Liberal’s administrations were generally closer to the principles expressed by individuals like Uribe Holguín or Vidal, even if not quite as intransigent vis-à-vis national music. Official radio was meant to educate the people about the values and achievements of civilization; therefore, the emphasis was on European fine arts and art music.⁴⁶ Murillo’s technical proficiency allowed him to find a comfortable middle ground for his musical practice that conformed with the state radio’s policies. But the most commercial kind of bambuco, *duetos bambuqueros*’ bambuco-song, could not play a part in that approach to the civilizing mission of “culture.” At the most, there was a program featuring a “string quartet” of two bandolas, tiple, and guitar on Sunday evenings, from 7:00 to 7:30 p.m. Figures like Añez found refuge in commercial radio; he set up a station of his own, Bogotá’s *Ecos del Tequendama*.

⁴⁵Añez 1951, 267.

⁴⁶Silva 2003.

Notwithstanding, the actual impact of commercial radio was still rather minor during the early 1930s. A radio receptor was still a luxury affordable only within high- and middle-class households, beyond the reach of most workers' budgets. An ad published in a newspaper in Medellín in 1935 announces that the price of a receptor was \$72;⁴⁷ meanwhile, the daily wage of an industrial worker ranged between \$0.45 and \$2.50.⁴⁸ The proprietors of the first radio stations tried to solve the problem by sponsoring the placement of loudspeakers in different places of the city. Radio slowly became ubiquitous, gradually invading the quietness of the streets, to the dismay of some neighbors who resented how "those radios that surround us resonate, for their owners' will, as if they were the very trumpets of the Last Judgement."⁴⁹

Private stations such as *Ecos de la Montaña* (Echoes of the Mountain),⁵⁰ founded in Medellín in March 1935, relied on both live performances by local ensembles and on recorded music, giving no particular support to genres of national music. In spite of the fact that the repertoire of several local duets comprised mainly bambucos and *pasillos*, most ensembles were rather eclectic in selecting pieces, and included within their lists of songs different genres they had learnt through records. Musicians and common citizens had become familiar with many songs through gramophones in the cafés and canteens, where records of bambucos alternated (indistinctively) with records of tangos, Mexican, or Cuban songs. Whether a particular song was originally Colombian or not made no difference to most consumers. For the ensembles, performing well-known songs, whether bambucos or not, was a way to guarantee their jobs at the station, so there was no reason for neglecting non-Colombian genres. The individual agenda of the self-appointed apostles of national music could do virtually nothing against the invasion of foreign songs.

Meanwhile, the sponsors of an academic national music did not have better luck than their counterparts, even when allowing some space in the agenda for popular musicians' expressions. When the Second Congress of Music was held in Medellín in 1937, one of the main events was a contest for national composers, with awards for the best compositions

⁴⁷ *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, March 29 1935.

⁴⁸ This figure is based on daily wages in Coltejer after a strike aimed to increase the salaries in June 1935 (Farnsworth-Alvear 2000, 136); Fabricato paid approximately the same (Arango 1991).

⁴⁹ "Víctimas de la radio" (Victims of radio broadcasting), letter sent by Juan Consuegra to the director of *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, published on July 1 1937.

⁵⁰ "La Montaña" denotes Antioquia; Medellín is frequently called "the capital of the mountain."

in three categories: one in popular song and two in academic music. In a letter that the jury sent to the president of the board of organizers, composers Jose María Bravo Márquez, Carlos Posada Amador, and Jorge Hernández S. lamented the lack of interest the contest had inspired among musicians all over the country. Only twelve pieces were sent to the competition, pieces whose artistic value was rather unsatisfactory. Only one prize and a mention were awarded to two songs in the category of popular music. The jury politely declared that the submission (a bambuco, which received only a mention) “would have more merits if its author had more adequately transcribed the rhythm, whether binary or ternary, of this type of music.”⁵¹

We can deduce some possible causes for the failure of the contest: the organizers under-promoted it, few musicians met the standards of the competition, and those who did had no interest in participating. In any of those possible scenarios, the error of judgement more likely belonged to the organizers of the contest—who came short to interpret the limitations of the local artistic milieu—and not to the potential participants. Whatever the case, the contests required that popular musicians demonstrate a technical mastery for which no institution offered the training.

Meanwhile, the boom of commercial radio in Medellín started to display its power in 1937. That year radio demonstrated that it had already become entrenched enough in society to mobilize public opinion. A governmental resolution seeking to establish more control over private radio broadcasting alarmed Antioqueño capitalists, who led what they called a *movimiento descentralista* (decentralist movement) to protest against what they saw as an example of Bogotá’s intrusive power into provincial affairs. In a campaign of only two days, Medellín’s *La Voz de Antioquia* organized a massive rally of people from Antioquia, Caldas, and Valle departamentos. On April 7, the train and the roads were unable to transport the thousands of protesters marching into Medellín, while the city’s main plaza was already jam-packed with infuriated dissenters. The government and the press had to accept the enormous influence of the new mass medium.⁵² That power was exactly what the advocates of national music needed to propel their project. To make good use of this opportunity, they needed

⁵¹ “Fallo sobre el concurso musical,” in *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, July 1 1937. The bambuco proclaimed the only winner was a piece by Medellín’s composer Pedro Pablo Santamaría.

⁵² See Pareja 1984.

to offer capitalists a good incentive for backing national music and to come to terms with the schism between academicians and popular musicians. The appropriate conditions for promoting national music were finally in place, but the required transformations happened gradually and through the intervention of different actors.

3.3.1 *Micro* and the New Generation of Música Nacional's Advocates

A new generation of musicians and cultural brokers came to the scene in the 1940s. This was a group of people with a better understanding of modern consumer society, the cultural market's multiplicity, and the new opportunities open to artistic activities within the system. Some of these characters gathered around a new publication issued in Medellín, the magazine *Micro*, directed by Camilo Correa. *Micro* was an innovative type of journal focused exclusively on radio, film, and mass entertainment in general. Its purpose was to provide information as well as to enhance the public's discernment about artistic matters. In this way, the magazine acknowledged diversity and multiplicity, but privileged good taste as the measure appropriate for audience decisions about which artistic manifestations were proper and which were not. Naturally, the arbiter of tastefulness was the magazine itself.⁵³

Correa was a combative journalist and merciless film critic engaged in several cultural crusades, the most important for him being the creation of a national film industry.⁵⁴ Through his writings it is possible to reconstruct the atmosphere of discussions held by many intellectuals in Bogotá and Medellín about the significance of national culture. Correa's confrontational style gained him several enemies and affected the stability of the magazine, which was suspended three times due to bankruptcy. Nonetheless, his voice was constantly present even when *Micro* was out of the business, because between 1942 and the mid 1950s he also published a widely read column titled "En picada" ("Plummeting") in *El Colombiano* under the pseudonym Olimac. Close friend of many musicians in the city, Correa became one of the main promoters and defenders of national music, in both its academic and its popular form.

⁵³On the different approaches to artistic judgement in early-twentieth-century publications and in *Micro*, see [Rojas López 1998](#).

⁵⁴On Camilo Correa's controversial role in the development of a Colombian film industry between the 1940s and 1960s, see Edda Pilar Duque's studies ([1988](#), [1992](#)). Even if throughout her account she seems sympathetic with Correa as a person, she portrays him as a ruthless critic as well as a catastrophic entrepreneur and filmmaker.

Although Correa's judgments could be equally harsh with locals and foreigners, he certainly favored the work of local musicians and emphasized the need to defend national music from foreign invasion. From the pages of *Micro*, Correa welcomed the establishment of new programs of *música típica* on different radio stations, condemned those that demonstrated small interest, and constantly called for campaigns to restore bambucos and *pasillos*' popularity through the airwaves. Fragments of an article published in one of the first issues of the magazine summarize Correa's main concerns, prevalent among many middle-class artists and intellectuals:

To find good tango performances, go to an Argentinean radio station...yet in Colombia, one feels deceived in listening to bambuco performances [...] radio broadcasting operates with materials brought from Mexico, Argentina, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Ecuador, and in the art music area, with European materials; native compositions in no way intervene in the programming. It is not an exaggeration to use this "in no way" wording, because the small percentage assigned to what is national in what is broadcast by our stations does not add up; it is just shameful. In Buenos Aires, between 5:00 and 10:00 p.m., 50% of the music is authored by Argentinean songwriters...it is not a question of closing the custom-house to foreign art. It is just that we consider it fair "to use" a little more of what is created here, and thereby stimulate a musical production that is visibly declining due to this criminal snobbism. For the (economically) powerful stations it would not be an onerous expenditure, or rather, not a superfluous one, to pay for original compositions to debut in their lavish programs. We have enough good composers to supply new materials to our large stations. And dear reader, what do you have to say about our native orchestras? Nothing, there are none. We can recall just one that is native only because of its name "Los Típicos del Aire." It's not native at all since they cannot distinguish a bambuco from a pasillo. "Los Cuatro Ases" is a marvellous group with great musicians, but they perform any type of music that comes across [...] In conclusion, there are no groups specialized in our music [...] With the exception of a weekly program organized by Antonio Uribe in *La Voz de Antioquia*, groups are never asked to perform in a 100% Colombian program, but in jumbles comprising music from the Patagonia to the Rio Grande. Sometimes they have to emigrate from the continent [to find their repertoire]. Without meaning to dictate terms, we ask the persons in charge of these issues at the stations and those who control advertisement, to give a little more national ambience to the transmissions [...].⁵⁵

Two interconnected imperatives converge in Correa's claim: one is to preserve national music, the other is to protect local musicians' labor interests. Like Vidal and other members of the art-music establishment, Correa thought it necessary to enhance popular musicians' proficiency and intellectual authority. The rationale was not that non-academic musicians must pursue an artistic idealism like Vidal's own; Correa saw instead very pragmatic issues

⁵⁵ "No hay típicos" in *Micro* Number 4, March 7 1940, pages 3 and 7.

at stake. It was a crucial step to secure the economic viability of artistic projects, including music and film, in the country. Local radio stations had enough money to spend, but they were spending it on non-national materials. The seemingly endless uncertainty about what to call national music remained a problem.

By this time, the debate had taken on even deeper connotations because it had been suggested several times that neither bambuco nor pasillo were originally Colombian musical genres. *Micro* reproduced fragments of a column published in Bogotá's magazine *Ondas* in which the author called into question the very existence of Colombian music. The columnist, writing under the pseudonym Tristán, denied that pasillo, bambuco, *torbellino*, and any of the other genres labelled national lived up to that identity, invoking the findings of a respectable Ecuadorian musicologist who had affirmed that pasillo was a Venezuelan genre.⁵⁶ Antioqueño regionalism had also cast shadows of their own on the issue. In the course of a controversy with a radio anchor, an editorial in *El Heraldo* had declared that bambuco, pasillo, and *cumbia*⁵⁷ were not Antioqueño music; some of them were probably born in other regions of the continent or had been "imported," a euphemistic way of saying that they were originally African.⁵⁸ The claim of bambuco's non-Antioqueño origin was actually a widespread idea, with many thinking that it had arrived directly from Bogotá, brought by Pelón Santamarta during the first years of the century. Others, like *La Defensa*'s columnist Pío Fernández did not seem to question the issue, declaring that the bambuco "wore" the arriero outfit ("it dressed with *ruana*, uses a *carriel*, owns a machete and an Aguadeño hat").⁵⁹ Years later Antioqueño writers Davidson and Restrepo Duque, both supporters of

⁵⁶ "Tijera" in *Micro* Number 6, March 30 1940, pages 2 and 4. Unfortunately, I was not able to locate Tristán's article and therefore I was not able to identify the cited musicologist.

⁵⁷ *Cumbia* is a traditional genre from the Caribbean Colombian coast, years later adapted into the commercial circuit as *música tropical*. See Wade 2000.

⁵⁸ This is the original quote: "¿el bambuco, el pasillo, la misma cumbia antioqueños? Originalísimo. Ni eso es nuestro, ni es terrígeno. Ni siquiera los compases [sic] ni su ritmo, que unos parecen tener su nacimiento en otras zonas de América, y otros importados, como queja dolorida de la raza atormentada que sirvió para el comercio escandaloso del hombre que vendía al hombre." ("[it is argued that] Bambuco, pasillo, and *cumbia* from Antioquia? That is very original. That music is not ours, it is not from our land. Not even their rhythms, which seem to be born in different areas of the continent, and some others have been imported to us, as the sorrowful cries of a tormented race that was victim of the shocking trade of men selling other men.") In *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, November 8, 1935, page 3. Certainly the writer did not acknowledge that whether bambuco, pasillo, or *cumbia* derived from Spanish or African musical traditions, in both cases they had equally been imported into the New World.

⁵⁹ "El bambuco," in *La Defensa*, May 30 1940, page 5.

bambuco's national identity, dismissed any doubts about the supposed Bogotano origin in the 1900s by demonstrating bambuco's presence in the province during the late nineteenth century.⁶⁰

Correa preferred to avoid that controversy and thereby to focus his efforts on putting more bambucos and *pasillos* on the airwaves. Perhaps the answer was to find a leader for the cause, someone able to persuade Medellinense radio stations to broadcast more bambucos.⁶¹ Interestingly enough, Correa did not even mention Murillo as a suitable candidate for such a task. Evidently the elderly Bogotano musician had already lost his momentum. Murillo would not have been a good choice in this case because he lived in the capital and worked for the official radio station; besides, musicians in Medellín considered him a terrible composer. Of that opinion was Luis Miguel de Zulátegui, a Spanish composer who had resided for many years in the city and who was *Micro's* most severe music critic.

Zulátegui thought one of the main reasons for the scarcity of national music broadcast was simply that there was no new repertoire available for the performers due to the fact that composers did not know the folk sources of the music. According to Zulátegui, it was essential to appoint folklorists to collect and analyze folk music, and the only one who had done something like that was Emilio Murillo, a mediocre musician and quite an awful amateur folklorist.⁶² Note that Correa and Zulátegui were talking about two different things altogether. The former was thinking about popular, commercially-appealing music, while the latter was talking about art music inspired by traditional folk roots. Yet they agreed on the truly fundamental point: the need to put more national music on the radio. For Correa, the problem was an inadequate distribution through the new media; for Zulátegui, the main obstacle was the musicians' deficient production. Both took consumption, namely the acceptance by the public, for granted.

Correa expressed no doubts about whom to ask for financial support for his quest. For him as for other middle-class intellectuals in Medellín, the state seemed either incapable of or uninterested in influencing cultural matters. Sponsorship from the local industrialists was

⁶⁰See Davidson 1970; Restrepo Duque 1971.

⁶¹"Notas" in *Micro* Number 8, April 13 1940, page 3.

⁶²"Música nacional" in the column "Clínica Musical" by Zas (Zulátegui) in *Micro* Number 10, April 27 1940.

more important, they thought. That is why Correa did not insist on calling on the government to exert better control over the airwaves and to appoint a censor to monitor the quality of the music aired.⁶³ The idea was inconvenient in view of the resistance to governmental intervention so effectively expressed just three years earlier, in 1937, by Antioqueño commercial radio stations. In describing the status of national music, Correa argued that the policies applied in the National Conservatory and in the programming of the state radio station—of which, he sarcastically commented, nobody in Medellín knew about⁶⁴—demonstrated the government’s total unwillingness to support national music’s promotion. By claiming this, though, Correa was plainly overlooking the major efforts the government had made in Bogotá through the Ministry of Education, the official radio station *Radiodifusora Nacional*, and the Comisión Nacional del Folklore (National Commission of Folklore).⁶⁵ Perhaps the government was underfunded or insufficiently prepared, but there were indeed researchers assigned to these organizations who cared, for example, about the collection of folk music, which Zulátegui claimed was an urgent need. Nevertheless, the viewpoint expressed in *Micro* was that the central government was incompetent and untrustworthy; hence it was imperative to find support in the local private sector to pursue national music’s rescue.

Micro’s campaign had a positive effect among the local press. Articles urging more broadcasts of national music and praising those industries sponsoring national radio programs soon became common in other publications.⁶⁶ Finally, in 1941, industrialists responded to Correa’s persistent appeals. The textile firms Indulana and Rosellón (filial firms of the largest textile mill, Coltejer) sponsored a new contest for national composers.⁶⁷ There were three awards in the category of popular songs: the best pasillo, the best bambuco, and the best

⁶³“Alcahuetería y radiodifusión,” in *Micro* Number 9, April 20 1940, pages 12 and 14.

⁶⁴For example, a short note in the gossip section “¿Sabía usted?” (Did you know?): “although the whole country knows nothing about it, in Bogotá there is a radio station called Radio Nacional.” *Micro* Number 53, November 1943.

⁶⁵In the late 1930s and early 1940s the Ministry and the Commission were deeply engaged in implementing a national folkloric survey that finally took place in 1942. Research on folkloric issues had come to the fore with the rise of the República Liberal, and in spite of its poor achievements, the survey excited great intellectual activity. See [Silva 2003](#).

⁶⁶For example “Programa folclórico,” in *La Defensa*, May 8 1940, page 3, in which the columnist praised Antonio Uribe’s programs aired in *La Voz de Antioquia*.

⁶⁷Apparently the idea to sponsor this kind of competition was not new. The Compañía Colombiana de Tabaco had awarded a prize to the pasillo “El violento” by composer Carlos Vieco in 1935. The piece was first performed on *Ecos de la Montaña*’s inauguration ([Ocampo Vásquez 2001](#)). The novelty in Indulana and Rosellón’s contest was the dimension of the project.

canción (song) would receive \$200.00 each.⁶⁸ An additional prize of \$500.00 would go to the best fantasy for orchestra employing themes of national music. The three songs and the fantasy had different deadlines and different juries. The orchestral piece, scored for eighteen instruments, would be examined by specialists, and the songs by important figures of the radio and the agent of Victor records. The pieces, signed with pseudonyms, had to be mailed to *La Voz de Antioquia*, where they would be performed during special live programs.⁶⁹ Once again, the circumstances showed that the issue was not so simple. As in the 1937 contest, the first impression was that the response to the competition would not be as massive as the organizers expected. Correa's inopportune commentary two weeks later said that the bambucos and *pasillos* received so far were few, bad, and not transcendent.⁷⁰ Months later Correa had to rectify his commentary when the prizes were awarded.

Actually the call to participate in the competition was very successful, since 320 pieces were entered in the contest.⁷¹ Nevertheless, in October of that year, the announcement of the winners sparked a big scandal—because the first prize went to Zulátegui's orchestral fantasy. An organization of local musicians, the Federación Nacional de Artistas (National Federation of Artists), whose president was the 1937-competition's winner Pedro Pablo Santamaría, declared that the process of selecting the best composition had been biased from the very beginning. The verdict, according to Santamaría, had no other aim than to cause harm to Colombian national pride by awarding the prize to a foreign competitor (Zulátegui was born in Spain).⁷² The commotion was so pronounced that the respective winners for the best pasillo and the best bambuco, composers Carlos Vieco and Manuel J. Bernal, passed almost unnoticed in the news, even though their awards were actually bestowed not by a jury but by a public opinion poll. The animosity between Correa and Santamaría went from bad to

⁶⁸All figures are given in Colombian *pesos* of the time.

⁶⁹*Micro* Number 44, January 22 1941, page 23. The popular song jury comprised Roberto Uribe E., Luis Ramos, Félix de Bedout, Hernando Téllez B., Mario Jaramillo Santamaría, and Aquileo Sierra. The members of the jury for the orchestral fantasy were Pietro Mascheroni, Joseph Matza, Jorge Hernández, Emilio Jaramillo, and Gustavo Lalinde.

⁷⁰"Un concurso desierto," in *Micro* Number 46, February 8 1941, pages 4 and 5.

⁷¹That is what Correa reports, but this may be an inflated estimate. The archives held at Medellín's Eafit University, containing the pieces sent to this contest and to another major competition sponsored by Fabricato, comprise only 272 pieces. See [Gil Araque 2003](#).

⁷²"Un concurso nacional organizado por Rosellón e Indulana en *La Voz de Antioquia*," in *Micro* Number 53, November 1940, page 15.

worse, and Indulana's and Rosellón's commercial interests were probably adversely affected. *Micro's* first bankruptcy at the end of 1941 might even have been somehow related to the outcome benefiting its collaborator.

Apparently the competition took place again in 1942 and 1943, but with scant participation and without major advertisement in the media.⁷³ Whether musicians distrusted the determinations of the jury, or simply felt unconfident about the technical qualities of their compositions, it is impossible to know. Whatever the case, the competition neither helped to close the breach between musicians nor constituted an advertising phenomenon for the company. *Micro's* closing for a period of a year and a half makes it difficult to follow up the details of the case.

3.3.2 The Power of Knowledge: Bambuco's Transcription Dilemma

Correa was able to put everything together again and restart the publication of his magazine in July 1943. The endeavor to save national music remained one of the magazine's major goals, and to that aim Correa invited several important figures to collaborate with the publication on articles about folklore and music history. Two eminent Bogotano musicologists, Andrés Pardo Tovar, the country's most respectable scholar in the field, and composer Daniel Zamudio became *Micro's* regular contributors. The inclusion of these Bogotano experts worked to soften the magazine's formerly belligerent tone, and increased the magazine's status by lending it the aura of an academic journal. It also contributed to give Correa's crusade for national music a more national appearance.

The climate of controversy surrounding national music was still high. The fight after the 1941 contest was another episode in the same battle between popular musicians and academics, now invigorated with the claims against foreign musicians like Zulátegui—who had arrived in the country as a refugee from the Spanish Civil War—and others escaping

⁷³There is almost no information about the 1942 and 1943 competitions. I did not find any mention of them in at least three major newspapers I consulted; hence I initially thought the competition of 1941 was the only one held. However, there are a few manuscripts in the Eafit collection dated between 1941 and 1943 that suggest the competition was carried out for three years. Professor Fernando Gil Araque, who analyzed and catalogued the manuscripts, does not have any further data about the 1942 and 1943 contests. He thinks most original pieces were lost, although some of them were probably preserved by individual musicians in Bogotá (email communication, November 16 2004).

Europe after the outbreak of World War II. The conflicts within the National Conservatory and in Medellín's own major musical institution, the Instituto de Bellas Artes, were favorite topics for journalists in different publications. See for example a fragment of a satirical sonnet about the skirmishes among the Instituto's faculty:⁷⁴

Los músicos de esta villa	The musicians of this village
Se mantienen agarrados	Are always in the middle of a brawl
Metiéndose zancadilla	Tripping one another up
Y la extranjera pandilla	And the foreign gang
Los tiene desazonados	Makes them feel frustrated

The issue was not simply a matter of xenophobia, as Correa often maintained. The actual problem was control over technical musical knowledge. Foreign musicians, who had received their musical education in their native countries, had better job opportunities and received more money than local musicians. In the realm of the contest, material advantages combined with better skills in matters like instrumentation contributed to make foreign composers and their works formidable opponents for the underpaid and less schooled native musicians. Furthermore, the categories of popular song, in which more musicians were able to participate comfortably in accordance with their knowledge and skills, belonged to second-rank competitions in terms of money and social recognition.

Unlike 1937's almost exclusively academic-oriented contest, the sponsored competition of 1941 had proved to be a very good strategy to increase the local production and consumption of all forms of national music, whether academic or popular. The material reward offered by Indulana and Rosellón had encouraged more participation, the traditional repertoire had absorbed several new pieces, and the weekly radio programs had succeeded in creating public expectation about the process and the final results of the competition. Of course, the controversy over the first prize made it evident that the project needed some adjustments to work properly.

Micro's people tried to come to terms with an answer for the puzzle. Zulátegui insisted that the problem lay not in the design of the contest itself, but in the manufacture of the pieces. Consequently, he advocated solving once and for all the problem of bambuco

⁷⁴“Los músicos,” in *El Bateo*, May 18 1940, page 10. “La villa” is a common nickname for Medellín, based on a short section of the original name *Villa de la Candelaria de Medellín* given to the Spanish settlement in 1675.

notation before calling for a new contest. He considered that newly composed bambuco-songs were watered down versions (*bambucos apasillados*) that had lost the syncopated rhythmic drive so distinctive of the traditional genre. Once musicians reached a consensus on the proper notation method, he claimed, it should be fixed by a governmental decree. With that purpose Zulátegui invited the readers of *Micro* to participate in a poll by answering the question: “How do you notate bambuco?”⁷⁵ Zulátegui’s complicated inquiry included a detailed questionnaire of nine points that could only be understood by specialists.

Here it seems appropriate to describe briefly the key elements that make bambuco’s rhythm so difficult to convey in notation.⁷⁶ Bambuco’s highly syncopated rhythm features a sesquialtera, common in other Latin American rhythmic patterns, which can be notated either in 3/4 or 6/8. However, unlike other patterns including the Mexican *son jarocho* and the Colombo-Venezuelan *joropo*, in bambuco the problem of notation cannot be easily solved by the alternation of both time signatures. The difficulty emerges from the coexistence of two different systems of accentuation, because phrases and articulations in the melody (favoring the accents given by the text) rarely if ever coincide with accents in the bass and with the harmonic rhythm. In other words, the problem is which strong beat has to be considered the strongest first beat of the measure.

Pedro Morales Pino, who successfully rendered many Andean musical genres from the oral to the written tradition in the late nineteenth century, chose to transcribe bambuco in 3/4, as exemplified in the original piano transcription of his classic bambuco “Cuatro preguntas,” in which the left hand imitates the strumming of the *triple* (see the first phrase in Figure 8). The underlined syllables indicate the accents of the text.

⁷⁵ “Encuesta, ¿Cómo transcribe usted el bambuco?,” in *Micro* Number 53, September 1943.

⁷⁶ Numerous articles, chapters in books and dissertations, and papers presented at conferences have dealt with this topic, for example: [Añez 1951](#); [Davidson 1970](#); [Mazuera 1972](#); [Koorn 1977](#); [Restrepo Duque 1986](#); [Varney 1999](#); [Varney 2001](#).



Figure 8: “Cuatro Preguntas” transcribed in 3/4 meter

At first sight, the rationale behind Morales Pino’s use of the 3/4 time signature is not very clear, since neither the accents of the text nor the harmonic change coincide with the first beat of the measure. For a performer not familiar with the oral tradition, and from the point of view of a transcriber who aims at providing an easy-to-read prescriptive transcription, it is much clearer to render it as a 6/8 (see the first phrase in Figure 9). In any case, note that, although in 6/8 the accents of the text fall on the first beat of measures 1, 3, and 5, and that the harmonic change coincides with the bars, the base line in the strumming of the *triple* never falls on a strong beat.



Figure 9: “Cuatro Preguntas” transcribed in 6/8 meter

Yet Morales Pino’s choice of time signature is not a mistake, since the 3/4 accentuation is very often present at the moment of performance. As the accomplished *bandola* player

and researcher Manuel Bernal explains, the 3/4 accents can be actively marked by the guitar strumming, indicating important beats for the dancers' steps. Ultimately, he says, there are bambucos that “sound” great in 6/8, while others “sound” better in 3/4.⁷⁷ Bernal's remark makes clear the importance of oral tradition and the degree of variation and rhythmic freedom in the performance of bambuco.

In 1944, only one musician, art-music composer Jesús Martínez Silva, answered Zulátegui's inquiry about bambuco's correct transcription—almost a year after the initial inquiry.⁷⁸ Zulátegui misjudged the real problem; untrained musicians knew how to perform bambuco correctly, but their knowledge was performative, not lettered. He was asking non-schooled musicians to express themselves in a language they did not know. Or more accurately, Zulátegui's inquiry was simply not addressing popular musicians at all. For him, the issue of notation was so complex that it had to be deciphered exclusively by professionals, and once defined, bambuco's rhythm had to be ruled by the government; popular musicians, had just to comply. This is a perfect example of an epistemic expropriation exerted by an elite, in which the value of the popular musicians' knowledge about their own tradition was totally denied.

Another important factor for the meager response to Zulátegui's inquiry was that popular musicians were not interested in the main pragmatic reason argued for creating a notational system. Although probably not one of Zulátegui's main motivations, a unified notation was needed to produce sheet music to send abroad, to be recorded by studio musicians in the United States or Argentina. Local musicians could not be less interested in that issue. At the end, Zulátegui's mistaken but well-intentioned proposal did not solve the question at all, and instead strengthened the opinion that bambuco's notation required special expertise.

Bambuco's alleged extreme complexity was a two-edged sword. It enclosed the genre in an aura of specialized knowledge that enhanced its representational status as a national symbol, by projecting bambuco above all other national music genres. Indeed, pasillo's symbolic potential was almost completely overwhelmed by bambuco's intellectual authority—especially since pasillo was still regarded as danceable music, while bambuco fitted better the ideal

⁷⁷Manuel Bernal, personal communication, also in [Bernal 2004](#).

⁷⁸Answer published in *Micro* Number 58, June 1944. It is also reproduced in [Restrepo Duque 1986](#), 56–59.

of concert-style music, given its complexity. At the same time, bambuco's special quality apparently became an obstacle that prohibited some untrained musicians from composing pieces in that genre.⁷⁹ Behind the discussion of the transcription, there was a problem of control: control over knowledge, of course, but also control over bambuco's potentially unruly non-European rhythmic asymmetry. According to Ana María Ochoa, to put bambuco into a meter was the final step toward the quest to "civilize" it, a way to make it comply with ideals of social order and patriarchal hierarchy.⁸⁰ This endeavor toward civilization, however, left out those musicians unable to understand and control bambuco rhythm because they did not "naturally" belong to the white educated male upper classes. Because it was virtually impossible for popular musicians to acquire the indispensable technical knowledge, they could not actively participate in a civilizing endeavor of any sort. Limiting the access to knowledge for a selected few was a way to preclude social—and racial—mobility, both symbolically and materially. The colonial system of castes, the *pureza de sangre*, operated here to tightly close upward mobility.⁸¹

It is not easy to gauge the real impact these troubled efforts on behalf of national music had on the general public. We can try to measure how many bambucos were in vogue in the early 1940s by examining local *cancioneros* (song books). Those published during the first years of the decade contain more foreign songs than bambucos, precisely at a moment when bolero was entering the local market of recordings and radio broadcast with more strength than ever.⁸³ By this time, a few recordings had been produced locally by Victor's agent Félix de Bedout, who bought a recording machine in 1940. The first locally-produced national music recordings, by *duetos bambuqueros* Ospina and Peláez and Ospina and Martínez, received a modest but fair promotion in the pages of local *cancioneros*.⁸⁴ Looking carefully at the titles, however, one notices something that will become a constant feature in *cancioneros*, catalogs

⁷⁹For example, when well-known singer and amateur songwriter Ligia Mayo was asked if she had ever composed a bambuco she replied, "bambuco? no, no way, it is too difficult" (Londoño and Tobón 2002).

⁸⁰Ochoa 1997.

⁸¹This mechanism has also been observed by Marco Palacios while analyzing the inaccessibility to knowledge in economics in Colombia during the late twentieth century.⁸²

⁸³See discussion in chapter 5.

⁸⁴Six pieces (bambucos and *pasillos*) from a total of 20 songs in *Cancionero Colombiano* #150, January 24 1941; and twenty pieces from 74 songs in *El Cantar de la Montaña* (n.d.; according to the advertisement, however, we know it was issued during World War II's early years).

of the composers, and lists of recordings: *pasillos* greatly outnumber bambucos.⁸⁵ To what extent the apparent decline of bambuco resulted from the problem of transcription, it is difficult to say, but clearly the notoriety attached to the genre in the intellectual discussions did not match its status or popularity with the music played in public.

Notwithstanding, the advances of the nationalist campaign were still modest but a little more evident in local radio broadcasting. In 1943, a program on *La Voz de Antioquia* sponsored by the Compañía Colombiana de Tabaco (Colombian Tobacco Company) presented a series on Colombian art music composers.⁸⁶ However, such programming was still sporadic. And whereas duetos bambuqueros had their niches in some of the programs, they very rarely performed in national music programs such as Antonio Uribe's "La Hora Típica," also on *La Voz de Antioquia*. Most often, they performed alternating with other ensembles playing an international repertoire.

3.3.3 "National Industry is Bambuco's Legitimate Sister"

Micro went out of business again in August 1944, leaving the rescue of bambuco unfinished. The concern stayed alive, however, and new circumstances brought the issue back less than a year later, when the end of World War II appeared to be imminent. In April 1945 a column in *El Colombiano* reported the formation of a new private organization to support national music in all its aspects. The reporter anticipated that this new body, which included art music composer Roberto Pineda Duque, Delio Jaramillo, director of the Instituto de Bellas Artes, and other local personalities, would be called "Asociación Musical Propatria" (The Fatherland's Music Association).⁸⁷ The name of the hypothetical organization was never mentioned again in the press, probably because the association itself never crystalized. However, several days later the same column reported that the radio station *La Voz de*

⁸⁵For example, in an unpublished catalog of the Duetto de Antaño's records, compiled by two aficionados, *pasillos* account for more than twice the number of bambucos ([Agudelo and Gutiérrez nd](#)).

⁸⁶Among the musicians featured in the program *Teatro del Aire* were Roberto Pineda Duque, Luis M. de Zulátegui, and Carlos Vieco (all of them Antioqueños or resident in Medellín). *El Heraldo de Antioquia* March 9 and 21 1943.

⁸⁷"Música Colombiana" appeared in the daily column "Norte Cultural" in *El Colombiano*, April 12 1945, page 5. Only two other members of the association are mentioned in the text, Jaime Velásquez Toro (a young lawyer) and Lucía Merino.

Antioquia was planning a huge project for promoting national music.⁸⁸ What was behind this sudden interest in national music? Why was it now a central policy of the most powerful local private radio station? Once more it is through Camilo Correa that we can learn what was happening. In his regular column, he transcribed the text of the plan designed by the radio station.⁸⁹

La Voz de Antioquia's wish to carry out an effective campaign to promote Colombian music aiming to create a nationalist awareness of our artistic forms, that necessarily will take the form of a solid protection of our industry, presents its plan of folkloric programs for this year to the consideration of industrialists and of other national organizations. It is well known that once Colombians' love for autochthonous issues is encouraged, creating a fondness similar to that existing in other countries for their native artistic expressions that afterwards incorporated their local industries, we would see crystallized an ideal we have envisioned without seeking it, TO FAVOR COLOMBIAN ART AND INDUSTRY IN ORDER TO BUILD THE FATHERLAND. [...] The proportion of autochthonous music sung and danced by Colombians is simply ridiculous; perhaps it doesn't even reach ONE PERCENT. Is it strange then, that the naive and ignorant predilection our compatriots feel for foreign musical forms such as foxes, *rumbas*, *huapangos*, and tangos unconsciously affects their acceptance of foreign commodities? How to ask Colombian people to have the nationalist awareness manifested in the consumption of national merchandise if native industrialists advertise their items with international music such as opera and operetta? Colombian people are ignorant of their own music, which can be compared with the music of any other country that proudly shows it to the world. [...] This is a marketing plan as well as a stabilizer of sympathies for the sponsoring firms, and a campaign to rescue native art, which if it is not carried out immediately, will come too late to save the remnants of one of the most beautiful Latin American folkloric traditions.

The awaking enthusiasm for the promotion of national music obeyed a marketing strategy rooted in the end of World War II. The war's huge economic disruption of the world market had been very favorable for the growth of local industry and the development of the Colombian domestic market. For six years, the economic apparatuses of the First World had been concentrated in the production of military hardware and supplies for the troops, allowing the industrialization of peripheral countries not directly involved in the conflict. In order to survive the imminent impact of the reorganized world trade on local economy, Colombian industry had to convince internal consumers to keep buying Colombian products. And music was an excellent vehicle for nationalist propaganda.

⁸⁸ "Música Colombiana" in "Norte Cultural," April 17 1945, page 3.

⁸⁹Published in "En Picada," *El Colombiano*, April 19 1945, page 5. Capital letters in the original. This is the only source of this text I know; some fragments were handed out in a brochure during the inauguration of the series of programs, but none appear to have survived.

The advertising strategy was a design of the firm Art Publicitarios Ltda., which had started a subtle but powerful daily advertisement campaign on the front page of *El Colombiano* at the beginning of April. Every day, a simple and elegant ad in the lower right corner called upon the government's economic protection and the commitment of local consumers. The sketch of the series of programs called "Música de Colombia," organized by Art Publicitarios and *La Voz de Antioquia*, was presented in society with a magnificent ball held in the elegant Club Unión, broadcast live by the station. The preparation of the party and the aftermath were widely discussed in the local press.⁹⁰ Since the event happily coincided with the announcement of peace negotiations in Europe after the fall of Berlin, the occasion was also considered a celebration of the end of hostilities. *El Colombiano's* front page of April 4 1945 included the news of peace, a huge announcement of the ball for that night in the left-hand corner, and Art-Publicitarios' customary ad (as well as a small note of thanks from the North American citizens resident in the city for the condolences they had received after President Roosevelt's recent death. See Figure 10).

The fashionable social event in Medellín did not receive any attention in Bogotá's press.⁹¹ Bogotano advertisement companies became interested, however. Musicologist and national music activist Andrés Pardo Tovar, who managed the radio department in the firm Propaganda Época, visited the city days later to explore the marketing possibilities of the campaign.⁹² It was announced that the daily half-hour program "Música de Colombia" would be launched on June 1, featuring a cycle of diverse topics including "The Music Colombians Dance," "Typical Composers," "Vernacular Aspects," "National Authors," "Autochthonous Musical," "National non-Typical Authors," "The Musical Anecdote," "Colombian Serenade," and "Greatest National Tales."⁹³ We do not know anything about the criteria used to plan this series of programs, which still had not materialized by June. The strategy to "educate the people with Colombian music, so they will realize that national industry is

⁹⁰The conservative newspapers *El Colombiano* and *La Defensa* carried numerous commentaries during the two first weeks of May 1945; curiously, there was no mention of the event in the liberal newspaper *El Diario* (the other liberal newspaper, *El Heraldo de Antioquia* went out of print in 1943).

⁹¹No mentions in either in *El Tiempo* nor in *El Espectador*.

⁹²Note in *El Colombiano*, May 8 1945.

⁹³These are the original Spanish titles: Lo que baila Colombia, Compositores típicos, Estampa vernácula, Revista de lo autóctono, Autores nacionales, Autores nacionales no típicos, La anécdota musical, Serenata colombiana, Grandes cuentos nacionales. In "En Picada," *El Colombiano* May 6 1945, page 5.



Figure 10: *El Colombiano's* front page, April 4 1945.

bambuco and *guabina's* legitimate sister”⁹⁴ faded away—at least for several months.

It appears the plan was not persuasive enough, because almost a year later the initiative was still in need of sponsors.⁹⁵ In addition, the radio station was having troubles with its orchestra, which went on strike in April and May 1946. The plea presented by the union was not economic: rather, they wanted a voice in artistic matters such as the appointment of the station’s artistic director. According to *El Colombiano*, the musicians had been misled by Communist agitators, who wanted to overthrow the hierarchical principle, the basis of Colombian industrial organization without which private property would disappear only to be replaced by chaos.⁹⁶ Musicians tried to fight back, accusing the station of replacing them with records—which acted as *esquiroles eléctricos* (electric scabs) usurping their labor—but the Inspector of Labor Issues could not find any law prohibiting the station’s use of its record collection.⁹⁷ The affair stimulated the foundation of a musicians’ organization in 1947, the

⁹⁴Editorial note “Música colombiana para los colombianos,” in *El Colombiano* May 15, page 5.

⁹⁵Editorial note “La música colombiana” in *El Colombiano* March 21 1946, page 5.

⁹⁶“Apoderarse de la emisora *La Voz de Antioquia* busca el sindicato de cantantes,” in *El Colombiano* April 5 1946, page 2.

⁹⁷“De la demanda presentada por los músicos de Medellín contra *La Voz de Antioquia*,” in *El Colombiano*

Colombian society of authors and composers SAYCO (Sociedad de Autores y Compositores de Colombia). The conflict also affected the station, which was acquired by a trust formed by a local entrepreneur and the textile firm Coltejer before the strike was resolved.⁹⁸

Apparently, the lack of public appeal of the national music agenda resulted in the program's failure. Backed by the city's most potent station and elegantly and effectively advertised in the press, the initiative had the potential to become a great commercial success. The fiasco indicates the essential indifference of the audience to the idea. In addition, the incident of the musicians' strike recalls the inflexibility of the establishment toward any type of resistance, even one formulated on the grounds of aesthetics. The performers' plea toward artistic autonomy was read as a threat to the hierarchical system; for those in power, disintegration appeared preferable to negotiating shared control. Confronted with the problem, the state apparatus was incapable of providing any reasonable solution. This can be seen as an example of what Marco Palacios deems the central state's weakness to implement effective institutional responses to discourses of exclusion in struggles for power.⁹⁹

In spite of the failure of the project, the crusade was eventually fruitful for the cause of national music. Almost all local stations devised programs of Colombian music (such as the pioneering program by Roberto Zuluaga Gutiérrez called "La hora colombiana" at *La Voz del Triunfo* in 1947, relocated in 1951 to *Ondas Tropicales*; and "Colombia al micrófono" at *La Voz de las Américas*), or the firms themselves offered to sponsor the series (like "Brindis Musical," sponsored by Ron Medellín in *La Voz de Antioquia*).

3.3.4 The Fabricato Musical Contest

After several unsuccessful attempts, the radio program "Música de Colombia" was finally set up in 1948, not at the powerful *La Voz de Antioquia*, but at a smaller station called *La Voz de Medellín* (Medellín's Voice). The circumstances involved a confrontation between the largest Antioqueño textile mills, Coltejer and Fabricato, and the creation of an annual contest for national music. A conflict of power between industrialists encouraged the textile

April 21 1946.

⁹⁸On the details of this transaction, see Téllez B. 1974.

⁹⁹Palacios 1995, 25.

mills' participation in the business of radio broadcasting in what authors call "the radio wars," which actually were "the textile mills wars."¹⁰⁰

Fabricato was the only company that had supported the trailer of the original radio program back in 1945. The management of Fabricato's advertisement was in the hands of the firm Publicidad Éxito, which acknowledged the great potential of the idea. Éxito was the publisher of Fabricato's well-produced magazine *Gloria*, a publication targeting mainly women, and exalting Colombian traditions, artists, musicians, and writers. In 1946 the firm had used the magazine to organize a sewing contest, an event that had been very successful both at local and national levels. Now, to attract a larger audience of consumers, it decided to hold a musical contest as proposed in the program's original outline. Thus, both Fabricato's sponsored program "Teatro en casa" (Theater at Home), originated at *La Voz de Antioquia*, and *Gloria*, became the company's most important vehicles for advertising a new musical contest called "Música de Colombia." The award ceremony was scheduled for Colombia's next Independence Day, August 7 1948, coinciding with the celebration of Fabricato's 25th anniversary.

The call for entries in the new contest, with all the requirements, was published in *Gloria* in late 1947.¹⁰¹ Spanish composer and conductor José María Tena, a veteran director of several radio orchestras in Medellín and Bogotá, was appointed the enterprise's artistic director. The pieces had to be sent to Éxito in a sealed envelope signed with a pseudonym. The five categories and their corresponding awards were: \$1,500 for the best fantasy for small symphonic orchestra; \$750 for the best bambuco; \$500 for the best pasillo; \$500 for the best piece on a different Colombian musical air; and \$500 for the best Colombian song. The non-symphonic pieces could be written for piano and the musical director was in charge of making the corresponding arrangement, whether for small symphonic orchestra or, if more appropriate, for *estudiantina* or *dueto bambuquero*. The call was a thrilling success; in a period of five months Éxito received 203 pieces: 12 symphonic pieces,¹⁰² 47 bambucos, 93 pasillos, 34 pieces of different genres (*guabinas*, *bundes*, *guajiras*), and 17 other pieces simply labelled as songs.

¹⁰⁰Gil Araque 2003, 24. Data from the Fabricato contest included here are taken from this work unless indicated otherwise.

¹⁰¹"Fabricato abre sensacional concurso de música colombiana" in *Gloria* September-October 1947.

¹⁰²In fact, only 5 pieces fulfilled the orchestration requirement; the others were actually chamber music.

A week before the award ceremony, as part of a larger transaction, Coltejer acquired the exclusive rights for textile advertisement at *La Voz de Antioquia*. For Fabricato, that meant it could not stage its ceremony as planned. In a matter of days, it had to make a deal with *La Voz de Medellín* and establish a partnership with Bogotá's most powerful private radio station, *Nueva Granada*. Repeating an effort it had already made at the beginning of that year to broadcast an important event, this station managed to create a network of radio stations throughout the country that allowed the award ceremony to be broadcast nationally. The celebration was successfully transmitted live from the Teatro Junín exactly on the prearranged date. The program "Música de Colombia" was launched later as a regular program twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, in direct competition with Coltejer's program "Coltejer toca a su puerta" (Coltejer Knocks at your Door), broadcast by *La Voz de Antioquia*. In February 1949, the improvised network became a permanent partnership under the name Radio Cadena Nacional, known simply as RCN. A few months before, on September 1948, its competitor had also become a formal network under the name Caracol (Cadena Radial Colombiana).¹⁰³

The conflict between radio networks also marked the first positive outcome of a musical contest. The competition demonstrated some advances in the elaboration of the pieces, and the strategy of providing an orchestral arrangement for the traditional pieces slightly closed the breach between the professionals and the intuitive composers still unable to produce an orchestral version by themselves. However, it also showed that the tensions between creators, evaluators, and the public persisted. A controversy exploded when the jury declared two categories void: none of the bambucos or Colombian songs merited an award. According to the jury, the submitted bambucos conformed with outdated models and did not offer any interesting innovations. Its decision to bestow mentions upon elaborate and well-structured pieces in the first category that did not conform with preestablished rules for orchestration drew the ire of certain members of the press. For example, *El Diario's* entertainment commentator asked why the competition bothered with rules if the jury conferred mentions on pieces by Uribe Holguín and Zulátegui even at the expense of bambuco.¹⁰⁴ Another con-

¹⁰³Pérez Ángel and Castellanos 1998.

¹⁰⁴Quoted in Gil Araque 2003; although it is not mentioned there, the columnist was Hernán Restrepo Duque, who years later would say that the Fabricato contest constituted a major injury (*puñalada*) to

troversony stemmed from the verdict given on the category of pasillo. Luis Uribe Bueno's instrumental pasillo titled "El Cucarrón" ("The Beetle") astonished the audience with its instrumentation and its harmonic audacity that included a progression of diminished chords never heard before in Colombian traditional genres. A widespread ill-intentioned rumor maintained that Uribe Bueno had plagiarized in his pasillo some parts of Rimsky Korsakov's famous piece "The Flight of the Bumble Bee."

In spite of all the obstacles and criticisms, the contest unquestionably drew the attention of the public. The jury's progressive attitude toward technical and aesthetic matters effectively shook the foundations of tradition, demanding elaboration both in art music forms and in more traditional genres. Despite the protests, the event made clear that the number of professional musicians able to take part in such a competition had increased dramatically since the Indulana and Rosellón musical contest in 1941. For better or worse, the boundaries separating amateurs from professionals, whether academic or popular musicians, had finally become clear by the late 1940s; even if they were not officially excluded, non-professional musicians had no chance in a competition like Fabricato's. The status of national music was hence favorably defined more in terms of art music than in terms of popular music, privileging orchestral arrangements over songs for *duetos bambuqueros*, as well as backing more sophisticated harmonic progressions and instrumental virtuosity. Still, rather than a symphonic tradition comparable to the German canon, the type of national music profiled for the contest had some features from North American big bands, especially in its orchestration, more appropriate for a radio broadcast than for a concert hall.

The aftermath of the competition showed that although bambuco had not lost its symbolic power, the traditional genre was undergoing a serious crisis. The contest had certainly underlined its significance by offering a larger sum to the best popular piece created in that genre, more than to other genres like the pasillo. The outcome, however, had demonstrated that few composers dared to deal with bambuco, and that the old model was exhausted and in urgent need of renovation. Apparently, the discussions bambuco had generated in intellectual circles for nearly fifty years had stiffened the genre, and nobody really wanted

bambuco (Restrepo Duque 1986). The pieces Restrepo Duque alluded to were Uribe Holguín's "Fantasía para dos pianos" ("Fantasy for two Pianos") and Zulátegui's piece for small orchestra "Ay mi negrita D'Uribia" (*danza guajira*).

to be criticized either for being too conservative or for challenging the standard too much. In contrast, the great originality and creativity displayed in the category of pasillo showed the tremendous possibilities traditional genres still had to offer. The arrival on the scene of young composer Luis Uribe Bueno, who would win prizes in different categories in all the versions of the contest, marked a definite shift.

A possible interpretation of the bambuco's award incident paradoxically provides evidence of the genre's definite status as national symbol, but one whose power has not been completely fulfilled. If bambuco had become completely institutionalized, it would have turned into a static museum artifact almost beyond the reach of ordinary musicians, probably losing much of its character of live music.¹⁰⁵ Bambuco's symbolic power would be finally crystalized in this process, taking shape as an exclusive and restricted symbol. In this sense, the jury's estimation of the aesthetic merits of the pieces would be the kind of regulatory instrument needed for such institutionalization. Yet their decision to declare the category void appears as the symbolic power's fundamental incompleteness: bambuco is yet to be created according to superior artistic standards. The jury's positive reception of innovation, illustrated in how they judge pieces in other categories of the competition, augured that bambuco eventually would achieve its symbolic completeness.

Although in general the Fabricato contest achieved a series of positive outcomes, the episode also made evident some problematic aspects. Indeed, bambuco's final symbolic incompleteness embodies the lack of national coherence and cohesion that might be so pervasively present during the second half of 1948, only a couple of months after Jorge Eliécer Gaitán's assassination in early April. On the other hand, it is hardly symptomatic that bambuco's national project had become a commercially-driven initiative in which the state had no participation. Despite its good intentions, the contest was a clear example of a national symbol's privatization; the nation, as constructed in bambuco by the contest, was from the very beginning basically a project created by and for a selected minority, and not a system of representation devised for the masses.

The competition was carried out again in the years 1949, 1950, and 1951, and most performances were broadcast on the program "Música de Colombia." Each year, the basis of the

¹⁰⁵On institutionalization of tradition and how tradition acquire symbolic power, see [Bourdieu 1987](#).

contest included some modifications (for example, the creation of a new category for chamber music in 1949), and the musical direction was given to Jorge Camargo Spolidore, winner of the 1948 award for the best orchestral fantasy. The number of participants decreased in subsequent contests owing to the level of musical expertise required for the competition. For Fabricato, the event represented a great economic effort, since it was expected to hire only the best musicians in the country to perform the pieces on its radio programs. But the expenditure was paid back in terms of renown and publicity for the firm. Of the much smaller music competitions carried out during those years by diverse institutions, such as the official radio station *Radiodifusora Nacional*, none was as successful as Fabricato's. The motives that led to the discontinuation of the contest are not very clear; I will come back to this issue in section 3.4.

3.3.5 Behind Nationalist Discourses: The Activities of the Performers

While intellectuals and entrepreneurs discussed the benefits of a nationalist crusade and its repercussions in both aesthetic and economic matters, several local ensembles struggled to survive the new mass entertainment market's dynamics. Times had changed since tailors and cabinetmakers performed bambuco just for their own entertainment in canteens or in improvised serenades, and in the 1940s several professional *duetos bambuqueros* (the most important being Espinosa and Bedoya, Obdulio and Julián, and the Duetto de Antaño, comprised of García and Carrasquilla) made their living offering their services to local radio stations and to young male clients eager to give their fiancées a romantic serenade.

These performers shared the origins of their predecessors, most of them blue-collar workers born in small villages who migrated to the city in search of jobs: Bedoya and Obdulio were tailors, García a textile worker, and Julián a cabinetmaker.¹⁰⁶ Unlike Obdulio and Julián, who were part of *La Voz de Antioquia*'s staff, most duets worked freelance at several local radio stations, or performed in movie theaters before and after the screenings. Late at night, duets could be found in certain cafés awaiting a gig as *serenateros* (serenade performers). After the gig they usually came back to the same place, whether to wait for another gig

¹⁰⁶All biographical data in this section from a series of interviews and archival research in [Ocampo Vásquez 2001](#).

or to join the party until dawn. Numerous articles and notes in the local press praising them for their artistry demonstrate that these performers were indeed loved by the public, although their profession was seen as a dissolute activity. Musicians themselves did not want their own sons to follow their careers.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, social prejudice against musicians had important gender implications. Very few women dared to become performers, and female duets such as Elena and Lucía were featured exclusively on radio broadcasts and recordings, never in gigs performed at night. Furthermore, female duets were not *duetos bambuqueros* in the literal sense; they were rather adaptations of similar ensembles performing bolero on Mexican or Cuban radio broadcasts, not accompanying themselves with stringed instruments but backed up by the radio orchestra. Accordingly, their repertoire usually comprised more foreign genres than bambucos (see section 5.3.2).

Because of their fame, well-known *duetos bambuqueros* were as highly regarded as they were severely criticized, yet their presence on the radio was not completely guaranteed. For example, when Obdulio and Julián celebrated their 25th anniversary as a duet in July 1949, a highbrow commentator from *El Colombiano* applauded their persistence in performing national music in an unfriendly atmosphere in which “the public’s curiosity about the most barbaric rhythms has detained our song’s prestige.”¹⁰⁸ A little later, however, the columnist of a popular *cancionero* ironically complained that the duets were too negligent and overconfident to ever bother renovating their old-fashioned repertoires: “Obdulio and Julián are not absent from the microphones, as some say, because they do not receive what they deserve, but because they took 10 bambucos and were dead lazy to learn any more. And, of course, 10 bambucos repeated over 20 years cannot be tolerated, not even by the Duetto de Antaño’s admirers, who are the world’s most lenient.”¹⁰⁹ Indeed, since the 1940 arrival of recording devices, the few records produced with the performance of local duets had been at the center of controversy precisely because of their outdated songs. By the end of the decade, the new records released by the Duetto de Antaño and Espinosa and Bedoya had received

¹⁰⁷According to the Duetto de Antaño member Camilo García: “When I was seven, my father [an aficionado guitarist] did not want to teach me music anymore, because he was worried I would become a vicious bohemian like himself” (Ocampo Vásquez 2001, 153). There is also a similar remark in the biography of amateur songwriter Héctor Ochoa Cárdenas, son of *Lira Antioqueña* member Eusebio Ochoa.

¹⁰⁸In the column “Ventana” by Lope, *El Colombiano*, July 12 1949, page 5.

¹⁰⁹“Comentario Radial” in *El Porteño: Cancionero de Colombia* Number 8, year II (August 1951) page 6.

some popular attention, while Obdulio and Julián’s refusal to record ostracized them from the public. When they finally agreed to record in the 1950s, their records were a flop in the market; their music was considered too old.

Sometimes it was much more a matter of local pride that made audiences praise and respect their musicians. For instance, foreign performers visiting the city were always congratulated when they included a bambuco in their performances; but most were also mercilessly judged as totally unable to understand the difficulties inherent in bambuco. Consider, for instance, the commentary—in the same *cancionero* mentioned above—on the performance by Mexican star Alfonso Ortiz Tirado: “Frankly, we cannot understand how *La Voz the Antioquia* allowed him to include in his performances songs of our poor and sick regional music. Ortiz Tirado’s golden throat does not make him capable of mastering all musical airs, much less ours”¹¹⁰ (note that the commentator was also denigrating the bambuco tradition’s good health). The performance of the cherished bambuco “Antioqueñita” by the renowned Mexican Trio Los Panchos, who visited the city in 1951, provoked similar remarks: “The famous trio might be very good for the performance of certain musical airs, but they have no right to demolish our regional music.”¹¹¹ In those cases, *duetos bambuqueros* were properly regarded as the main authorities in bambuco performance.

That foreign performers came in for such criticism is rather paradoxical. The truth was that most of the repertoire of bambucos and *pasillos* arriving in the city in the form of records was produced by non-Colombian musicians. Before the consolidation of the local recording industry in the early 1950s, the majority of bambuco records were still made in Buenos Aires and New York City. Argentinean and North American recording studios had their own ensembles specializing in the performance of Colombian music, such as the Romanceros del Cauca and the Estudiantina Colombia, respectively.¹¹² The musical director of RCA Victor in New York for Latin America, Argentinean Terig Tucci, composed a series of *pasillos* that are still considered classics of the Colombian Andean music repertoire, even

¹¹⁰ “Lo bueno y lo malo de la radio” by Jessie Monyato, in *El Porteño: Cancionero de Colombia* Number 8, year II (August 1951) page 15. I noticed that labelling the music “regional” instead of “national” started to be a common habit in the late 1940s, and the terms were simply used as synonyms. The reason is perhaps that at the time Costeño music was rapidly coming into the scene as a new type of national music. See next section 3.4.

¹¹¹ “Destrozada” in the section Panorama in *El Diario*, April 13 1951, page 5.

¹¹² Interview with Jesús Vallejo Mejía, Medellín, July 3 2003. Other data from Restrepo Duque 1992.

though Tucci himself never visited Colombia. People in Medellín were relatively well aware of that; Camilo Correa, for example, used Tucci's contribution to the repertoire to criticize local composers: "[he] has written more than Pedro Pablo Santamaría, Carlos Vieco, and Arturo Alzate."¹¹³ Commentaries of the sort did not applaud the inner qualities of either the composer or the piece, but the fact a foreigner had recognized the beauty and value of a Colombian genre—and, of course, condemned locals for not doing the same. Whatever the case, foreign performers were generally well received, while the few initiatives developed to promote Colombian artists at home—such as the *Cadena Bolívar*, a short-lived series of programs featuring only national artists (see page 172)—rapidly succumbed to the pressures of the market.

In spite of the poor appreciation the musical profession inspired, the cultivation of traditional music as a hobby was strongly encouraged at home and in other social spaces. As part of the welfare policies developed in the Patronatos, for example, many companies hired instructors and formed their own ensembles of workers. Composer Carlos Vieco directed an *estudiantina* in the textile mill Tejicondor, and several choirs in Coltabaco, Xócidos, Everfit, and Empresas Públicas de Medellín. Other firms that formed ensembles include Coltejer, Fabricato, Indulana, Fábrica de Empaques, Cerámicas Sabaneta, and Locería Colombiana. That educative strategy continued until the 1980s.¹¹⁴ Musical proficiency was highly regarded in privileged social circles as well. In 1949, Gonzalo Hernández established a musical academy to train members of the elites in the performance of bambuco. Hernández was a skilful *bandola* player and a retired member of the once renowned trio Hermanos Hernández. Most of his students were young women, and their concerts were always warmly reviewed in the local press. Even the members of the branch of the powerful family Echavarría who owned Fabricato were known for their enormous talent as amateur musicians. And Jaime R. Echavarría, a chemical engineer and governor of Antioquia in the 1970s, became one of the country's most gifted songwriters of traditional and other popular music genres such as bolero.

In fact, contrasting with the professional performers' ambiguous status, composers were

¹¹³ "Créalo," in *Micro* Number 30, September 24 1940, page 11.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Ricardo Antonio Puerta, member of Tejicondor's *estudiantina*, in [Ocampo Vásquez 2001](#).

very well respected, exemplifying how intellectual knowledge was favored over performative skills. In addition, in accordance with traditional gender boundaries and aside from very sporadic contributions by a few female aficionado songwriters, composition was generally regarded as a male activity. The press very rarely reported the work of female songwriters, showing surprise whenever a woman produced a piece. For example, a *guabina* by Margarita Posada de Upegui received an honorary mention in the Fabricato Contest of 1950. Ra-Vel, *El Colombiano*'s music critic, commented: "the award-winning piece comes from the hand of a female composer, a significant thing since our women, like all women around the world, do not dare to cultivate the field of composition."¹¹⁵ Likewise, the activities of the Colombian songwriter Sonia Dimitrovna (María Betancourt de Cáceres), who was active in New York in the 1930s and composed several *pasillos* recorded in that city, were ignored by journalists and critics. Even Jorge Añez, a fellow musician of hers in New York who compiled a history of bambuco (see next section), paid no attention to her output.¹¹⁶

On the list of respected local composers was Carlos Vieco, whose prolific production was constantly recognized as an example of local creativity. Unfortunately, such unconditional admiration and his family's aspirations to preserve his work, have prevented a thorough critical appraisal of his vast oeuvre. Meanwhile, the success of the non-Antioqueño Luis Uribe Bueno (originally from the Norte de Santander *departamento*) after his arrival in Medellín in 1948 was seen as a positive manifestation of the new times; although his presence was threatening to the Paisa musical environment, his knowledgeable authority helped to solve the transcription problem and established the tradition of instrumental virtuosity that today characterizes the performance of Colombian Andean music.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ "El concurso de música de Fabricato," by Ra-Vel, in *El Colombiano* August 11 1950, page 5.

¹¹⁶ Hernán Restrepo Duque and Jaime Rico Salazar acknowledged her work and have tried to gather information about her; see [Restrepo Duque 1971](#) and [Rico Salazar 2000](#).

¹¹⁷ On the figure and the work of Luis Uribe Bueno, see the still-unpublished monumental study produced by the group Músicas Regionales at the Universidad de Antioquia, [Londoño 2004](#).

3.4 RE-CONSERVATIZATION: THE REAFFIRMATION OF BAMBUCO'S MYTH IN THE EARLY 1950S

We have seen how in spite of bambuco's persistent state of crisis during the 1930s and 1940s, towards the end of the decade its symbolic effectiveness as a national symbol was finally coming together. However, at the beginning of the next decade, several voices came to proclaim the strength of bambuco's symbolic national status. The most important reason for the reaffirmation of bambuco's significance was the relentless advance of Costeño music (also called *música tropical*), which was perceived as a menace to the *mestizo* (and therefore predominantly Spanish) national identity. Costeño music began expanding its influence throughout the Andean interior due to the establishment of the country's first recording business in Cartagena, the ancient fortified Spanish outpost on the Caribbean coast, in the mid-1940s. Discos Fuentes was the first record label to have a press to manufacture records in the country. Despite some initial resistance from certain sectors of the public, especially from the middle classes, Medellín's market rapidly welcomed Costeño dance music. It was precisely during this period that bambuco and pasillo started to be labelled as regional music, in an attempt to differentiate it from Costeño music, which was undeniably a type of national music too.

The most traditionalist and conservative members of local society were especially alarmed at the implications of such symptoms of permissiveness and tolerance, which they regarded rather as signs of relaxed morals. Considering dancing morally dangerous, the Church had influenced the municipal government to establish some restrictions on this activity around the turn of the century. Any citizen interested in organizing a dance party had to inform the authorities and pay a tax. Despite the tight controls, many legal and illegal dances took place in the city, and evidence of such activities can be traced back in the correspondence sent to the city council.¹¹⁸ Parties usually included Costeño music and other danceable genres of Afro-Cuban music, including bolero (see sections 5.3.3 and 5.3.4.)

Besides the alleged risk entrenched in dance itself, traditionalists were further concerned

¹¹⁸Historian Luz Marina Jaramillo, head of Medellín's Municipal Council Archives. Personal communication, July 13 2004.

about the type of music involved: Costeño music was improper because its African ancestry supposedly allowed indecency and improper physical contact.¹¹⁹ In contrast, Antioqueño music, they claimed, was white and maintained a proper distance between bodies. A remark in a contemporaneous newspaper article perfectly illustrates perceptions of this contrast between “right” and “wrong” music. In August 1950, at the beginning of an article in *El Colombiano* congratulating Carlos Vieco, a highbrow Conservative columnist discussed the influence of recordings on the taste of the public: “It is a healthy influence when noble, classic, and brilliant music prevails, but disturbing and degrading when it is the result of the repulsive and lascivious Negro music that comes to us from the Caribbean [*las Antillas*] and our Atlantic coast.”¹²⁰

Of course, such bitter racist commentary was not completely new. Its aggressive tone, however, accorded with the climate of conservative intolerance that dominated the country just a few days after Laureano Gómez’s presidential inauguration (August 7 1950). The ideology of the new radical Conservative government was profoundly Hispanophile—that is, intent on underlining Colombian culture’s Spanish ancestry as well as in adopting the policies of General Francisco Franco’s contemporaneous Spain. Antioqueño elites had habitually lined up on the moderate side of Conservatism, but once the radical wing took control, reactionary attitudes and discrimination started to emerge in traditionally non-radical venues like *El Colombiano*. Therefore, what before had been rather politely manifested as a muted prejudice against blackness (for a comparison, see commentaries made in 1935 in a Liberal newspaper, page 79), now appeared bluntly expressed as a value judgement.¹²¹ Whether evident or tacit, the support of bambuco as a white, Spanish, and patriarchal musical genre thrived as an effective antidote against the public’s growing appreciation of Costeño music.

The discussions about bambuco’s appropriateness as a symbol, the urgent need to renovate the genre, or its ultimate definition as popular, folk, or art music, simply came to an end.

¹¹⁹For a deeper analysis of dance and body politics in *música tropical*, see [Wade 2000](#).

¹²⁰“Carlos Vieco, la música y la poesía en Antioquia,” by Arnoldo Estrada López in *El Colombiano*’s dominical supplement, August 9 1950, page 4.

¹²¹This observation should not be taken out of context; Peter Wade’s study follows up racist biases openly expressed, since the 1930s, by broad-minded and intransigent peoples alike ([Wade 2000](#)). However, in reading newspapers one can perceive how the level of tension increased after the imposition of official censure in November 1949. Moderates were more cautious with their commentaries, while radicals had nothing to fear from the censor’s eye.

Bambuco's representational power was simply a given, and determining the reason for its endurance became the most important issue. The most important attributes claimed for it were its weight of tradition and its nostalgia. For example, see the opinion expressed by Hernán Restrepo Duque, commenting on an event that the local brewery Cervecería Unión organized to honor Antioqueño composers:

Bambuco, *guabina*, *torbellino*, and pasillo are never out of fashion. Those sung five decades ago are sung today as if they were born recently, and people receive them with the same affection, although, understandably, such love does not manifest itself as a massive back-up. Their notes glide over what is just superficial music that stays in vogue, songs that are scarcely hummed or danced for a month or two, and later are, fortunately, completely forgotten. Among Colombian *departamentos*, Antioquia, and Medellín in particular, is the tabernacle of Colombian bambuco. Especially of bambuco song because, curiously, there are as few among us who know how to dance it as there are many who know by heart at least three or four bambucos, and attentively listen to all those performed in radio, clubs, and theaters. And the bohemian *tiples* nights of the Antioqueño capital, those of today as well as those of the old times, shine with arpeggios produced by tiples and guitars, and the remembrances of the old singers persist in the memories of the people.¹²²

These reminiscent images comparing the shallowness of other types of popular music with the evocative power of bambuco raised the genre to a level of transcendence. Likewise, stating that the bambuco practiced in Antioquia was a non-danceable genre secured its proper morality. Medellín, in Restrepo Duque's view, played the role of a guardian of tradition. Actually Restrepo Duque himself was going to play that very role after his involvement in the local record business. Antioqueño entrepreneurs stepped into the music recording industry in 1949, and in 1953 Restrepo Duque was appointed as Sonolux's advertisement director (years later, he was made manager of the company). With the brilliant collaboration of Luis Uribe Bueno, hired the same year as the label's artistic director, for nearly twenty years he guided the company's production of hundreds of *dueto bambuquero* records (among other genres). Although the proportion of the catalog in 1950 evidently favors Andean music (50%, of which 16% comprised bambucos, and 32% pasillos) over Costeño music (20%), it also shows that there was a diverse demand coming from the market.¹²³ Clearly, bambuco-song's survival in the market after the 1950s owed much to the personal commitment of both Restrepo Duque and Uribe Bueno.

¹²² "Programa radial de la semana: Primer festival de la Canción Antioqueña," in *El Diario* April 18 1951, page 2.

¹²³ Numbers from an ad of Lyra, one of Sonolux's labels, quoted in [Wade 2000](#), 149.

Another aspect of the genre to receive emphasis during this time was bambuco's traditionally patriarchal nature. Conventionally, the woman depicted in bambuco song was an idealized *campesino* girl, a joyful, beautiful, and innocent creature. See, for instance, a fragment of "Rosalinda" (1949, lyric by Tocayo Ceballos, music by Enrique Figueroa):

Rosalinda es linda rosa
 Que floreció junto al río,
 Tan atisbando en sus ojos
 Los mismos ojos de un niño

Rosalinda is a beautiful rose
 who bloomed near to the river,
 in her eyes come into view
 the eyes of a child

This uncorrupted, childlike young woman, who is protected from immorality by being secluded at the paternal home, is sometimes taken away from her humble lover by a lustful, malicious landowner. The female body, which in this view is merely a passive object of men's trade, had traditionally been a site where men fought battles to gain rights over property or to exert control over other men. But now, superimposing a new layer on this patriarchal paradigm, the narrative of the genre started claiming bambuco's innate virility. Allegedly, bambuco's masculinity stood out against other genres' effeminate sensibility or dangerous sensuality (whether tango, bolero, or Costeño music). Take, for example, the images conveyed in the closing paragraph of a contemporaneous article on bambuco's history that also dealt with the transcription dilemma. In this last section, Gabriel Escobar Casas, a musician himself, celebrated the latest achievements of Colombian composers (most of them Antioqueños):

Several composers from the mountain [...] have led bambuco's poetry and melody through a more favorable route. Because bambuco was following tango's and bolero's path of weeping and despair, lyrics that talk about absences, oblivion, and infidelities. But no, bambuco is not like that, and I reassert it: bambuco is a virile musical air, that brings to our senses the scent of the tobacco plantation, the vivified steam of numerous cattle, which smells like gunpowder and *aguardiente*.¹²⁴ When one listens to its performance, images start jumping into one's eyes: the bullring, the beheading of roosters during Saint John's Fiestas, the dog races in the Camino Real, or the mortal duel setting two machos in conflict in any narrow and lonely street. Meanwhile, in the wall of the Plaza Mayor, among banners, flowers, and garlands, is heard the first whistle that starts the bullfight, where spontaneous bullfighters will play with their lives under their women's insinuating gazes, while in the air there come unstrung the notes of a bambuco.¹²⁵

¹²⁴An aniseed sugar-cane liquor.

¹²⁵"Para la historia de nuestra música: el bambuco, expresión colombiana," by Gabriel Escobar Casas, in *El Colombiano*, September 23 1951, page 3. See Appendix B.

Needless to say, the quote brims with stereotyped Spanish mannerism, including spontaneous bullfighters, roosters, brawls, garlands, and perhaps veiled *majas*, like in Goya's canvases. In this colorful depiction of bambuco's suggestive powers, men are the subjects of action and decision, while women are barely represented as inert characters, only allowed to gaze. Notwithstanding Escobar Casas' assertion of bambuco's male strength and contained sentimentalism, the truth is that expressions like weeping and jealousy were often present in classic pieces of the repertoire, such as the already mentioned "Tiplecito de mi vida" or Morales Pino's foundational bambuco "Cuatro preguntas" (see page 56.)

The lines separating masculinity from femininity are also clearly demarcated in the setting up of a stereotyped choreography for bambuco that started circulating around that time. A contemporaneous booklet describes a choreography of eight basic steps in which the man and the woman never touch each other, the only contact between them being a handkerchief that is held by the couple at two opposite ends.¹²⁶ There is no clue, whether written or ethnographic, about the source of this step design (Restrepo Duque's quote makes clear that the dance was very rare, at least in Antioquia). Subsequent folkloric surveys have simply reproduced the same basic sequence.¹²⁷

Bambuco-song's controlled expressivity was another advantage in a time characterized by strong censorship. Unlike other genres from the coast, which were commonly used as vehicles for political expression, bambuco very rarely conveyed such messages openly. In their more traditional expression of the rural *copla*, Andean musical genres allowed some political commentaries,¹²⁸ but urban bambuco texts were almost completely apolitical, with the important exception of the songs and instrumental pieces composed for the presidential election of 1930 (published in Bogotá's *Mundo al día*). In contrast, for the presidential election of 1946, the campaigns of two candidates (Mariano Ospina Pérez and Jorge Eliecer Gaitán) chose Costeño genre *porro* to create their own popular anthems. In an era of an imposed silence, bambuco's bucolic imagery portrayed a peaceful and idyllic countryside, even as the indescribable horrors of partisan warfare were utterly sweeping away any remainder of such a tranquil lifestyle.

¹²⁶Benigno A. Gutiérrez's book, one among six or seven titles he published on Antioqueño folkloric traditions, contains landmark items of bambuco's history, such as the poem by Rafael Pombo, Morales Pino's "Cuatro preguntas," and reproductions of Torres Méndez's drawings, made in 1851 (Gutiérrez 1952).

¹²⁷See for example Davidon 1970; Restrepo Duque 1986.

¹²⁸For example, see partisan *coplas* in Morales Gómez 1997.

An important landmark of bambuco's myth appeared at the beginning of the decade: Jorge Añez's book *Canciones y Recuerdos: Conceptos acerca del origen del bambuco* (Songs and Remembrances: Concepts Regarding Bambuco's Origins, Bogotá 1951). This work became the first of a series of books dealing with the origins of the genre. Written by a well-known performer, it has been considered a primary source of bambuco's twentieth-century history for decades—despite its several inaccuracies concerning details like dates and names. This work was a keystone in consolidating an official history for bambuco that dismissed any possibility of an African heritage, in cleaning up bambuco's problematic historical record, and in setting up a national symbol that clearly demarcated gender and racial boundaries. In the flamboyant words of a contemporary observer, bambuco emerged as “the national music per excellence, mirror of our virtues, source of our race, song of our epic feat, flag of our heroic deeds, Olympus of our ideals, and sap of our nationality.”¹²⁹

In this rarified atmosphere, in which triumphant nationalism conflicted with a silenced but still perceptible tension, national music lost one of its more important venues. After the 1951 version, the Fabricato musical contest was brought to an end. In his study on the topic, professor Fernando Gil Araque provides three possible reasons for the discontinuation of the annual competition. First, Fabricato changed its advertisement policies in 1951, also stopping the publication of the magazine *Gloria* the following year, and instead started sponsoring flashy image-oriented events such as beauty pageants. Second, the profits of the industry apparently decreased, and there were some symptoms of economic recession. And third, key figures during previous contests were not around any more: conductor José María Tena and jury member Emilio Jaramillo had passed away, and Fabricato's senior president Rudesindo Echavarría had been replaced by a younger manager.¹³⁰ Aside from these factors, evidence also suggests that Fabricato was losing control over the contest owing to the government's interest in the accomplishment of the 1951 competition.

Since the fall of the República Liberal, the two Conservative administrations had seriously engaged in cultural reformation. Numerous organizations founded during the previous era were shut down after being accused of being cradles of Communism, while the power

¹²⁹ “Los orígenes del bambuco,” by Gabriel Escobar Casas, in the dominical supplement of *El Colombiano*, February 24 1952, page 4. See Appendix B.

¹³⁰ Gil Araque 2003.

of the Catholic church was consolidated. In accordance with this policy of reformation, in July 1951 the Ministry of Education planned to carry out two folkloric contests designated to reaffirm the solemnity of patriotic festivities. According to a note published in *El Colombiano*, President Gómez and Minister Rafael Azula Barrera called composers to participate in two simultaneous competitions, one for music of the Andean interior to be carried out in the Andean city of Ibagué, and the other for music of the Atlantic coast to take place in Cartagena.¹³¹ The pieces had to be unpublished, and the music should be scored for voice and piano; other minimum requirements, as well as the course of action and the formation of panels of judges, were left to be decided by commissions created by the local branches of the ministry. The deadline for the competitions was set for a month and a half later, on August 31. It was also announced that the awarded pieces would be performed in concerts held to celebrate two important national days, on October 12 (Columbus Day) and November 11 (Cartagena's Independence Day). The rush and lack of coherence in the solicitation of entries made clear the improvisation of the project, which was in fact very characteristic of Gómez's impulsive decisions.

Predictably, the official competitions never took place. In their place, the government gave special support to the Fabricato contest, which, instead of its traditional big event in Medellín's Teatro Junín on August 7, held two final concerts in Bogotá and Medellín on the dates originally set for the failed governmental contests. On October 12, Bogotá's Teatro Colón hosted the National Symphonic Orchestra's performance of the awarded pieces, broadcast and recorded by the *Radiodifusora Nacional*.¹³² Medellín's closing ceremony took place correspondingly, on November 11.

Lack of information prevents a definitive conclusion about the degree to which official intervention influenced Fabricato's decision to suspend the competition. However, I will advance a speculation supporting the reasons already argued by Gil Araque. In addition to the customary distrust Antioqueño industrialists felt for governmental intrusion of any kind, Medellín's moderate Conservative elites were seriously displeased with Gómez's repressive guidelines, and they did not want to be associated with his authoritarian rule. The

¹³¹ "Dos concursos sobre el folclor abre el gobierno," in *El Colombiano* July 15 1951, page 7.

¹³² Some of those historical recordings were located and restored by Eafit's research team. See [Gil Araque 2003](#).

progressive detachment of the moderate elites from a radical Conservative national project eventually gave way to the fall of the government in June 1953. The progressiveness regularly displayed in Fabricato's musical contests simply contradicted the authoritarian style exhibited by Gómez's government.

In spite of the lack of consensus regarding bambuco's appropriateness as national symbol that characterized discussions during the 1930s and 1940s, during the early 1950s the myth establishing its status was finally entrenched. That change evidenced the transformation of the country's political and social atmosphere, from a period of passionate controversy to another of ostensible conformity. That sudden appeasement not necessarily meant a harmonic agreement on bambuco's unquestionable national status, but rather that the controversy had abruptly been cut short. The social struggles that had been taking place in the arena of culture regarding bambuco's status had not been solved but brusquely shot down.

Since the 1920s, the debate had mostly focused on bambuco's ethnic status and hence on its epistemic legitimacy. The legitimation of traditional musical knowledge was a matter of great importance especially for non-academic musicians, because in the end it would determine their position in the social structure. Until the mid-1940s, most episodes of the struggle had taken place in the enclosed realm of the musical institutions—essentially in the Conservatory and the music competition. The mediation of radio broadcast, in particular the implementation of the Fabricato contest, had finally brought the issue closer to the public, who were asked to participate in the discussion even if only as spectators. Still, Fabricato's venue was very much confined to Medellín, hindering somewhat a more effective impact of the discussion of national music nationwide; the suspension of the competition in 1951 brought that prospect to an end.

By 1950, however, the radical Conservative establishment had unilaterally decided on the matter. It embraced a bambuco constructed ethnically as white, as a male music genre marked by a certain degree of intellectual complexity only understood by a selected few. Although this imagery of bambuco was construed as "traditional folk music," it was associated with a whitened rural identity, that of the *campesino* who had been able to clean up his blood enough to become a member of the Colombian modern nation. However, bambuco's canonization really played the role of concealing a long and complex history of aesthetic dilemmas

and class struggles. The reaffirmation of bambuco's national status by the establishment, however, was never really reflected in the genre's wide popularity among the masses. Other musical genres, including tango, attracted the people's interest much more, as we will see in the next chapter.

4.0 TANGO: GARDEL'S DEATH, RECORDINGS, AND THE CITY

4.1 PRELUDE: THE SOUL OF BUENOS AIRES'S URBAN LIFE

The origin of Argentinean tango, in the words of an influential scholar in the field, is perhaps the most popular and controversial topic among *tangueros* (tango aficionados and scholars alike), and the roots of the genre go deep into “long-lasting conflicts over race, class, and gender supremacy.”¹ Tango was born amidst the processes of immigration, urbanization, and economic expansion experienced in the cities of the River Plate, Buenos Aires and Montevideo, during the end of the nineteenth century. In Buenos Aires alone, the population grew from 187,000 inhabitants in 1869 to 1,576,000 in 1914²; the city became the largest and finest metropolis of the southern hemisphere. The immigration flow to Argentina, especially from Italy and Spain, was second only to that to the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. Buenos Aires' poor neighborhoods or *arrabales* (sing. *arrabal*) swelled with poor people searching to find a better life in the New World. In the environs of the port, in an atmosphere of poverty, delinquency, and prostitution, emerged a simple type of music, rather banal at the beginning and totally subordinated to accompanying dance. This new music known as tango resounded in the cafés and brothels where immigrants, most of them lone males, went to find some female company and earthly pleasure.

Tango music in itself most likely evolved as a local combination of several foreign musical styles. Among tango's ancestors are the native dance-form *milonga*, the Spanish-Cuban *habanera*, and perhaps the music of the black and mulatto communities of Buenos Aires

¹Savigliano 1995, 32. For an excellent brief account of tango history, see Kohan 2002.

²Figures in Vila 2000.

during the 1800s.³ Different musical expressions came together in tango, which served as a catalyst for consolidating the city's new urban sensibility, providing a sort of common language among immigrants with different cultural backgrounds. Tango rapidly became an important element in the construction of an Argentinean identity for European immigrants and their heirs. For that first generation born in Argentina and later constituting the middle class, it would have been impossible to embrace tango as their own without its previous social approval and cleansing by elite circles.⁴

Rich youngsters of the upper class who frequented Buenos Aires's brothels brought the music and the dance from the arrabal to Europe. In the 1910s, the Parisian jet set welcomed tango as an exotic and sensual dance, and soon afterward it caused a frenzy in the *Belle Epoque's* decadently elegant ballrooms all over Europe.⁵ The couple's close embrace and stylish leg movements during the performance of the dance offended traditionalists and even motivated a Papal condemnation.⁶ The scandal only drew more attention to tango, increasing rather than thwarting its popularity. Encouraged by its social endorsement by European audiences, the Argentinean middle classes adopted tango as their own, especially a new manifestation called tango-song, created in the mid-1910s.

Most historical accounts pinpoint 1917 as tango-song's birth-year, the moment in which it became another branch of the genre, fully differentiated from instrumental tango. That year, Carlos Gardel, an already well-known singer on the local scene, performed and recorded what is considered the first tango-song, "Mi noche triste," with lyrics by Pascual Contursi and set to the music of a pre-existing instrumental tango, "Lita," by pianist Samuel Castriota. The recording of this song is regarded as a decisive moment in the history of South American popular music, with Gardel's tango interpretation establishing a completely original performing style that has been imitated by most tango singers ever since.⁷ After Gardel, tango was no longer a European sub-product but a purely Argentine national cultural form that stood up as a marker of "Argentiness."⁸

³Collier 1986, 55.

⁴On immigration and issues of racial identity in tango, see Vila 2000.

⁵For details of the adoption of tango in Paris and the European tango craze in the years preceding the First World War, see Humbert 2000.

⁶Cámara de Landa 2000.

⁷For a biography of Gardel, see Collier 1986.

⁸Castro 1999.

Although early tango from the school known as *Guardia Vieja* (1870–1920) was mainly instrumental, some pieces for theater or vaudeville occasionally included roguish lyrics, full of sexually suggestive undertones. By the mid-1920s, tango-song’s new form, almost completely polished and poetically richer than its predecessor, was already consolidated. One crucial factor in this consolidation of tango-song was the outstanding performance of the Argentinean economy during the early twentieth century. It allowed the early establishment of a small but thriving film industry (1908), a recording industry (1912), and radio broadcasting (1920), all funded by what appeared to be a solid internal consumer market.⁹ The emergence of tango-song within mass-mediated circuits made tango the first Spanish-language popular-music genre.¹⁰ Indeed, tango lyrics of the first period (between approximately 1917 and 1922) used an abundance of *lunfardo*, Buenos Aires’s street slang, which was progressively tempered to conform with the requirements of mass media. The massive distribution of the music through these media channels rapidly popularized tango in the countries of the Southern Cone (Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay) and parts of Brazil, although the barrier of language limited its impact somewhat in the vast Portuguese-speaking country. The lack of regular trade routes connecting the southern countries and the countries located on the Caribbean basin hindered the effective expansion of Argentinean cultural products within the rest of the Spanish-speaking market at least until the mid-1930s.

In the early 1920s, North American recording companies, operating in Mexico and the Caribbean since the beginning of the twentieth century, profited from tango’s increasing recognition within the Spanish-language countries. Columbia and RCA began releasing well-known tangos sung by non-Argentinean performers, and by 1925 established their own recording studios and record manufacturing plants in Argentina and Chile. Tango idol Carlos Gardel was relatively unknown on the Caribbean basin until he signed an exclusive contract for recording and distribution with North American companies RCA Victor and Paramount Pictures in 1933.¹¹ His first Latin American tour in 1935, programmed to promote his new records and more recent movies made in the United States, ended tragically on June 24 in

⁹For a study of the popularization of tango through mass media in Argentina, see [Castro 1999](#).

¹⁰In this case, the Spanish term “popular” has the same sense ascribed to the English term; see explanation in page 18.

¹¹On the popularity of North-American-produced tango recordings in Cuba in the 1920s, see [Vizcaíno 2004](#).

a plane accident at Medellín's airfield. Gardel's death at the pinnacle of his extraordinary artistic career catapulted him and his work even further into the status of a myth.¹²

After Gardel's demise, tango suffered a short period of decline that lasted until the early 1940s, when the genre enjoyed its Golden Era (1940–1955). In Argentina, tango-song's popularity was somewhat affected by new regulations created between 1943 and 1946 by the military government prohibiting the use of *lunfardo* in radio broadcasting. Under the commandment to purify the Spanish spoken in Argentina, some classic tangos were nonsensically corrected, completely altering the spirit of the lyrics, and others simply disappeared for some years from the repertoire. Large dance orchestras flourished in Buenos Aires and new important singers continued the style of Gardel, although they were no longer individual stars by themselves, but outstanding members of particular orchestral ensembles.

The presidency of General Juan Domingo Perón (1946–1955) coincided with the period of major expansion of tango, but the social changes his regime triggered also sowed the seeds for a new decline. Although the cultural policies of Peronism were always ambiguous, Perón's populist agenda tended to favor tango as an artistic and cultural expression closely associated with the nation.¹³ At the same time, the Peronist project of industrialization attracted thousands of immigrants from the interior of the country to Buenos Aires. The newly arrived working-class *cabecitas negras* (literally "little black-heads") were mestizos, ethnically and culturally different from the Porteños, the inhabitants of the Argentinean capital, mostly descendants of the most recent European immigrants. Folk music from the Pampa, Argentina's vast fertile plains, progressively became more important in the local scene, and tango started losing its original dominance in the huge metropolis. Nevertheless, the production of tango records and films, with a Hollywood-like star system, continued to play a crucial role in the Latin American context until the late 1950s.

This chapter describes and analyzes tango's adoption in Medellín and the way its reception by different groups transformed over the years. The first section traces the advent of tango-song in the 1920s and the class issues associated with its early adoption. I also consider there the impact of Carlos Gardel's death in local imagination in the late 1930s. A second

¹²For interesting insights on Gardel's myth, see the first section of [Moreno Chá 1995](#).

¹³On tango and Peronism, see [Azzi 2002](#).

section discusses the renewed enthusiasm with which tango was embraced in the 1940s owing mainly to the influence of Argentinean cinema. That circumstance spurred the expansion of gender role models brought by female tango actress-singers. In that section I will also explore tango's potential for resistance against censorship during *La Violencia*'s hardest years in the late 1940s. The last section examines tango and its inception in mass entertainment as a social strategy for evading reality, a way to escape social and political tensions in the 1950s.

4.2 THE ARRIVAL OF TANGO-SONG RECORDS IN MEDELLÍN DURING THE 1920S AND EARLY 1930S

It was a rainy day in 1935 in Medellín, one of those lazy afternoons during mid-February when occasional rainfalls break the monotony of the day in the northwest of the Colombian Andes. The habitual customers of the cafés and *cantinas* (canteens) of Guayaquil, the market district, arrived in the middle of the drizzle and shook off their soaked hats and shoes in a futile attempt to get dry before entering the noisy and already busy drinking-spots. There was unusual excitement in one of the *cantinas* that day, thanks to the arrival of a new stock of recordings in the shop of Don Félix de Bedout, the owner of a publishing house and the local agent of RCA Victor. Although it was pretty common to receive new shipments at least twice a month, this time there was a special reason for the agitation. Customers were eagerly awaiting the release of a couple of songs recorded by Argentinean Agustín Magaldi, a rising star in the world of tango. The songs were “En la calle” (“On the Street”) and “Son de campanas” (“Sound of Bells”), with music by Antioqueño composer Carlos Vieco and lyrics by local poet Libardo Parra Toro, better known by his pseudonym Tartarín Moreira (see Figure 11).

Calmly playing with the smoke of his cigarette under the wing of his stylish hat, Tartarín waited at his customary table for news from Bedout's shop. One of his friends appeared in the door completely soaked, struggling to protect a package from the rain with the lapel of his jacket. “I have them here!” he shouted, and the place exploded with a cheerful uproar. Only Tartarín stayed immobile, smoking his cigarette, while everybody else rushed around, moving chairs and tables to the sides and bringing the gramophone to the center of the room. A few



Figure 11: Carlos Rodríguez (photographer), Alfonso Robledo, Mery González, and Tartarín Moreira. Puerto Berrío, 1943. Photograph by Foto Reporter (Carlos Rodríguez). Archivo de Memoria Visual de Antioquia, Palacio de la Cultura Rafael Uribe Uribe, Medellín.

seconds later, after the place was completely rearranged by the happy anarchy that looked like a sort of human tornado, everybody gathered around the machine. Someone placed a record onto the turntable and they all attentively listened to Magaldi's velvety voice; the first 78 disc was carefully removed and replaced by the next, to which they likewise listened. When the music ended, all faces instinctively turned towards Tartarín, awaiting his reaction. They observed the seemingly emotionless face of the poet, noticing in his eyes, however, that he was deeply moved by the songs. Some seconds of tense and solemn silence passed as he slowly exhaled the last mouthful of smoke, and then he serenely replied: "Shit...damned Magaldi! He mispronounced a passage in 'Son de campanas' and changed a word in 'En la calle'."

Although this scene is a combination of imaginary circumstances and real details extracted from the many anecdotes about Tartarín that still circulate in Medellín's popular culture discourse, the two songs were indeed recorded by Magaldi on November 15 1934.¹⁴ The story

¹⁴Elements included here were extracted from stories recalled by researcher Gustavo Escobar Vélez (Interviewed in Medellín, July 9 2003) and from [Rojas López 1997](#). Tartarín was a newspaper columnist and a

serves to reconstruct the social space and the historical circumstances in which tango was mainly listened to in the city, as well as a fundamental fact most local *tangueros* emphasized in our conversations: tango-song was already an important element in Medellín's popular culture, brought in the form of recordings, before the tragic accident in the local airport that ended Gardel's life. Although a rapid examination of dates easily proves that the Vieco-Tartarín's tangos predate Gardel's visit, it seems quite unlikely that the genre would ever have achieved the great significance it enjoyed and still enjoys in the city if the accident had never taken place. Since the memory of when or how tango-song arrived in Medellín is somewhat blurred, the following section draws on diverse historical records and oral tradition to reconstruct that process.

Instrumental tango of the period of the *Guardia Vieja* was probably known in Colombia around the mid 1910s, precisely while it was in vogue in European ballrooms. A song composed in 1915 that was part of the repertoire of Bogotano duet Wills and Escobar mentions tango in its lyrics, underscoring the romantic and sensual embrace of the couple in the performance of the dance.¹⁵ This example makes the speed with which the local aristocracy and middle-classes adopted European trends evident, regardless of the fact that tango was not an originally European expression but an Argentinean one. Tango was, therefore, rapidly incorporated into the repertoires of small *música de salón* orchestras along with waltzes, polkas, foxtrots, and *pasillos*. The adoption of new tango-song, however, was a different matter altogether, because it did not arrive in Colombia indirectly, as a European fad.

Gardel and his tango-songs were known in Paris, Barcelona, and other European cities. In the late 1920s, he made a highly successful tour through theaters, high-class cabarets, and casinos in Spain and France, but tango-song was not a massive phenomenon in Europe, especially because the Spanish lyrics were meaningless in non-Spanish-speaking European countries.¹⁶ Furthermore, the lyrics containing many *lunfardo* terms are hard to understand

member of the literary circle *Los Panidas*.

¹⁵The song is a *danza* titled "Ribereña," with music by Alejandro Wills. In Restrepo Duque 1971, 31.

¹⁶It should be noted, however, that in concerts held in Paris and Nice, Gardel performed some pieces of his repertoire in French (Peluso and Visconti 1990; Collier 1986). A native of Toulouse, Gardel and his mother emigrated to Argentina when he was two years old, and years later he became relatively fluent in the language.

even by Spanish-speaking audiences outside Buenos Aires itself. Therefore, Gardel's success in Europe was based mostly on his personal charm and the expressive nuances of his voice, something that is very difficult to convey in recordings even today. Gardel even recorded part of his repertoire in Spain in 1925 and in France in 1928, but those recordings, made for local branches of the German label Odeon, have very limited circulation, if any, in Latin America.¹⁷

Despite the tremendous growth in production of the Argentinean recording industry, which in 1925 sold 500,000 records (mostly tangos) in Buenos Aires alone,¹⁸ tango records produced before 1930 rarely reached the northern corner of the South American continent. Occasionally they found their way to the Caribbean, probably transported by sailors or travellers. That is likely how the first tango recording to reach Medellín arrived—barely two years after Gardel recorded the first tango-song “Mi noche triste” (1917). The city's familiarity with this song is documented in a short story written by local poet Ciro Mendía in 1919 and published in a refined literary journal.¹⁹ The tale, set in the red light district, revolves around a fallen woman who is assassinated by her jealous lover. On the night of the crime, the couple visited several *cantinas*, in one of which the gramophone was playing the song in vogue: Mendía quoted the foundational tango-song's first stanza.²⁰

The early presence of a tango-song recording in the city, based largely on anecdotal sources, demonstrates the wide circulation of recordings in South America even when there were no regular flows of trade bringing Argentinean cultural products to Colombia. Furthermore, it shows that local society was very up-to-date with the latest trends in remote Buenos Aires, the so-called “South American Paris.” For one thing, owners of long-wave radio receptors in Medellín sometimes were able to catch the signals of Argentinean radio

¹⁷Until the mid-1920s most of the repertoire of tango-song was distributed by the local Argentinean branch of Odeon, Nacional-Odeón, owned and managed by German émigré Max Glucksmann, a tycoon in the business of radio and theaters in Buenos Aires (Collier 1986).

¹⁸Castro 1999.

¹⁹See Mendía 1919. The long-forgotten short story was located by historian Manuel B. Rojas (Rojas López 1997).

²⁰Local *tangueros* have no memory of such an early arrival of tango in Medellín. When I mentioned Mendía's story in my interviews, some of my informants doubted the recording was Gardel's original version of 1917, and suggested it would be a North American-produced rendering by singer Carlos Mejía. However Mejía's version, in which lunfardo terms were eliminated, was recorded in New York in 1925 (Spottswood 1990).

broadcasting—although the distance and the formidable barriers of the Amazonian jungle and the Andean peaks in between made it very difficult. For another, the tango-song sensation came to them also with the duet Wills and Escobar, which brought a few tango-songs back from Argentina after their tour through Argentina and Chile in 1926.

Local awareness of the tango-song phenomenon in the Southern Cone created a growing expectation that North American recording companies met. Around 1922, RCA Victor and Columbia started recording tango-songs in New York performed by artists José Moriche, Juan Pulido, Pilar Arcos, Carlos Mejía, and Margarita Cueto, among others. According to local researcher and record collector Oscar Berruecos, the earliest indication of a tango-song recording available in Medellín's market was a May 1925 newspaper ad announcing the arrival of "Galleguita" by Pilar Arcos, a 78 rpm record produced in New York by RCA Victor.²¹ Those generic pre-Gardel tango recordings,²² along with many other Latin American songs (including bambucos and *pasillos*), became very popular in Medellín's cafés and *cantinas* in the 1920s and 1930s. Nowadays, this repertoire is known in Medellín as *música antigua* or *música de antaño* (early music, music of the old times).

Rapidly realizing the economic potential of the Southern Cone markets, North American recording companies decided to establish their own studios and record factories in the region in the mid-1920s. By then, tango—as instrumental music, as dance, as song, and very soon also as film music—was the keystone of the Argentinean cultural industries, which were rapidly becoming strong competitors for the domination of the Latin American market. RCA Victor had the benefit of relying on a much better network of distribution all over the continent, and by the early 1930s many tango stars had already started recording with them. A commercial strategy, aimed at expanding the consumption of tango records outside Argentina, was more likely the main reason behind the Argentinean production of tango-songs originally composed in Medellín. According to a local researcher, it was customary for local agents to send sheet music to the studios, usually comprising local genres such as bambuco. However, around 1933 and 1934 RCA Victor's agent in Medellín, Félix de Bedout,

²¹Interview with Oscar Berruecos, Medellín July 3 2003.

²²I am borrowing the label "pre-Gardel" from María A. Vizcaíno (2004), favoring the perspective of the consumer over that of the producers. Although the recordings themselves date from the early 1920s, they were available in the markets of the Caribbean basin much earlier than those recorded in Argentina by Gardel in the 1910s.

began asking musicians and writers to compose tangos.²³ Almost certainly the intention was to win local audiences over to the idea of having a consecrated tango singer performing the songs, so Colombian listeners would become an active part, and not only spectators, of the Southern Cone's tango-mania.

Local accounts assert that Gardel himself was originally appointed to record the songs sent from Medellín but spent 1934 attending to more important commissions in New York.²⁴ The veracity of such claims is a minor issue for the present discussion; whatever the circumstances that surrounded Magaldi's participation in recording the tangos by Vieco and Tartarín, it is clear that the final product specifically targeted the Colombian market. Each of the two double-sided 78-rpm discs contained a bambuco on the opposite side—using the frequent local marketing policy of combining a Colombian and a non-Colombian genre on the same disc.²⁵ It appears that this commercial strategy was a feature specially requested by Antioqueño entrepreneurs owing to the particularities of the local market, since the recordings sent to Peru or Ecuador never combined a local song and another foreign Latin American genre on the same disc.²⁶

Certain particular characteristics make Vieco-Tartarín's tango suitable for international consumption rather than for the Buenos Aires' customary Porteño audience. The Spanish used in the text is colloquial and for the most part stripped of local idiomatic peculiarities. However, some terms have different meanings in the wide Spanish-speaking world, and in fact the small change Magaldi introduced in the text of "En la calle" results from a quite common (and usually very amusing) misunderstanding among Spanish speakers from different countries. The fairly ordinary verb *coger* is used in Colombia in its Spanish-Castilian sense to mean "to take," while in Argentina and Mexico it has rude sexual connotations. Not

²³Interview with Gustavo Escobar Vélez (Medellín, July 9 2003).

²⁴Restrepo Duque and Calle 1985, 34. This statement seems more subjective than historically accurate; Gardel never recorded for RCA Victor-Argentina but did record for RCA Victor-New York as part of the movies he was shooting there. It is possible that Gardel's manager Armando Defino had opened negotiations with the local branch about starting to record after his return to Argentina in 1935, a homecoming that never took place. Unfortunately, Restrepo Duque does not cite sources, and I have not found any information suggesting that was the case.

²⁵Bambucos "Embriaguez de llanto" (music and lyrics by Tartarín) and "Montañerita mía," (lyrics by Tartarín and music by Manuel Ruiz, locally known as Blumen). Both bambucos were also performed by Magaldi.

²⁶Interview with Gustavo Escobar Vélez (Medellín, July 9 2003).

surprisingly, Magaldi readily replaced the problematic verb with the unambiguous *saber*, “to know,” although it does not make any sense in context (see the end of verse four):

Así te quería ver,
Maldita, sola y botada,
Valiendo menos que nada,
Como tenía que ser.

That’s how I wanted to see you,
Cursed, alone, and abandoned,
Worth less than nothing,
The way it was meant to be.

Así, con esa mirada
Triste y sin fulgor ni vida,
De nadie correspondida
Y por todos despreciada.

In this way, with that sad,
Shadowy and lifeless expression,
By no one acknowledged
And by everyone despised.

Sin saber adonde ir, ni a quien buscar,
Con el feto de este horrible padecer,
Ya cansada de sufrir y de llorar,
Sin hogar y sin amor, mala mujer.

Not knowing where to go, or whom to reach,
Feeling the toil of a horrible agony,
Tired of suffering and crying,
With no home and no love, bad woman.

Así te quería ver
Convertida en un guiñapo,
Como si fueras un trapo
Que nadie quiere saber.

That’s how I wanted to see you,
Turned into a tatter,
As if you were a rag
That nobody wanted to know.

Así, por eso el así,
Muerta de hambre y demacrada
Como basura tirada
Calle abajo frente a mí.

In this way, exactly like that,
Starving and emaciated
Tossed like trash
Down the street, in front of me.

Para darte a comprender
Que mi perdón desde el día de mi fuga yo te di,
Pues sabía que era mío tu corazón
Y eso quiero solamente yo de ti.
Así te quería ver, pobrecita, ven a mí.

To make you understand
That my forgiveness I gave you from the day you left me,
Because I knew that your heart was mine
And that’s the only thing I want from you.
That’s how I wanted to see you, poor little woman, come to me.

The romantic topic of deceitful love and the dark atmosphere of the song are certainly very common in tango-song, although the misogynist bitterness of this text in particular is quite exaggerated if compared with other tangos with a similar storyline. Revenge is a more or less typical tango theme, and although there are many variations in the resolution of the romantic conflict, the desire for vengeance against the faithless woman can even end in murder. In Tartarín’s text, forgiveness comes at the end, but only after the female has suffered extreme humiliation. An undisguised tone of anger always dominates the scene. In order to be restored to her former lover’s side, the female must allow herself to be completely denigrated as the only way of re-establishing the hierarchical relationship between men and

Figure 12: “En la Calle” by Carlos Vieco and Tartarín Moreira

Piano & Guitar

1. (guitar) | 2. Voice

6
 sí te que_ rí a ver mal di ta so lay_ bo ta da

10
 va lien do me nos que na da co mo te ni a_ que ser A

14
 sí con e sa mi ra da tris tey sin ful gor_ ni vi da

18
 de na die co rres_ pon di da y por to dos des pre cia da

22
Stanza
 Sin sa ber a dón de ir nia quien bus car con el fa to dees teho rri ble pa de cer

26

ya cansa da de su fir y de llo rar sin ho gar y sin a mor ma_ la mu jer

30

sin saber a donde ir ya quien buscar con el fa to__ de este ho rri ble_ pa decer

34

ya can sa da de su fir y de llo rar sin ho gar y sin a mor ma la mu jer.

women; her pitiless belittlement restores social order. Although not a refined text, Tartarín’s lyrics still follow traditional tango stereotypes. Vieco’s setting of the text (see example in Figure 12) is quite simple; it reproduces common features in tango, including a key contrast between B minor, in the verse, and B major in the stanza, and an uncomplicated harmonic language not elaborated further than by the use of a secondary dominant. The melodic line is somewhat dull, moving mostly in step-by-step motion during the verse, and its most expressive feature seems to be the upward octave on the first phrase of the stanza.

At this point, it becomes essential to establish a comparison with a more refined tango-song. The contemporary Gardelian tango “Amargura” (“Bitterness”) helps to illustrate the simple roughness of Vieco-Tartarín’s tango, both in its poetic content and its musical materials. This tango unfolds the same stereotypical storyline with more sophistication, and paradoxically, less bitterness. First, the text shows a gentler attitude toward the unfaithful woman: although he considers murdering her in a moment of desperation, the male lover focuses more on solving his internal conflict than on seeking revenge. Moreover, there is no cruelty in his recalling of her.

Me persigue implacable su boca que reía,
Acecha mis insomnios este recuerdo cruel.
Mis propios ojos vieron como ella le ofrecía,
El beso de sus labios rojos como un clavel.

Her smiling mouth haunts me,
Such a cruel memory spies on my insomnia.
I say with my own eyes her offering him,
A kiss of her carnation-red lips.

Un viento de locura atravesó mi mente
Desecho de amargura yo me quise matar
Mis manos se crispaban mi pecho las contuvo
Su boca que reía yo no pude matar.

A storm of madness entered my mind,
Broken with bitterness I want to kill myself.
My hands twitched, my chest kept them back,
Her smiling mouth I could not kill.

Fue su amor de un día toda mi fortuna
Confíe mi alegría a los campos y a la luna.
Por quererla tanto por confiar en ella
Hoy hay en mi huella solo llanto y mi dolor

Her short-lived love was all my fortune,
I trusted my happiness to the fields and the moon.
For loving her dearly and having faith in her
Crying and sorrow now mark my path.

Doliente y abatido mi vieja herida sangra,
Bebamos otro trago que yo quiero olvidar.
Pero estas penas hondas de amor y desengaño,
Como las hierbas malas son duras de arrancar

Sorrowful and depressed, my old wound bleeds,
Lets drink another shot that I want to forget.
But these awful lovelorn griefs,
Are as difficult to get rid of as weeds.

Del fondo de mi copa su imagen me obsesiona,
Es como una condena su risa que es igual.
Coqueta y despiadada su boca me encadena,
Se burla hasta la muerte la ingrata en el cristal.

Her fixed image appears in the bottom of my glass
Her very laughter I believe my conviction.
Her flirtatious and merciless mouth binds me,
Reflected on the glass she laughs at me to death.

Musically (see example in Figure 13), the piece shows the same kind of harmonic contrast between the verse, set in E minor, and the stanza (measure 25), set in the key of the parallel major. The melodic line displays a variety of effective resources: beginning with an expressive ascendent interval, the melodic contour of the stanza (measures 9 to 24) moves downward to convey the painful narrative of betrayal. Interspersed upward leaps disrupt the falling melodic line adding dramatic intensity to the scene, which is further accentuated by the intense rubato—indicated in the transcription with arrows—that lends it a sense of anxiety. Conversely, the more optimistic melody of the refrain set in the major key, in which the lover evokes better times, presents an opening phrase with a predominantly ascendant contour, extended later through a gentle downward sequence.

The differences between both tangos evidence the type of audience targeted by each piece: while Gardel's tangos appealed mainly to a refined middle class, Vieco-Tartarín's tango was essentially a rough drinking song. This and other tangos created in Medellín at the time were of the type listened to by male customers attending working-class cafés and *cantinas* like those populating the streets of the bustling market district of Guayaquil.

Figure 13: “Amargura” by Carlos Gardel and Alfredo Le Pera

Introduction

Violins

Bandoneón

6 *Voice*

Me per si gueín pla ca ble su

10

bo ca que re í a a ce cha mis im som nios es te re cuer do cruel mis

13

pro pios o jos vie ron co moe lla leo fre cí a un be so de sus la bios ro

16

jo co moun cla vel un vien to de lo cu ra a tra ve só mi men te de

19

she cho dea margu ra yo me qui se ma tar mis ma nos se crispaban mi pe cho las con tu vo su

23 *Stanza*

bo ca que re i a yo no pu de ma tar

1. fue su amor de un di a
2. por querer la tan to

27

to da mi for tu na con fié mia le
por con fiar en e lla hoy ya yer mi

30

grí a a los cam pos ya la lu na.
hue lla so lo llan to y mi do lor.

4.2.1 *Música de Antaño* Recordings in Guayaquil

The drinking spots of Guayaquil resembled somewhat the commercial establishments around Buenos Aires's port where tango was originally born. At least that is how local tango aficionados often describe the district, adding that it was a kind of *puerto seco*, a dry port, where people and merchandise entered the city. Those statements underline what they see as a strong connection with tango's birthplace.²⁷ The railroad and the streetcar stations were located just in front of the marketplace, the heart of the district always crowded with local merchants and many farmers from the outskirts of the city. The constant rush of people coming in and out during the day gave way to an equally busy nightlife in which duetos bambuqueros and gramophones provided the musical background. *Cacharrerías* (hardware shops), miserable quarters housing poor immigrant families, and houses of prostitution saturated the narrow and noisy streets of the district, just a few blocks away from downtown. Cafés and *cantinas* entertained blue-collar employees, occasional visitors from the countryside, and rural migrants in search of jobs. A main attraction of these cafés, especially for country people who had never seen a mechanical, and later, electric sound appliance, was the gramophone. Live music was performed in several commercial establishments at night, but most of the time the streets were swamped with the cacophony created by different recordings playing simultaneously in adjacent places.

The *cantina* and the café were not exclusive features of Guayaquil, but rather successors to the nineteenth-century *estancos*, liquor shops that were common spaces of socialization in Antioquia as well as in other regions.²⁸ Similar establishments included the rural tavern or *fonda* where *arrieros* stopped during their long journeys across the cordillera, and the urban *tienda*, a small grocery store that occasionally also served liquor. Indeed, *tiendas* and small local cafés are still familiar landmarks in many working- and middle-class neighborhoods. In these places, male customers gathered to chat and engage in collective activities such as making music, consuming liquor, and gambling. Drinking spots of this sort were scattered all across the Aburrá valley, and often played recordings that could also be heard in Guayaquil.

²⁷Among the people who described Guayaquil to me as a *puerto seco* were local *tangueros* José "Chepe" Rúa and Jaime Jaramillo Panesso. Manuel Bernardo Rojas also frequently uses the expression (Rojas López 1997).

²⁸On the district of Guayaquil and drinking spots, see Betancur Gómez 2000, 240–255.

Prolonged night excursions, such as the one described in Mendía's short story mentioned above, in which customers visited one place after the other until dawn, were very common. These trips were often motivated by people seeking discs from different record collections available in another café.²⁹

Accordingly, for the distributors of recordings, the owners of cafés and *cantinas* were a crucial segment of the local market, alongside the probably less numerous though wealthier customers who bought mostly opera and symphonic music records. The business of imported records was in the hands of three local family-run trade firms: Félix de Bedout e Hijos sold recordings by RCA Victor, David Arango sold Columbia, and in the early 1940s the firm of Julio and José Ramírez Johns started importing Odeon records.³⁰ Owing to their customers' growing enthusiasm for the latest hits, the owners of cafés frequently spent a good part of their earnings on 78-rpm records, which eventually became the basis of several important local collections.³¹ Most cafés located along the frame of the marketplace had an assorted collection of generic *música de antaño* records, but in the late 1930s several other spots across the neighborhood started specializing in particular repertoires. Most cafés eventually acquired a radio receiver during the 1930s, but it appears they were used mainly to listen to news reports.³² The owner's record collection was an essential part of each café's special identity, so the music was provided mainly, if not exclusively, by the gramophone.

In spite of being an urban space predominantly populated by underprivileged peoples, Guayaquil was often frequented by more affluent visitors. Several cafés located in the district or in outlying areas were meeting places for intellectuals and bohemians such as Tartarín and other members of his literary circle. Some of the intellectual gatherings that had taken place previously in artisans' workshops moved to cafés such as *La Bastilla*. These cafés were middle-class bohemian spaces, where poets met with artists, journalists, and musicians. A medical student who was an assiduous visitor to the district in the 1930s, wrote that students

²⁹Interview with Hernando Vélez Sierra (Medellín July 7 2003).

³⁰After the world economic crisis of 1929, the German company Odeon became part of the British conglomerate EMI. The recordings sold in Medellín came from the Argentinean branch Nacional-Odeón, pressed in Chile. Interviews with Gustavo Escobar Vélez (Medellín, July 9 2003) and with Jesús Vallejo Mejía (Medellín, July 3 2003).

³¹That is, for example, the case of the record collection at Salón Málaga. (Interview with its current owner, César Arteaga, Medellín June 26 2003).

³²Interview with José "Chepe" Rúa (Medellín July 9 2003).

of the Universidad de Antioquia habitually escaped from their academic obligations to party in Guayaquil.³³ Guayaquil was a place practically banned to decent women, or at least to unaccompanied respectable ladies. The middle classes and church officials perceived the district as a chaotic and decadent zone inhabited by poor and destitute peoples and rather illicitly visited by some indulgent and morally lax wealthy individuals.

For some local *tangueros*, the *arrabalero* atmosphere of Guayaquil and its role as a gateway for rural immigration created the perfect social conditions for the adoption of tango.³⁴ An eminently urban type of music, tango songs tell stories of absence and estrangement, of the vicissitudes of love and revenge, but also of horse races, gambling, and drinking. Enjoying the privilege of hindsight, we can easily identify some connections between the urban experiences of Paisas and Porteños. Such correlations, however, were not as evident at the time, and although tango-song was perhaps the trendiest genre of popular music, there was no special local fondness for it, at least no more than for any other genre of *música de antaño*. What is more, the type of tango song and the circumstances of its consumption in Medellín were far from the refined style proper for the high-class cabaret and the *teatro de revistas* (similar to vaudeville theater in the United States) already in vogue in Buenos Aires since the early 1920s. The best example of such cosmopolitan sophistication was Gardel's latest work.

4.2.2 Gardel's Movies and the Unexpected End of his Tour

Gardel's international profile had grown considerably after a series of major successes in Europe in the late 1920s. He had been praised in the most fashionable night-spots of Paris and had actively sought the opportunity to enter the business of sound cinema. In 1917 he had participated in a silent movie produced in Argentina but despite the fact that in the early 1930s the technological advances required to produce sound movies were already available in the country, he preferred to go abroad for his screen debut in talkies. In 1931 and 1932 he filmed his first movies in the studios of Paramount Pictures in Joinville, a quiet suburb outside of Paris. "Luces de Buenos Aires" ("Buenos Aires' Lights") and "Melodía de

³³Franco Vélez 1984.

³⁴Interviews with Jaime Jaramillo Panesso (Medellín, July 1 2003) and Alejandro Bernal (Medellín, July 2 2003).

Arrabal” (“Arrabal Melody”) were huge box office successes in the Spanish-speaking world.³⁵ Numerous stories from all over Latin America and Spain recount the cheerfulness with which audiences obliged projectionists to stop the film and rewind the reel, so they could listen twice or three times to Gardel’s musical numbers.³⁶

In 1934, enthusiastic about the positive reception his first movies had among the public, Gardel went to New York to pursue his career as an international movie star. Once there, he established his own production company, Exito’s Spanish Pictures. During 1934 and 1935, in association with Paramount Pictures, Gardel starred in four movies and appeared in an English-language movie that also featured the U. S. movie star Bing Crosby. Determined to promote his most recent productions in the Latin American market, Gardel embarked on a tour that would take him through several countries of the Caribbean, where his fame and popularity were just emerging as the outcome of his participation in movies rather than from his previous recording career. The tour was officially made known through a record advertisement made by RCA Victor on March 25 1935, when Gardel and his close collaborator, Alfredo Le Pera, recorded some words announcing their forthcoming visit to Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Cuba, and Mexico.³⁷

Upon his arrival in Puerto Rico, Gardel was received by a large crowd of fans as a superstar, a pattern that was to be followed in every country he visited. People were extremely excited about his visit; they had never seen a real movie star before. More importantly, perhaps, Gardel was a Spanish-speaking artist whose movies everybody could easily understand. Movies were a great attraction for the masses, both visually and aurally appealing—but there were still few original Spanish-spoken films, so most movies screened in theaters were English-language films with Spanish subtitles. With illiteracy levels running high in most Spanish American countries at the time, many people could not follow the details in the storyline, and were eager to attend the screenings of Spanish-language feature films. The popularity of Gardel’s movies seems to have been a cross-class and a cross-national phenomenon, his

³⁵In his biography of Gardel, Simon Collier mentions another feature film titled “Espérame” (“Wait for me”) also shot in 1932 (Collier 1986). The film was not very popular and is rarely mentioned in Gardel’s filmography.

³⁶Collier 1986, 183.

³⁷Later reproduced on records as a tribute to their memory, with an introduction by Mexican singer Tito Guizar: “A la memoria de Carlos Gardel.” In *El CD más raro de Gardel*, Discos Preludio (Medellín, n.d.), track 13.

films appealing to all spectators across the social spectrum. Besides being accessible to the illiterate, all his movies, but especially those filmed in New York and still unknown at the time of his tour, had a refined atmosphere of cosmopolitanism that made them attractive to middle-class, bourgeois Latin American urban audiences. The films also crossed national barriers in that the scripts, authored by Le Pera, used a neutral colloquial Spanish that could be easily understood by audiences in different countries. Not surprisingly then, tango-songs with music by Gardel set to Le Pera's lyrics rapidly became important pieces of the classic tango repertoire.

In Medellín, Gardel was most likely awaited with the same enthusiastic popular reception. I have no data on when or under what circumstances Gardel's two initial movies were shown in Medellín, but an announcement of the forthcoming premiere of "Cuesta Abajo" ("Downhill") in early January 1935 (actually at least half a year before it was finally commercially released to be screened) suggests the general approval they probably received from the local public: "Gardel's name on the billboard guarantees absolute sellouts to the theater owners."³⁸ His fame as the most venerated tango singer, generated by publicity and films, drew the attention of the upper classes, although tango-song in itself was still considered a product of the working-class districts. But in fact the working classes had limited knowledge of Gardel's songs; according to Carlos Serna, who grew up in Guayaquil in the 1940s: "I listened to Gardel much later in my life, because his music wasn't heard in Guayaquil. That was [listened to] downtown."³⁹

Gardel arrived in Medellín on June 10 1935, after a triumphant though brief series of concerts in Barranquilla and Cartagena, the most important cities located on the Colombian Caribbean coast. Despite his profound dislike of flying, his journey through the interior of the country was not possible otherwise. The distances and the rugged terrain made ground transportation very impractical: first, time-consuming travel upriver in a ferry and then transfer to the train in order to surmount the cordillera. Largely because of such geographic characteristics, air services had developed in Colombia faster than in any other

³⁸In *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, January 3 1935, page 8.

³⁹Carlos Serna, interviewed by Victa María de Fex. In "Tangueando en Medellín," a special issue of the *Club Amigos del Tango's* journal subtitled "Medellín capital de tango" (Medellín, October-November 1993, pages 14–15).

Latin American country. Gardel was therefore welcomed by a multitude of bystanders not at the railroad station but at the Olaya Herrera Airport.⁴⁰ He performed in three concerts (June 11, 12, and 13) in the Circo-Teatro España, a partly open arena that was used as a bullring and a movie theater. As was customary in the city, Gardel's performances were combined with the screening of a movie, in those cases one of his own. Although only two performances had been originally contracted, a third one that offered cheaper tickets was specially requested by the singer himself. Gardel wanted everybody to see him in person, even the poorest.⁴¹ On June 12, he also addressed his public briefly on the radio through the new local station *Ecos de la Montaña*.

Even if Medellín was becoming the nation's industrial center, it was still a minor venue for a touring movie star of his reputation. Gardel stayed only three days, and then moved to the most important stage of the tour in the Colombian territory, the capital. On June 14, Gardel flew to Bogotá where he was received by an exultant multitude of approximately ten thousand people. The city had never seen such a popular craze for a touring artist. Over a period of only ten days, Gardel's schedule accommodated the astonishing number of nine concerts and a brief show on the local radio station. Once more, a huge crowd attended his farewell at the local airfield on the morning of June 24, when he departed to the southwestern city of Cali. The plane flew northwest to avoid crossing over the heights of the towering central cordillera, so the pilot planned to make a stop in Medellín and then to move south following the valley of the Cauca river. The plane made a short stopover of no more than twenty minutes in the airfield of the Antioqueño capital. There, Gardel and his partners were greeted by a small pack of fans who went to say goodbye to their idol, and then the plane departed some minutes before 3:00 p.m. The aircraft started moving along the runway, and after several hundred meters, inexplicably went off course and crashed into another small plane ready to depart toward Bogotá. With their tanks completely full of gasoline, the airplanes instantly exploded in flames, killing almost everybody onboard. Fifteen people died immediately, and two of the five survivors died shortly afterward.

News of the terrible catastrophe swept at once across the city and very soon all across

⁴⁰The airport is also known as Las Playas.

⁴¹For a short account of Gardel's performances in Medellín and Bogotá, see [Zatti 1992](#).

the country. Antonio Henao Gaviria, a young journalist covering Gardel's short stop in the airport, reported the disaster directly from the scene on the radio. In direct phone communication with journalist Gustavo Rodas Isaza on *La Voz de Antioquia*, he described the details of the incident live, a common journalistic practice nowadays, but completely new for Colombian radio broadcasting at the time.⁴² Among the fifteen casualties were Gardel, Le Pera, two guitarists and other members of his retinue, as well as important members of the local society, including businessmen, lawyers, and the celebrated pilot and airline-owner Ernesto Samper Mendoza, who had been flying the crashed plane. The accident was Colombia's worst aeronautical disaster ever, and one of the most talked-about air tragedies during the 1930s. The fact that so many distinguished people had died caused great consternation. The archives of Medellín's Municipal Council preserve dozens of letters of condolence from city officials, town councils, and foreign governments lamenting the tragic incident. Executives of the industry and the media in New York and Buenos Aires also sent letters expressing their sympathy.

The immediate reaction was, of course, bewilderment. Local newspapers especially lamented the loss of native personalities, publishing extensive obituaries in memory of the renowned lawyer Estanislao Zuleta Ferrer and the aristocratic Bogotano pilot Samper Mendoza.⁴³ Gardel's provisional burial in the San Pedro Cemetery was attended by several hundred people, silently marching after some members of a *zarzuela* company then in town who served as pallbearers. Thereafter, there were several events keeping the national and international press occupied for months, such as an unbelievably thorny process initiated almost immediately to repatriate Gardel's remains to Argentina (which finally arrived in Buenos Aires in February 1936), the investigation of the causes of the disaster, and a series of concerts offered in the city on behalf of the late guitarists' families. A technical commission, appointed by the government to investigate the accident, reported that several factors came together in the tragic episode, such as the departing plane's excessive weight and the effect of an unusually strong southward wind. The official pronouncement did not prevent many absurd theories

⁴²On the importance of this incident in Colombian radio journalism, see Téllez B. 1974; Pérez Ángel and Castellanos 1998. Beginning at some point in the late 1930s or early 1940s, every June 24 Henao Gaviria broadcast a radio program recalling his experience as reporter of the fatal accident.

⁴³For example, the editorial page of *El Heraldo de Antioquia*, June 25 1935, as well as in the extensive article on Samper Mendoza on July 6, 1935.

on the subject, including reports that Samper was drunk and that a quarrel between Samper and Gardel over a woman resulted in a shooting.

The incident undoubtedly attracted attention to what was still just a remote town perched over the Colombian mountains. Medellín suddenly became a point of reference for the Spanish-American popular imagination when the idea of Latin America as a cultural unit, sharing a common language and a mestizo identity (the oft-cited tri-cultural heritage), was not widespread. José de Vasconcelos' notion of the blended *raza cósmica* (Cosmic Race) or José Carlos Mariátegui's Marxist interpretation of the Indian affairs in Peru, developed in the 1920s, were still no more than intellectual abstractions linking Latin American peoples with little impact on reality. In contrast, Gardel's stardom depended heavily on language commonality and a new bourgeois sensibility that was rapidly coming to light in urban centers across the continent. It may be said, therefore, that the accident contributed to creating that bond—the idea of an all-embracing Spanish-speaking Latin America. Antioqueños did not yet realize the repercussions of the incident outside the borders of their city and what it meant, especially for the Argentinean masses, to inhabit the place where their beloved *Zorzal Criollo* (*Creole Thrush*, Gardel's most common nickname) had departed this life.

4.3 TANGO ON THE BIG SCREEN: GARDEL'S FADING MEMORY AND TANGO-SONG'S RENEWED POPULARITY IN THE 1940S

In June 1940, the entertainment magazine *Micro* commented briefly on the fifth anniversary of Gardel's death: “[H]ere, as in the rest of the world, [the memory of] the accident has faded: each year, the number of people dedicating a thought to the deceased dwindles,” and adhering to its habitual role of cultural crusader, it added, “*Micro* would like to become the guardian of such remembrance, which should persist in Medellín to be expressed every June 24 through prayers and floral crowns.”⁴⁴ The suggestion, however, did not have any real consequence in the city since not even the magazine itself campaigned for the institutionalization of such public ritual, busy as it was with other important matters, including the promotion of national music.⁴⁵

⁴⁴*Micro* Number 17, June 25 1940, page 1.

⁴⁵See section 3.3.1.

Such apparent disregard for Gardel's memory in the written press and perhaps in some people's minds did not symptomatize a notorious decline in the consumption of tango recordings, or in habitual tango venues and public. Quite the contrary: the arrival of a fancy new machine re-invigorated the seeking-out and consumption of records in *cantinas* and cafés. Known locally as *traganíquel* (coin-swallower) or simply as *piano*, the coin-operated jukebox was a sensation when it arrived in the city around 1938.⁴⁶ Indeed, the use of the term *piano* (most likely derived from the mechanical pianola) indicates that the jukebox was virtually regarded as a musical instrument, but unlike the high-class instrument of the same name, it was available for everybody in the *cantina's* seemingly classless and more democratic space. Whoever had a 5-cent coin had the right to play a song, allowing the expression of individuality in the form of aesthetic choice and hence enriching the collective experience of listening to recorded music in a public space.

The customary old gramophone was quickly replaced in most cafés by the new automatic device, which not only helped preserve the fragile records by limiting their constant direct manipulation, but also added a kind of allure and pleasure to the otherwise simple selection of a song. There was a touch of magic in slipping a coin into the slot and then pushing a button to activate the movement inside the machine, and it became a sort of ritual to be performed whenever anyone went into a café. Lifelong *tanguero* José “Chepe” Rúa vividly remembers the first time he operated a machine at a café in Guayaquil during his early childhood:

The 24-disc Wurlitzer, [...] those were the first ones I saw, and in one of those I first put a 5-cent coin [...] At that time I had a terrible cough, and since there were so many natural open areas around the district, my father took me with him because it seems that pure air is good for that [...] so we found some of his people in a [café on a] corner, and someone gave me a coin and told me “*vea m'ijo*, push it in and pick a song!” I did not know anything about that machine, “now press any key,” and I did, and then a tango came out, there were many tangos in that piano [...] It happened around 1940, or 1941.⁴⁷

Although most *traganíqueles* around the plaza had an assorted variety of music genres, some cafés had special tango collections. Juancho Uribe, a tango connoisseur who owned a large collection of records, supplied several pianos in cafés such as the “Rey del tango”

⁴⁶Interview with Gustavo Escobar Vélez (Medellín, July 9 2003).

⁴⁷Interview with José “Chepe” Rúa (Medellín, July 9 2003).

and the “Armenonville,” named after Buenos Aires’s most famous and fashionable cabaret. Those who knew about Uribe’s proverbial good taste for tango roamed the neighborhood looking for a small card or tag attached to the piano, inscribed “Discoteca de Juancho Uribe” (“Juancho Uribe’s record collection”). According to Hernando Vélez Sierra, a middle-class aficionado who is also an expert in bolero and a major collector of celebrities’ autographs, except for those pianos specially supplied with refined tangos selected by Uribe, most of what was heard in Guayaquil was an average, low-profile, rather ordinary tango.⁴⁸

It is not an easy task to determine which tangos were most listened to in Guayaquil during the 1940s, and therefore, to make a value judgement on their intrinsic artistic merit. A look at the few *cancioneros* that have survived shows the enduring popularity enjoyed by a few fine classic songs (“Mano a mano,” “Son cosas del bandoneón,” “Yira, yira,” “Amargura”) and many more average pieces (“Desaliento,” “Media noche,” “Corazón cobarde”).⁴⁹ Yet we cannot assume that the content of the *cancioneros* plainly indicates which songs were the local audience’s favorites. Sometimes the lyrics appeared as a form of advertising, because new recordings had been released and were available immediately on the market. So, for example “Amargura” was included in *cancioneros* in 1940, not necessarily because Gardel’s original version was very popular among aficionados, but most likely because a recording of Mexican tenor Pedro Vargas—who was visiting the city at the time (see section 5.3)—had been recently released. Furthermore, the very existence of a crowd following Juancho Uribe’s collection suggests that some people had a particular fondness for old recordings and not necessarily for the latest hits. Whatever the case may be, the key question for these people was: were those tangos good or bad, according to whom, and why? As illustrated before in the case of Vieco-Tartarín’s tango, there are some objective characteristics to determine the level of elaboration involved in a tango-song. Even then, it can be argued that considering those features as objective still implies a highly subjective judgement. That said, according to an observer like Vélez Sierra, most tangos heard in the district were drinking songs usually branded *tangos arrabaleros* or *tangos cantineros*—epitomized by Vieco-Tartarín’s tango—

⁴⁸Interview with Hernando Vélez Sierra (Medellín, July 7 2003).

⁴⁹*Cancionero Colombiano* #144 (October 7, 1940) and #150 (January 24, 1941); *Cancionero Antioqueño* #69 (September 1940); *El cantar de la montaña* (no date, although it can be dated around the first years of World War II because of the advertising).

and usually performed by average singers including Enrique Rodríguez, Armando Moreno, Antonio Tormo, or the Chilean performers Pepe Aguirre and Chito Faró.

Criteria for good tango certainly operated among middle and upper classes. But the ambiguity of tango's artistic value and its relationship to social status resulted in many contradictions. Thus, whenever anybody wanted to epitomize bad musical taste (usually for the sake of national music's endorsement), they used tango as a scapegoat. Camilo Correa, commenting on the lack of interest in the music of Colombian composers, wrote: "In Colombia, the musical work of Antonio María Valencia or [José] Rozo Contreras is unknown, while we sob with Carlos Gardel's bad tangos and know by heart the whole repertoire—good, bad, and mediocre—of Mr. Lecuona."⁵⁰ Two months later, however, he was proposing a yearly festival, an Argentinean week to commemorate Gardel's death, and promoting the arrival of a little known Argentinean tango singer, Rulenzo, hired by *La Voz de Antioquia*.⁵¹ In contrast, Correa was much more consistent in condemning most music aired by modest working-class-oriented radio stations such as *Radio Córdoba* and *La Voz del Triunfo*, whose repertoire, especially the former's, was mainly comprised of tangos.⁵² He used to call it pejoratively the "radio-cantina Córdoba"⁵³ and constantly asked for censorship to control its tastelessness and vulgarity.⁵⁴

The profusion of imported records available in the market and the absence of clear aesthetic standards to judge them generated anxiety in the middle-classes, who wanted to know how to make sense of such an overwhelming abundance of cultural goods. Trade channels supplying records from Buenos Aires and Mexico were running smoothly, bringing, in Correa's words, "loads of tangos, tons of boleros, and avalanches of rumbas."⁵⁵ While the bourgeoisie was still determining the criteria to discriminate good tango, rumba, bolero, and so on from bad, the *traganíqueles* at cafés were simply filling up with songs of every imaginable kind.

⁵⁰Ernesto Lecuona was a renowned Cuban composer in both classic and popular repertoires. "Alcahuetería y radiodifusión," in *Micro* Number 9, April 20 1940, pages 12 and 14.

⁵¹"Semana argentina," in *Micro* Number 17, June 25 1940, page 13.

⁵²*Radio Córdoba* not only aired tango but also Argentinean folklore: in the early it 1940s it regularly presented a local *payadores* duet.

⁵³Actually, Correa was right in maintaining that the station allowed drinking, and that members of the public attending the studio were usually drunk while singers were performing during live programs.

⁵⁴"Se dice que..." in *Micro* Number 25, August 21 1940, page 5; and "Ah, Córdoba," in *Micro* Number 19, July 11 1940, page 3.

⁵⁵"Se acaba la música nacional," in *Micro* Number 34, October 22 1940, page 1.

Likewise, small radio stations like *Radio Córdoba*, which hired working-class musicians and even amateurs to air second-rate live music programs, began relying more and more on the very same recordings to fill out their recorded programs. In brief, the musical styles played in *cantinas* and cafés were often those likewise found in working-class households and even in elite social clubs. Given the ubiquitous nature of the radio signal, the only way to maintain class boundaries was to establish a line between good and bad music, between the music for the upper classes and the music for the lower classes, and tango was at the center of this formation process.

4.3.1 Working-class Tango and Upper-middle-class Tango

Despite the fact that tango-song was a more socially-complex genre and not simply a working-class music, it was for the most part depicted the latter in the local press owing to tango's passionate idealization of working-class quarters. An excellent example of this romantic approach to life in the arrabal is an excerpt from the classic tango "Melodía de arrabal" (1933, lyrics by Alfredo Le Pera and Mario Battistella Zoppi, music by Carlos Gardel):

¡Barrio...! ¡Barrio,
que tenés el alma inquieta
de un gorrión sentimental!
¡Penas...! ¡Ruego,
es todo el barrio malevo
melodía de arrabal!
¡Viejo barrio,
perdoná si al evocarte
se me pianta un lagrimón
que al rodar en tu empedrao
es un beso prolongao
que te da mi corazón!

Quarter...! Quarter,
you who own the restless soul
of a sentimental sparrow!
Sorrows...! Craving,
it's the whole street-tough's quarter,
arrabal melody!
Old neighborhood,
forgive me if in evoking you
a large tear turns up my cheek,
that to stroll through your paved-roads
is like a prolonged kiss
my heart gives you!

Never mind that, as a Gardel biographer correctly observes, by the time most tangos of this topic were written, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the way of life of the *arrabal* was becoming just a memory in contemporary Buenos Aires.⁵⁶ Tango's suburban culture had a powerful hold on the Porteño imagination, romanticizing the past as a way to validate the city's social foundation and to celebrate its progress and improvement. In the late 1930s and

⁵⁶Collier 1986.

early 1940s, this social construction was effortlessly relocated to Medellín's own immigrant-packed local scene, evoking the same romanticized stereotype of the working-class district as an example of urban dynamism and social variety. See, for example, how a middle-class columnist, writing in *El Colombiano* about how music and perfume spread similarly through the air, described a working-class quarter: "It is in the poor suburb, though, where I have found the perfect music. It is there, where *serenateros* spend hours before they move to the silent street and the closed window, new instruments resound and a perfect harmony penetrates the sleepy eyes [...] old tangos sound, tangos that come out as though dressed with our spiritual skin."⁵⁷

Likewise, both in song lyrics and in the popular press, tango-song commonly appeared associated with dark atmospheres and figures from the poor quarters such as the *malevo*, the pretentious tough guy, and the *milonguita*, the poor girl lost in the dissipated nightlife's lure. For example, in August 1945 the city passionately followed the news about an awful murder case labelled by the press the "Crime of the pin." In a humble tenement in Guayaquil, a young woman named Leonor Pineda had been stabbed to death with something that resembled a long pin. When interviewed, one of her lovers, an itinerant vendor known as Perucho, declared to the reporter that after he found out about the crime, his first reaction was to go find a place to listen to tangos: "I went to cry over there, in front of the Café Tropical. In that place I requested that they played the recording she liked the most, 'La última copa' ('The Last Drink')."⁵⁸

Leaving aside this powerful stereotypical image of low-class tango in the city, in the early 1940s a middle-class-oriented type of tango appeared in the advertisement of the local market of recordings. This middle-class tango-song was an outgrowth of Gardel's films, a type of song mostly created for movies' soundtracks. The movies starring the diva Libertad Lamarque, who was presented as *la reina del tango* ("The Tango Queen"), reached local theaters beginning in 1942.⁵⁹ A high-profile tango diva was something almost unknown in Medellín at this time, although Lamarque was already a veteran of Buenos Aires's tango

⁵⁷ "La música del mundo" by Puck, in *El Colombiano* July 24 1945, page 5.

⁵⁸ "Perucho se enteró por este diario de la muerte de Leonor; inmediatamente después se fue a una cantina a escuchar un tango" in *El Colombiano* August 4 1945, page 2.

⁵⁹ Movie ads in *El Diario*, January 12, 28, and 30 1942.

venues and her recordings had been available in the local market of records for years (as advertised in a 1930 catalog, see page 71). Although female voices had always been highly admired in Argentina, in Medellín tango had been up to this point considered a male genre. Nor was this gender emphasis a local misinterpretation, for tango's male bias has always been pinpointed as a part of its intrinsic nature.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the topics of the songs and the places where they were usually listened to within the city, such as cafés and *cantinas*, were part of an exclusively male social realm that offered no room for reputable women. The oft-claimed indecency of tango-song most likely derived from its alleged inappropriateness for respectable ladies' ears, and that attribution explains why figures like Camilo Correa strongly criticized tango-song programming on radio broadcasts. Probably following the same line of reasoning, powerful radio stations such as *La Voz de Antioquia* aired little tango.⁶¹

The marketing of Libertad Lamarque's stardom, therefore, marked an important shift in the type of audience targeted locally for tango-song consumption, both in films and recordings. Lamarque, as well as Hugo del Carril and Alberto Gómez—other tango singers participating in the movies—were anything but novel figures in the film industry. They had been included in numerous movies since the release of the 1933 film “Tango,” the first Argentinean sound feature-film.⁶² But although Argentinean cinema had grown throughout the 1930s, reaching a creative peak toward the end of the decade, its productions only started arriving in Medellín's theaters around the early 1940s. Such a delay in distribution almost certainly had something to do with Cine Colombia's monopoly over numerous movie theaters in the city. In 1930, this firm had signed a contract to distribute only Metro-Goldwin-Mayer's productions—an agreement highly criticized in Medellín at the time⁶³—and not modified until the late 1930s.⁶⁴ Consequently, it was only in 1942 that a 1939 movie starring Lamarque, “Caminito de Gloria” (“Little Path of Glory”), was screened in Cine Colombia's

⁶⁰Even when tango is performed by a woman, often the female voice embodies a male lookout in which lyrics almost always speak from a man's perspective. For an analysis of gender tensions in female tango performances, see [Dos Santos 1995](#).

⁶¹Interview with Hernando Vélez Sierra (Medellín July 7, 2003).

⁶²[España 1992](#).

⁶³[Duque Isaza 1992](#), 262–268.

⁶⁴According to newspaper movie ads, Mexican movies were introduced into the local market around 1937. Almost certainly several Spanish-language movies produced in Argentina, Mexico or Spain had been screened before, but they were in no way part of the mainstream supply.

most important theater in the city, the Teatro Junín. The steady new supply of Argentinean films reaching local theaters, precisely while North American and European cultural products were suffering from wartime production and distribution restrictions, helped to expand the tango-song market to a bourgeoisie middle-class family audience.

The images and the melodramatic story lines unfolded on the screen showed the adaptation of conventional roles into contemporary bourgeois characters who had to confront modern society's new challenges. Understandably, it was far easier for local audiences to identify culturally with Spanish-speaking Porteño characters and social situations portrayed in Argentinean movies than with characters and plots in Hollywood productions. The local interest for Argentinean feature films grew rapidly, as reported in *Micro*: “[...] an approximated idea of the good reception Argentinean cinema has among Colombian aficionados can be inferred from Teatro Junín's billboard any Sunday: ‘Cuando canta el corazón’ with Hugo del Carril, ‘El cura gaucho’ with Enrique Muiño, and Angel Magaña starring ‘Yo quiero morir contigo.’”⁶⁵ A focal point in many of those newly-arrived movies, tango-song was presented as an important vehicle of expression for a modern and cosmopolitan sensibility that challenged traditional gender stereotypes. Tango heroines in female-oriented movies like Libertad Lamarque's, even if highly stereotyped by the conventional formulas of melodrama, represented a more appealing role model for female spectators than conventional and old-fashioned characters depicted in traditional genres, like bambuco's virginal *campesino* girl. Lamarque's movies offered a new variety of female tango heroines that went beyond the fallen *milonguita*, and now women in tango could be both modern and morally acceptable. Lamarque became a huge idol in the city, the press constantly reporting her concert tours and the screening of her new movies.

An outbreak of local interest in Argentinean culture followed the success of Argentinean movies, and suddenly it became normal to invite Argentinean and Chilean tango singers to perform on the radio and in theaters. *Micro* started publishing a regular section of the magazine dealing with news and gossip from Buenos Aires's entertainment business (“Sucedió en la Argentina,” “It happened in Argentina”). Celebrated pianist and composer Joaquín ‘El Negro’ Mora arrived with the singer Lydia Paz in July 1943 for a series of performances on the

⁶⁵ “¿Está herido de muerte el cine argentino?” in *Micro* Number 58 February 1944, page 26.

local radio.⁶⁶ Their visit was not the first by a touring Argentinean ensemble; for instance, some years before a troupe led by actress-singer Chita Bozán, a self-appointed *emperatriz del tango* (Tango Empress) had stayed for a while in the city.⁶⁷ Notwithstanding these and other Argentinean musicians' visits to Medellín and other places close to the Caribbean, Mora's visit to the city was the first by a young musician who was by then becoming a promising figure in the Argentinean musical establishment. And certainly the highlight of tours by tango artists during the 1940s came in 1947 and 1948 with the visit of Libertad Lamarque herself.⁶⁸

4.3.2 Tango-Dance: Gender, Class, and the Restrictions on the Body

However much Lamarque's stardom had helped to draw local bourgeoisie into the tango audience, the rift separating upper- and lower-class tango consumers was evident in the way different groups approached tango as a dance, a physical activity that not only mediated class but also gender relations. Because of the prejudice against dancing in general, few members of the middle classes knew how to dance tango, especially since it had previously been condemned as immoral by religious authorities (see page 113). In contrast, more liberal upper classes, who had been familiar with European ballroom-style tango in the mid-1910s, had all but forgotten it, and the dance was occasionally practiced in the late 1940s and early 1950s by teenage boys and girls at parties in the protected spaces of upper-class social clubs like the Club Campestre.⁶⁹

Ironically, tango dance was also important for some members of the lower classes, including some characters seen as social pariahs. After the arrival of Argentinean movies some blue-collar dancers learned a series of steps from what they saw being performed on the big screen. Highly-skilled dancers, such as the legendary Oscar 'Gato' Muñoz, staged acrobatic

⁶⁶*Micro*, Number 57, January 1944, page 32, and Number 54, July 1943, page 8.

⁶⁷*Micro* Number 53, November 1941, page 35. Hernán Restrepo Duque mentions that two ensembles visited the city in the late 1920s, but he could not find corroborating details (Restrepo Duque 1986, 281). A tango aficionado (José "Chepe" Rúa, cited interview) told me the same story, most likely because he had heard about it in conversations with Restrepo Duque.

⁶⁸In *El Diario*, February 20 1947, first page.

⁶⁹Interview with Dora Ramírez de Echavarría (Medellín, July 15 2004). Her case, however, seems rather exceptional; she and her brother learned to dance tango from a working-class helper at their parents' estate located in the city's outskirts nearby Manrique.

performances and regularly improvised nighttime competitions. Those activities congregated small crowds of spectators, including middle-class observers, in some *cantinas* at Guayaquil or in the customary working-class dance-gatherings held at the *Parque de la Independencia* (Independence's Park) on Sunday afternoons.⁷⁰ Most of the dancers came from the fringes of society, usually known by their nicknames and dressed up as dandy *malevos*; others were homosexuals and transvestites using female pet names such as 'Albertina' and 'Zoilo.'⁷¹

Such a peculiar social division between tango-dance practitioners reveals the strength of the conventions controlling the body. Upper-class teenagers were allowed to dance, either tango or other genres, because they were secluded and constantly monitored at the social club, and thus, their moral integrity was always well secured. On the other hand, the low-class tango-dance in the unrestrained space of the *cantina*, although very admired by the public, was seen as exotic. As in the Buenos Aires's tango atmosphere of the early 1900s, in Medellín men learned to dance with prostitutes, and apparently it was not rare to find males dancing together in *cantinas* until the mid-1930s, when the practice of male dancing couples was banned by the authorities.⁷² Social regulations put the male dancer's virility under suspicion, and the female dancer was definitely presumed a prostitute. The view of dance as an effeminate hobby reinforced patriarchal structures and rationalized social control. Although the predisposition against dancing weakened over the years, unlike other dances such as *cumbia*, tango's particular choreography required not only skills but discipline and constant practice, something not always possible under the circumstances. Therefore, in Medellín tango dancing continued to be considered a curiosity, even an abnormality.

4.3.3 Tango-song's Renewed Popularity and the Growth of the Gardelian Myth

While tango-dance was rather a curiosity practiced by a few working-class individuals and some privileged girls, in the mid-1940s tango-song conquered a place in the musical taste of all social classes. The success of Argentinean movies was a key factor in re-energizing local

⁷⁰Bernardo Paniagua and Roberto Yepes, personal communication (Medellín, July 13 2003).

⁷¹Rafael Ortiz alias 'Julián Centella' registers some of the dancer's names: 'Cheta' Álvarez; 'La Polla,' Jorge Marín, also known as 'el Negro Jorge,' 'El Palomo,' 'El Manchao,' 'Tornillo,' Jesús Medina; Carmen Saldarriaga; Enrique Olaya Saldarriaga alias 'El Bizco,' 'El Negro Mifra,' 'El Negro Cerveza,' 'Sin Harina,' 'El Viejo Quin' (Joaquín); 'El Ñato Casildo,' 'Quinqui,' 'Najita,' 'Los Alzates' (Ortiz A. 1992, 166).

⁷²Betancur Gómez 2000, 435.

consumption, and several cafés in Guayaquil and beyond enhanced their collections of tango recordings.⁷³ For instance, radio-programmer and tango connoisseur Hernán Caro was still a teenager between 1942 and 1945 when he began to work at Envigado's Café Real, whose owner put him in charge of acquiring music to fill out the first *traganíquel* to arrive in town, a 24-disc Wurlitzer. He recalls his periodical journeys to shops in downtown Medellín to buy recordings, noting that tango was so widely available that at the end the whole device was always loaded with Argentinean music.⁷⁴ Likewise, in the mid-1940s second-rate radio stations such as *Ondas Tropicales* and *La Voz del Triunfo* launched daily programs that specialized in Argentinean music.⁷⁵ Even *La Voz de Antioquia* aired two short 15-minute segments with tangos on Saturday mornings.⁷⁶

In spite of being spaces restricted to adult male audiences, neighborhood cafés played an important role in the dissemination of tango-song among women and children, especially in working-class districts. For one thing, thanks to temperate weather, Medellín's inhabitants can keep doors and windows permanently open, to the point that sometimes these barriers separating the interior from the street become more imaginary than real. For another, children who passed by cafés and heard the music coming out of *traganíqueles*, grew eager to turn into young adults allowed to enter those mysterious spaces.⁷⁷ Finally, women eventually learned the songs that they managed to hear in the distance, playing loudly all day long in the street-corner neighborhood café; several contemporary tango aficionados say they remember their mothers washing their clothes and singing tangos.⁷⁸ Another tango aficionado recalled the experience of an upper-class female friend, who became interested in tango as a girl while riding in the school bus or in the streetcar, whose stops were placed right in front of *cantinas*

⁷³José 'Chepe' Rúa, interview by Alejandro Bernal González. "Los cafés de Guayaquil," in "Medellín capital de tango," a special issue of the *Club Amigos del Tango's* journal (Medellín, October-November 1993, pages 8–10).

⁷⁴Hernán Caro, interviewed by Victa María de Fex. In "Tangueando en Medellín," in "Medellín capital de tango" (*Club Amigos del Tango*, Medellín, October-November 1993, pages 14–15).

⁷⁵Alberto González M. was the program's anchor at the former, broadcast daily at 6:00 p.m. (in *Cancionero Joyeles* Number 20, May of 1947, year III: González M. was the *cancionero's* editor); the latter aired two half-hour sections at 11:30 "Argentina canta," and 1:30 "La hora porteña" (in *El Colombiano* May 18 1947, page 8).

⁷⁶*El Colombiano* May 18 1947, page 8.

⁷⁷Interview with Héctor Ramírez (Medellín, July 9, 2004). Orlando Mora's book of essays describes the admission into the café as a ritual of male adulthood (Mora 1989).

⁷⁸Hernán Caro, interviewed by Victa María de Fex. In "Tangueando en Medellín," in "Medellín capital de " (*Club Amigos del Tango*, Medellín, October-November 1993, pages 14–15).

where men listened to tango.⁷⁹ Cafés in working-class quarters such as Manrique, Buenos Aires, and La Toma spread the fondness for the repertoire throughout the neighborhood by adorning their walls in the fashion of Guayaquil's cafés, with pictures of Gardel and tango band-leaders such as Francisco Canaro and Miguel Caló.⁸⁰

It was around this time that the veneration shown by Argentinean actors and musicians visiting the place where their idol Gardel's death site aroused local awareness of his mythical stance. For example, the first thing the Argentinean theatrical company led by actress Gloria Guzmán did upon arriving at the airport in January 1946, was to proffer flowers paying homage to Gardel's memory.⁸¹ A journalist who covered the special act for *El Colombiano* commented: "[Guzmán] brings to our memory the name of the Porteño Carlos Gardel, who still lives in the imagination and the minds of Antioqueño aficionados." Less than a year before, however, the tenth anniversary of the tragedy had passed completely ignored: no commemoration took place on June 24, 1945 and no newspaper article remembered the date. Yet in 1946, Gardel's movies were back once again, periodically screened in local theaters.⁸² Then, in 1948, Libertad Lamarque and her husband, tango band leader Alfredo Malerba, realized with astonishment that there was no memorial to Gardel in the airport.⁸³ They commissioned (and spent a couple of months in the city waiting for its completion) a special bronze plaque honoring the idol—the uprisings of April 9 1948 confining them for a week in a small Antioqueño town while touring the region. The plaque was unveiled in a ceremony some weeks later, on April 27, in the presence of Lamarque, Malerba, Mexican bolero stars María Luisa Landín, Juan Arvizu, and Chucho Martínez Gil, as well as a huge multitude (see Figure 14). Hernán Restrepo Duque's extensive article on Gardel's death, appearing on the fourteenth anniversary (July 1949), almost certainly constitutes the first comprehensive journalistic commentary on the subject published in the city since the avalanche of news reports immediately following the tragic events of 1935.⁸⁴

⁷⁹Interview with Jesús Vallejo Mejía (Medellín, July 3 2003).

⁸⁰José 'Chepe' Rúa, interview with Alejandro Bernal González. "Los cafés de Guayaquil," in "Medellín capital de tango," a special issue of the *Club Amigos del Tango's* journal (Medellín, October-November 1993, pages 8–10).

⁸¹Photograph with the caption "Gloria Guzmán's Teatrical Company offers a bouquet to Gardel after their arrival to Las Playas Airport." Guzmán was member of the cast in one of Gardel's movies shot in Paris. *El Colombiano*, January 23 1946, first page.

⁸²"Espérame" (*El Diario*, November 25 1946) and "Luces de Buenos Aires" (*El Diario*, January 30 1947),



Figure 14: Libertad Lamarque at the airport (Photograph by Foto Reporter, Carlos Rodríguez. Archivo de Memoria Visual de Antioquia, Palacio de la Cultura Rafael Uribe Uribe, Medellín.) Lamarque and Malerba's bronze plaque (Jardín Gardel, Olaya Herrera Airport, Medellín).

The renewed passion for tango-song stimulated by the advent of Argentinean movies in 1942 is evident in the emergence of a new periodical *cancionero* published around that time by a local bookstore. The middle-class monthly *El Tangón*, issued by the bookshop of the same name, was a slender publication containing lyrics and occasionally commentaries on performers or show reviews. The earliest surviving issue, from 1947, includes the lyrics of tangos by Lamarque and Mercedes Simone, a few boleros, several other songs cast in Mexican and Spanish genres, and the lyric of a bambuco authored by Tartarín.⁸⁵ Unlike earlier *cancioneros* published at the beginning of the decade, this issue quite consistently indicates data such as the name of the performer who recorded a song and the musical genre to which each one belonged. Such a high level of specificity correlates to a higher degree of public awareness regarding the artists and the uniqueness of each genre. Certainly, the audience was much more informed than in the 1920s, when all Spanish-language songs were indistinguishable in their marketing by record companies. Although not an all-exclusive

both screened in the recently inaugurated Teatro Imperio.

⁸³Lamarque 1986.

⁸⁴Published in *Micro* Number 63, July 1949.

⁸⁵*El Tangón: revista cancionero*, Number 55, May 1947, Fifth year.

tango *cancionero*, *El Tangón* as well as its sister periodical *El Porteño* (issued by the same bookstore starting on 1950) relied on the popular allure of their tango-related names.⁸⁶

Continuing Carlos Vieco's and Tartarín's earlier steps, a couple of local musicians undertook the composition of tango-songs of their own, also working with the support of record agents. Even when some of those tangos were recorded in Medellín, as late as the mid-1940s record label representatives still had to send the originals to be pressed in Argentina or Chile. For example, orchestral arranger and composer Eduardo Murillo signed a contract in 1945 with Odeón's agent in town, Julio Ramírez Johns, to compose some new tangos to be delivered to the company's recording studios.⁸⁷ Murillo's continuous activities in local radio, especially on *La Voz de Antioquia*, and the publicity received in an important newspaper make us believe that his music was considered appropriate for middle-class audiences. According to a local researcher, some years later Guayaquil's musicians, including Arturo Ruiz del Castillo and Carlos Washington Andrade, composed mostly working-class *tango arrabalero*.⁸⁸ Talented musicians such as Edmundo Arias and José Barros, later important in the evolution of tropical music genres (*cumbia* and *porro*), also participated as songwriters or performers in this local tango trend.

These examples show that after the dormant years following Gardel's demise, local demand for tango-song had revived. But, indeed, such examples also show that tango-song's local adoption was concentrated mainly in the mass production and consumption of recordings, and barely involved the performance of live music. Despite the activities of songwriters like the aforementioned Murillo, Ruiz del Castillo, and Andrade, there were no permanent tango ensembles performing regularly, as happened, for example, in cities like Barcelona and Madrid. Such particular circumstance was consequence of both the significance of the record itself as a source of cultural capital and the meager local adoption of tango dance, whose extensive practice would need live tango orchestras performing at dance halls. In that sense, the appropriation of tango-song in Medellín is pretty unusual if compared to similar processes in other social contexts. Argentinean musicologist Ramón Pelinski marks a difference

⁸⁶ *El Tangón*'s latest issue preserved in the Fonoteca Departamental de Antioquia is Number 210, from 1965, and it is almost completely dedicated to tango.

⁸⁷ "Compositor colombiano especializado en tangos," In *El Colombiano*, February 9 1945, page 8.

⁸⁸ Restrepo Duque 1992, 97–98.

between the “tango Porteño” and the “tango nomadé,” the latter a practice deterritorialized from Buenos Aires that has been reterritorialized somewhere else. Tango nomadé defines, therefore, a *mestizo* genre, a fusion between the Argentinean tango and its new musical environment.⁸⁹ In Medellín, however, it seems paradoxical that tango has never been a tradition of live music but an electronically mediated experience. That particularity precluded much variability, and would later allow an easy institutionalization (in associations, clubs, and venues) engaged in the preservation of the old repertoire. The rationale for that eventual institutionalization might be in tango’s potential to articulate a difference between the local and the national, a differentiation first presented in the form of muted resistance.

4.3.4 Censorship and Tango’s Potential for Resistance

Even after tango’s more favorable reception among upper and middle classes in the late 1940s, either its self-indulgence in tragedy or its plebeian origins, or perhaps both, kept the genre surrounded by a certain aura of darkness. Characters populating tango-song are usually lonely men drinking after being dumped by spoiled women, suffering mothers, and hopeless lovers. Many tango lyrics proudly recall the genre’s humble origins, its achieved respectability always being on the verge of falling down toward its original *arrabalero* roots. Yet, far from being flaws, its dubious stability on the edge and such compulsive fascination with difficulties and misfortunes made tango topics and tango characters plausible and human. The acknowledgement of human fragility, of failure and suffering, made them appear real and sincere. Tango’s shadowy atmosphere and resilient roughness seemed to defy every attempt at regularization. A contemporary columnist describes with no hidden awe tango’s resistance to being tamed and civilized by the elites:

Tango lost its personality the day some posh folks from Buenos Aires decided to take it to the elite ballrooms, to dance it in tuxedo and with genuflections, with those honest manners more appropriate for religious-school intern girls. For undoubtedly tango was made to be danced in gaucho attire in dim-lightened taverns, clinking spurs against uneven ground. Only in such a way is it possible to conceive its music and understand its *arrabal* lyrics, on Saturday nights imbued with cheap-drink odors and the smoke of bad tobaccos. Tango was introduced into high society by Carlos Gardel’s prodigious throat, whose voice reduced delicate girls to tears as well as fetched sighs from those protuberant-chested matrons with

⁸⁹Pelinski 2000.

hairy moles on their cheeks. But its introduction was just a formal ceremony, because fathers refused to permit their oxygenated-blond sweethearts to dance with their hated would-be sons-in-laws. Tango is thus only appropriated in suburban saloons profusely festooned with paper chains, rubber balloons, and artificial flowers. Tango is neither a literary nor a musically refined product, but one derived from the harsh and brutal frankness with which scarcely-cultured peoples understand one another. Naturally, in tango's vulgar lyrics there are occasionally some gems that glow with priceless poetic preciousness. Yet, for every two select jewels, there are a hundred cheap glass pearls. . . ⁹⁰

This column appeared in *El Colombiano* a week after the government's declaration of State of Siege (November 10, 1949), which established an official censorship policy over radio broadcast and newspapers. It would be risky, perhaps, to read this tribute to tango's endurance against regulation as a political manifesto. There is no reason to believe the author deliberately meant to criticize new governmental measures to tighten control over public opinion.⁹¹ Yet his appreciation of tango's vulgarity and the hope of finding some beauty in the unrefined are striking within this context, and stand in sharp contrast to contemporary discussions about establishing a national music canon. At the very same time that bambuco's advocates were celebrating its long-awaited regularization (see section 3.3.4), the author of this column lauded tango for epitomizing a cheerful and irreverent inappropriateness.

There are several ways to interpret this ironic commentary, whose tone, nevertheless, was not unusual in Antioqueño press. First, tango politics in the city, even during this time of intensive partisan confrontation, cannot be reduced to a quarrel between Liberals and Conservatives. Given its gloomy spirit, tango was a type of music more welcomed in the upper and middle classes by open-minded aficionados, but it would be a blunt oversimplification to say that all tango fans were Liberals. Indeed, whoever authored the column mentioned above was himself a moderate Conservative with a daily column in the leading moderate-

⁹⁰“La función del tango,” by Tout, in *El Colombiano*, November 17 1949, page 5.

⁹¹It is not possible to make such an assumption without knowing exactly who the person behind the pseudonym was, but there is no doubt journalists used such strategies to criticize. An example is José Gers' column, published a few days before the State of Siege's launching, and titled as a phrase of Antonio Fuentes' *porro* in vogue at the time: “*Mamá, no puedo con ella*” (“Mamma, I cannot bear her”). The text began by commenting on the song's success in the country and abroad—its double-meaning lyrics meaning to talk about a heavy pot, not a woman—but later it became a critique of the current situation by means of interpreting the pronoun “her” as referring to violence. In *El Colombiano*, September 30 1949, page 5. Even so, Jacques Gilard identifies Gers (José Gerardo Ramírez) as one of the most reactionary journalist of the time (Girard 1986, cited in Wade 2000).

Conservative local newspaper. Political parties themselves were not homogeneous at that point, split up as they were into several antagonistic factions. Rather than defending a partisan viewpoint by making fun of upper-class tendencies toward pompous sophistication and away from authenticity and common sense, the author was actually criticizing how badly the elites, regardless of their political tendency, were dealing with class struggle.

Moving further in the terrain of speculation, it is possible to propose another subtle reading of the article in light of hegemonic tensions between center and periphery. The clash between rudeness and refinement may also be interpreted as the expression of the local opposition against the quest for homogenization dictated from the nation's capital. The author romanticizes the figure of the rude gaucho dancing tango as a symbol of authenticity. But such an image is intrinsically problematic, because as a type of urban music, tango was never performed by peoples of the rural Argentinean Pampa. The misconception is perfectly understandable, however, because from tango's very inception in Europe, the gaucho appeared closely linked to the genre as some sort of embodiment of South American exoticism.⁹² Beyond its questionable authenticity, the important point is that the image of the gaucho strongly resonates with the local figure of the *arriero*, the forceful and sometimes rude Antioqueño colonizer. In this way, the symbol of the gaucho/*arriero*, with its raw authenticity and crude honesty, resists and challenges the well-mannered artificiality of the lettered elites, the Bogotano ruling class who, after all, were the ones imposing censorship. Moreover, the whiter identity of the imaginary equivalent Argentinean/Antioqueño, the gaucho/*arriero*, contrasts with the Bogotano/*mestizo* identity of the bambuco. The configuration of a contrasting Antioqueño identity appears here clearly articulated in tango's local appropriation.

Lack of more contemporary data supporting these hypotheses precludes a thorough exploration of the extent to which tango was used for political resistance during the tumultuous late 1940s. Although the lyrics of several tangos are overtly political in the Argentinean context, there is no evidence that they had ever been successfully adapted to the Colom-

⁹²Collier 1986. Rudolf Valentino's famous scene dancing tango dressed as a gaucho in the classic silent movie "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypses" (1920) is a perfect example of this early connection.

bian situation.⁹³ Official censorship of the press was constantly enforced, leaving very few traces like the aforementioned article. Yet listening to tango, the music blaring out from a *traganíquel* in a café, ironically allowed a silent protest against the establishment, one that might not be subjected to censorship, or put the protester in danger of being murdered by right-wing extremists. The dissenter could use his inactive role as a listener to conceal himself—being neither the author nor the singer of the song. And anyhow, he could always argue that if the lyrics were critical, they were complaining about Argentina and not about Colombia. We can only speculate about the effectiveness of such a strategy; we know for sure that repression was particularly acute in Guayaquil, tightly controlled by right-wing killers, the so-called *aplanchadores* (literally “people crushers”).⁹⁴

There is, however, a work of fiction that offers an interesting insight into tango’s defiant underworld during this period. Manuel Mejía Vallejo, then a young writer persecuted by the regime and forced into exile, wrote a novel titled “Aire de tango” (1979), in which he portrayed Guayaquil’s tango subculture, populated by low-class dark characters and a rebellious generation of poets, writers and composers who felt captivated by the complexity of this world outside the law and social norms. In the novel, despite the many musical genres to be heard in Guayaquil in testimony to its openness and cultural heterogeneity, tango is a unifying passion, a sort of lingua franca for the many people who daily come and go into the district.⁹⁵ Sometimes it is hard to find the lines between reality and fiction in Mejía Vallejo’s narrative, and the story is so well known and loved among local tango aficionados that it seems difficult to question nowadays its historical accuracy by asking them to recall their memories. In any case, those elements of active resistance, although still not explicitly formulated, would play a great role years later, much beyond the scope of this dissertation.

⁹³Actually, it is very interesting to note that in my examination of contemporary local *cancioneros*, I have never come across one of the repertoire’s most loved tangos of all times, Enrique Santos Discépolo’s “Cambalache” (1935), which makes me think it was intentionally kept out of the market until much later in the century. A smart protest song with provocative phrases such as “*Que el mundo fue y será una porquería, ya lo se, en el 506 y en el 2000 también. . . pero que el siglo veinte es un despliegue de maldad insolente, ya no hay quien lo niegue*” (“That the world was and it will always be filthy, I already know, whether in 506 or in 2000. . . yet that the twentieth century is an insolent deployment of evil, is something nobody refutes anymore”), this tango was constantly censored by military governments in Argentina (Benedetti 1998).

⁹⁴Certainly the press did not mention the issue. For an example of the use of the word *aplanchadores* in this context, see Franco Vélez 1984.

⁹⁵From Jiménez 1998, who makes an insightful analysis of the story.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the city experienced its own tango golden age, and among local intellectuals, Mejía Vallejo was one of its more diligent champions.

4.4 TANGO IN THE EARLY 1950S: SOCCER AND MASS ENTERTAINMENT

Besides tango, soccer was another crucial source of Argentinean culture in Colombia. A national passion in both countries, Argentina was already a world power in the game when Colombian clubs started gaining some renown on the continent. The economic boom of the 1950s allowed teams to hire many Argentinean players for the two nascent local soccer clubs, the DIM (Deportivo Independiente Medellín) and the Atlético Nacional. Just like Argentinean actors and musicians, soccer players and visiting Argentinean clubs, such as the Wanderers in 1951, performed special homages to Gardel's memory whenever they reached Medellín.⁹⁶ Some Argentinean team members of local soccer clubs, such as Domingo Walton, were also amateur tango singers and were occasionally invited to perform both in radio broadcasts and in theatrical shows.⁹⁷

By 1951, the number of Argentinean motion pictures playing at the city movie theaters had significantly increased. They were constantly running at several premiere theaters located downtown (Junín, España, Ópera, María Victoria, Avenida, Lido, Granada) as well as in neighborhood theaters (Manrique, Buenos Aires, Barrio Antioquia, Cuba, Ayacucho, Aranjuez, Rialto, Santander, Roma, etc.) that screened older productions.⁹⁸ Films recently premiered in Buenos Aires were screened in Medellín only a few months later.⁹⁹ Gardel's classic films outnumbered by far all pre-screened movies projected again in peripheral the-

⁹⁶“Ofrenda floral a Gardel hicieron los argentinos. Los jugadores del Wanderers visitaron ayer el sitio de la tragedia de 1935 en Las Playas,” in *El Colombiano*, February 4 1951, page 2.

⁹⁷Walton participated at least once in *La Voz de Antioquia's* radio shows (“Walton canta esta noche por la radio,” in the section “Notas de Sociedad,” *El Diario* May 28, 1951, page 6.) Another soccer player with the last name Cabasco took part in a multi-star concert sponsored by the magazine *Micro* in 1949 (“Los maestros Tena y Camargo dirigirán el primero de los Festivales Micro mañana. Parte de los artistas del formidable elenco del desfile de estrellas en el Teatro Bolívar,” in *El Colombiano*, August 2 1949, page 2.)

⁹⁸Movie advertisements and show information schedules in *El Colombiano* and *El Diario*, January through December 1951.

⁹⁹“Pasión Maldita” (also titled “Los Isleros”) debuted in Buenos Aires on March 20 1951 (Manrupe and Portella 1995, 307), and was already in Medellín's Teatro Ópera by mid-August.

aters, followed by films starring tango luminaries Hugo del Carril, Tita Merello, and Alberto Castillo.¹⁰⁰ In September 1951, Alberto Castillo came to the city to attend the debut of one of his new movies, “El tango del recuerdo,” which was screened simultaneously in three major movie theaters.¹⁰¹ These movies’ widespread popularity seems not to have been affected by the severe ratings that a newly-reinforced censorship committee started publishing at least twice a week in *El Colombiano*. The committee was formed to evaluate the moral content of the movies, but did not hesitate to articulate such valuations in the form of aesthetic judgements: for example Tita Merello’s *Arrabalera* was rated “dangerous,” whereas Gardel’s *Cuesta Abajo* was simply dismissed as “bad.”¹⁰²

The local music recording industry, whose onset in the city dates from 1949, experienced a series of fierce battles between small labels that aspired to supply the ever-growing market of records. In order to favor the emerging new business, the government increased taxes on imported records, triggering a huge struggle over retail prices among local producers. Although almost certainly intended as a way to protect recordings of Colombian music, the decree was rather imprecise about musical content.¹⁰³ Eventually, taxation affected all foreign-pressed vinyls, whether offering Colombian or non-Colombian music, so producers invented different strategies to secure their hold on the local market. Some firms faced the internal competition by reissuing tango recordings originally produced in Argentina. For instance, between 1950 and 1952 Sonolux-Lyra extensively promoted the records of Argentinean tango singer Raúl Iriarte, whose reproduction rights had been granted to the label after an agreement with a foreign company. Iriarte visited the city several times and performed accompanied by a small ensemble in Cine Colombia’s movie theaters as well as on *La Voz de Antioquia*.¹⁰⁴

New locally-composed *tango arrabalero* repertoire also found its way into the releases of

¹⁰⁰This tendency shifted towards the end of the decade, according to the memories of Jesús Vallejo Mejía (Interviewed in Medellín, July 3 2003).

¹⁰¹Advertisement of Teatro Junín, in *El Colombiano*, September 18 1951, page 13.

¹⁰²“Clasificación moral de las películas,” in *El Colombiano* September 1 1951, page 7.

¹⁰³A column by *El Colombiano*’s music critic Ra-Vel (Rafael Vega V.) comments on the imprecisions in the regulation: “Mayor impuesto de aduana para la buena música,” in *El Colombiano* December 15 1949, page 5.

¹⁰⁴“Lo bueno y lo malo de la radio” by Jessie Monyato (pseudonym), *El Porteño* Number 2 Year I, March 1950; “Recorrido de lo que está grabado en Atlantic, Lyra y Sonolux,” by Hernán Restrepo Duque in “Antena,” *El Diario* May 16 1951.

other labels, especially in the form of what started to be called *música de carrilera* (literally, railroad music). Rather than a genre, *carrilera* is a commercially-derived umbrella term coined around 1950 to describe a repertoire of drinking songs produced to supply *traganíqueles* at every small-town café in the Antioqueño hinterland—therefore, it not only includes tango, but also bambuco, pasillo, bolero, as well as Mexican rancheras. Among the record labels producing these very inexpensive records were Zeida, Silver, Ondina, and Victoria, their output being sold by peddlers following railroad tracks all over the Antioqueño cordillera.¹⁰⁵

Tango's power to gather a sizeable local audience during the 1950s is illustrated by the organization of massive tango spectacles. The first large-scale tango concert ever held in the city was put together on June 21 1952 to commemorate the seventeenth anniversary of Gardel's passing.¹⁰⁶ The chosen venue was the beautiful Plaza de la Macarena, the municipal bullring, and the performers were several visiting Argentineans, other foreign artists who happened to be in the city at the time, and a few locals. The main attractions were the aforementioned Raúl Iriarte and his orchestra, and actor-singer Guillermo Casaly (also spelled Casali). According to a contemporary newspaper, Casaly, author of a biography of Gardel, starred in an Argentinean motion picture based on the idol's life, and was now presenting a series of radio programs on the subject on *La Voz de Antioquia*.¹⁰⁷ Among the other performers who took part in the concert were Brazilian tenor Mario Marcus and local *bambuquero* ensemble Trío Grancolombiano. Two other smaller events were simultaneously held two days later, on the exact anniversary day, in two movie theaters, downtown's Ópera and a peripheral theater located in the working-class neighborhood known as Buenos Aires. Casaly and Iriarte combined their performances with the screening of Hugo del Carril's movie *Así nació el tango* (*Thus Tango was Born*).¹⁰⁸

Far from being great stars of the Argentinean tango pantheon, Casaly and Iriarte were rather mediocre, unimportant figures. It was not their artistic qualities but their cosmopoli-

¹⁰⁵Interview with Jesús Vallejo Mejía (Medellín, July 3, 2003).

¹⁰⁶Half-page advertisement in *El Colombiano*, Saturday June 21 1952, page 14.

¹⁰⁷"El nuevo Gardel," in *El Colombiano* April 20 1952, page 5. Either Casaly or the journalist who wrote the note made up that story, because there is no such Argentinean movie starring Casaly (see (Manrupe and Portella 1995)).

¹⁰⁸Advertisement in *El Colombiano*, June 24 1952, page 18. The title of the film may be incorrect because there is no movie with such a name in Hugo del Carril's filmography (Manrupe and Portella 1995).

tan exoticism that enabled performers like them to draw so much attention from the local public. Mass entertainment portrayed a bustling way of life that seemed all the more natural given the expectations aroused by the city's flourishing industrial and economic development. Yet local audiences' great attraction to this successful urban lifestyle depicted in the products of the Argentinean cultural industries had another side: it also showed the people's desire to escape from the more immediate affairs affecting their everyday life in Colombia. Whether fearful of governmental censorship or just thirsty for distraction from the serious disturbances on public order in the countryside, local audiences were eagerly looking to follow models from the outside world.

Local identification with Argentinean affairs indicated the Antioqueños' profound admiration for the achievements brought by modernization into a culture they considered very similar to their own. Antioqueños recognized themselves in how they imagined Argentinean society: a community of white immigrants, a forceful race of colonizers of the Pampa who had successfully reclaimed savage territories—like Paisas had done with the indomitable Antioqueño cordillera—by bringing them into Western civilization. Moreover, such an emphasis in the relationship with a culture identified as ethnically white distinguished Antioqueños from a hypothetically darker *mestizo* Bogotá. This contrast accentuated the difference between the nation's capital center, colonial and old, and the Paisa periphery, modern and dynamic. The imaginary connection between Argentinean and Antioqueño cultures and the growing prestige of the Gardelian myth in Argentina and beyond rapidly led to the evolution of a local myth in the 1950s. Such a legend consolidated completely later, in the 1960s, when some tango stars visited regularly to attend tango festivals or settled in the city. Medellín was henceforth known as a tango stronghold, as “Medellín, capital de tango.”¹⁰⁹

In the early 1950s, because of its relation to working-class listening practices and soccer, tango-song had come to represent an ethnically white, non-elitist Antioqueño identity. It marked a sharp contrast with bambuco, which was being advanced as a national symbol by the conservative establishment at the time. While bambuco validated the maintenance of the traditional hierarchical social order—based on the old colonial habitus of *pureza de sangre*—tango-song's irreverence articulated Medellín's middle and lower classes's possibility

¹⁰⁹Subtitle of a special issue of the *Club Amigos del Tango's* journal, Medellín October-November 1993.

of resistance. In this sense, tango's local adoption emerged in opposition to both the aesthetics values of the local upper class and the narratives of the nation for which Antioqueños were merely a peripheral community.

While bambuco's meaning was tied to tradition and the narrative of the nation, tango-song's foreignness to the Colombian cultural milieu permitted certain freedom for reinterpretation. Tango-song's local appropriation in Medellín allowed the crystallization of a cross-class Antioqueño identity. Class boundaries were still meaningful in tango-song listening practices, but the establishment had much less control on the preservation of the boundaries. Class segregation would be more effectively articulated through bolero, as we will see in the next chapter.

5.0 BOLERO: RADIO AND LATIN AMERICAN COSMOPOLITANISM

5.1 PRELUDE: THE SOUND OF LATIN AMERICAN MODERNITY

The term bolero has extensively been used over centuries to identify different musical styles in Spanish-language communities, most notably a nineteenth-century dance derived from the *seguidillas* and very important for the development of the Spanish classical ballet tradition.¹ The modern Latin American genre has no relation with its Spanish counterpart other than its name (Spanish bolero is a ternary-meter dance, while Latin American bolero is a binary-meter song), and unlike bambuco and tango, there is no mystery concerning its origins at the core of the Caribbean culture's melting pot. Cuban bolero originated in the eastern province of Santiago towards the end of the nineteenth century, stemming mainly from a mixture of Spanish and African musical and literary elements, but also under the influence of French, Italian, and English musical traditions.² An important variety of the Cuban song, bolero is a slow-tempo genre suitable for dancing whose intimate lyrics often unfold the theme of romantic love through metaphors and refined imagery. Its most important characteristic is the *cinquillo* (quintuplet), a rhythmic pattern marked in the accompaniment. This rhythmic element is also found in other Cuban genres common during the nineteenth century such as the *danzón* and the *contradanza*, as well as in the bolero's contemporary, the Cuban *son*.

José 'Pepe' Sánchez (1856–1918) has been widely recognized as the precursor and most important figure of bolero's earliest period. Sánchez's song "Tristezas" ("Sorrows") is recognized as the inaugural piece of the genre's history (1883).³ A whole generation of popular

¹Suárez-Pajares 2002.

²Villar Paredes and Valdés Cantero 2002.

³All information on the early history of bolero in Cuba and Mexico comes from Rico Salazar 2000 and Orovio 1995 unless indicated otherwise.

singers known as *trovadores* (*trova* is the word for “song” in Cuba), accompanying themselves with guitars and an idiophone, generally the maracas, contributed to the expansion of bolero across the island around the turn of the century. The introduction of recordings in the 1910s and radio broadcast in the 1920s increased the range of bolero’s popularity over the Spanish-speaking Caribbean basin. Mexico’s Yucatán peninsula, closely related to Cuba after centuries of trade and cultural exchange, welcomed and embraced the Cuban genre that shared some traits with the tradition of the romantic Yucateco song.⁴

The late-nineteenth-century Italian-influenced Mexican *canción* (song) and the Yucateco tradition blended with the newly arrived Cuban genre in the work of talented young songwriters Guty Cárdenas and Agustín Lara, who by the late 1920s had crafted their own style of bolero. Mexican bolero is slower and tones down the original rhythmic exuberance of the Caribbean sort: the original 2/4 meter and the *cinquillo* are replaced by a 4/4 meter accentuating beats one, three, and four; percussion instruments are minimized or eliminated; stringed instruments predominate in the ensemble. In addition, the Mexican style puts greater emphasis on the performers’ ability to express deep emotions based on his or her vocal strength, and points towards a higher level of emotional complexity and poetic sophistication.⁵ Meanwhile, in Cuba small ensembles like the famous Trío Matamoros popularized a new, more lively fusion, the *bolero-son*, and in New York a small group of Puerto Rican and Mexican songwriters, such as Rafael Hernández and María Grever, experimented with enriched harmonies and small instrumental formats.⁶

In the 1930s bolero became one of Mexico’s most successful cultural artifacts, in no small degree due to the establishment of a wealthy private radio station, Emilio Azcarraga’s XEW *La Voz de América* in Mexico City. The media tycoon hired the most accomplished musicians to be found in Mexico and the Caribbean (such as tenors Pedro Vargas, Juan Arvizu, and Alfonso Ortiz Tirado; sopranos Lupita Palomera, María Luisa Landín, and Toña la Negra) and broadcast luxurious live music programs from his studios. Radio listeners across the

⁴Apparently both Cuban *trova* and Yucateco song received influences from Colombian bambuco in the early 1900s (Betancur Álvarez 1993), another example of the dynamic interrelation between musical traditions through the Caribbean at the turn of the century.

⁵For a good account of bolero’s transformations as a consequence of its Mexican appropriation, see Torres 2002, 155-159.

⁶On Rafael Hernández’s artistic career and the contribution of his work in the construction of a comprehensive Latin American identity, see Quintero Rivera 1998.

region picked up the shows on their short-wave receptors, and XEW became a model followed by many Latin American radio stations. In the late 1930s, while Cuban bolero had a period of little production, Mexico emerged as bolero's new stronghold. During that period, the songs by Agustín Lara (1900–1970) and the former-New-York-immigrant Puerto Rican songwriter Rafael Hernández (1891–1965) were at their peak of popularity across Latin America.

During the late 1930s and 1940s Mexican cinema provided the images to nurture bolero's soundscape with glamorous characters moving at ease within the cosmopolitan atmosphere of refined nightclubs, against the musical background of the greatest performers' shows. The Mexican film industry, strongly supported by Hollywood during the time of war and enjoying their northern neighbor's distribution networks across Latin America, spread out their own nationalist-inspired movies as well as others portraying more cosmopolitan lifestyles. Music was an important aspect in both types of films: *ranchera* music embodied Mexican rural traditions, while bolero and other urban genres represented stylishness and sophistication. A special category of the latter that came out towards the late 1940s and was known as *cabaretera* (cabaret movie) showed the ambivalences of modernity, in which urbanization not only was seen as the sign of progress and prosperity, but it also meant the dissolution of traditional gender roles and social conventions. Cuban music, including *son*, *danzón*, *rumba*, *guaracha* and bolero, as well as their Cuban performers, epitomized both modernity's lure and its decadence;⁷ even so, bolero's romantic lyricism and somewhat restrained sensuality kept it at a tolerable middle point if compared with the other, exclusively dance-centered genres. From the cross-fertilization between Afro-Cuban, Mexican, and North American musical traditions during the time of World War II, bolero gained the new sonority of the big band, the chromatically enriched harmonic progressions of jazz, and an extended repertoire of vocal nuances allowed by the use of the microphone.

Accompanying a lengthy list of accomplished bolero crooners sprouting mainly from Cuba, Mexico, and Puerto Rico, in the 1940s several great Cuban ensembles comprising eleven to fifteen musicians, such as the Sonora Matancera, the Orquesta Aragón, and the Orquesta Casino de la Playa, expanded their popularity through radio and recordings. Infused with a rich Caribbean flavor, those orchestras performing in *Radio Progreso* or housed in Havana's

⁷For an analysis of Cuban music's representation in *cabareteras*, see [Crespo 2003](#).

fancy nightclubs such as the legendary “Tropicana,” cultivated the tropical and danceable *bolero-son* in addition to *guaracha*, *rumba*, and some years later *mambo* and *cha-cha-cha*; this orchestral branch of Afro-Cuban music gave way to *salsa* and Latin Jazz in the 1960s. Approximately at the same time, and reinforcing the troubadours’ ancient tradition of the guitar-accompanied romantic serenade so widespread in Latin America, the bolero performed by a stringed trio was revitalized. Following their Cuban and Puerto Rican antecessors, the renowned Trío Los Panchos (founded in New York in 1944) awoke a new interest in this type of ensemble comprising two guitars and a *requinto* (higher-pitched guitar) accompanying the three-voice mellow harmonies. After their arrival in Mexico in 1948, Los Panchos participated in numerous movies and carried out extensive tours across Spanish-speaking America and around the world, and inspired the formation of similar ensembles all over the continent that performed bolero together with their own local or regional traditions of romantic song.

Around 1944, in response to bolero’s growing acceptance everywhere, the Argentinean music industry began producing their own boleros following primarily the Afro-Cuban standard, also known as *bolero antillano* (from the Antilles, the Caribbean islands). Great Argentinean bolero singers emerged during this time, such as Leo Marini and Hugo Romani, and important ensembles like Américo Belloto’s Don Américo y sus Caribes became extremely popular throughout South America. Several tangos were rendered as boleros, and lifelong *tangueros* like Libertad Lamarque (who moved to Mexico and worked there for many years) included boleros in their repertoire. By this time, bolero had become a transnational style of romantic song shared by Latin American musicians and audiences across borders, including the Portuguese-speaking frontier that usually turns out to be a cultural barrier separating Brazil from the rest of the continent.⁸

Several fusions and different performing styles resulted from the blend between bolero and local genres, for example the *bolero ranchero* with mariachi accompaniment developed in Mexico in the early 1950s; or the faster danceable genres like *bolero-mambo* and *bolero-cha* performed by Cuban orchestras during the same period. In the 1950s and 1960s, a new variation originating in Cuba, the so-called *bolero feeling*, extended the use of jazz harmonies as an expressive resource to paint emotions. Although bolero’s golden age came to an end

⁸For an account of bolero’s inception in Brazil and its influence in local music, see [Araújo 1999](#).

around the early 1960s, the genre has never faded away from the popular music panorama. Singers and ensembles from all corners of Latin America keep the old repertoire alive, and bolero anthologies periodically come back in the discography of well-known singers such as Mexican pop star Luis Miguel and Cuban *nueva trova*'s legendary singer-songwriter Pablo Milanés. Bolero has also been marketed as World Music, as in the case of Buena Vista Social Club's Omara Portuondo.

This chapter narrates the local reception of bolero in Medellín by different groups and the transformation of the practices involving the genre during the period. The first section describes bolero's introduction during the 1930s as a sophisticated type of music targeting the middle classes. It also analyzes how the marketing of bolero eluded local biases against blackness and overlooked potential moral contradictions. The second section describes the impact of national and transnational advertisement for the continuous influx of foreign bolero singers performing on the radio during the 1940s. We will see how bolero's increasing prominence helped to configure new practices and new spaces of socialization in the city while keeping other social boundaries intact. The last section examines how the illusion of a bolero golden age, brought by economic stability during the 1950s, helped to hide growing social tensions.

5.2 BOLEROS ON THE AIR: EMULATING MEXICAN RADIO IN THE MID-1930S

In 1936, a customary scene takes place every week, on weekday evenings. A couple of minutes before the clock strikes 7:30, maestro José María Tena rushes into a small office at *La Voz de Antioquia*'s studios carrying some blank staff paper, while a young technician struggles to catch the elusive radio signal on the station's short-wave receptor. Within the fuzzy white noise it is somehow possible to distinguish the opening credits of a radio program, "La hora íntima de Agustín Lara" ("Agustín Lara's Intimate Hour"), and the pressure over the technician mounts under the impatient eyes of the maestro. Finally the signal becomes stronger, and now the receptor clearly blares the anchor's voice "this is the XEW, *La Voz de América Latina* broadcasting from Mexico." The technician breathes in relief, and the

maestro smiles and sits down in front of a table. Tena listens to the show's opening credits with the same attentive attitude of a schoolboy playing with his sharpened pencil in front of the classroom blackboard.

Hernando Téllez Blanco, the presenter of a new radio program titled "Novedad" ("Novelty"), invited Tena to become the program's musical director in September 1935. A program sponsored by Cine Colombia in Medellín's most powerful radio station, it is intended to be the most attractive radio show in town, and the music aired there must be highly appealing and a complete "novelty" for the public. That explains Tena's habitual duty of transcribing Agustín Lara's songs aired on the Mexican radio station, transcriptions that will be rearranged, orchestrated, and performed by Tena's own orchestra for the local radio program. Lara, a talented songwriter who cultivates an aura of mystery around himself, has become a superstar in Mexico and the Caribbean since the beginning of the decade, and everybody wants to listen to his music and to imitate him. Most of his repertoire is comprised of boleros, although he tried earlier with tangos and has a nice collection of Spanish *pasodobles* of his own. Yet Tena concentrates on the boleros, the real novelty of the times.

Tena often receives the help of his wife, who notates the lyrics of the songs while he transcribes the music. Occasionally, the Domínguez Sisters, the station's bolero duet, come to give a hand to the maestro. Marta and Inés Domínguez are known among their fellows at the station for their exceptional musical memory. They are able to memorize songs after the first listening, and to reproduce at ease the startling two-voice harmonies of the Mexican duo the Águila Sisters. Tena transcribes the boleros premiered by Lara's "official" performer, tenor Pedro Vargas, having in mind the voice of local tenor Luis Macía; other boleros will be performed by singers of the station's staff, including Fanny Cataño, known as *Estrellita*, and Obdulio Sánchez, member of the traditional *dueto bambuquero* Obdulio y Julián. The new boleros, diligently scored by the Spanish-born maestro for small orchestra, will receive their first performance in Colombia a day or two later.⁹

Mexican radio broadcast was a paradigmatic model in Latin America during the mid-1930s, when *La Voz de Antioquia* was at the forefront of the nascent mass media business in

⁹Details taken from Rico Salazar 2000 and Téllez B. 1974; also from the account given by Medellín's "Bolero Bar" owner Jorge Buitrago (personal communication; Medellín, June 4 2004).

Colombia. Cuban radio stations such as CMQ and Havana's *Suaritos* were also available on the short-wave dial, but local radio producers found the Cuban style quite messy and "too tropical," favoring instead the neat style of the British BBC and the tempered sophistication of the Mexican stations.¹⁰ It is not surprising then, that *La Voz de Antioquia* copied not only the type of programs and their production style, but also the music performed in the Mexican originals. Local resources, however, were rather modest compared with the Mexican model. For example, the station's orchestra was very small, comprising four violins, viola, cello, bass, flute, two clarinets, two trumpets, trombone, and a drum set.¹¹ Yet the success of the program was not based on its originality or its accuracy to reproduce the paradigm. Its success rested on its novelty, and that was very clearly stated in the program's name.

In spite of its alleged newness, bolero was not completely new in Medellín in 1936. The older variety of Cuban bolero was probably known in the city in the early 1930s, owing to the arrival of records and movies featuring the celebrated Trío Matamoros; further, the Cuban trio itself visited the city in February 1934.¹² The Matamoros' repertoire included not only boleros, but also *rumbas*, *caprichos*, *sones*, and *guarachas*,¹³ and in fact, their specialty was the *son*. Apparently, their concert at the Circo España was well received by the local public at the time, but there was not much commentary about their music after their departure. It would be possible to interpret this silence as simple indifference, perhaps on account of their particular sound of guitars and percussion and their vocal style, which differed greatly from the opera-based style of song popularized by the recordings produced in New York and Mexico during the 1920s.

By the mid-1930s, the introduction of Mexican bolero as a novelty had more to do with marketing strategies, both in Colombia and in Mexico. As a matter of fact, there is a murky zone around the line of demarcation between the old style of Mexican *canCIÓN* and

¹⁰In Téllez B. 1974, 39. According to Téllez, the Argentinean radio production and the style of their anchors was not liked in Medellín at the time. Besides, even if not appreciated in Medellín, Cuban stations were very influential in the coastal cities of Cartagena, Barranquilla, and Santa Marta, where the signal could be easily caught on a daily basis.

¹¹According to a list of musicians by Camilo Correa in *Micro* Number 32, October 9 1940.

¹²The Trío's popularity in the city before its visit remains unclear. A newspaper article announcing their arrival simply stated "[...] Trío Matamoros, known for their Victor recordings and their Paramount films." "El Trío Matamoros vendrá a Medellín," in *La Defensa*, February 15 1934, page 12.

¹³Advertisement in *La Defensa*, February 22 1934, page 12.

the allegedly new Mexican bolero, the use of the *cinquillo* and a brighter orchestration being the main distinctions between both genres. Well-known and already beloved *canCIÓN* singers, such as Alfonso Ortiz Tirado and Juan Arvizu, moved smoothly from one repertoire to the other. Most singers coming under the spotlight in the 1930s, however, focused only on the performance of bolero. The advertisement of bolero occasionally made reference to its roots in the centuries-old Hispanic tradition of romantic poetry and song, but emphasized bolero's freshness and modernity. Moreover, Lara himself subtly promoted the relationship that Mexican journalist and writers found between the lyrics of his songs and Modernist poetry, in the vein of the great Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío.¹⁴

Such emphasis on the qualities of bolero's poetry assigned a certain respectability to the genre, a mark of literary sophistication appreciated by middle-class listeners. The popularization of Lara's songs, marked by his dexterity with words and stylish literary figures, has been analyzed as a sign of a "democratization" of high culture in Mexico.¹⁵ The budding Mexican middle class felt attracted to this repertoire of songs that came to epitomize refinement, exalting a new type of sensibility that was at ease expressing tenderness and intimate emotions. A good example of the tone of intimacy and personal confession common in Lara's boleros is "Amor de mis amores" ("You Are My Love's Dearest"), from 1936:

Poniendo la mano	Placing my hand
Sobre el corazón	On my heart
Quisiera decirte	I would like to tell you
Al compás de un son,	While keeping the beat of a <i>son</i> ,
Que tú eres mi vida	That you are my life
Que no quiero a nadie,	That I want no one else,
Que respiro el aire,	That I am breathing the air,
Que respiro el aire	That I am breathing the air
Que respiras tú.	You are breathing.
Amor de mis amores	My love's dearest
Sangre de mi alma	Blood of my soul
Regálame las flores	As a gift of flowers
De la esperanza.	Give me some hope.

¹⁴On Lara and Modernism, see [Couture 2001](#) and [Monsiváis 1988](#).

¹⁵[Couture 2001](#), quotation marks in the original.

Permite que ponga	Allow me to place
Toda la luz de verdad	The whole light of truth
Que tienen mis dolores	My sorrows own,
Para decirte	To let you know
Que tú eres el amor de mis amores.	That you are my love's dearest.

Lara used simple but effective musical resources to express the emotions of the text (see example in Figure 15). After presenting the same D major melody twice in the first period (12–16), a quite unexpected change in the harmonic progression emphasizes the second degree, E minor, providing a dramatic atmosphere to the lover's emotive declaration (16–19). The short break between the repetitions of the next phrase (21), set on an almost motionless melodic line on the dominant chord, suggests a sigh and reinforces the image of anxious breathing expressed in the text. The use of chromatic embellishments in the opening of the stanza (24–31) underscores the addressee's sugary pet name, “amor de mis amores.” A new emphasis on E minor in bar 38 contributes again increasing the melodramatic tone of the lover's statement of sincere affection.

By employing a repertoire of simple but powerful effects, Lara succeeded in portraying a refined ideal of romantic love not very far away from the antique European models of courteous love.¹⁶ Like in the centuries-old European tradition, bolero idealizes the woman and conveys the notion of love as a nonphysical relationship, as intimacy without physical contact. The male creator/singing subject idealizes the woman as an unattainable divine being, articulating his never fulfilled desire by means of the poetry and the irregularity of the syncopation. Yet another particular characteristic of bolero lyrics allows a certain vagueness, giving no reference to the genders of the singer or his/her addressee, and therefore somewhat blurs the lines between masculinity and femininity.¹⁷ The gendered voice of a female performer might subvert the patriarchal objectification of desire embodied in the female body. As a result, bolero opened new potential possibilities for expression that threatened traditional structures of power.

¹⁶On the correlation between bolero and the ideal of courteous love, see [Zavala 1991](#). For an interesting analysis on how the woman is articulated as an absence in bolero's lyrics, see [Aparicio 1998](#).

¹⁷For a study of bolero's texts based on psychoanalysis and phenomenology, see [Castillo Zapata 1990](#). Simple but insightful observations from a local perspective are noted in [Mora 1989](#).

Figure 15: “Amor de mis amores” by Agustín Lara

Piano

4

molto ritenuto Ped.

8

rit

a tempo

12

a tempo

Voice

Po nien do la mano so breel cora zón quisie ra de cir te alcompás deun

16

son que túe res mi vi da queno quieroa na die queres pi roel

21 Stanza

ai re que res_ pi roel ai re que res pi ras tú. A

25

mor___ de mis a mo res san gre demi al ma re

30

gá___ la me las flo res delaes pe ran za Per mi

36

te que pon ga___ to da la luz de ver dad que tie nen mis do

41

lo res pa rade cir te que tueres el a mor denisa mo res.

5.2.1 The Quandaries of Bolero's Moral and Racial Contradictions

In spite of bolero's courtly-love characteristics highlighting sweetness and pure and nonsexual love, bolero sporadically presented emotions and situations uncomfortably far from agreeable middle-class ideals. For example, in the mid-1930s there was a great controversy in Mexico owing to the idealization of the prostitute in Lara's boleros. Indeed, in 1936, the Secretary of Public Education of that country prohibited Lara's songs to be performed at schools because of their "obscene, immoral, and degenerate" lyrics.¹⁸ See, for instance, a fragment of the famous bolero "Aventurera" ("Adventuress"), which became the main theme of a 1949 *cabaretera* movie of the same title:

Vende caro tu amor, aventurera	Sell your love for a high price, adventuress
Da el precio del dolor a tu pasado	Charge for the grief of your past
Y aquel que de tu boca la miel quiera	And whoever wants the honey from your lips,
Que pague con brillantes tu pecado.	Has to be ready to pay with gemstones for your sin.

In Medellín, such scandal was never brought up, perhaps because Tena and his staff avoided transcribing controversial songs like "Aventurera." It is not possible to check whether that particular song was ever performed on radio, because live programs were rarely recorded in the 1930s, and even if they were, any kind of documentation about them disappeared long ago.¹⁹ In any case, Lara's role as *enfant terrible* was not an issue in the city; it was rather part of his glamorous figure as a bohemian poet. It is interesting to note, however, that the troublesome song was known in Medellín in 1941, as attested by the publication of its lyrics in a section of *Micro*. Camilo Correa, always so eager to condemn bad taste and immorality, did not comment about the inclusion of "Aventurera" within a short *cancionero* published in his magazine, comprising several well-known songs such as Emilio Murillo's bambuco "El Trapiche" and Ernesto Lecuona's bolero "Siboney."²⁰ Apparently the sophistication of Lara's poetry excused his doubtful morality.

But if local society seemed not to be very alarmed by Lara's tolerance with prostitutes, on account of the Mexican songwriter's talent and charm, it appeared more critical about

¹⁸Couture 2001, 72.

¹⁹According to Carlos Páramo and Tatiana Duplat from the Radio Section of the Colombian Ministry of Culture, the archives of most private radio stations were destroyed many years ago, before the Ministry or other governmental institution made any attempt at preservation (personal communication, June 2003).

²⁰"Cancionero," in *Micro* Number 51, April 1941.

bolero's occasional excess of exoticism. Local predilection for Mexican boleros over Cuban and Puerto Rican boleros or *boleros antillanos*, came from a predisposition against anything that seemed "too tropical." The local press offers many instances in which the labels "tropic" or "tropical" have negative connotations. For example, in a note by Camilo Correa about a *dueto bambuquero* named Dueto Tropical, he commented: "by the way, that is an awful name."²¹ That bias was common in Andean Colombia at the time, as Peter Wade demonstrates in his study of Colombian *música tropical*.²² For Antioqueños and other inhabitants of the cooler highlands, "tropical" meant exactly the opposite of "civilized;" the tropic represented the untamed wilderness, the hot and humid lowlands populated by darker inhabitants, descendants of runaway African slaves and civilization's renegades. The imaginary of the Caribbean, therefore, embodied blackness, wilderness, primitivism, and uncontrolled sexuality.

Those local biases played against notions of cosmopolitanism and modernity current in Latin America during the 1930s and 1940s, ideals that often revolved around images associated with the Caribbean. For the period of World War II, many North American cultural and artistic expressions, including those derived from Afro-American traditions like jazz, were welcomed in most Latin American countries. That circumstance provided renewed impetus to other cultural movements celebrating the African heritage in the Caribbean, the most important being the *Afrocubanismo* described in Robin Moore's study of Cuban music between the 1920s and 1940s.²³ Bolero had originated and grown in that cultural framework, but Antioqueños seemed rather reluctant to recognize those connections, favoring instead the *mestizo* identity of Mexican bolero. In the 1930s, Mexico had become the epitome of a modern *mestizo* nation, in which the ghost of blackness had no room. Antioqueños, therefore, embraced Mexican bolero in a manifestation of their participation into the broader ideal of a modern, whiter Latin America, whose voice was, according to the XEW's slogan "*La Voz de América Latina* (Latin America's Voice) broadcasting from Mexico," essentially coming out from *mestizo* Mexico.

²¹In "En Picada," *El Colombiano*, July 15 1945, page 5.

²²Wade 2000.

²³Moore 1997.

5.2.2 The Invisible Blackness Behind the Microphone

Certainly, racial prejudices against blackness were not exclusive to Medellín. Black musical expressions suffered from discrimination in Cuba, Brazil, and the United States, to cite only well-documented cases. Since the introduction of recording technology, however, it became possible to separate the musical sound from the musician's body, and in consequence microphones were more easily opened to black musicians everywhere. This circumstance was fundamental for the diffusion of Jazz and several Afro-Cuban genres, and bolero was not an exception to the rule.²⁴ In Medellín, the preservation of bolero's respectability and morality among middle-class radio audiences depended heavily on the emphasis on bolero's *mestizo* component and the negation of its connections with black musical traditions. Local entrepreneurs' awareness of this issue provoked an awful incident in 1940.

During the 1930s, Puerto Rican singer-songwriter Rafael Hernández had achieved international recognition as one of the most important authors of bolero. In April 1940, Hernández and his ensemble, the Cuarteto Victoria, embarked on a tour of concerts and radio performances that took them to several Colombian cities. Camilo Correa announced early that month that Hernández and his group would soon perform at *La Voz de Antioquia*, although the date for their arrival had not been established yet.²⁵ A month later, a picture of the composer and his ensemble appeared in the magazine, with a caption advertising their forthcoming performance on a local radio station.²⁶ Two weeks later, noticing with surprise that the group had not been programmed to perform in any local theater, Correa published an extensive note about the famous musician that included a close-up photograph of the maestro. As the time went by, it became obvious for people in the entertainment business like Correa that theater owners, perhaps in agreement with radio entrepreneurs, had imposed a veto on Hernández owing to his dark complexion. Correa denounced the affair, and accused Félix de Bedout of insulting the maestro by stating that the incipient recording company he managed wanted Hernández's songs to be recorded by other, presumably whiter, performers.²⁷

²⁴Rico Salazar (2000, 42) briefly mentions this issue. For an interesting analysis of how radio naturalized the sound of black music in the south of the United States approximately during the same time, see Kloosterman and Quispel 1990.

²⁵*Micro* Number 7, April 6 1940, page 9.

²⁶*Micro* Number 11, May 11 1940, page 10.

²⁷*Micro* Number 13, May 28 1940, pages 1-3 and 8.

Despite Correa's indignation, no other written medium registered the incident. Hernández left the city stating he had never been so mistreated anywhere else, and announced he would never come back to Medellín.

Most likely, neither the entrepreneurs nor Correa himself knew beforehand about Hernández's skin color. Unlike Lara, the Puerto Rican musician lacked a public image, having appeared very briefly in just a couple of movies in the late 1940s. In this particular episode, and perhaps paradoxically, Camilo Correa's standpoint embodies local society's contradictions about the correlation between race, class, and the value of individual merit. His position in Hernández's defense probably stemmed from his awareness of the Puerto Rican's international prominence and somehow against his own biases. Certainly, Correa's attitudes, although always ambiguously shifting between open-mindedness and prejudice, attest to his relative progressiveness and cosmopolitanism in contrast with the much more dominant narrow-minded provincialism of his peers. Finally, in spite of the quarrel, in Medellín Hernández's boleros were always among the most popular, although usually considered as part of the repertoire of lighter-skinned performers such as the Cuban René Cabel. Cabel's voice was likened to that of Pedro Vargas, that is, closer to the lyrical style of the Mexican bolero than to the simpler *bolero antillano* style.

5.3 TOURING BOLERO STARS IN THE 1940S: THE ADVENT OF NATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL ADVERTISEMENT

A major factor affecting the development of the Hernández affair was that Medellín was anything but short of touring international bolero stars at the time. Kresto was a chocolate-flavored soft drink manufactured in Argentina, introduced in the Colombian market in 1940 through an ambitious promotional campaign that included bringing well-known international singers to perform on the radio. The operation required assembling a nationwide network of local radio stations, the *Cadena Kresto*, allied to broadcast spectacular programs nightly, from 8:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., featuring the most famous and accomplished performers. The shows were produced at the studios of either of the country's two major private radio stations, Bogotá's *Nueva Granada* and Medellín's *La Voz de Antioquia*. The widely-publicized first

radio show, hosted in Bogotá, took place on Sunday, April 14 1940, only a couple of weeks before Hernández's arrival in Medellín. The guest stars of the inaugural night were the Mexican bolero singers Lupita Palomera and Chucho Martínez Gil, accompanied by the Mexican pianist Heriberto de Alcalá and the house orchestra directed by maestro José María Tena, who had moved to Bogotá in 1939.²⁸

Local firms like Tejicondor tried copying the idea of the bolero shows, with more modest radio programs featuring native stars such as the Domínguez Sisters.²⁹ A better organized project, the *Cadena Bolívar*, was launched in January 6 1941 at *Radio Nutibara* and *La Voz de Antioquia*, featuring a variety of local artists.³⁰ But locally-sponsored initiatives were unable to compete with the appeal of the international luminaries brought by *Cadena Kresto*; for example, in July 1940 it brought to Bogotá a legendary singer, the so-called "Tenor de las Américas" (Americas' Tenor), the Mexican Pedro Vargas. Vargas arrived in Medellín in August and stayed for a month, participating in fancy radio shows and performing in several concerts at the Teatro Junín. Camilo Correa commented about Vargas's reception among the public:

The delirious audience has paid the Mexican singer a warm homage of sympathy and admiration, a deference no other artist has ever received in this *villa*. It can be stated with no doubt that Vargas dominates all repertoires: well-known songs, often the oldest, have been raucously cheered by spectators from all classes. We never imagined an artist would achieve as deep a place in the heart of a public who has never known him except on electric recordings [...] Vargas was heard here for the first time no more than three years ago, and he was immediately crowned by the general applause; a couple of songs from this *moreno's* privileged voice were enough to mesmerize Medellín, a city that does not surrender easily [...] we never thought it possible, but Kresto made such a miracle happen for us.³¹

Despite Correa's embroidered prose praising Vargas as unique, such a report was not very different from commentaries made about Gardel's visit, barely five years before (see page 4.2.2). It is worth noticing, however, the emphasis Correa placed on Vargas's skin color: *moreno* (brown). Such a term has two possible readings: in Colombia, it is often

²⁸ "El debut de dos grandes artistas," in *La Defensa* April 12 1940, page 2; and *Micro* Number 8 April 13 1940, page 12.

²⁹ "Otra cadena nacional," in *Micro* Number 10 April 27 1940, page 3.

³⁰ Téllez B. 1974, 46.

³¹ "Pedro Vargas y Pepe Agüeros aclamados por todo Medellín," in *Micro* Number 26 August 28 1940, page 1.



Figure 16: Mexican tenor Pedro Vargas, 1945. Photograph by Foto Reporter (Carlos Rodríguez). Archivo de Memoria Visual de Antioquia, Palacio de la Cultura Rafael Uribe Uribe, Medellín.

used as “a euphemism for a black person,”³² but in Mexico the expression is used to denote whitened *mestizos* of mildly-bronzed skin and marked Native-American features. Almost certainly Correa’s expression meant the latter, not only owing to Vargas’s complexion (see Figure 16), but especially in contrast to the term *negro* (black) Correa used in reference to Hernández. Therefore, unlike Hernández, Vargas’s ethnicity was well-suited to allow him to become a local icon. People’s enthusiasm toward Vargas’s performances was evident indeed: his performances on the radio produced so much fascination among spectators that hundreds wanted to attend the live programs, and the organizers were compelled to receive no one into the studios arguing that “in Argentina and the United States radio-theaters are being eliminated.”³³ Local *cancioneros* published in 1940 also document Vargas’s great reception; numerous songs of his, most of them boleros but including also a couple of tangos by both Gardel and Agustín Lara, fill up the pages of many booklets.³⁴

³²Wade 2000, 124.

³³In *Micro* Number 25, August 21 1940, page 5.

³⁴For instance, in *El cantar de la montaña* (n.d., early 1940s) 27 songs, out of 74, have the inscription “from Pedro Vargas’s repertoire”; *Cancionero Antioqueño* Number 69 (September 1940) reproduces many of the same songs, but not always identifies them as Vargas’s; *Discograma RCA Víctor* Numbers 25 and 26 4th year (October-November 1940) includes Lara’s songs from Vargas’s repertoire.

But *Cadena Kresto*'s success was the target of a few criticisms as well. Following Gonzalo Vidal's spirit of old-fashioned prejudices against mass-produced music (see section 3.2.2), *Micro*'s music critic Zas (Luis Miguel de Zulátegui) asserted: "[Kresto] has come to our country to take away several thousand *pesos*, and has been unable to find a better way to pay back but by becoming another promoter of bad music, contributing to the people's unculture. Because, what else would *Cadena Kresto* have imagined all those singers of musical trash are, performing that repertoire by Curiel, Lara, Lecuona, *and company*? [...] [Kresto] should help to make possible the visit of Heifetz, Stokowski and other heralds of the high music culture."³⁵ Another more down-to-earth criticism reproved Kresto's practice of hiring foreign musicians and ignoring the nationals.³⁶

Over the year that *Cadena Kresto* remained on the air, it brought to Medellín bolero performers such as the Águila Sisters, the Castilla Brothers, the Dos Marías duet, and the Trío Calaveras from Mexico; the Argentinean duo Martínez-Ledesma; and the Cubans René Cabel and Rosario García Orellana. *Cadena Kresto* had to be discontinued in 1941, apparently owing to the drink's bad performance on the national market and the difficulties and dangers for touring artists during the years of World War II. Its competitor *Cadena Bolívar* could not deal with shortcomings in its commercial sponsorship and went out of business as well. The episode of the *Cadenas* on radio, however, taught local entrepreneurs that Medellín was a greater stage for foreign musicians on tour than for nationals.

5.3.1 The Competition Between Record Labels and the Introduction of Argentinean Boleros

In the early 1940s, the Mexican branch of RCA Victor produced nearly all the records of Medellín's most beloved bolero composers and performers, including Rafael Hernández and Pedro Vargas. Managed by Félix de Bedout e Hijos, the local distribution of the record label had significantly expanded. In contrast, the catalogs of Columbia and Odeon lacked well-known stars. Yet in spite of the challenge RCA Victor represented for its competitors,

³⁵ "Música y músicos" by Zas in *Micro* Number 12, May 21 1940, page 5. English in the original.

³⁶ "Kresto hace programas con talento nacional después de la partida de Las Aguila," in *Micro* Number 35, October 29 1940.

Odeon's dynamic local dealers, Julio and José Ramírez Johns, conceived commercial strategies to fight back. According to singer Leo Marini, in 1944 the Colombian dealers wrote to their Argentinean colleagues at Odeon suggesting the configuration of a studio bolero orchestra; the Ramírez Johns brothers asked them to find new singers in Argentina who were able to compete with the Mexicans.³⁷ Marini was still a relatively unknown bolero singer in Argentina when hired by Odeon to record four boleros, two of them by Rafael Hernández, on July 12, 1944.³⁸ Backing him up was an orchestra conducted by Américo Belloto, a fine classically-trained violinist, better known later simply as Don Américo. Don Américo's group was a studio ensemble, only coming together to make records, either under the name "Don Américo y sus Gauchos" whenever they recorded tango, or as "Don Américo y sus Caribes" when recording boleros, the latter genre made only to be sold overseas.

Although there is no documentation corroborating the arrival of records by Marini and Don Américo in Medellín, Marini was already well-known in the city by April 1946, when his name appeared as a major celebrity in a radio station's advertisements, and the press reported the beginning of negotiations between him and the brothers Ramírez Johns regarding a future visit.³⁹ One of the boleros originally recorded in 1944 by Marini, "Lo quiso Dios," was a local hit in May 1947.⁴⁰ Other Argentinean bolero singers emerged alongside Marini: Hugo Romani, Fernando Torres, Gregorio Barrios, and Genaro Salinas, some of them often visiting Medellín during the 1940s and 1950s. For instance, Romani performed for the first time in the city on May 20 1947 at the Teatro Junín and came back again some years later, in 1951, 1952, and 1954.⁴¹ Marini and Don Américo's first tour brought them to Medellín on March 1948, and a month later, when performing in Bogotá, they found themselves unable to leave the city because of the riots of *El Bogotazo*.⁴²

³⁷Leo Marini, interviewed by Orlando Mora, in [Mora 1986](#), 166–167.

³⁸Biographical data from interviews with Marini in [Ramírez 2004](#), which includes a catalog of his recordings. Marini's unusual isolated development as a bolero singer in an Argentinean province can be explained due to the influence of Mexican singer Tito Guizar, who moved to Argentina in the 1930s to continue his career on local radio (Juan Pablo González, personal communication).

³⁹In "Programación de radio: La Voz de las Américas," in *El Colombiano* April 22 1946, page 14; and in "En Picada," May 2 1946, page 5.

⁴⁰In *Cancionero Joyeles* Number 20, May 1947.

⁴¹"Discofonía," in *El Tangón* Number 55, May of 1947, fifth year; advertisement in *El Colombiano*, November 23 1950, page 15; ad of a performance at Hotel Nutibara, *El Colombiano* July 19 1952, page 16; and from the interview with Hernando Vélez Sierra (Medellín July 7, 2003).

⁴²Advertisement in *El Colombiano*, March 3 1948, page 1; and in [Mora 1986](#), 170.

Odeon's strategy of creating Argentinean bolero stars effectively challenged the profitable advantages of RCA Victor's Mexican-produced boleros. Consciously or not, the Ramírez Johns actually took advantage of ethnic and cultural biases entrenched in local society.⁴³ Locals would always consider Argentinean performers whiter and therefore less "tropical" than any Caribbean musician. Paradoxically, the style of the Argentinean boleros was much closer to the *boleros antillanos* than to the Mexican boleros, emphasizing bolero's syncopated rhythms with percussion. Indeed, Leo Marini's voice blended perfectly with the Cuban style, and in 1951 he started recording with the renowned Cuban orchestra Sonora Matancera.⁴⁴ For traditional upper-middle-class bolero aficionados like Hernando Vélez Sierra, however, the highest point of Marini's career took place while performing with Don Américo: "Marini's voice is very romantic, he needed a soft orchestral accompaniment, with winds and strings [...] the Sonora Matancera does not have strings, it is much better for spicy tropical voices."⁴⁵ Yet Vélez Sierra's opinion was not shared by everybody in Medellín, especially not by working-class youths, who enthusiastically embraced the tropical flavor of the Sonora Matancera's boleros, accompanying Marini as well as other singers such as the Puerto Rican Bobby Capó.⁴⁶ Working-class audiences exhibited less apprehension toward tropical traits in the music. We will come back to this point later when discussing dancing practices in Medellín during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

5.3.2 Fair Social Spaces for Females: the Domestic Realm, the Radio Studio, and the *Heladería*

Bolero's great appeal for the middle classes was a consequence of its balance between convention and progressiveness, and insofar as it helped to keep racial and gender boundaries in place, bolero's appropriateness for radio was assured. The growth on the local radio business

⁴³According to the accounts of Dora Ramírez, daughter of one of the brothers, they were a fairly tolerant family. For example, she and her brother were never reproached for taking tango dance lessons with a working-class employee at her father's estate (interview with Dora Ramírez de Echavarría, Medellín July 15 2004).

⁴⁴Ramírez 2004.

⁴⁵Interview with Hernando Vélez Sierra (Medellín, July 7 2003).

⁴⁶That is the case of Héctor Ramírez, a local physician and amateur researcher who has written two books about the Cuban orchestra (see Ramírez 2004), and is the president of the fan club *Corporación Club Sonora Matancera de Antioquia* (interview with Héctor Ramírez, Medellín, June 9 2004).

was, therefore, closely associated with the growth in bolero's popularity among diverse sectors of the public. The female audience's potential was perhaps the greatest, because women at home were able to listen to radio during the day while doing household chores, and soon new female-oriented programs were developed, such as the *radionovela* (soap opera).⁴⁷ Essayist Orlando Mora, a middle-class observer, remembers the importance of radio at home during the 1940s and 1950s:

From dawn to dusk, radio marked the hours of the day. Time went on by demanding its never-ending repetition of the same duties, and the radio programs appeared as a backdrop, one after another, with the same precision. Countryside songs for waking up; Enrique Hincapié and his fabulous "broom's hour"; sentimental songs in the middle of the morning; the noon serenades by Obdulio and Julián; the mid-afternoon *radionovelas*; Captain Silver and Zandokán for the kids, and at night, the programs of live music after saying one's prayers (*rezar el rosario*) and after dinner. *El peso Fabricato, La Voz de Antioquia, La Voz de Medellín*, and all the singers and orchestras of the continent that filled up stages during those years.⁴⁸

Bolero easily fit within this model of household times and routines, becoming a soundtrack for everyday activities. Gender lines and stereotypes were at stake in the relation between the active and passive roles of the author and the performer, on one side, and the listener on the other. Although usually composed by male lyricists and songwriters, boleros allowed the expression of emotions more commonly associated to the female character, such as tenderness, vulnerability, and passionate irrationality. Yet those attributes were often representations of a feminine ideal, projections of a romanticized female subject conveyed on the woman from a male standpoint. But even as expressions of male desire, boleros appealed to the configuration of female subjectivities. It would be inaccurate to say that bolero's lyrics, like mass-produced melodramas, were narratives created for women.⁴⁹ First, because the lyrics rarely narrate a story and more often portray an instant or a feeling, with few or no references to places, names, or other data that identify the subject. And second, as explained before, because that very ambiguity somewhat blurred the limits between gender roles. Although in bolero it is not always explicitly said that the woman is the object of desire, the female can achieve an active yet softened role when her voice utters the lyrics.

⁴⁷On the inception of melodrama in Latin America and the emergence of *radionovela* in the 1930s, see [Martín-Barbero 1993](#).

⁴⁸[Mora 1989](#), 32.

⁴⁹On narratives for female audiences, see [Modlesky 1982](#).

The elusiveness of the subject in bolero, with its disembodied way to express love, made it possible for some women, such as the Mexican songwriters María Grever and Consuelo Velásquez, to become very respected professionals. Yet female creative freedom was still an exception to the rule in most Latin American patriarchal societies: both Grever and Velásquez developed their careers in New York, not in Mexico.

In Medellín, the relatively passive role of the female radio listener became common in the 1940s, but women had a more restrained participation in active roles as either songwriters or performers. Actually, there is no evidence of any local female bolero songwriter active in the city between 1940s and early 1950s. It can be stated with sufficient certainty that an unpublished collection of songs, including some boleros by singer Ligia Mayo (b. 1932), dates from a later period.⁵⁰ Performance, on the other hand, created a lot of problems for women, because female singers were generally assumed to be morally relaxed, especially those who sang music with tropical undertones. For example, Matilde Díaz, a successful singer of Colombian *música tropical* who had a substantial repertoire of boleros as well, had to deal with deep-rooted social prejudices against female entertainers. In an interview made in the 1990s, she recalled her experiences as the first female singer to perform with a renowned orchestra in Colombia. She said she had to present herself as a Mexican singer on stage in order to protect her reputation, only admitting to being a Colombian when her recording career was well established.⁵¹

In Medellín, the local move to de-tropicalize bolero allowed female singers to succeed on the radio, performing a whitened repertoire that also included bambucos and operatic arias. The Medellín golden age of radio had a select group of star female singers: Alcira Rodríguez, Yolanda Vásquez, Alba del Castillo, Gilma Cárdenas de Ramírez, Marta Domínguez, from the Domínguez Sisters, as well as the duet Elena and Esmeralda. Unlike Matilde Díaz's professional activity, taking place mainly as live entertainment performed at nightclubs and hotels, radio broadcast was considered a much safer place for female affairs because it allowed women to participate in social exchanges while inhabiting male-controlled spaces: the family room at home holding the radio receptor, and the radio-theater stage (see Figures 17 and 18).

⁵⁰Londoño and Tobón 2002.

⁵¹Interview in Wade 2000, 105.



Figure 17: Female singers, 1954 (Betty de Vásquez, María Luisa Landín, Matilde Díaz, and Adelina Landín). Photograph by Foto Reporter (Carlos Rodríguez). Archivo de Memoria Visual de Antioquia, Palacio de la Cultura Rafael Uribe Uribe, Medellín.



Figure 18: Unknown singer at the RCN *radioteatro*, around 1950. Photograph by Foto Reporter (Carlos Rodríguez). Archivo de Memoria Visual de Antioquia, Palacio de la Cultura Rafael Uribe Uribe, Medellín.



Figure 19: Heladería Santa Clara, Parque Bolívar. August 1950. Photograph by Foto Reporter (Carlos Rodríguez). Archivo de Memoria Visual de Antioquia, Palacio de la Cultura Rafael Uribe Uribe, Medellín.

Around the mid-1940s and the early 1950s, another female-friendly social space appeared in local neighborhoods: the *heladería*, the ice-cream parlor (see Figure 19). Unlike the *cantina*, the *heladería* was a site of socialization suitable for families, including women, teenagers, and children. According to bolero aficionado Hernando Vélez Sierra, those places were great venues for the diffusion of bolero:

“romantic music, boleros, were heard in neighborhood *heladerías*. In those years, *heladerías* and family saloons were very much in vogue [...] In [the district of] La América there were two famous parlors in Medellín, very elegant spots with well-stocked *traganíqueles*: El Raudal and Claro de Luna. In [the district of] Boston there was a famous one, the Heladería de Boston, also very well-stocked with nice music.”⁵²

Heladerías became neutral areas of interaction between men and women, where decency was taken for granted. Unlike the *cantina*, the consumption of liquor was, at least in theory, not allowed in those family saloons, which operated only during the day.⁵³ In the mid-1940s, young and unmarried working-class women, like Alesia Álvarez, attended middle-class neighborhood *heladerías* on Sundays, where they enjoyed picking songs in the house

⁵²Interview with Hernando Vélez Sierra (Medellín, July 7 2003).

⁵³In Jorge Franco’s *Hildebrando* (1984), male characters often drink while having a chat with females at *heladerías*; apparently, the regulations controlling liquor consumption in Medellín’s public establishments have never been closely enforced (interview with César Arteaga, Medellín June 26 2003).

traganíquel.⁵⁴ Although not exclusively stocked with boleros, these devices contained more “romantic music,” different from drinking songs like *tango arrabalero* common in *cantinas*, or *música caliente* (“hot music”), a term to describe tropical music available at dancing halls and more intended for male customers (discussed in the following section).

After the introduction of *heladerías* as a place of socialization for women, traditional female roles acquired more autonomy. Attending *heladerías*, wives, unmarried women, and girls were not completely confined at home. Although very restricted, women were allowed an unprecedented kind of freedom to engage in unwatched social exchanges, which had hitherto been an exclusively male prerogative.

5.3.3 Fashionable Social Spaces for Males: Lovaina

Along with the evolution of new middle-class female-oriented places for entertainment, more sophisticated spots that catered to males emerged as well. In the 1940s, a new party district known as Lovaina developed along Palacé, a street near downtown and not too far from Guayaquil. Although it had probably been a place for nighttime entertainment for a while, in the 1940s Lovaina became the fashionable counterpart of the always-reviled low-class Guayaquil. Oddly enough, there is not much written about Lovaina, perhaps because it was not a place for scandals and public order disturbances, aspects for which the market district had always been singled out. At any rate, Lovaina, like Guayaquil, was indeed a red-light zone, but a much more controlled and refined one, with renowned brothels like Ana Molina’s and Ema Arboleda’s.⁵⁵ Numerous cafés and restaurants, adorned with fancy *traganíqueles* and neon lights, sat along an esplanade of three to five hundred meters in the main boulevard, between Lovaina and Lima streets—most prostitution quarters being discreetly located in perpendicular and less illuminated roads. Local artistic and intellectual middle-class bohemians met there at night for drinking, gambling, discussing politics or literature, and listening to music. Owing to the active competition between the bar owners for loading their *traganíqueles* with the latest recordings on the market, every bolero to become a hit in the city was played at Lovaina first before other places.⁵⁶

⁵⁴Interview with Berta Alesia Álvarez (Medellín, June 29 2004).

⁵⁵Bernardo Paniagua, personal communication (Medellín, July 13 2003).

⁵⁶All data in this section is from an interview with Hernando Vélez Sierra (Medellín, July 7 2003), unless indicated otherwise.

Lovaina was, therefore, a place that was considered decent and had orderly male entertainment. Only superficially different from the allegedly improper Guayaquil, the differentiation was actually a matter of class scruples and safety concerns more than anything else.⁵⁷ Yet the division between targeted audiences was clear, and it had its repercussions in the type of repertoires chosen at Lovaina's commercial establishments. Bolero and modern "*música de ritmo*" ("rhythmic music") were at the forefront in Lovaina—the latter, a label for danceable music (Colombian *cumbia* and *porro*, Cuban *son* and *guaracha*) that deliberately omitted the term tropical. In contrast, tango was rare: only two bars, the River Plate and El Coquito, played tango-song. In Lovaina, bolero's Caribbean rhythmic danceable traits were not concealed as usual, but greatly appreciated instead. Some of the district's large bars had roomy dance floors, catering to a clientele of middle-class men and resident "*muchachas del barrio*" ("girls from the neighborhood"). The smartest dancing spots at Lovaina were El Milancito, El Ventiadero, Río de Janeiro, and Isla de Capri.

Unlike tango dancing, bolero dancing was not considered too out of the ordinary and was widely practiced in dance halls along the district. Bolero's choreography is simple, involving just two slow back-and-forth steps, and does not require great skills or extra practice to be mastered. Its straightforwardness was a relief for middle-class men who felt uncomfortable with dancing's physicality, which might call their virility into question. Bolero's slow pace and mellifluous harmonies were ideal for unceremonious courtship with prostitutes, allowing dancing partners to come in contact through a sensual close embrace, their bodies swinging together in slower small movements. As a matter of fact, ever since the dawn of the century, most men learning to dance in Medellín, either bolero or any other danceable genre, were trained by prostitutes.⁵⁸ In any case, in analyzing different sources that bring up dancing practices in the 1940s, it appears that dancing was quite widespread among working-class men, while middle-class men often participated only as spectators.⁵⁹ Such a role was par-

⁵⁷Former customers of Lovaina's say it was safer and cleaner than Guayaquil, often referring to both the bars and the prostitutes (Bernardo Paniagua and Roberto Yepes, personal communication, Medellín July 13 2003); also see [Franco Vélez 1984](#).

⁵⁸See [Betancur Gómez 2000](#).

⁵⁹Peter Wade's observation about Medellín's dancing scene, that it was livelier than Bogotá's during the mid-century, fails to notice class distinctions ([Wade 2000](#), 192). In interviews and informal conversations, I noted that working-class men proudly talked about their skills as dancers, while middle-class aficionados were prompt to observe their poor talents for dancing.

ticularly evident in the case of dancing contests. Besides daily non-professional dancing, some of Lovaina's dance floors were taken on Saturday nights by skilled dancers staging brilliant dancing challenges. As in the case of skilled tango dancers, professional bolero dancers clearly marked their otherness: some of the most famous dancers in the late 1940s and early 1950s were "Chinaco," a recognized homosexual dancer, and "Tin Tan," a colorful popular performer extravagantly dressed as the famous Mexican comedian of the same name.

In conclusion, although the same bolero repertoire would be heard on both radio broadcasts and in Lovaina's dancing halls in the 1940s, dancing and listening practices were actually kept apart along gender lines. At least superficially, bolero's wide popularity cut across class and gender differences, but a closer examination makes evident the restrictive nature of its local appropriations. Bolero suited Antioqueños' narrative of a classless social structure because it maintained the image of universality and cosmopolitanism while keeping in place the patriarchal social structure and class boundaries alike.

5.3.4 The New Cosmopolitan Gathering: Middle-class Couples at the Nightclub

In spite of the traditional reservations about dancing practices among local middle classes, toward the end of the 1940s the stylish practice of ballroom dancing turned out to be a vogue in the city. Sophisticated new dancing venues appeared downtown, including the Grill at the elegant Hotel Nutibara and the so-called "High Life Club" El Cortijo (later renamed Montevideo). These nightclubs featured renowned dance orchestras modeled on the format of North American big bands such as the internationally-famous Lucho Bermúdez's orchestra (whose star singer was the aforementioned Matilde Díaz, Bermúdez's wife), other regular dance orchestras like Ritmo y Melodías, and occasional performing ensembles conducted by local directors such as Jorge Camargo Spolidore, Juancho Esquivel, or A. Lertzundi.⁶⁰ Colombian *música tropical*, bolero, and Afro-Cuban dancing genres comprised the repertoire of those ensembles, very often featuring as well a touring bolero singer arrived in the city to participate in radio shows. For example, Chilean Sonia Gómez and local tenor Jaime

⁶⁰Advertisements in *El Colombiano*, August 1949 to May 1952.

Hernández performed both on a radio broadcast show and at El Cortijo;⁶¹ Hugo Romani performed on the radio, at a local theater, and in the course of an elegant ball held at the Hotel Nutibara's Grill.⁶²

Those novel entertainment venues emerged due to the development of a more affluent middle class eager to reproduce the ballroom-dance gatherings held at upper-class clubs. Dance parties featuring an orchestra were not uncommon at the exclusive Club Unión or Club Campestre, but those meetings were private events held on special occasions such as weddings or birthdays. The institutionalization of the nightclub, therefore, offered middle-class customers pricey yet affordable access to such events, with the advantage that nightclub parties took place at least on a weekly basis. The events were open to respectable, presumably married couples; El Cortijo, for example, clearly advertised the nightclub's proper atmosphere: "if you want to have fun properly, if you want dancing, enjoyment, and laughing in a morally acceptable atmosphere, come with your family and you will enjoy hours of genteel happiness."⁶³ Nightclubs were particularly active on weekends, sometimes throwing parties until 4:00 a.m., but the Hotel Nutibara's Grill offered dance dinners every night except on Mondays.⁶⁴

Although this practice of urbane middle-class entertainment was becoming progressively normal by the early 1950s, there is a hint revealing the establishment's uneasiness with it during the Conservative administration's more repressive years. A column by Lope tells us about a moralizing campaign, which apparently was not just controlling but rather harassing some nightclubs: "We think the campaigns trying to control scandals at clubs are rather exaggerated. For it is good to watch closely some of those places, but we think absurd to go as far as banning Sundays and Saturday nights dancing at places recognized to be respectable. Honest entertainment should be allowed, because there are many from the middle class who are not members of the Clubs Unión, Campestre, Medellín, or the Club de Profesionales, and who cannot find a better location to have fun on the weekends. The municipal authorities should reconsider the severity of the regulations."⁶⁵ Although I have not found evidence to

⁶¹ Article in *El Colombiano*, August 8 1949, page 4; El Cortijo's advertisement, February 10 1950, page 14.

⁶² Advertisement in *El Colombiano*, November 23 1951, page 16.

⁶³ Advertisement in *El Colombiano* September 3 1949, page 10.

⁶⁴ Advertisement in *El Colombiano*, August 9 1950, page 16.

⁶⁵ "Algo sobre los bailes" in the daily column "Ventana" by Lope. *El Colombiano*, October 9 1951, page 5.

support this view, it is likely that Lucho Bermúdez and Matilde Díaz’s departure to Mexico in 1952—they had been living in the city since 1948—might be related to the increasing pressure over this kind of nighttime spectacle.

There is no other evidence suggesting that the same kind of tight controls were applied over traditionally gender- and class-segregated entertainment venues like those at Lovaina—which nevertheless were quite common at Guayaquil—but it does not mean repression did not take place at all. The important point, however, is that it is striking to detect such an aggressive reaction from the Conservative establishment against what can be considered a rather unoffensive practice, given its elitist exclusivity. Lope’s recount of the incident exposes the growing social and political tension building up in the early 1950s, not only among the subaltern urban classes and rural populations, but also among the upper layers of society at a traditionally conservative urban center like Medellín.

5.3.5 Swinging Between Support and Disapproval: Local Bolero Songwriters and Performers

Ever since bolero was introduced as an innovation in the mid-1930s, local musicians had successfully prepared covers of famous songs for both radio broadcast and informal gigs. Soloist and ensembles gained popularity for their good renditions of well-known boleros, that is, for effectively reproducing foreign models. The Domínguez Sisters, for example, recorded very early (in 1940) their version of the boleros “El Amor de mi bohío” and “Tu volverás” from Pedro Vargas’s repertoire.⁶⁶ During the course of the decade, local composers and songwriters began to produce a few original boleros with relative success. Jorge Lalinde’s bolero “Morena mía” awakened some interest in the press owing to Eduardo Lanz’s offering to record the song for RCA Victor (Lanz was a renowned Venezuelan baritone).⁶⁷ It is worth mentioning that the author considered it important to justify his preference for “foreign songs” instead of bambucos. In an interview published a couple of days later, Lalinde stated he had not composed Colombian songs (meaning bambuco) because they were yet to leave the

⁶⁶ “Discos ‘Made in Medellín,’” in *Micro* Number 1, February 15 1940, pages 1 and 5.

⁶⁷ “‘Mi morena’ de Jorge Lalinde será grabada en Víctor por el tenor venezolano Eduardo Lanz,” in *El Colombiano* June 20 1943, page 2.

countryside and to become a type of stylized orchestral music.⁶⁸ Lalinde's attitude seems to respond to concerns related to the supposed obligation local composers would have to express themselves first as Colombians, and also against the idea that they were not skilled enough to deal with bolero. Lalinde was confident; he had indeed written several art-music pieces with Colombian themes, and in 1948 his Fantasy for piano and orchestra was awarded a mention in the Fabricato musical contest.

In fact, the evidence of external approval was important to recognize locals as good bolero songwriters. Since the early 1940s Antioqueño singer and songwriter Jorge Monsalve, better known as Marfil (Ivory), had resided and worked in Buenos Aires, where he gained fame as an accomplished bolero composer. In 1947, Marfil was received as a cultural hero in Medellín; a group of musicians and impresarios came together to organize a concert to welcome him. A note in the press appeared the day of the concert, praising Marfil's successful career abroad but also criticizing him for having decided to premier a bolero for the public instead of a bambuco.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, this kind of ambivalent attitude toward local bolero composers shifted in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, Restrepo Duque wrote later that Jaime R. Echavarría's songs, dating from that period, were among the most beautiful of bolero's entire repertoire, never questioning their supposed foreignness within the Colombian milieu.⁷⁰ Undoubtedly, Restrepo Duque's own strong agenda in defense of bambuco (see page 105) informed his criticism in Marfil's case.

The case of tenor Carlos Julio Ramírez helps to illustrate the artistic milieu's intricacies for Colombian performers, even those enjoying a relatively successful career overseas (see Figure 20).⁷¹ Ramírez was born in 1914 in Tocaima, a small town not far from Bogotá. A gifted singer since childhood, he and his sister started singing bambucos in their town, where the national-music champion Emilio Murillo first took notice of them. After a troublesome period in which the two siblings toured the country as a duet, Carlos, relying on Murillo's support, tried entering the National Conservatory in Bogotá, but was rejected by composer Guillermo Uribe Holguín apparently due to the singer's *bambuquero* background. Ramírez

⁶⁸ "La música colombiana necesita abandonar el campo donde vive y presentarse en sociedad para darse a conocer," in *El Colombiano*, June 25 1943, page 7.

⁶⁹ "Radiomanía" by Hernán Restrepo Duque in *El Diario*, November 26 1947, pages 2 and 3.

⁷⁰ See Restrepo Duque 1992.

⁷¹ Biographical data on Ramírez from Restrepo Duque 1992 unless indicated otherwise.



Figure 20: Carlos Julio Ramírez, April of 1946. Photograph by Foto Reporter (Carlos Rodríguez). Archivo de Memoria Visual de Antioquia, Palacio de la Cultura Rafael Uribe Uribe, Medellín.

entered Bogotano radio—where he was presented as a *tanguero* for his good renditions of Gardel’s songs—and joined an incipient opera troupe. Ramírez was a member of the *zarzuela* troupe performing in Medellín in 1935 at the time of Gardel’s tragic passing: he was one of the pallbearers at Gardel’s funeral. His career in opera brought him first to Buenos Aires and later to the United States, where he recorded both classical operatic arias and boleros with RCA Victor. Paramount Pictures hired him during the same period, and in the 1940s he appeared briefly on screen in a couple of North American movies (the better known “Bathing Beauty,” from 1944, and “Easy to Wed,” from 1946, both starring Esther Williams).

In the 1940s, having focused on a repertoire of boleros and other popular genres, and after being recognized as a transnational star, Ramírez visited Colombia several times. Although he was always presented as a great performer, he was also the target of strong criticism. For example, in 1946 his appearance in Medellín’s theaters and on radio shows was highly publicized. Some members of the musicians’ union, then in the midst of labor struggles with *La Voz de Antioquia*, broke the strike to accompany him in three concerts.⁷² Days later, Camilo Correa commented about the performance: “the audience’s enthusiasm reached a real

⁷²“En Picada,” in *El Colombiano* April 11 1946, page 5.

frenzy.” But he added: “it is worthless having such a great voice just for singing insignificant boleros [...] that trash is appropriate for those who cannot sing nobler genres [...] it is not fair that a such a singer prompts a dialogue with those louts sitting at the gallery, it is a lack of respect for serious spectators who also paid for their tickets [...] in deference to Carmen Miranda, [Juan] Arvizu, [Pedro] Vargas and [Alfonso] Ortiz Tirado, those little popular songs are quite inappropriate for Ramírez.”⁷³

Ramírez’s determination to leave the lyric stage in order to pursue a career as a popular singer was construed as a weakness; his attempt to please the less affluent audiences, as the singer’s lack of respect with the local cultured public. Actually, the problem was that Ramírez was trapped in the middle of class struggles. By overcoming poverty and exclusion during his childhood, he had moved upward when becoming a lyrical singer with an international career. His story had demonstrated that upward mobility was possible, although he had initially been denied the opportunity to access technical knowledge in the academy. His return to performing popular music, however, was seen as a challenge to the upper classes who had welcomed him, and explains why Correa considered that singing boleros was fine for beautiful foreign voices, but it was just not good enough for a gifted native singer like Ramírez.

5.4 BOLERO IN THE EARLY 1950S: A GOLDEN ERA AS SMOKESCREEN

The year 1951 was particularly active for touring musicians, including many foreign bolero singers and ensembles, some locally known hitherto only through records or movies. Early in the year, a euphoric article in *El Colombiano* announced the imminent arrival of great stars:

This radio year appears much more brilliant and prosperous than we had already anticipated [...] Prominent international figures will be the main attractions of the year’s first quarter, which has begun at great cost to offer us an exquisite parade of well-known names [...] Marcos Redondo, the very famous Trío Los Panchos—so many times announced before, but just now signed up—Pérez Prado’s orchestra, currently performing in Caracas [...]

⁷³“En Picada,” in *El Colombiano*, April 12 and 14 1946, page 5.

The celebrated black star Marian Anderson, the world-famous unrivaled alto [...] Xavier Cugat, Tito Guizar, the legendary Mexican musician and poet Agustín Lara, and the bolero singer Fernando Fernández⁷⁴

Clearly an advertisement disguised as a news report, the text gives no sign of controversies filling an already heavily charged local atmosphere. The most conservative sectors of the elite were increasingly uneasy with an alleged “Afro-Cubanization” of the people’s musical taste—an uneasiness that may help to explain the persecution against upper-middle-class dancing practices. And bolero’s undeniable Caribbean connections, as we have seen, occasionally made it improper. Although such a veiled bias against Afro-Cuban music was old, in the early 1950s the wide local popularity of this music was increasingly becoming an issue for traditionalists. For example, a commentary on radio programming published in *El Colombiano* in January declared: “we do not oppose the diffusion of popular music, but we believe programs should be oriented by criteria more applicable to our milieu. Colombian music offers excellent genres, and the [North] American folklore has very tasteful compositions. But most radio programs include foreign music of Afro-Cuban tendencies, which are rather incitations than compositions, things that have nothing to do with our character.”⁷⁵

Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that the arrival of foreign orchestras with Afro-Cuban repertoires generated some misgivings. In March, the visit of New-York-based Xavier Cugat’s orchestra created great expectations. The orchestra was the house orchestra at the Waldorf Astoria and had participated in several movies, but was most known locally as a backing ensemble for important bolero singers, such as the Puerto Rican Daniel Santos and the Colombian Carlos Julio Ramírez. In spite of the orchestra’s remarkable reputation, some members of the local elite were displeased with its visit. In his daily column Lope commented: “Frankly, we do not like him at all. What we have listened to, or seen at the movies, we consider detestable. He is, anyway, a theatrical attraction, and there are some who esteem and admire him.”⁷⁶ The performance took place anyway some days later, on March 13.

⁷⁴ “Famosos artistas vendrán a Colombia en 1951” in *El Colombiano*, February 17 1949, page 3.

⁷⁵ “Programas radiales” in *El Colombiano*, January 9 1951, page 5.

⁷⁶ “Xavier Cugat” in “Ventana” by Lope. *El Colombiano* March 9 1950, page 5.

The reception of Dámaso Pérez Prado's orchestra, signed up to perform in April 1952, was even more bitter. The mayor's office received several letters from different local educational and religious associations—Juventud Católica de Medellín, Círculo de Acción Católica San José, Universidad Bolivariana, and Congregación Mariana del Colegio San Ignacio, plus another message coming from Santa Rosa de Osos, a neighboring town—asking him to stop the looming performance of Pérez Prado's world-renown mambo music.⁷⁷ Mambo was a fast-paced dancing music derived from the Cuban rumba and related to the cha cha cha, with almost no lyrical content, apart from the constant repetition of a simple phrase or even a word (for example the famous “que rico el mambo,” from the song of the same name). A commentary by Hernán Restrepo Duque, going back scarcely a year before this incident, shows another example of how violent local opposition to mambo might become. Following some gossip coming from Venezuela and Peru stating that both Pérez Prado and Mexican actress María Antonieta Pons had been excommunicated, Restrepo Duque stated:

[Pérez Prado and Pons] the former, inventor of such an infernal and disparate noise, said to be the smartest dancing music, the so-called mambo, and the latter, heroine of many filthy Mexican movies, deemed as such when they are but the most outstanding collection of idiocies to be told on screen [...] Those Venezuelan and Peruvian institutions have not said anything novel, but to make public determinations so long held by cultured and refined people's common sense. Of course, we cannot expect those mambos and other aberrations to stop because of this campaign. Unfortunately, in Medellín we will keep “enjoying” our rights insofar as the city supports a Lucho Bermúdez's great orchestra, and our people buy doctor Lemonta's cheap bulletins, attend some Mexican-cinematographer's deeds, and get drunk by *traganíqueles* listening to stupid lyrics. I repeat, we cannot ask this to stop, but at least we can be happy knowing that other societies do acknowledge how good people reject that filth disguised as art.”⁷⁸

Because Pérez Prado's Mexico-based ensemble rarely acted as a backing bolero orchestra, the resistance against it stemmed from its lone focus on mambo. Unlike Pérez Prado's, most renowned orchestras in New York and Cuba, such as Xavier Cugat's, the Sonora Matancera, and Beny Moré's La Gigante, habitually alternated romantic bolero and dancing music. The point to make here is that while some members of Medellín's elites refused to acknowledge the issue, most people in New York and on the Caribbean circuit had no trouble considering that bolero, along with son and mambo, were but different modern manifestations of the same centuries-old Afro-Cuban tradition.

⁷⁷“Adhesiones para que no actúe Pérez Prado” in *El Colombiano*, April 6 1952, page 7.

⁷⁸“Dámaso, Toña y otros engendros” in *El Diario* June 20 1951, page 2. Quotation marks in the original. I have not identified who doctor Lemonta was, but apparently he was some kind of *yerbatero* (witch doctor).

5.4.1 Radioteatros: The Golden Era of Live Music on the Radio

During the early 1950s, Medellín's stages featured numerous foreign stars, owing to the national economy's good performance. The parity between the North American dollar and the Colombian peso allowed local industries to sponsor the visit of numerous artists, even after the peso's value weakened in 1952. Large public theaters like Teatro Junín and Teatro Bolívar constantly staged concerts that featured a wide range of musical styles: opera singers including Marian Anderson (1951) and Tito Schipa (1954), classical pianists Claudio Arrau (1952) and Alfred Cortot (1952), Spanish *copla* ensemble Los Churumbeles de España (1954), and tango singers Agustín Irusta (1955) and Andrés Falgás (1955).⁷⁹ Bolero singers and ensembles were not the exception, and contrasting with the contested reception of Afro-Cuban-style orchestras performing danceable music, most *boleristas* were welcomed, especially those coming from either Mexican or Argentinean bolero schools. The list of visiting bolero stars between 1949 and 1952 included the Mexicans Maria Luisa Landín, Juan Arvizu, Chucho Martínez Gil, Alfonso Ortíz Tirado, Fernando Fernández, and Trío Los Panchos; the Argentinians Hugo Romani, Angélica Anchart, and Don Américo; the Chilean Sonia Gómez; and the famous Puerto Rican singer Bobby Capó, who had performed before in Medellín as a member of Rafael Hernández's Cuarteto Victoria.⁸⁰

Most singers of popular music genres arrived in the city with a contract to perform on the radio; managers sometimes arranged performances in local theaters in advance, but not every singer performed live concerts. More often than not, the public attended those concerts having heard their music beforehand either through records or through the radio. Both *La Voz de Antioquia* and *La Voz de Medellín* had their own *radioteatros* (radio-theaters), although the former occasionally put on the air live programs staged at the Teatro Junín. *Radioteatros* offered free admission, but potential listeners had to wait in line in front of the offices for hours in order to get a ticket for the night. Then a young upper-middle-class aficionado, Hernando Vélez Sierra was a regular spectator of *radioteatros*:

⁷⁹Data extracted from Hernando Vélez Sierra's collection of autographs and from advertisements published in *El Colombiano*.

⁸⁰It is worth also mentioning that Cubans René Cabel, Fernando Albuérne, and Wilfrido Fernández were very admired as well; Albuérne and Fernández visited the city in 1955 (interview with Hernando Vélez Sierra, Medellín July 7 2003).

Radioteatros had room to accommodate around 300 or 400 spectators, but I remember very few young people attended. The audience was mainly comprised of adults. I used to go with my sisters, we went there very frequently [...] they use to come with me whenever I attended. I rarely missed any performance, I would have to be ill to miss it. Or perhaps I failed to go because I did not know the singer beforehand [...] those attending *radioteatros* were real aficionados, because one had to wait in line since 6 o'clock in the morning. I always arrived at 6, and there was someone already there, some six or seven people already waiting. And we were very lucky whenever they [the clerks at the radio station] decided to hand over the tickets before 9. But the *radioteatros*' world was just fabulous...⁸¹

Apart from Vélez Sierra's memories and Foto Reporter's photographs (see Figure 18), little information has survived about the dynamics of live performances in *radioteatros*. In any case, from the habitual display of large ads on the newspapers' front pages and the abundant commentaries and critiques published afterwards in different written media, we can conclude that there was a sizeable audience at home fervently following the nightly broadcast shows. The rivalry between the two major networks resulted in the simultaneous programming of foreign stars. For example, on August 5 1952, RCN *La Voz de Antioquia*'s program "El Peso Fabricato" (8:30–9:00 p.m.) featured the Mexican bolero singer Fernando Fernández, while Caracol *La Voz de Medellín*'s simultaneous program "Novedades Pilsen" presented "Los Churumbeles de España's stylized modern Spanish folklore."⁸² Local performers and journalists alike kept complaining that foreigners charged much more money than local musicians had ever received.

The visit of the legendary Mexican Trío Los Panchos serves to exemplify the reception of foreign bolero stars. Los Panchos arrived in Medellín on April 1951 for a series of concerts and radio shows. Huge announcements appeared in the press, and *El Diario*'s music specialist, Hernán Restrepo Duque, wrote a extensive note about how local audiences had always loved the Trío's music since 1948, when their recordings arrived for the first time. As in previous cases involving touring musicians, praising words proliferated and the comparison with Gardel's visit was unavoidable: "Los Panchos deserve the applause of the multitudes, and therefore their Colombian tour has resulted in a great success. Such a triumph has rarely been seen before, perhaps only similar to Gardel's, but no other artist has ever achieved so

⁸¹Interview with Hernando Vélez Sierra, Medellín July 7 2003.

⁸²Advertisement in *El Colombiano*, August 5 1952, page 1.

much among us.”⁸³ Los Panchos’ success had a single flaw, however, which was their widely-commented attempt to singing bambucos (see page 100). Restrepo Duque tempered his initial remarks disapproving their effort to please the local audience, commenting that the Mexicans should not be blamed for not being able to handle such a difficult genre—whereas most local musicians proved incompetent to deal even with easier foreign genres such as the Mexican *huapango*.⁸⁴

What Restrepo Duque failed to acknowledge in either of his commentaries about Los Panchos was that the Mexican trio was also well known among the local audience for their frequent participation in *cabaretera* movies. Mexican motion pictures featuring Los Panchos, like “Rayito de luna” (“Moonlight”), “Aventurera” (“Adventuress”), “Perdida” (“Fallen Woman”) and “Negro es mi color” (“Black is my Skin Color”), had been screened in second-rate movie theaters since 1949.⁸⁵ While the first one was judged appropriate “only for adult audiences, not recommended for young ladies,” the censorship committee rated the rest as “bad” and “dangerous.”⁸⁶ Restrepo Duque’s annoyance with the quality of Mexican movies passed unnoticed in his remarks about Los Panchos’ proficiency and charm. Once again, bolero’s occasional inappropriateness to local eyes was easily overlooked on account of its refinement and cosmopolitanism.

Bolero’s local golden age went on with no major interruptions at least until the mid-1960s. Musical practices involving bolero were not greatly affected by the thorny political situation affecting the country during the early 1950s because of bolero’s introspective nature. Bolero lyrics did not lend themselves to political commentary or social critique, their emphasis on brief emotional instances giving small or no room for resistance. The occasionally unrestrained expression of desire was bolero’s lone menacing facet, an aspect hegemonic forces tried to contain by means of controlling musical practices involving the body, hence the restrictions on dancing practices, or simply by ignoring or concealing bolero’s sensuality. In this way, bolero fulfilled middle-class ideals of refinement and sophistication, while keeping in

⁸³ “Mañana se presentarán Los Panchos” in *El Diario*, April 11 1951, page 2.

⁸⁴ “Hablemos de Los Panchos y su versión de ‘Antioqueña,’” in *El Diario*, April 18 1952, page 5.

⁸⁵ Advertisements published in *El Colombiano* and *El Diario*.

⁸⁶ Comments from the censorship committee published in *El Colombiano*: on “Rayito de luna,” January 9 1950, page 12; on “Aventurera,” July 11 1951, page 11; on “Negro es mi color,” December 7 1951, page 18.

place class structure and patriarchal hierarchies. At the same time, bolero's cosmopolitanism provided a formula to escape local and national reality, connecting an internal universe of personal feelings with an external imaginary of modernity.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

The three simultaneous narratives presented in this dissertation about popular music, identity and class struggles in Medellín offer us important clues to appreciate different levels of the articulation of collective identities in the sphere of music during the first half of the twentieth century. Over the years, different social groups displayed diverse attitudes toward musical practices including the three musical genres under study, embodying in their opinions some of the sources of social tension that marked this historical period. In this chapter I will summarize the struggles articulated in the crystallization of national, local, and transnational collective identities around bambuco, tango, and bolero.

Although discourses claiming bambuco as a national music dated from the late 1800s, the consolidation of such an idea was a rather incomplete project by the early 1950s. In addition to the struggles engaging academic and non-academic musicians in Bogotá's National Conservatory, musicians and audiences in the periphery were reluctant to recognize the cultural hegemony of the nation's capital. In Medellín, Paisas seemed particularly unenthusiastic about accepting the kind of national integration proposed by Bogotano musicians, and members of the middle classes and the elites opted to pursue their own projects to put forward bambuco's national status. For local bambuco advocates like Camilo Correa and Hernán Restrepo Duque, the lack of confidence they felt in the politics of the central state contrasted with their deep convictions about the benefits brought by the activities of the private sector. Bambuco, and hence the nation, were for them the private endeavor of a select few with the money and the altruism to "civilize" the people.

Local masses might be sufficiently aware of the elitist nature of bambuco's national project. They never fully adopted the genre as their national music, as was the case with samba in Brazil, or with ranchera and mariachi music in Mexico. Those societies had adopted

different approaches to music nationalism derived from their acceptance of *lo popular*—and hence something somewhat “improper” because of its lower-class, non-European cultural origins—as a valid category. The populist politics in Brazil, Argentina, and Peru emerged from what Marco Palacios deems a “discovery” by the upper classes regarding the problems that the profound social inequality had for the modernization of the state and the integration of the subaltern classes into the project of nation building. Consequently, they “used mechanisms of distribution and learned to employ egalitarian rituals and symbols” (Palacios 2001, 47). In Colombia, on the contrary, where regional elites had always maintained their hold on power through alliances and pacts among themselves, the upper classes never considered *lo popular* a suitable or relevant category. For bambuco to be accepted, it had to reflect European “civilized” qualities like refinement and elaboration, whereas the “uncultured” audiences had to be taught to appreciate those features. In other words, the weakness of the bambuco’s national project, whether launched by any public or private organization in Bogotá or Medellín, lay in the unlikely possibility that the masses agreed to be lectured about their own folk traditions.

The elitist approach to culture, however, was not an uncommon feature of similar national music projects launched in Latin America at the time. For example, J. E. Hayes’ study shows that the Mexican state had a similar paternalistic approach to folklore and traditional culture (Hayes 2000). According to her, such an approach became a drawback for the state-sponsored radio station, which was unable to cope with the competing nationalism of the commercially-oriented private radio. In the Mexican case, however, both competing nationalist agendas arose from different sectors of the Mexico City’s elite. On the contrary, in Colombia the spheres of state and the private sector were almost split between two different elites, those of Bogotá and Medellín. Although the national narrative of bambuco was very similar in both capitals, the struggle for hegemony between the two cities weakened the overall impact of the national music project over the national audience.

In spite of the limited adoption of bambuco among the masses, the myth of bambuco’s national status was encouraged by the conservative establishment in the 1950s. The rationale behind that renewed support was the definite cleansing of bambuco’s ethnic background brought by two main factors: first, the threatening emergence of a new type of national mu-

sic associated with black ethnicity, Costeño *música tropical* (Wade 2000); and second, the Hispanophile politics of Laureano Gómez's government (1950–1953). Arguments emphasizing bambuco's European origin had been so common since the beginning of the century that they had even been used as a subject of scorn in Rendón's cartoons in 1930. But in the 1950s, the claim was that bambuco was specifically Spanish, derived mainly from the music of the southern province of Andalusia, home of most Spaniards who arrived in the New World during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹ The contention validated the hold on power of an elite that considered itself a direct heir of the Spanish colonizers, and strengthened the links between Colombia and the fascist government of General Francisco Franco (1939–1975). Despite the minor support that moderate conservatives manifested for Gómez's extremist policies, the political atmosphere favored elite-oriented cultural projects such as bambuco.

Finally, the prevalent division between performers and songwriters (mostly amateurs with no academic training) and art-music composers (who had control over musical knowledge) hindered for years bambuco's wider development either as a form of popular or art music. For a long time, the study of bambuco and other genres of Andean folk music were kept from entering academia. Even today, there is an evident disconnection between the two musical realms, as most conservatory-trained musicians in Colombia still have minimal contact with the Andean music repertoire. Consequently, many of the most accomplished instrumental virtuosos of the tradition are not professional musicians. Only relatively recently a new generation of professional folk musicians, such as *bandola* player Manuel Bernal, have appeared in the country's musical panorama.

It would be interesting to explore in depth bambuco's evolution between the late 1950s and the 1970s, when the narrative of folkloric canon was finally established by Abadía Morales (1977) and Davidson (1970). The efforts of Hernán Restrepo Duque and Luis Uribe Bueno, to encourage Andean music's endurance by means of making it part of the local recording industry's, catalog were not in vain. In the 1960s and 1970s, Sonolux's sound recordings by *duetos bambuqueros* Garzón y Collazos and Silva y Villalba achieved a good level of national

¹The Andalusian imagery is clearly depicted in Gabriel Escobar Casas' essays on the origins of bambuco; see Appendix A.

recognition. Nowadays, most people in Colombia consider those mass-produced bambucos as “traditional folk bambucos,” not having any aural reference to rural expressions, like the bambuco tradition among the Paeces Indians in the Cauca departamento, described by ethnomusicologist Carlos Miñana ([Miñana Blasco 1994](#)).

In contrast to the narrative of the nation unfolded in bambuco, tango articulated the construction of a local identity. The appropriation of the Argentinean genre in Medellín eventually extended throughout the entire Antioqueño area of influence, becoming part of Paisa’s regional narrative.² The initial step of this process of appropriation was tango-song’s adoption in the late 1920s by an audience comprising middle- and working-class people, mostly males recently arrived in Medellín from the countryside. The rural immigrants from the Antioqueño hinterland, listening to the music played by *traganíqueles* at cafés, articulated their experiences of migration and uprooting in tango-song’s original narratives of the European migrants to Buenos Aires. The flavor of rudeness and impoliteness in tango-song was initially construed as an opposition to the establishment, and the Argentinean connection helped Paisas to articulate a white ethnic identity for the *raza antioqueña*.

In spite of Gardel’s importance in the history of tango-song, the impact of his death in 1935 on the local imagination was not instantaneous. By the time, Gardel was still a new figure in the local market of recorded music, and neither audiences of the upper nor the lower classes had a clear idea of how to receive his music. On the one hand, and despite Gardel’s cosmopolitan allure, the upper classes were still reluctant to consider tango-song as a socially acceptable kind of music due to its working-class upbringing. The audience of the lower classes, on the other hand, who were the main consumers of the musical genre, did not know Gardel’s music enough. What is more, they might not be fully aware of the singer’s important stature in the tango world until it was highlighted by Argentinean visitors to the city during the following decade. Whatever the case, there is no evidence indicating significant changes in local tango-song’s listening practices during the late 1930s. Tango-song was still considered a cultural expression associated with working-class men,

²An interesting example of this appropriation is Fernando Cruz Kronfly’s novel “La caravana de Gardel” (“Gardel’s Caravan,” [1998](#)). The novel elaborates a fictional story based on the true episode of the journey of Gardel’s body from Medellín to Buenaventura, a port on the Pacific coast. In the story, Gardel’s disguised funeral convoy travelled throughout the southern Paisa territory, where eventually the singer’s body and his belongings were fragmented in hundreds of relics.

embodying patriarchal attitudes toward female roles and behaviors. Tartarín's tango lyric is a good example of how local society severely punished female insubordination to male control: male judgement was a key determinant of female's decency and, therefore, dictated the position of the woman in the social structure.

The arrival of Argentinean cinema in the early 1940s helped tone down the strong aspect of working-class resistance originally embedded in tango-song listening practices in Guayaquil's atmosphere. Argentinean movies depicted a middle-class lifestyle that provided tango-song with bourgeoisie imagery previously unknown in Medellín. The popularity achieved by female figures like tango-singer and actress Libertad Lamarque also contributed to ease tango's original association with rude male stereotypes. Tango was not perceived anymore as the exclusive soundtrack of brothels and dissolute drunkards. The expansion of tango's audience among members of the middle class as well as the progressive awareness of the importance of the Gardelian myth outside Medellín, were key factors strengthening the connections between tango and a cross-class Antioqueño identity.

Tango's potential to articulate attitudes of opposition and revelry did not disappear completely, however. Toward the late 1940s and early 1950s the practices of tango listening were used, beyond partisan allegiances, as tactics for resistance against the new governmental mechanisms of censorship. The defiant attitude of Guayaquil's bohemians served as catalyst for sentiments of discomfort and uneasiness produced by repression. Local resistance toward national politics, perceived as something derived from the Bogotá's sphere of power, found expression in tango-listening practices. In this way, tango's local adoption eventually became a form for articulating *raza antioqueña's* non-elitist white identity, which in the eyes of many members of this powerful peripheral society appeared more compelling than bambuco's centralized national *mestizo* project. Tango's symbolic significance as marker of regional identity crystallized as a form of resistance to an homogenizing national identity perceived as an imposition in the 1950s.

Local narratives of lower-class resistance in tango were taken up by intellectuals and sympathizers of the left during the following decades. Manuel Mejía Vallejo's novel "Aire de Tango" (1979) is the best known example of the construction of a legendary oppositional *tanguero* past in Medellín. There are many aspects of tango local history that deserve further

study. For example, little has been said about several important tango festivals in the city between 1968 and 1974, organized by a group of upper-middle-class *tangueros* including several intellectuals, lawyers, and businessmen. Some Argentinean residents in Medellín, especially Leonardo Nieto Jardón, have played a large role in the creation of a strong local myth around the figure of Gardel.³

In contrast to bambuco and tango, the local construction of a cosmopolitan identity in bolero was the venture of an apolitical local middle class barely interested in struggles for hegemony against Bogotá's power. Probably in reaction to the local and national charged political atmospheres, sectors of the burgeoning middle class sought to take part in a transnational idea of modernity, and bolero epitomized that principle. Bolero was marketed as a novelty, a signifier of Latin American cosmopolitanism that appeared very attractive for an emergent audience eager to enjoy its recent inclusion in a modern society of mass consumption. Radio broadcast, then the newest and most important medium of communication, was bolero's fundamental stage and its most efficient channel of distribution.

Although bolero was part of the aural soundscape of the cosmopolitan black Caribbean, local biases against blackness determined that bolero musical practices were stripped of features identified as originally Afro Cuban. Such disregard for Afro Cuban and Puerto Rican models favored the popularity of Mexican boleros, characterized by a softened rhythmic character and an opera-based vocal style. However, the key for bolero's ethnical identity was not rooted in its musical characteristics. In fact, black performers were accepted insofar audiences did not notice their skin color. The incident created by the visit of singer-songwriter Rafael Hernández clearly shows the bias against dark-skinned performers. Hernández's ethnic identity had not been a problem for local entrepreneurs until someone suggested he should not limit his performances to radio broadcast but give a concert at any local theater. Radio allowed the invisibility of the black performer, but did not invalidate the importance of ethnicity as a determinant factor to rule music as proper or improper. In contrast to Hernández's black ethnic identity, Mexican bolero performers such as Pedro Vargas embodied a *mestizo* identity. Such ethnic identity was acceptable because it was closer to the ideal represented

³Nieto Jardón, for years the owner of the Casa Gardeliana, was the main force behind the determination taken in the late 1960s to put up a Gardel bronze statue at Manrique's main street, located half a block from the famous tango venue. Interview with Leonardo Nieto Jardón (Medellín, June 25 2004).

in bambuco, with the advantage that it did not have the rural imagery that characterized the Andean genre's lyrics. In the mid-1940s, the arrival of Argentinean boleros contributed to a further cleaning up of the genre on account of the new South American performers' white ethnic identity.

Behind "modern" aspects in bolero, which included its poetry, the addition of new harmonies brought from jazz, and the adaptation of North American crooners' performing style, the practices associated with the genre kept intact, for the most part, the roots of traditional patriarchal structures. Bolero's practices endorsed traditional forms of social behavior shaping gender roles, for example, by following models inherited from the European lyrical traditions of courtly love. The emphasis on platonic, non-physical love maintained bodies and genders at a prudish distance from one another. Yet bolero's body politics of were potentially disruptive owing to its suitability as dance music and a certain ambiguity about the gender of the singing subject. Local society established regulations for those aspects, in particular by confining most dance practices to the social space of the dance parlor in Lovaina, where all the female partners were prostitutes. Meanwhile, the de-tropicalization of bolero, which operated as a strategy to emphasize bolero's European features while downsizing the Afro-Cuban component, allowed the participation of women in other gender-restricted musical practices.

Bolero's romantic idealization, focused on inner individual feelings and emotions, was an important factor contributing to its popularity during the late 1940s and early 1950s. The general absence of references to wider social or political affairs—which, nonetheless, were sometimes present in bolero at a metaphorical level (see [Quintero Rivera 1998](#))—proved important. Bolero was able to escape depolitization and open censorship imposed over several practices of popular culture. Bolero was for the most part immune to tactics of repression, which affected newly-devised upper-middle-class dance practices including Afro-Cuban music genres and Colombian *música tropical* during the early 1950s.

Some aspects of the evolution of bolero's golden age in Medellín throughout the 1950s, as well as the growing popularity of Afro-Cuban genres over the next decades, are open to further study. Peter Wade (2000) offers some interesting insights into how *música tropical* became progressively popular in both Medellín and Bogotá over the decade. However, Wade fails

to notice the key importance of class and, above all, the impact of politics in the reception of that music. For instance, as a center of working-class entertainment, Guayaquil was the first place where Costeño music became appreciated in the city—especially in the bars of the now disappeared *calle de los tambores* (street of drums), where drummers played along with the music coming out of *traganíqueles*. The good reception of this music in Guayaquil took place long before the music of Lucho Bermúdez was accepted in upper-class venues. Further, Bermúdez and his orchestra were greeted in Medellín in 1948 after succeeding in Bogotá’s fancy nightclubs, and it is doubtful they would have ever been welcomed without Bogotá’s elites’ previous mediation. As we have seen, Bermúdez’s music was not very appreciated by some members of the local middle class—such as Hernán Restrepo Duque—or by the conservative government’s officials. Whatever the case, both *música tropical* and Afro Cuban genres were finally accepted, giving rise to several generations of *matanceros* (fans of the Cuban Sonora Matancera) and later *salseros*.

Another important aspect that has not been sufficiently explored in scholarship on the period is the virtual dissolution of Guayaquil. In the 1980s, a large section of the old market district was demolished to give room for the construction of a huge complex known as La Alpujarra, housing the offices of the Antioquia’s Governmental Administration. With this project, the authorities finally established their control over the unruly district. Although some traditional drinking spots like Salón Málaga survive, as evidence of Guayaquil’s former centrality for working-class entertainment, the district’s night-time activity has greatly diminished since. Guayaquil’s former reputation as home of poor immigrants, vice, and immorality appears nowadays almost inoffensive if compared to the desolate realities thousands of people have to deal with daily in working-class neighborhoods located in the northeastern districts.

Finally, a logical outgrow of this dissertation is a study of the current social dynamics of local old-music collectors and associations. Class boundaries persist among aficionados. For example, the *Asociación Gardeliana* comprises professionals including medical doctors, journalists, and prominent lawyers, whereas the *Club Amigos del Tango* includes middle-class employees, merchants, and retired workers from the textile mills. Although some attempts have been made to create a unified club, the interests and the economic resources

of both groups greatly differ from one another. While upper-class aficionados prefer digital recordings and recognize the innovations introduced by tango's greatest innovator, Astor Piazzolla (1921–1992), middle-class fans collect classic 78-rpm records and judge innovations as a corruption of tango.⁴

The correlation between social class and ethnicity is still an aspect that affects the reception of certain musical practices within some social sectors. However, the promulgation of a new political constitution in 1991 recognizing Colombia as a “pluriethnic and multicultural nation” has opened previously unknown possibilities for the expression of the enormous cultural diversity of its peoples. This political and cultural transformation has stimulated the evolution of Afro-Colombian musical expressions, including marimba music from the southern Pacific coast and tambora music from the Caribbean coast. Nevertheless, those traditions are still perceived in Colombia as “exotic,” and although they are beginning to enter the global circuits of the World Music market, their full inclusion within the mainstream Colombian music market is still an uncertain issue.

⁴Interview with Alejandro Bernal, former president of the *Asociación Gardeliana* and head of *Club Amigos del Tango* (Medellín July 2 2003).

APPENDIX A

CONTROVERSY ON “MÚSICA NACIONAL:” LETTERS PUBLISHED IN *EL HERALDO DE ANTIOQUIA*, 1928

A.1 “EL CASO MUSICAL,” APRIL 9 1928, P. 2

Publicamos enseguida las cartas que se cruzaron don Ricardo Olano, don Emilio Murillo y el maestro Gonzalo Vidal con respecto a cierto problema musical que ha venido naciendo últimamente en los centros musicales de la altiplanicie. Por lo visto hay dos tendencias, la popular y la estética. Unos patrocinan la una, otros defienden la otra como que en ella ven que se le presta mayor servicio al arte y a la patria. Juzguen los lectores y digan quién tiene razón en este caso que sí merece comentarse.

Medellín, marzo 15 de 1928

Señor don Gonzalo Vidal

Presente

Muy apreciado amigo: don Emilio Murillo de Bogotá me ha escrito la carta que copio a continuación y la transcribo a usted seguro de que contribuirá a desarrollar la idea del artista bogotano. La carta dice así:

”A usted tengo que complicarlo en la obra de nuestra música nacional. ¿Cómo? Viendo allá la forma de que los compositores antioqueños escriban con los temas del pueblo, música buena o regular, clásica o popular, pero... que escriban. Con el tango ha realizado Argentina una obra de propaganda en el mundo superior a la hecha por sus embajadas. ¿Qué es “La Cabaña”? Esa canción se canta desde hace siglos en Antioquia. Don Fidel Cano me dijo una noche en la Fidelena: ‘Oiga un tema para que se lo lleve’. Él arregló la letra y yo la música y hoy es una pieza mundial. Produzca usted un movimiento en este campo y escíbame. Suyo,

Emilio Murillo”

En la esperanza que esta gestión sea benéfica para el arte antioqueño, me suscribo de usted atento y S. S., Ricardo Olano

Medellín, marzo 23 de 1928

Señor don Ricardo Olano

Presente

Muy señor mío y amigo: Por ocupaciones imprescindibles he demorado la contestación a su atenta del 16 de los corrientes. Sírvase excusarme. En cuanto al asunto de que se trata, le informo lo siguiente. Hace ya bastantes años don Emilio Murillo me escribió en igual sentido sobre el tema

de su predilección, la música que él llama popular y su divulgación en Colombia y fuera de ella. Yo lo estimulé cortésmente como es de suponer, en su propósito de arte nacional y de progreso, pero con franqueza le di a entender que yo no me sentía con impulsos de apóstol ni con vocación de agitador en tal sentido. Nací con otras tendencias, con otros ideales, y he sido un perseverante en el estudio de los clásicos, de sus obras consagradas y de las fuentes y orígenes de gran parte de la música universal. Yo concibo labor de arte nacional en otros países, no en el nuestro, plagado de compositores sin preparación, sin estudios serios, sin habilidad ni siquiera para confeccionar pasillitos, dancitas, guabinillas, bambucos, mucho menos para explotar obras y producir obras de arte sólido. Componer así está al alcance de cualquiera, no supone conocimientos ni compromete ideas. Estos productores de música en Colombia no escasean, nos tienen hasta aquí, se prodigan sin objeto y no es difícil que el tráfico de sus brotes musicales sea para ellos fuente de satisfacción y engañifa que los tenga atados al carro de la incomprensión y de la rutina. Observo, analizo obras de jaez, y el resultado es negativo siempre, incorrección en la armonía, carencia de ideas, monotonía rítmica y melódica, ingenuidad primitiva en las modulaciones, etc. Claro está que nada de lo dicho tiene que ver con los pocos compositores colombianos consagrados, estudiosos, comprensivos, que honran el arte y la patria con actuaciones dignas, con producciones valiosas. En esta hora solemne, en plena civilización, para bien del arte entre nosotros, lejos de decir a los compositores: escriban, prodúganse, publiquen, valdría más estimularlos a la meditación, al estudio, a la producción seria, a la honradez artística, al temor a la publicidad, no al triunfo barato ni a los éxitos de relumbrón. Dejo así contestada su muy amable carta y me suscribo.

De usted atento, S. S., Gonzalo Vidal

A.2 “SOBRE MÚSICA NACIONAL,” MAY 15, P.5

En la carta reciente de don Emilio Murillo a don Luis Cano dice que la réplica a mis declaraciones a propósito de la música nacional, es un artículo mío escrito en 1915, encomiástico en relación con el mencionado Murillo. Como es muy humano, muy natural que en 13 años que lleva de publicado aquello, su autor haya evolucionado en vista de hechos cumplidos que no son reveladores de un progreso evidente, de un adelanto innegable en pro del arte nacional, soy de opinión que ese escrito no debe seguir siendo una especie de comodín, enarbolado cada vez que le convenga al favorecido.

En 1915 Emilio Murillo, después muy aplaudido y festejado en Medellín, me exigió (bien lo recuerdo) que algo publicara relativo a su actuación. Yo escribí, para complacerlo, algo que publicó “La Semana” de *El Espectador*. En casos como este vale más tomar a beneficios de inventario los elogios, leer entre renglones, descartar lo exagerado y aprovechar el resto como estímulo hacia un plus ultra glorioso, progresivo, basado en estudios serios que sirvan de ascensores para el logro de aspiraciones legítimas en las jornadas de arte. También algunos párrafos del mencionado escrito salieron a relucir en época reciente como escudo, como argumento poderoso en polémica de Murillo con el maestro Uribe Holguín, si mal no recuerdo. Explicado el asunto, me tiene sin cuidado la reproducción que de mi escrito hace Murillo en *El Espectador*. Si con reproducirlo íntegro su defensa queda asegurada, santo y bueno, tan conformes. . . “así están las cosas, y basta”. Mas por el género chico que informa hoy el arte nacional, pasillos, bambucos, guabinas, guatecanos, etc., género que se compra, se vende, se trajina, se baila, se impone, los especialistas y aún los bisoños pierden el gusto por el estudio severo de la composición que hasta para una mejor presentación de sus trabajos les serviría, y ya no vuelven a pensar más que en prodigarse, en hacer obra lucrativa sin hacer mayor esfuerzo mental, sin dificultades que vencer. En estas actuaciones, componiendo o

descomponiendo, pasan toda una existencia, llegan a la vejez y al hacer balance. . . la mar de pasillos cada compositor e igual cantidad de bambucos, guabinas y cumbias. . . y pensar que los señores Di Domenico Hermanos y Cia, han abierto un “gran concurso de música nacional” patrocinado por el “popular compositor señor don Emilio Murillo” y que en él se admiten “pasillos, bambucos, guabinas” y que el primer premio será de \$150, el segundo premio de \$100, el tercero de \$50, y además de \$100 para distribuir en “accesits” entre las composiciones que lo merezcan. Y uno de los tres jurados calificadores será el artista nacional don Emilio Murillo, a quien se debe “el éxito de la música colombiana en todas partes”. Para orientar un poco a los que tomen parte en este concurso, el pasillo puede tener como base “El Lucero”, autor Emilio Murillo, el bambuco “En el fondo de tus ojos”, autor J. Velasco y la guabina como base “La guabina santandereana”, de que es autor Lelio Olarte. Hasta los aficionados, los analfabetos, los músicos de oído, pueden valerse de alguien que les escriba la simple melodía y enviarla así, en clave de sol, sin armonizarla. Este trabajo lo hará un técnico en la altiplanicie. Así pues, según los vientos corren, va a llover música de ese género sin caridad, Dios nos coja confesados. Menos mal, si el jurado calificador se impone, llegando el caso y declara que no hay lugar a premios, o que estos fueron adjudicados a quienes por su eficiencia, seriedad y prestigio en asuntos de composición los merecen indiscutiblemente. Puede que resulten pequeñas joyas de arte, pero finas, no falsas ni de escaso valor ante la crítica. Concluyo declarando que esta especie de campaña por mí emprendida no debe interpretarse en otro sentido que en el de laborar a todo trance por un mejoramiento en el arte de componer para gloria y provecho de la patria. Tengo interés en que nuestra generación nueva se inspire en nobles ideales, estudie las obras maestras de la música, y el resultado práctico sea el triunfo del arte nacional bien entendido. Colombia lo merece.

Medellín, mayo de 1928, Gonzalo Vidal

A.3 “MÚSICA NACIONAL,” JUNE 11, NO PAGE NUMBER

Debiera establecerse diferencia entre música popular y música nacional para dilucidar mejor en estos casos. Como su nombre lo indica, música popular es la que emana del pueblo, guabinas, pasillos, bambucos, etc., o las imitaciones a que esto de lugar, hechas generalmente por autores no preparados y que no ofrecen garantías ni en lo que pudiéramos llamar la indumentaria de sus composiciones. Éstas, en mi concepto, deberían rotularse “música populachera”. Por música nacional debería entenderse aquella esmeradamente pensada, sentida y escrita, sea cual fuera el género a que pertenece, presentable dentro y fuera de la república sin temor de una presentación inculta o descuidada. Así pues, un tema del pueblo adaptado por mano maestra puede pasar a la categoría de música nacional y hacerse valer ante la crítica. En cambio una exhibición de música populachera, un desconcierto de pasillos, un desfile de guabinas, exponente de analfabetismo, aquí, en París o en Nueva York, sería siempre una exhibición triste, sin interés, sin trascendencia, que el arte y el patriotismo no tienen por qué aplaudir ni agradecer. Tengo ya dicho que componer así está al alcance de todo el mundo, con suscribirse a ciertas revistas, oír ciertos discos y revistas de actualidad queda uno convencido. Hay verdades amargas, y esta es enorme. Una especie de compensación se establece, muy halagadora por cierto, con obras nacionales como “Del terruño” de Uribe Holguín, “El torbellino” de Martínez Montoya, “Sabanera” de J. A. Rodríguez, y los bambucos bien cincelados de Escobar Larrazabal. En estas composiciones algo popular se trasciende, pero ennoblecido por los refinamientos del arte. Concluyo transcribiendo los párrafos de un reportaje a un intelectual de primer orden, a Gabriel Carreño, el cual reportaje aparece publicado en el número 60 de *Tierra*

Nativa, revista ilustrada, bien dirigida por Salazar Álvarez, de Bucaramanga: “La música nacional existe en su germen, en sus constitutivos esenciales en la forma inculta pero definida de folclor. La música nacional académica, presentable en los templos del Viejo Mundo, en capacidades para resistir el análisis científico de los magos de la estética, apenas se inicia. Grandes mentalidades enardecidas por un verdadero fuego apostólico trabajan por formarla, y en verdad que ya pueden sentirse ufanas de su apostolado (me refiero a Guillermo Uribe Holguín y a Andrés Martínez Montoya en Bogotá; a Vidal en Medellín; a Quevedo en Ibagué; a Villalobos en Bucaramanga).” Se agradece el anterior concepto, inesperado e inmerecido por parte del que firma estas líneas.

Medellín, junio 4 de 1928, Gonzalo Vidal (para *El Herald*o en su primer aniversario.)

A.4 “MÚSICA NACIONAL,” DECEMBER 18 1928

Señor Gonzalo Vidal, Ciudad

Estimado maestro y amigo: Después de haberlo conocido personalmente y de haber leído una serie de artículos que ha venido publicando con el mote de música nacional, he querido expresarle mi opinión. Su labor, atacar el analfabetismo musical, vituperar el eterno beabá de los que como el Sidulfo de Emilio Carrere, viven alucinados, careciendo hasta de ortografía, envueltos en un vaho de gloria que han creado ellos mismos ante una multitud más ignorante aún. Bien por eso, maestro Vidal. Bien, porque mientras podría enrolarse en la manada de compositores nacionales, especulando con la fiebre de pobreza, de dinero, su vanidad, su conciencia de sí mismo rechaza la traición de sus propios ideales. No se qué sensación producirá el hablar de honradez entre ladrones. Sin embargo, me da tristeza el pensar en la verdad de sus aciertos. Titiriteros del arte, que bajo el techo de su ignorancia y en la inconciencia de su proceder desnudan la incorrección, persisten en la banalidad, descubriendo vergonzosamente ante los ojos de la humanidad una época que evoca un portal rústico y la ingenuidad de muchos villancicos. No me causa gran extrañeza el fenómeno, la decadencia asoma, caprichosamente, pero siempre asoma en individuos, familias y naciones. Igual en las artes. Lo raro es que cuando la costumbre general, cuando el termómetro del pueblo marca la baja temperatura artística, los llamados, los que en su cerebro llevan la llama del conocimiento, y en su pluma la autoridad del bien decir, no propendan eficazmente a la labor de salvación. Bien por eso, una vez más, maestro Vidal, y mal para aquellos que debiendo ser sus compañeros en la ardua tarea de enderezar torcidos, callan con el silencio vergonzoso de la impotencia, soportando la reclusión del verdadero arte en las hediondas mazmorras de la incorrección y de la ignorancia. Desgraciadamente yo no tengo su autoridad. Desgraciadamente yo no tengo el heroísmo suyo, y usted comprenderá por qué, y por faltarme ese heroísmo siento la tristeza y la confusión casi anónima. Pasillos, bambucos, guabinas, cancioncillas, guatance, torbellinos, rumbas, no, no, no, es verdaderamente bochornoso. ¿Cómo nos compondríamos si los grandes prosistas se limitaran a escribir avisos? ¿si los grandes poetas no hicieran sino décimas? ¿si los escultores se entretuvieran en moldear granos de café? ¿si los pintores nos quisieran deleitar hoy con una boca y mañana con un pie? Toda labor seria es buena labor, los años pasan y en la noche del tiempo solo brilla lo que tiene luz. Mañana en los archivos del olvido no cabrán las necesidades de un pueblo, y para la historia habrá una opinión altiva, triste, ahogada en la embriaguez de la inconsistencia luminosa, luego como digno prólogo de una era de esperanza, de verdad y de arte.

A. M. Camacho y Cano

A.5 “MÚSICA NACIONAL,” DECEMBER 21 1928, P. 3

Medellín, diciembre 18 de 1928

Señor don A. M. Camacho y Cano, Ciudad

Apreciado amigo:

En el número de hoy del Heraldo de Antioquia leí la carta que usted dirigía al que esto escribe y me es grato manifestarle mi agradecimiento por sus conceptos favorables a la campaña por mí emprendida en pro del arte musical colombiano. Me he propuesto laborar cuanto me sea posible por un mejoramiento en el arte de componer de muchos que hoy son considerados maestros y de jóvenes que empiezan, que ya han abordado el estudio de la música. Porque es cosa y caso triste que mientras los intelectuales de mi patria, llámense escultores, pintores, arquitectos, poetas, dramaturgos, novelistas, etc., se han esmerado en adelantar, en sobresalir, obedeciendo a leyes naturales e impulsos de vocación irresistible, nuestros músicos, los que tanto preponderan y tanto se prodigan, no han sido capaces de componer otra cosa que pasillos, dancitas, cancioncillas, bambucos, y otras hierbas, no siempre aceptables como exponentes de originalidad, de corrección, de cultura en achaques (*¿*) de composición. Yo recuerdo pasillos que oí desde la cuna en mi ciudad natal hace la bicoca de trece lustros. Allá pude apreciar también el bambuco, nuestro bambuco tan apasillado al presente. Comparo aquello a la producción actual, con ese diluvio de hojarasca pasillera, y el resultado es un desastre. ¿A dónde iremos a parar si esto sigue? ¿Cuál será nuestro progreso si esto no acaba? Pasará este siglo, y Colombia en sus trece, alcahueteando descomposiciones, creyendo que eso es arte apreciable, que esto es música autóctona, que esta es el alma de la raza. Lo afirmo porque los medios de comunicación de nuestra incultura musical son aterradores, al par que atrayentes. Para los amantes del progreso patrio tales medios resultan perniciosos; para los traficantes, y hoy forman legión, halagadores. Los innumerables discos, rollos, aparatos portadores de contagio, las grandes empresas extranjeras que estimulando siembran el mal, los que venden sus producciones que no honran al arte ni contribuyen al esplendor de Colombia, no hacen labor plausible en la hora presente. Todo lo contrario, la música seria, las grandes obras maestras, lo que podría educarnos va cediendo el campo en discos y rollos a la hojarasca, a esta invasión terrible que me recuerda a las hormigas en La Vorágine. Si las empresas periodísticas que pudiéramos llamar musicales reaccionaran y no dieran margen a tanta producción de música popular inconveniente, ya sería ello feliz augurio de un porvenir menos inquietante. No pierdo la esperanza de que en más o menos tiempo esto suceda. Los grandes pensadores, antes que empecinados, son patriotas, esperemos. Bien se, por conversación con usted y con su carta de hoy, que estamos en estos momentos de acuerdo. Lástima que usted por circunstancias o exigencias especiales de la vida, no le sea dado predicar con el ejemplo en la actualidad.

De usted atento, S. S., Gonzalo Vidal

APPENDIX B

THE MYTH OF BAMBUCO'S SPANISH ORIGIN IN THE 1950S

B.1 "PARA LA HISTORIA DE NUESTRA MÚSICA: EL BAMBUCO, EXPRESIÓN COLOMBIANA," BY GABRIEL ESCOBAR CASAS. *EL COLOMBIANO*, SEPTEMBER 21 1951.

Alguien me ha preguntado que por qué escribo yo el bambuco en seis por ocho y yo le he contestado que es la mejor manera de hacerlo. No he querido decir que sea la única pero si la más apropiada. El bambuco, como toda la música latinoamericana, deriva en su totalidad, ya lo he dicho alguna vez, de los antiguos aires españoles, traídos al nuevo mundo por los conquistadores. Es ella una consecuencia de los soleares, fandanguillos, zambras, jotas, leares y peteneras transformados en cuecas, huapangos, zambas, gatos, tosonderos, marineras, bambucos, guabinas, torbellinos y pasillos, casi todos escritos actualmente en seis por ocho. El bambuco, como casi todos sus hermanos que acabo de citar, es un ritmo binario-ternario, es decir, divisible por dos y por tres. Muchos autores colombianos de indiscutible autoridad lo escriben en tres por cuatro, también signatura adecuada pero para ser ejecutada por elementos nativos, no si se trata de intérpretes extraños a nuestra idiosincrasia rítmica.

Aquí mismo en Colombia, en la costa atlántica por ejemplo, da gran trabajo su ejecución; y conste que el costeño lleva el ritmo en su sangre y podría decirse que lo hay hasta en el ambiente: el vaivén de sus palmeras, el rítmico vaivén de la caleta, el murmullo acompasado de las olas que van a romper sobre la arena, el ondulante caminar de sus mujeres, todo allí es ritmo. El grito del gamín al anunciar el diario, el resoplar del los barcos que surcan este nuestro gran río de la Magdalena, el pregón acompasado del vendedor ambulante, el botellero, el billetero, la dulcera, el carbonero, y lo que aún queda fluctuando en el alma de los barranquilleros. El grito inconfundible de Serafina Robles, la vendedora de cocos de agua, perpetuado en una magnífica página musical de mi personal amigo Eliécer Benítez.

Es que todo es ritmo, la luz, los perfumes, los colores, la materia, el universo y hasta la vida misma. Ya se ha dicho que ritmo es la relación de tiempo y espacio. Para que haya ritmo es necesario que haya simetría, y aún puede existir sin ella; pero para que ésta exista debe haber un punto de partida, algo que diga al espíritu el alfa de la continuidad. El hombre sintió el ritmo cuando dio el primer paso, el segundo, el tercero, y después cuando comenzó a trotar tras la presa que se le escapaba. Pero el ritmo puede ser binario o ternario, ambas cosas a la vez, y en este caso está el bambuco. En el bambuco hay dos tiempos fuertes o graves, que en muchos casos no es lo mismo, el primero y el segundo, tesis y arsis, o sea bajada y subida de una mano. En la signatura de

tres por cuatro encontramos que la segunda acentuación, o sea arsis, está en la mitad del compás, y en esa misma signatura encontramos que solamente el primer tiempo es fuerte, no así los dos restantes que son débiles o concediendo más, primer tiempo-fuerte, segundo-débil y tercero-medio fuerte o anacrúsico por añadidura, es decir, que necesita su resolución. Tiene el bambuco dos acentuaciones; debe necesariamente buscarse una signatura que muestre libremente, digámoslo así, su acentuación, y en ese caso tendremos el compás de seis por ocho o de 6/8 de unidad de valor.

Y viene ahora lo más delicado del bambuco, su ejecución. Cuando yo estudiaba instrumentación en el New York Collegue of Music, el de la ciudad de Nueva York, mi maestro, el gran Joseph Feinberg, me decía que para una buena ejecución es bueno que haya: 1. Formas claras y definidas; 2. Exactitud en el ritmo; 3. Acentuación exacta y precisa. Sin acentos no puede haber regularidad rítmica, y siendo el bambuco un baile es necesario, por su escritura, un compás que muestre claramente su acentuación y ese compás, para mí, es el seis por ocho. Si el bambuco tiene dos acentos, ambos fuertes, no encuadra dentro de la medida de tres por cuatro, porque la segunda mitad de ese compás es débil y aún más, está en la segunda mitad del tiempo débil del segundo tiempo de dicho compás. En mi libro "All Latin American Rhythms for the Modern Orchestra" (Edward B. Marx, New York, 1950), describo este ritmo en seis por ocho, y parece que está dando buenos resultados, pues algunas orquestas americanas y latinoamericanas están incluyendo en su repertorio bambucos y pasillos. El ritmo del porro lo habían hecho conocer con anterioridad. Esta fue una de las observaciones que hice en la ejecución del bambuco por las orquestas de la National Broadcasting Company. Casi todos los componentes de estas orquestas son ejecutantes de fama mundial, encontrándose entre ellos conductores de orquestas, directores de conservatorios, tratadistas, solistas, instrumentistas y doctores en música de diferentes nacionalidades.

Cuando yo llevé el primer bambuco escrito en tres por cuatro la confusión fue enorme. Los profesores leían lo que estaba escrito pero no le daban el aire de bambuco, como se dice comúnmente. Yo presenciaba el ensayo desde una de las primeras filas de butacas, un poco cerca del director. Era este el famoso Paul Lavalle; recuerdo además que estaban a mi lado Victoria Córdoba, José Ferrer, quien más tarde habría de ser tan célebre, Eddie Nelson y otros artistas, los cuales debían tomar parte ese día (noche) en el programa. El bambuco se ensayó una vez, otra vez, una vez más, pero el bambuco no salía. Yo me rascaba la cabeza de impaciencia al ver lo que sucedía, y hasta tuve ganas de recoger mis papeles y salir corriendo, cuando de pronto Lavalle, suspendiendo el ensayo y dirigiéndose a donde yo estaba, me preguntó en italianizado inglés: "oiga, mister Escobar, ¿esto qué es?", "un bambuco" le contesté yo casi sin saber lo que le contestaba. "Si, ya lo se que es un bambuco," me contestó riendo, "pero es que los muchachos (boys) no lo agarran". Como una iluminación del Todopoderoso cruzó por mi mente una solución rapidísima, hija de la circunstancia. "Oiga Lavalle", le dije, "cambie la signatura por 6/8", le contesté desde mi asiento, un tanto amoscado. El ordenó el cambio de compás, es decir de acentos, y el bambuco salió. Recuerdo que era "El republicano", de mi lamentado amigo Luis A. Calvo. Allí aprendí por la fuerza de las circunstancias que el bambuco debe escribirse en seis por ocho, para que haya una buena ejecución.

El bambuco se caracteriza también por las anticipaciones melódicas, llámense estas apoyaturas sencillas, dobles o triples, o retardos, es decir, que la melodía da la impresión de estar en dominante, por ejemplo, en tanto la armonía entra a tónica al principio del compás. Aquí en Antioquia, de donde están saliendo actualmente los bambucos más bellos que jamás haya oído, hacen las orquestaciones esquivando el primer tiempo del bajo, la fundamental, y poniéndolo en el segundo o tercer tiempo de cada compás. Esto desvirtúa una de las características del bambuco, cual es la anticipación melódica, que la determina el primer tiempo del bajo. Me da la impresión de un punto bajo guanacasteco, o de un son chapín, o de un son guatemalteco. El bambuco indudablemente pasó del

Tolima a Santander, de allí a Cundinamarca, más tarde a Antioquia y por último al Cauca, después de desprenderse de su abuelo el Cante Jondo, que encubó a su vez los soleares, los fandanguillos, las zambras, las jotas y las peteneras.

¿Cuándo se desprendió el castellano, el francés, el italiano, el portugués y todas las lenguas romances y no romances de su madre latina? ¿Cuándo se desprendieron el bambuco, el bunde? Quien lo sabe. Pero lo cierto es que durante la gesta emancipadora ya estaban suficientemente caracterizados para entrar a formar parte de nuestro folclor y ser ejecutados en los campos de batalla. La verdad es así mismo que durante la rebelión de Los Comuneros, ya se oían los primeros compases de bambucos, bundes y guabinas. El torbellino y el pasillo vinieron después. Manuela Beltrán era una gran bailadora de esos aires, lo mismo que Galán y sus compañeros. Siempre han sido el bambuco, el bunde y la guabina los bailes del pueblo.

Recuerdo de niño haber oído en Honda, Tolima, una frase que encerraba, o creo que aún encierra, una ofensa: dos mujeres del pueblo reñían desesperadamente, y después de haberse arañado las caras, mesado los cabellos, escupido e insultado de la manera más cordial, al separarlas le dijo una a la otra: ¡bundelera! Es decir, bailadora de bunde. ¿Y qué es el bunde? Un baile. ¿Y el bambuco? Su hermano mayor. Otro baile. ¿Y la guabina? Su hermana menor, lo mismo. Por eso es que yo no veo la razón por la cual al bambuco lo hayan tornado ahora en baladas sentimentales y en distraimiento de trastiendas y borrachos. Gracias a algunos autores de la montaña entre ellos el pereirano Luis Carlos González, a Macías, a quienes no conozco personalmente, al santandereano Luis Uribe Bueno, una de las más interesantes figuras de la música en Colombia, a Vieco, Figueroa, Camargo y otros cuyos nombres no preciso en estos momentos, poética y melódicamente los han encausado a mejores destinos, pues ya iba el bambuco camino del tango y del bolero, con letras lloriqueonas o despechadas, donde se habla de ausencias, olvidos e infidelidades. Pero no, el bambuco no es eso, y vuelvo y lo repito: el bambuco es una aire viril, que trae a nuestros sentidos la fragancia del tabacal, el vaho vivificante de la vacada prolífica, que huele a pólvora y aguardiente, y que al oírlo ejecutar saltan en nuestros ojos la corraleja de toros, el descabezamiento de gallos en las Fiestas de San Juan, las carreras de mochos en el Camino Real, cuando no el desafío mortal de macho a macho en la callejuela circunvecina y solitaria, en tanto en la barricada de la plaza mayor entre bandoleras, flores y guirnaldas, suena la primera clarinada que da comienzo a la fiesta brava, donde los diestros improvisados se jugarán la vida bajo la mirada insinuante de sus mujeres, mientras en el aire se desgranán las notas de un bambuco. Y si ese bambuco es ejecutado por la banda de El Espinal, en el Tolima.

B.2 “LOS ORÍGENES DEL BAMBUCO,” BY GABRIEL ESCOBAR CASAS. *EL COLOMBIANO*, SUPLEMENTO DOMINICAL P.4. FEBRUARY 24 1952

(Una gentil amiga me ha pedido que escriba algo sobre los orígenes del bambuco, y aunque este artículo a debido aparecer primero que mi anterior “El Bambuco, su escritura, su ritmo y su interpretación”, para complacer a esta muchacha de cabellos de oro, en cuyos bucles se refleja los cambiantes del maizal en flor, accedo a ello, presentándole de antemano mis rendidos agradecimientos por su obligante y generosa exigencia).

Se ha dicho y se ha creído que el bambuco es de origen negroide, y dizque hay que buscarlo en la música traída a nuestro país por negros esclavos traídos de un lugar denominado Bambuk, perteneciente al Senegal, África occidental, colonia francesa desde 1858, pero país completamente desconocido por los habitantes de Europa en la época del descubrimiento de América. Y lo curioso del caso es que tanto escritores como novelistas, historiadores, musicólogos y personas más o menos

cultas hayan caído en semejante desatino, formando alrededor de este nombre un verdadero laberinto de opiniones, aseveraciones y elucubraciones de toda índole, hasta llegar a negarle a nuestro más auténtico baile y música nacionales su origen netamente español.

El primer error partió—a mi parecer—de nuestro ilustre novelista y costumbrista don Jorge Issacs, quien en una de las páginas de su famosa *María* dice hablando del bambuco: “Siendo el bambuco una música que en nada se asemeja a la de los aborígenes americanos, ni a los aires españoles, no hay ligereza a asegurar que fue traída del África por los primeros esclavos que los conquistadores importaron al Cauca, tanto más que el nombre que hoy tiene parece no ser otro que el de Bankuk levemente alterado”. Más tarde don Enrique Naranjo Martínez, de la Academia de Historia, hace otra aseveración algo parecida al decir que “lo que si he encontrado en el África Ecuatorial son los nombres de Banduco, Bamacos, Bambumbe y Bamaki... es bien posible que alguno de los nombres antes citados hayan llegado a originar la palabra Bambuco”. Y más adelante añade: “Siempre he creído que el Bambuco pasó del Cauca al Tolima, de allí a Cundinamarca y de Cundinamarca al sur de Santander”. El señor Jorge Ignacio Perdomo Escobar en su *Historia de la Música en Colombia* afirma que “El bambuco en nuestro concepto, como dijimos atrás, es la resultante musical de las tres razas fundidas: Afro-hispano-indio”.

Pero a mi juicio, ni una cosa ni la otra: el bambuco ni tuvo su origen en África, ni fue traído al Cauca por los conquistadores, ni es la resultante del negro, del español y del indio. Estoy enteramente de acuerdo con don Enrique Otero D’Costa, quien en su obra *Montañas de Santander* afirma que “el bambuco no tiene origen africano porque no lo tocan los negros de todas las regiones de Colombia, donde predomina ese elemento racial”. Y yo añadiría: es que ni siquiera lo conocen. Y algo más: el bambuco es originario del Tolima donde el elemento negro está en bastante minoría en tanto que la raza española dejó hondas costumbres en raíces, en costumbres y tradiciones.

El bambuco como el huapango, el joropo, el bailecito boliviano, la chacarera, la plena portorriqueña y hasta el mismo ñañigo cubano, son como la mayoría de la música folklórica latinoamericana—con excepción del huayno peruano—de la más pura extracción española. El origen de toda ella hay que buscarlo en los fandanguillos y soleares de Andalucía y Sevilla, traídos a América por los conquistadores entre algunos de los cuales había payadores y cantaores de la mejor calidad. El mismo tango con su típico sabor gaucho es la más pura cepa española, debiendo buscarse su origen en las zambras de Jerez de la Frontera, música de los gitanos que habitan las cuevas de Granada en la región de Albaicín y el Sacro Monte.

El negro no ha dado nada a la cultura musical hispana, por lo menos melódicamente. Todo su aporte ha sido rítmico, pero no melódico. La línea melódica ondulada, como es la del bambuco, no la puede concebir pero ni siquiera entender. Ni aun en la música que se dice afro-cubana, tiene el negro otra parte que no sea la rítmica. Porque las fragmentarias escalas pentatónicas y sextatónicas que se usan en su composición, pertenecen a las antiguas escalas moras llevadas a España en las invasiones de los Almorávides y Almohades de los siglos VI y VII y de allí, ya elaboradas, traídas al Nuevo Mundo.

El indio tampoco a dado nada a la cultura musical hispanoamericana. Cuando don Pedro de Añasco fundó la Villa de Timaná en 1539, ya hacía mucho tiempo que había desaparecido la civilización agustiniana y sus instrumentos musicales no pasaban de ser pitos, caracoles, sanajas y charrascas sin otra melodía que no fuera gritos guturales, chillidos y palmadas. Ninguno de los historiadores de la Conquista de América, incluyendo a fray Pedro Simón, menciona nada acerca del arte musical en los países descubiertos por España, con excepción—como dejo dicho—del huayno peruano. Y Pizarro al conquistar el Perú, sólo encontró fragmentos de la antigua civilización Inca, especialmente en lo que a música se refiere. Las antiguas escalas Aymara y Quechua y algunos instrumentos primitivos tales como la quena, flauta hecha con los huesos de la llama o del cóndor.

La antara o flauta de pan y el ayariche, especie de ocarina, tambores y sonajas, fue todo lo que encontraron Pizarro y sus compañeros de la enantes pujante dinastía Capac.

El bambuco es tan de origen español como son el pasillo, el joropo, el huapango, el gato, la chacarera, el merengue dominicano, la guajira cubana y todos sus congéneros. Son una evolución de los antiguos aires españoles traídos a nuestras tierras por los conquistadores, y todos, pero absolutamente todos, basados en la moderna notación y escala diatónica. Unos escritos en 3/4, otros en 6/8, pero todos basados en las soleares, zambras y fandanguillos, y estos basados a su vez en el cante jondo, y evolucionados en la forma que hoy los conocemos.

El bambuco, la más auténtica de nuestra música nacional, encierra en sí la brillantez del antiguo bolero español y la alegría de la jota aragonesa, pero se lo está despojando de su masculinidad para convertirlo en un soliloquio sentimental, con letras trágicas donde se habla de suicidios, muertes y cementerios, y toda la gama funeral que hizo tan célebres a nuestros bardos centenaristas. Pero el bambuco es todo lo contrario, es un aire viril, evocador y bizarro. El libertador lo hacía ejecutar por las bandas militares al iniciarse los combates y más tarde, en nuestras guerras internas, tuvo parte principal en los triunfos y derrotas de los dos bandos rivales. Siendo yo muy niño lo oí ejecutar por bandas particulares en las corridas de toros con emoción y gallardía dignas de la fiesta brava. La célebre banda del Espinal (Tolima) a la cual Murillo dedicó algunas de sus composiciones, ha tenido y tiene fama de interpretar magistralmente nuestros bambucos.

Es el Bambuco que hace exclamar a Rafael Pombo de la siguiente manera:

Para conjurar el tedio
De este vivir tan maluco,
Dios me depare un bambuco
Y al punto, santo remedio.

Pero lo más extraño del caso es que aquellas personas encargadas de popularizarlo y hacerlo conocer, llámense duettos o tríos, directores o arregladores, le están cavando su propia sepultura con esos calderones interminables, ritardados y vallebatados, pero aun más, con algunos finales donde las voces se ahogan en un vertical descenso de la melodía, casi todo en modo menor, donde se adivina en el acto una raza semivencida, que sólo le queda el derecho de recordar.

Pero el bambuco es todo lo contrario: es la música nacional por excelencia, reflejo de nuestra personalidad, espejo de nuestras virtudes, engendro de nuestra raza, canto de nuestra epopeya, pabellón de nuestras gestas, olimpo de nuestros ideales y savia de nuestra nacionalidad.

Yo tengo mucha fé en nuestro bambuco y lo defenderé donde quiera que me encuentre. Lo he enarbolado en lo alto de la fama; lo he paseado triunfalmente por todos los pueblos que mi peregrinaje artístico me ha obligado a recorrer y si aún me quedan algunos años de vida, ellos los dedicaré a mostrarlo y enseñarlo a los pueblos del mundo en un afán de glorificar y enaltecer el más genuino, el más auténtico, el más castizo de nuestros aires nacionales.

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