

Susan Thomas. 2009. *Cuban Zarzuela: Performing Race and Gender on Havana's Lyric Stage*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois.

**Reviewed by Marti Newland**

In *Cuban Zarzuela: Performing Race and Gender on Havana's Lyric Stage*, musicologist Susan Thomas draws on her years of archival work in Cuba and the work of a broad collection of scholars including Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler, Karen Henson, and Robin Moore to detail the development and performance practices of an understudied genre of Cuban opera, "zarzuela." Emerging as a well-received genre in Havana theaters during the early twentieth century, Cuban zarzuela incorporates Spanish light opera and Afro-Cuban musical characteristics into one-act operettas featuring a number of racial and nationalist archetypes endemic in turn-of-the-century Cuba: the "mulatta" woman, the "black" man, the "white" woman, and the "white" man. Thomas organizes the text into studies of each of these subject positions to reveal how Cuban zarzuela served as a platform to establish a distinctly Cuban opera genre, as well as to provide a respectable social outlet for Cuba's white, female bourgeoisie. A rich example of the confluence of nationalism, race, gender, class, art and popular music, this genre allows the author to analyze a vast swath of key polemics challenging the modern West.

After an introduction in which she outlines the historical and musical scope of her text, Thomas spends the first two chapters of the book historicizing Cuban lyric theater (chapter 1) and outlining the theoretical framework for her analysis of gender and genre in Cuban zarzuela (chapter 2). Stressing how zarzuela articulates themes of everyday life in Havana, Thomas carefully situates zarzuela as an emplaced, local musical tradition in juxtaposition to Cuba's metropole and North American transnational influences. She also traces the development of theater infrastructure in Madrid and Havana, as well as the development of Afro-Cubanismo and Cuban women's political activities to underscore the means by which zarzuela developed its particular class of consumer: white upper-class women.

A set of archetype studies follows the opening material. Chapters 3 through 6 each feature one common character type in zarzuela performance, characters that also represent the social positions at the heart of early twentieth-century Cuban political debates. The mulatta, "a beautiful young woman whose genetic makeup is the source of both her character and the intrigues, comic and tragic, that shape her life," is usually a soprano role most noted for her *salida* entrance aria (40). Thomas offers analysis of

## Current Musicology

---

salidas scores from three zarzuelas, *Maria la O* (1930), *Cecilia Valdes* (1932) and *Amalia Batista* (1936), which represent the demanding tessitura and melodic contour of the arias, but lack detail about timbre and zarzuela's Afro-Cuban musical characteristics. Black male characters embodied stereotypes of black masculinity found in a *negrito*, a comic buffoon, a *negro tragico*, a sentimental, serious (black) man, and a *negro catedratico*, a black professor who used "overly flowery speech" and "poked fun at the growing class of black professionals" (85). Additionally, white male or female artists in blackface often performed these roles. *Ingenues*, white upper class female characters who search for husbands, contrast with the working, poor, white female characters in zarzuelas. *Romanzas*, an ingenue's aria scenes sung in private, protected spaces (unlike the public spaces of the mulattas' salidas), reinforced white upper class femininity with virtue and helped to maintain a social construction of whiteness, according to Thomas. White male characters, the *galan*, a symbol of upwardly mobile Cuban patriarchy through an urban, wealthy, male university student and the *criollo*, a rural, uneducated, poor (white) man exposes "the white male protagonist's failings [and] also teaches the necessity of having to learn to live with him" (176).

Thomas's structuring of these traditional zarzuela roles is both organized and informative. This monograph responds to Karen Henson's critique that "operatic studies of the Other have . . . largely ignored the cultural work done by male bodies and voices," as it analyzes both male and female characters and demonstrates the saliency of this approach to opera studies' analyses of difference (94). Her analysis frames black and white, male and female roles as classifications contingent upon each other—a much needed approach in race and gender studies. However, Thomas's structuring of character privileges a Western gaze of zarzuela for the reader—she gives us a keen account of white male fascination with oversexed black women mulattas in zarzuela performances, as well as white female fascination with the approachable black male found in negro tragicos. But what of other social positions? What is the story of non-mulatta black women, as well as non-black and non-white Cubans in zarzuela history?

The book suffers from what is beyond Thomas's control: we do not know enough about Cuban zarzuela—yet. She dedicates a large portion of her text to introducing the reader to the genre and its composers, performers, and consumers, and she does so by making perceptive connections between different zarzuela productions and codifying zarzuela performance practice with sophistication. While Thomas has thoughtfully made this necessary introduction of zarzuela, she leaves the reader with questions—especially related to the complicated use of dialect in zarzuela performance, and the

biographical information on popular zarzuela singer-actors. In what ways does dialect represent a character? Who were these artists, and how did their social positions inform their performances? Thomas gives us a brief glimpse of a few of these people, including: Enrique Arredondo, a blackface actor mentioned in a footnote, whose career trajectory illustrates zarzuela politics; Francisco Covarrubias, the first Cuban known to perform in blackface; Rita Montaneur, a soprano who played a man in blackface and “feminized the portrayal of black masculinity” (87); Miguel de Grandy, who played the only negro tragico title role—as a tenor, not in the conventional baritone register used in most negro tragico performances; and Ester Borja, a zarzuela singer who performed in New York in the 1940s. It is now up to the scholarly community to conduct in-depth research about Cuban zarzuela singers and how they used language to mediate race and gender identity.

Thomas could have strengthened the text with more discussion about two issues she attentively negotiated: her treatment of sound and the challenges of her archival work. Her inclusion and analysis of score excerpts certainly helps the reader hear zarzuela music through historical musicological methods. The writing of early twentieth-century Cuban journalists and other zarzuela critics, in addition to her score analysis, would help us better understand the sounds ascribed to Cuba’s female upper-class through zarzuela performance. Perhaps the challenges Thomas faced in conducting her archival research determine the absence of non-score oriented sonic descriptions. She writes, “Not a single zarzuela score was ever published” (5). Her preoccupation with presenting rare zarzuela scores may have overshadowed the possibility for involving other forms of musical description and representation. In the introduction, Thomas tells us that fear of theft and appropriation kept zarzuela composers from publishing their scores. Composers kept tight guard over their hand-written scores, conducted their own productions, and did not fully orchestrate percussion parts, especially those associated with popular dance rhythms. The lack of zarzuela publications speaks to a larger social phenomenon of theft as it relates to cultural products in the black Atlantic. Thomas cites Eric Lott’s (1995) “love and theft” theory in order to explain the simultaneous fear of black bodies and desire for black zarzuela characters in this Cuban context (82). She regards the impossibility of studying an urtext as “irrelevant” in this context of popular show business (6), but I argue that zarzuela composers’ efforts to protect their works exemplifies the larger issue plaguing cultural producers and products in the black Atlantic. Thomas could have elaborated upon the historical and current reproduction of black cultural products to show how practices of stereotyping and appropriation act as methods

## Current Musicology

---

to manage power and subordination. Her text recuperates Cuban zarzuela in the historical record. More methodological discussion from Thomas would articulate the current challenge that the rarity of scores poses in contemporary scholarship.

*Cuban Zarzuela* is sure to be a text that inspires more work on zarzuela, a genre important to scholarship about the black Atlantic, gender studies, music produced through colonial encounters, and opera studies. Its oral and written mode of transmission as well as its large, racially and economically diverse audiences distinguish Cuban zarzuela as both popular and art music. Thomas shows us how Cuban zarzuela complicates this distinction between popular and art music, the division between improvisation and notation in music making, and the instability of genre categorization. This is a timely, foundational book for scholars working in postcolonial academia. Cuban zarzuela is a genre ripe for more scholarship, and Thomas has led the way.

### References

- Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. Imitation and Gender Insubordination. In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Haperin, 307–320. London and New York: Routledge.
- Henson, Karen. 1999. Victor Capoul, Marguerite Olnagier's *Le Saïs*, and the Arousing of Female Desire. *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52: 419–63.
- Lott, Eric. 1995. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, Robin. 1997. *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920–1940*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.