



# (De)constructing Argentine Women: Gender, Nation, and Identity in ‘Alfonsina y el mar’

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## Abstract

This article examines gender, nation, and identity in the popular song of folk roots ‘Alfonsina y el mar’. Written by Félix Luna and Ariel Ramírez, the song is based on the suicide of feminist poet Alfonsina Storni and achieved worldwide popularity through Mercedes Sosa’s 1969 rendition on the album *Mujeres argentinas*. Using Butler’s theory of gender performance, Cusick’s proposals for a feminist music theory, and Plesch’s concept of dysphoric topics in Argentine nationalist music, this article deconstructs the song’s poetic, musical, and visual discourses to critique its underlying cultural signification. It concludes that by infantilizing, romanticizing, and nationalizing Storni’s public figure, her legacy was adapted to the patriarchal expectations of decorum and historical narrative about nation pervasive in Argentina in the late 1960s. Storni’s white European urban background was adapted to more ‘authentic’ Argentine values through Sosa’s performance and public image.

En el fondo del mar  
hay una casa  
de cristal.<sup>1</sup>

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1 ‘In the bottom of the sea / there is a house / of crystal.’ Alfonsina Storni, ‘Yo en el fondo del mar’ (‘I at the bottom of the sea’), *Poemas* (Buenos Aires: Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación, 2017), 76. All translations from Spanish are by the author unless otherwise noted.

Poetry was her destiny and, because of this,  
her life was a painful struggle  
between a reality that she desired to sublimate  
and an illusion that she insisted on achieving<sup>2</sup>

If gender is constituted by bodily performances,  
and metaphors of gender are constantly circulating through discourse,  
might not elements of all bodily performances be read as metaphors of gender  
even when they seem to be performances of other things?<sup>3</sup>

In 1969, Argentine musician Ariel Ramírez, historian Félix Luna, and vocalist Mercedes Sosa (1935–2009) collaborated on the creation of an album entitled *Mujeres argentinas* (*Argentine Women*).<sup>4</sup> The narration is organized into eight self-contained numbers, each based on a real or fictional Argentine female character and vernacular genre. Sosa's performance of each of these contrasting roles is astonishingly diverse. Her powerful voice and political activism signalled her as having the perfect *physique du rôle* to embody, for example, Juana Azurduy, the fierce revolutionary captain.<sup>5</sup> However, it was the more gentle 'Alfonsina y el mar' ('Alfonsina and the Sea'), inspired by the poet Alfonsina Storni (1892–1938), that became the most popular song of the album and a regular feature in Sosa's repertory for decades to come.<sup>6</sup> The liner notes state that 'Alfonsina y el mar' evokes Storni 'in her stellar, definitive moment.'<sup>7</sup> But the song does not describe Storni's significance as a writer and a feminist, nor the recognitions that she achieved in her lifetime. Instead, the song focuses on her suicide, a death by drowning.

Alfonsina Storni was a feminist urbanite, a celebrated poet, and a Swiss immigrant to Argentina. A 1924 picture shows her walking assertively on the *ramblas* in Mar del Plata, the same popular seaside city where, at 47 years old and suffering from terminal cancer,

2 Mercedes Sosa, Ariel Ramírez, Félix Luna, and Héctor Zeoli, *Mujeres argentinas* (Buenos Aires: Philips, 1969). 82223 PL – Mono, 85574, Stereo. Inner sleeve.

3 Suzanne G. Cusick, 'Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem', *Perspectives of New Music* 32/1 (1994), 14.

4 Sosa et al., *Mujeres argentinas*.

5 This song was also featured in the film *Güemes, la tierra en armas* (1971). Directed by Leopoldo Torre Nilsson. With Alfredo Alcón and Norma Aleandro in the leading roles. Ariel Ramírez composed the music for this film, which was nominated for the Golden Prize at the International Film Festival in Moscow, in 1971. Sosa was cast as Juana Azurduy. Fragments of the film accompanied by Ramírez's song can be viewed on YouTube at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifZ37B5t-T8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifZ37B5t-T8) (accessed 16 August 2020). The film can be viewed on YouTube at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeeEnkTubOE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeeEnkTubOE) (accessed 21 December 2021).

6 Very well known in the Spanish-speaking countries, 'Alfonsina y el mar' has been covered by artists of various styles and genres, such as Chabuca Granda, Plácido Domingo, Nana Mouskouri, Paloma San Basilio, Tania Libertad, and Shakira, to name a few. A simple Spotify search on 25 November 2020 returned a total of 909 entries.

7 'Ariel Ramírez ha conseguido dar a esta zamba la belleza que su tema merecía, rodeando de una melancólica sugestión el hermoso poema con que Félix Luna evoca a esta singular mujer en su momento estelar, definitivo.' [Unsigned]. Liner notes to *Mujeres argentinas*. LP, Philips, 82223 PL, Mono, 85574, Stereo, 3.

she would jump to the sea from a pier.<sup>8</sup> However, the song portrays her as a naive girl who walked calmly into the water, romanticizing her suicide by expunging it of its violence.<sup>9</sup> The vernacular rhythm of the zamba, the performance style, and Sosa's regional diction add rural overtones to the story as depicted in 'Alfonsina y el mar'. Nonetheless, Sosa's powerful and nuanced performance provides an empathic representation of the feminist heroine.

Similar tensions in the representation of gender, nation, and identity can be observed in the graphic design of the *Mujeres argentinas* record and the sheet music collection. While the LP cover art suggests a historiographic narrative that explores Argentina's identity in relation to its past as a Spanish colony, the inner sleeve presents a series of vignettes in naive style to represent each one of the women in *Mujeres argentinas*. Similarly, the feminine ingenuity conveyed through the sheet music cover design would give place, with time, to a nationalistic, empowered female representation by replacing the initial painting by Raúl Russo with a photograph of Mercedes Sosa.

This article offers an examination of music and identity in and around the song 'Alfonsina y el mar', tracing gender and nation markers in their affective, material, and vocal aspects within a broad sociopolitical and historical context. First, I briefly present Alfonsina Storni's life and work against the background of the negotiations of gender and nation in modernist urban Argentina at the beginning of the twentieth century. I infer Storni's political position regarding female subjectivity and women's roles in society from her life and details of her poetry. Second, I contextualize sociohistorically and aesthetically the genesis of the song, composed thirty years after Storni's death. I examine its significance within the album *Mujeres argentinas* and contrast it with a previous album by the same authors. Both albums contain stylized versions of rural music in a practice that flourished between the 1940s and 1960s and came to be known as the Argentine folk boom.<sup>10</sup> Lastly, I offer a hermeneutical analysis of the three converging discourses in 'Alfonsina y el mar' as an aesthetic object: visual/textual, poetic, and musical.<sup>11</sup> I examine the identitarian cues embedded in the graphic

8 'Alfonsina Storni frente al mar', *Caras y Caretas*, Buenos Aires, 1924. The central picture is kept at the Argentine National Archives (Archivo General de la Nación Argentina, Inventario 7770).

9 'y si llama él no le digas que estoy / dile que Alfonsina no vuelve / y si llama él no le digas nunca que estoy / di que me he ido' ('And if he calls don't tell him that I am in / Tell him that Alfonsina will not be coming back / And if he calls, don't you ever tell him that I am in / Tell him that I have gone'). Translated with help from Melanie Plesch. Ariel Ramírez and Félix Luna, *Alfonsina y el mar*, piano arrangement (Buenos Aires: Editorial Lagos, 1990), 2.

10 Folk music disseminated by the mass media, including radio, television, records, and sheet music, is known as 'música de proyección folklórica' to distinguish it from the local music-making in the rural areas. There are many debates around the proper denomination. Some authors prefer to use the term 'folk music' or 'folklore' for music originating in the rural areas, preferring to call 'música popular de raíz folklórica' ('popular music of folk roots') to those creations that are massively mediated through artists such as Yupanqui or Sosa, widely consumed throughout the urban concentrations. As Díaz developed, there was a debate around these denominations fuelled by ideological differences and countering perspectives. See Claudio Díaz, *Variaciones sobre el ser nacional. Una aproximación sociocultural al folklore argentino* (Córdoba, Argentina: Ediciones Recovecos, 2009), 85–6.

11 I am loosely adapting here the basic principles of discursive practices as defined by Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 2nd edn (London: Taylor and Francis, 2012).

design and marketing strategy of the commercialized products (record album and sheet music), the lyrics, the music, and the performance. Ultimately, this article shows how the meanings of a song are built through the intersection of creative processes and reception dynamics that are inextricably connected to the song itself.

### (De)constructing the Argentine woman

A guiding theoretical assumption in my argument is that musical cultures, and within them popular songs, reflect and reproduce existing sociocultural identities in addition to being sites of sociocultural tensions and negotiations.<sup>12</sup> Songs are multivectorial sources that encapsulate statements, responses, and contradictions present in society, and they do so in a complex manner that involves the perception of material and immaterial modalities. Georgina Born describes the fluid continuity of music as a paradigm of multimediated art.<sup>13</sup> Mediated by their material support (ink on paper, vinyl, magnetic tape, CD, memory card, or silicon chip), songs are perceived as both sound *and* image.<sup>14</sup> They are encoded and transmitted between writers and performers through musical and verbal notation and cues. When they reach the audience, they also convey meanings through the cover art on the record sleeve, the illustration that advertises the sheet music, the video clip that promotes the song, and the bodies of the performers who sing and dance on the stage or screen.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, I complement the analysis and critique of the lyric and musical materials of 'Alfonsina y el mar' by discussing the cultural actors that participate in the song's production. In addition to examining the life and work of Alfonsina Storni, I analyse the testimonials of the songwriters Ariel Ramírez and Félix Luna about their creative process, critique the visual design and marketing strategy of the products, and describe the performance and public persona of Sosa, the vocalist who, by embodying, possessing, and giving acoustic presence to the song, participated actively in the construction of the sociocultural identities that are inscribed in the materials, thus impacting their initial cues of gender and nation.

According to Judith Butler, gender can be understood as an outcome of performance, as an attribute that is the resulting form of a behaviour in real or in fictional life.<sup>16</sup> But what happens when the behaviour of real and fictional women is described by male authors?<sup>17</sup> Are they

12 See Georgina Born, 'IV. Music and the Representation/Articulation of Sociocultural Identities' and 'V. Techniques of the Musical Imaginary', in *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

13 Georgina Born, 'On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity', *Twentieth Century Music* 2/1 (2005), 7.

14 Visuality of popular music became more poignant with the development of the music video. See Fabian Holt, 'Is Music Becoming More Visual? Online Video Content in the Music Industry', *Visual Studies* 26/1 (2011).

15 As observed by Cusick, these bodies may also enact metaphors of gender or the constitution of gender itself. See Cusick, 'Feminist Theory', 14.

16 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 191.

17 The depiction of real and fictional women by male authors has been addressed extensively in musicology, especially during the last decades. *Frauenliebe und Leben*, a song cycle composed by Robert Schumann on poems by Adelbert von Chamisso, for example, has provided the basis for an important discussion on the representation of gender roles in poetry and music. Even if the poems described an imaginary heroine, scholars have identified Clara Wieck as the female character that Schumann imagined as he set the verses to music, months before their marriage. See Elissa

constructing a particular type of woman in their depictions? If so, is male construction of womanhood embedded with nationalist markers? There is a striking contrast between Storni's gendered behaviour and the representation of gender in the poetic, musical, and visual discourse of 'Alfonsina y el mar'. As apparent through her poetry, Storni's life as a woman and her ideas about womanhood contrast with the strong patriarchal values present in a sociocultural sector in Argentina in the late 1960s, values which influenced the constructed identity of Storni in 'Alfonsina y el mar'.

The second lens applied in my discussion is that of nation, in particular the construction of a nationalist identity in and through a song. Absent from the poetic discourse, this categorization – crucial for the aesthetic and ideological purpose of the album – was defined through musical and visual discourse and inscribed in the commercial strategy endorsed by the publishing company and record label. In order to situate 'Alfonsina y el mar' within a musical aesthetic that sought to construct an idea of the Argentine nation on the basis of an imaginary peasant past, I draw on Melanie Plesch's concept of dysphoric topics in Argentine nationalist music.<sup>18</sup> By combining these two categories, gender and nation, I argue that the transformation of Storni's identity made it more appealing to the general public. Finally, following Martin Stokes's 'vocal turn', I consider musical performance (and in particular vocal performance), as integral to the said transformation.<sup>19</sup> 'Musical performance', writes Stokes, 'is multitextual, embracing all manner of contradiction (between, for example, a lyric, a musical phrase, and a tone of voice) [and it] allows veiled criticisms to be expressed when open criticism is impossible'.<sup>20</sup> For this reason, I contend, Sosa's performance modulates gender and nation markers underlying in the musical materials, applying her own gendered perspective to the initial representation cues.

Through the case study of 'Alfonsina y el mar', paraphrasing Martin Stokes, I show that *Mujeres argentinas* was intensely involved in the propagation of dominant classifications of ethnicity, class, and gender, and notably, too, in the cultural articulation of nationalism.<sup>21</sup>

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S. Guralnick, "'Ah Clara, I Am Not Worthy of Your Love": Rereading "Frauenliebe Und Leben", the Poetry and the Music', *Music & Letters* 87/4 (2006); Ruth A. Solie, 'Whose Life? The Gendered Self in Schumann's Frauenliebe Songs', in *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. Steven Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Kristina Muxfeldt, 'Frauenliebe und Leben Now and Then', *19th-Century Music* 25/1 (2001).

18 Melanie Plesch, "'Una pena estrordinaria": tópicos disfóricos en el nacionalismo musical argentino', *Acta Musicologica* 86/2 (2014). Plesch has successfully adapted the classical topic theory, developed by Leonard Ratner, *Classical Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980) and further expanded by the work of Kofi Agawu, Wye J. Allanbrook, Robert Hatten, and Raymond Monelle, among others, to Latin American art music.

19 See Martin Stokes, 'Musical Ethnicity: Affective, Material and Vocal Turns', *The World of Music*, 6/2 (2017), 19–34.

20 Martin Stokes, 'East, West, and Arabesk', in *Western Music and its Others*, ed. Born and Hesmondhalgh, 216.

21 'Music is intensely involved in the propagation of dominant classifications of ethnicity, class, and gender, and notably, too, in the cultural articulation of nationalism. Indeed, the violence which enforces dominant classifications is seldom far away from musical performances in many situations.' Martin Stokes, 'Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity and Music', in *Ethnicity, Identity and Music*, ed. Martin Stokes (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 8.

## Argentine identity in the twentieth century

The issue of a national identity was crucial in Argentina at the turn of the twentieth century. The country was perceived as a land of promises and received the largest number of immigrants in relation to the pre-existing population. While the ideologues of the Generation of the 1880s, who promoted European immigration, expected the arrival of engineers and skilled labour to help build the country, it was mostly farmers and unskilled workers who arrived en masse. Instead of populating uninhabited rural areas such as Patagonia, immigrants concentrated on urban centres in the Litoral region<sup>22</sup> and especially in Buenos Aires, accentuating the existing demographic imbalance. According to the 1895 census, more than half of the inhabitants of the city were immigrants, mostly of Italian and Spanish descent, and this number escalated to a proportion of five immigrants for each native when considering the segment of adult males.<sup>23</sup>

The Stornis followed this migratory path. Born in 1892 in Sala Capriasca, Switzerland, Alfonsina Storni emigrated with her family to Argentina in 1896 to the province of San Juan, in the northwestern region of Cuyo.<sup>24</sup> Failing to make a living as brewers, they moved east to the city of Rosario, province of Santa Fe, in the Litoral region and opened a coffee shop, which would also be unsuccessful. Owing to her family's precarious financial situation, Alfonsina started working at a young age while she continued her education. When she was 17 years old, she moved to Coronda (north of Rosario and in the same province) to enrol at the Escuela Normal Mixta de Maestros Rurales (Normal Co-Education School of Rural Teachers) where she graduated as a rural elementary school teacher in 1910.<sup>25</sup> As an unmarried woman already pregnant with her son, she settled in Buenos Aires in 1911 and worked in various administrative and teaching positions while publishing sporadically in literary magazines.<sup>26</sup>

Considered one of the greatest Latin American female poets of her time, Storni's poems and life reveal tension between an autonomous feminine subjectivity and the existing gender normativity.<sup>27</sup> Her first book of poetry, *La inquietud del rosal* (*The Restlessness of the Rose Bush*), was published in 1916 and opened the door for her to join certain intellectual circles where she became acquainted with socialist modernism and poetic avant-garde ideas – including the

22 The Litoral region comprises the provinces of Misiones, Corrientes y Entre Ríos, and the area of the provinces of Formosa, Chaco, and Santa Fe that are close to the Paraná and Paraguay rivers.

23 Oscar Terán, *Vida intelectual en el Buenos Aires fin-de-siglo (1880–1910): Derivas de la cultura científica* (Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2000), 46.

24 Tania Diz, 'Alfonsina Storni', in *Dictionnaire des Créatrices*, ed. Antoinette Fouque, Béatrice Didier, and Mireille Calle-Gruber (Paris: Éditions Des Femmes, 2010). See also Josefina Delgado, *Alfonsina Storni. Una biografía esencial* (Buenos Aires: Random House, 1990).

25 Many of the writers of the period and the women who participated in the early feminist movements were Normal School graduates. See Mónica Szurmuk, *Women in Argentina: Early Travel Narratives* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 98.

26 Storni's poems have been insightfully critiqued in the context of Buenos Aires modernist culture by Beatriz Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1902 y 1930* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1988), 78–85.

27 Francisco Luis Cardona Castro, 'Estudio Preliminar', in Alfonsina Storni, *Antología poética* (Barcelona: Brontes, 2018), 5. See also Alicia Salomone, *Alfonsina Storni: mujeres, modernidad y literatura* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2006).

use of eroticism and variations on classical forms. Storni's poetry explores and documents feminine subjectivity by describing the embodiment not only of musical sensations<sup>28</sup> but also of women's experiences in a patriarchal society. The rose bush, for example, is a metaphor for young women who are restless and anxious to grow up, without realizing that adulthood would bring hardships. In 'Inútil Soy' ('I Am Useless'), published in *Ocre* (1925), allusions to bodily sensations are combined with images from nature that express the feelings of inadequacy of women living in a world defined by men.<sup>29</sup> 'Femenina' ('Feminine') responds to a poem by Baudelaire inverting male–female roles.<sup>30</sup> The female narrator describes her disenchantment with a male lover who is cold and impervious to her suffering, affirming that at least Baudelaire, being a man, got some pleasure from the female body that he so severely criticized.<sup>31</sup> It is worth noting that Storni's contribution to Argentine culture was as much political as poetic, since she was one of the first women to write about the female voting rights in Argentina and participated actively in unions and civil activist groups.

Buenos Aires was growing at an impressive pace and had become a cosmopolitan city, reasons that constituted a challenge to its sociocultural dynamic and to the notion of a national identity. From 1,567,000 inhabitants in 1914, it reached 2,415,000 in 1936, largely due to immigrants and their children.<sup>32</sup> The variety of languages and national origins combined with the fast growth of the city influenced the vision of the intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>33</sup> Politically, the first decades of the twentieth century also saw critical changes. In 1912, the Sáenz Peña Law declared the secret, obligatory, and universal vote for all male citizens, born or naturalized. This law not only transformed the Argentine political scene but also resulted in the election of a Unión Cívica Radical (UCR) government in 1916. This centre-leftist party would remain in power for fourteen years, interrupted by a military coup in 1930, the first of a long list of anti-democratic events.<sup>34</sup>

28 See, for example, Storni, 'Vida', 'El cisne enfermo', and 'Al oído' from 'La inquietud del rosál' (1916), *Antología poética*, 11–13.

29 Storni writes: "[Q]uise . . . ser en el mundo algún tornillo más . . . Pero . . . de mi instinto volví al oscuro pozo . . . Pues . . . Yo nací para el amor . . . Inútil soy, pesada, torpe, lenta' ('I wanted . . . to be another screw in the world . . . But . . . I went back to the dark hole of my instinct . . . As . . . I was born to love . . . Useless I am, heavy, clumsy, slow'). The poetic narrator, identified as a female, accepts her inability to function in a productive, machine-oriented world. Instead, she compares herself with to insect (a trope for insignificance) or to a snake, establishing a connection with the biblical character of Eve, the primordial woman. For full analysis of this poem, see Inés Elena Regueira, "'Inútil soy" de Alfonsina Storni. Un análisis semiótico', *LyCE Estudios* 18 (2015), and Graciela Queirolo, 'Una modernidad femenina: las crónicas de Alfonsina Storni', in *Feminaria Literaria*, 12/19 (2007).

30 Charles Baudelaire, 'Une nuit que j'étais près d'une affreuse juive', in *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Le livre de poche, 1999), 107. Several English translations are available at <https://fleursdumal.org/poem/130> (accessed 5 December 2021).

31 Storni, 'Femenina', from 'Ocre' (1925), *Antología poética*, 107–8.

32 Zulma Recchini de Lattes, *La población de Buenos Aires; componentes demográficos del crecimiento entre 1855 y 1960* (Buenos Aires: Centro de Investigaciones Sociales Torcuato Di Tella, Centro Latinoamericano de Demografía, Editorial del Instituto, 1971), 30, 134, as quoted in Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica*, 18.

33 Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica*, 16–17.

34 The UCR was created in 1891 and it remained in power from 1916 to 1930. Hipólito Yrigoyen was the first democratically elected president in Argentina and he governed from 1916 to 1922 and from 1928 to 1930. Marcelo T. de Alvear was president from 1922 to 1928.

Storni did not lead a conventional life; she was a single mother who raised her child while continuing to write and work. In 1920, she was awarded the Buenos Aires Municipal Prize in Poetry and came second in the National Prize in Literature, accomplishments that brought her some financial stability.<sup>35</sup> She travelled to Europe in 1930 and 1934 to establish connections with other poets, but soon after was diagnosed with cancer. In 1938, realizing that her illness had no cure, she became depressed and hopeless. In the spring, she travelled to Mar del Plata, a popular seaside resort 400 kilometres south of Buenos Aires where she used to spend her holidays. On a cold night, she went out for a final walk and left two letters and a poem in her hotel; one letter was for the judge, another for her son, and the poem, 'Voy a dormir' ('I Am Going to Sleep'), for her readers. This poem was published in the national newspaper *La Nación*, accompanying the news of her demise.<sup>36</sup> Storni jumped from a pier into the sea's dark waters. Her body was found by two workers the following morning. The substantial media coverage and the ensuing popular impact are considered instrumental in her story becoming a legend in popular culture.

### From *Los caudillos* to *Mujeres argentinas*

Thirty years separate Storni's suicide from the song composed in her honour, but societal values on gender politics and national identity were still being negotiated via an intense political struggle in the 1960s.<sup>37</sup> The law introducing the female vote in Argentina was finally promulgated in 1947, during the first Peronist government (1946–52), and was portrayed as a personal triumph of Eva Duarte de Perón.<sup>38</sup> By then, Argentine society was so polarized that some feminist associations withdrew their participation in the celebrations of the *Ley Evita* (Evita Law), as it was known, because of their opposition to the Peronist government.<sup>39</sup> Perón was deposed in 1955 by a *coup d'état* organized by military and civic sectors in what was called the *Revolución Libertadora* (Liberating Revolution). In 1957, the UCR was fragmented but one of its branches, the Unión Cívica Radical Intransigente (UCRI, Radical Intransigent Civic Union), saw their candidate, Arturo Frondizi, become president in 1958.

35 In Argentina, these prizes consist of a pension for life.

36 Alfonsina Storni, 'Voy a dormir', *La Nación* (26 October 1938), 7. Cited in Salomone, *Alfonsina Storni*, 199–200. On Storni's last poems, see Janice Geasler Titiev, 'The Poetry of Dying in Alfonsina Storni's Last Book', *Hispania* 68/3 (1985). On urban representations and feminine identities in Latin America, see Claudia Darrigrandi, María Lucía Puppo, and Graciela Queirolo, 'Representaciones urbanas e identidades femeninas en América Latina (de fines del siglo XIX a principios del siglo XXI). Introducción', *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, 27 May 2009.

37 See María del Carmen Feijoó, Marcela M. A. Nari, 'Women in Argentina During the 1960s', trans. Luis A. Fierro. *Latin American Perspectives* 23/1 (1996).

38 María Eva Duarte de Perón (1919–52) was the wife of populist president Juan Domingo Perón and a controversial leader herself. She was depicted as the central character of the musical *Evita* (Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice, 1978).

39 Gregory Hammond, *The Women's Suffrage Movement and Feminism in Argentina from Roca to Peron* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011). The 1951 presidential election, the first one in which women could vote, evidenced societal polarization: 63 per cent of votes went to Perón, against 32 per cent for the UCR's candidate (Balbín). Only 4 per cent voted for other candidates and 1 per cent of votes were invalid.



Lawyer, historian, and writer Félix Luna (1925–2009) and composer and pianist Ariel Ramírez (1921–2010) met in the late 1950s as partisans of the UCRI, a party whose programme was based on a Latin American derivation of economic Developmentalism.<sup>40</sup> Luna and Ramírez's first collaboration was politically motivated: they composed songs to promote candidates who would write a constitution to replace the one established by the Peronist government. A strong friendship was built on their common political beliefs and their interest in folk music.<sup>41</sup> In 1964, they collaborated in *Navidad nuestra (Our Christmas)*, a musical composition featured on the B-side of the LP that included Ramírez's famous *Misa criolla (Creole Mass)*. After the success of these religion-inspired works, the authors went back to politically charged creations. The cantata *Los caudillos (The Leaders)* (1966) was their first important project. Through simple poetry set to vernacular rhythms, the work was closely connected to Luna's eponymous book and presented biographical accounts of some of Argentina's historic popular leaders – always according to the UCRI's ideology. *Los caudillos* was released in a complex sociopolitical context and had a poor and polemic reception.<sup>42</sup> President Frondizi had been deposed by a *coup d'état* in 1962. The 1963 presidential election was won by Arturo Illia, leader of another branch of the UCR (Unión Cívica Radical del Pueblo, UCRP). However, the continuous ban on the Peronista Party and the country's deep social and economic problems, created a very delicate political situation. In 1966, a military uprising led by General Juan Carlos Onganía, which called itself the 'Argentine Revolution', established a violent dictatorship that would last until 1973.<sup>43</sup>

Learning from *Los caudillos*'s failure, Luna and Ramírez introduced some important changes to their next collaboration, which started in 1968. First, they focused on women in Argentine history rather than men. It was clear that, in a country divided by ideology, they had to select women who could be seen simply as Argentine, in a neutral way, without any specific political overtones. They ended up with eight female figures to whom they would

40 The Theory of Economic Development grew from a report presented by a group of experts to the United Nations after the Second World War. See United Nations, *Measures for the Economic Development of Under-Developed Countries* (New York: United Nations, 1951). The main Argentine economist to endorse this theory was Rogelio Frigerio (1914–2006). See 'Falleció Rogelio Frigerio, el padre del desarrollismo', *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), 15 September 2006. About *desarrollismo* during Onganía's regime, see María Carolina Ferraris, *La influencia del franquismo en la dictadura de Onganía: autoritarismo y desarrollismo durante la Guerra Fría* (Rosario, Argentina: Prohistoria, 2017).

41 Luna was director of the magazine *Folklore* from 1964 to 1967, after which he gave his full attention to the periodical *Todo es Historia (All is History)*. On the collaboration of the authors and a general analysis of the album, see Ariel Mamani, 'Heroínas, mártires y cautivas: renovación folklórica y usos políticos del pasado en el LP *Mujeres argentinas* (1969)', *Revista Argentina de Musicología* 18 (2017).

42 See Ariel Mamani, 'Caudillismo, usos políticos del pasado y música folklórica: Félix Luna y la polémica historiográfica en torno a los caudillos', *Cuadernos de Historia. Serie Economía y Sociedad* 13/14 (2015).

43 The infighting between many military divisions led to two internal coups. Onganía was succeeded by Marcelo Levingston (1970–71) and Alejandro Agustín Lanusse (1971–73). The 1970s would mark the beginning of a bloody military regime (el *Proceso de Reconstrucción Nacional*, 1976–82), in the course of which thousands of citizens would be kidnapped, tortured, and murdered. See María José Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol: Armed Struggle (1969–1979)* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012).

pay homage and 'give poetic and musical life', as they put it.<sup>44</sup> Second, they simplified the album's musical scope and orchestration. Rather than a cantata for soloist, choir, and orchestra, they wrote a series of eight short songs for a small musical ensemble, closer to the traditional instrumentation of Argentine vernacular music and involving less resources.<sup>45</sup> Third, they tailored their compositions for Mercedes Sosa, who was singled out as the ideal performer from the start of the project. Years later, Luna described this project, *Mujeres argentinas*, as 'a work without pretensions' in which Sosa's voice, Ramírez's piano performance, and a very light percussion support resulted in the album's popularity.<sup>46</sup> However, from a gendered perspective, *Mujeres argentinas* is to *Los caudillos* what women are compared with men in a traditionally patriarchal framework: less pretentious, less ambitious, simpler, and more accommodating.

The comparatively more modest scope of this project coded musically the comparatively minor role that these women played in Argentina's history, as opposed to the political and social impact of the men who were represented in *Los caudillos*. This patriarchal imbalance is also evident from the fact that Luna researched intensively and wrote a book on *Los caudillos* that was published in addition to the LP, a task he did not embark on for *Mujeres argentinas*. The gender markers are evident when comparing the songs' titles. Whereas all but one of the leaders are referred to by their surnames,<sup>47</sup> only two heroines are mentioned with their full names, and in one of those the first name appears in a diminutive form.<sup>48</sup>

Even if displaying a gender bias, *Mujeres argentinas* initiates a symbolic pantheon of national heroines. Based on real and fictional female characters, the songs in *Mujeres argentinas* touched on political and cultural issues that were relevant to the listeners but were approached in a sufficiently distant past to avoid ideological positioning. Among the fictional characters, 'Gringa chaqueña' stands out as the first song on the A-side. Simultaneously 'gringa' (an informal demonym applied to a foreigner, usually from Europe or North

44 Félix Luna, *Encuentros a lo largo de mi vida* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2004), 33, quoted in Ariel Mamani, 'Cantando la Historia. Música folklórica, participación política y divulgación histórica en la cancionística de Félix Luna', *Cambios y Permanencias* 5 (2014), 206.

45 See Tânia da Costa Garcia, 'Mundo Radial e o cancionero folclórico nos tempos de Perón', *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, Images, mémoires et sons, 11 June 2015.

46 '[F]ue una obra sin pretensiones. La voz de Mercedes, el piano de Ariel y un apoyo de percusión muy liviano bastaron para lograr esa sencillez en la ejecución que sin dudas formó parte de la rápida popularidad de la mayoría de los temas incluidos.' Luna, 35, quoted in Mamani, 'Heroínas, mártires y cautivas', 154.

47 However, 'Dicen que al Chacho lo han muerto' (Vidala chayera), includes the surname in the lyrics (Peñaloza).

48 The exceptions are Juana Azurduy and Rosario Vera, but in the latter, the diminutive was applied (Rosarito), a common infantilization in gender marker. The titles of the songs in *Los caudillos* also include words that emphasize action ('When Varela Comes'), courage (the Northern Guerrilla), power (the tiger of the plains, the protector), and hierarchy in society (the protector, the restorer, the civic leader). Only one song alludes to romanticism (the leader in love). The title of the songs are accompanied by a description of the vernacular rhythm or type of piece: 'Artigas, el Protector' (Estilo-Milonga), 'Güemes, el Guerrillero del Norte' (Aire de chacarera), 'Ramírez, el Caudillo Enamorado' (Canción), 'Quiroga, el Tigre de los Llanos' (Aire sureño-Cueca), 'Rosas, el Restaurador' (Candombe-Canción), 'Cuando viene Varela' (Zamba riojana), and 'Alem, el caudillo cívico' (Aire sureño). ('Artigas, the Protector', 'Güemes, the Northern Guerrilla', 'Ramírez, the Leader in Love', 'Quiroga, the Tiger of the Plains', 'Rosas, the Restorer', 'They say that Chacho has been killed', 'When Varela Comes', 'Alem, the Civic Leader'.)

America) and 'chaqueña', living in the Chaco region (northeast of Argentina), the character embodied the colonization of the Americas. Also exploring issues of identity and immigration but focusing on the tension between the Indigenous population and European settlers, 'Dorotea, la cautiva' ('Dorothy, the Captive') is based on the story of Dorotea Bazán, told in the book *Una excursión a los Indios Ranqueles (An Excursion to the Ranqueles Indians)* by Lucio V. Mansilla (1831–1913). Dorotea, a white woman, is kidnapped by an Indigenous group with whom she becomes acculturated.

A first group of historic characters recall the struggle of the first settlers to sever ties with European powers that took place during the nineteenth century. 'Manuela, la tucumana' tells the story of Manuela Hurtado y Pedraza (Tucumán, 1780–1850), who fought alongside her husband to reconquer Buenos Aires after the short-lived British invasion in 1806. Similarly, 'Juana Azurduy' celebrates the life of a patriotic lady who fought during the Hispano-American Independence Wars. Born in Alto Perú, now Bolivia and formerly part of the Spanish Viceroyalty of Perú, Juana Azurduy (1780–1862) collaborated with her husband to provide support for the revolutionary troops.

Centred on the transition from Spanish rule to autonomous governance and the birth of the Argentine nation, 'Las cartas de Guadalupe' ('Guadalupe's Letters') and 'En casa de Mariquita' ('At Mariquita's House') celebrate the indirect roles that women could perform in the political life of their country. María Guadalupe Cuenca (Chuquisaca, 1790–1854) was married to Mariano Moreno, an important figure in the 1810 revolution. The letters she sent to her husband are considered historical documents. Mariquita Sánchez de Thompson (Buenos Aires, 1786–1868) was a socialite in whose house the national anthem was sung for the first time in 1813.

Only 'Rosarito Vera, maestra' ('Little Rosario Vera, Teacher') and 'Alfonsina y el mar' celebrate women who lived in the twentieth century and whose contributions to the nation are cultural rather than political. However, they can also be regarded as reflections of particular aspects of gender politics. Rosario Vera Peñaloza (1872–1950) was a prestigious pedagogue, born into a traditional family of the northwestern province of La Rioja. Storni, who worked as a teacher in Buenos Aires, is remembered for her poetry.<sup>49</sup> An account given by Ramírez of the arrival of Storni's coffin from Mar del Plata to Buenos Aires confirms her dual role in society. He recalled that the casket 'was received [at the train station] by ten thousand children dressed in white smocks'.<sup>50</sup> Significantly, the title of the song did not mention her profession but

49 Storni worked at the Instituto de Teatro Infantil (Children's Theatre Institute) Manuel José de Labardén.

50 Ramírez also mentioned that Storni had been a student and mentee of his father at the Normal School in Coronda, establishing, indirectly, a personal connection with the poet. However, there were some inaccuracies in Ramírez's account. He erroneously situated Storni in Coronda in 1916, when she was already living in Buenos Aires, according to Storni's biography and other sources. Similarly, Storni's biography describes a more modest reception of the coffin in Buenos Aires. See Delgado, *Alfonsina Storni*, 126–8. Ariel Ramírez, monologue recorded at SADAIC (Sociedad de Autores y Compositores de Música) in an episode of the TV programme *El sonajero*. 'Alfonsina y el mar, Ariel Ramírez cuenta cómo la compuso (progr. TV Roxana Kreimer)', YouTube, 4:05, 29 June 2010, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejApeOxYWNs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejApeOxYWNs).

**Table 1** Songs, heroines, and musical genres in *Mujeres argentinas* (1969)

| Side, track | Title of the song       | Heroine   | Musical genre, as described on the LP |
|-------------|-------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| A, 1        | Gringa chaqueña         | Fictional character that personifies European colonization of South America.  | <i>Guarania</i>                       |
| A, 2        | Juana Azurduy           | Juana Azurduy (Alto Perú, Bolivia, 1780–1862), patriotic lady, related to the Independence Wars.  | <i>Cueca</i>                          |
| A, 3        | Rosarito Vera, maestra  | Rosario Vera Peñaloza (La Rioja, 1872–1950), pedagogue.   | <i>Zamba</i>                          |
| A, 4        | Dorotea, la cautiva     | Dorotea Bazán, whose story was told in <i>Una excursión a los Indios Ranqueles</i> by Lucio V. Mansilla (1831–1913).  | <i>Milonga pampeana</i>               |
| B, 1        | Alfonsina y el mar      | Alfonsina Storni (Switzerland, 1892–Argentina, 1938), feminist poet.  | <i>Zamba</i>                          |
| B, 2        | Manuela, la tucumana    | Manuela Hurtado y Pedraza (Tucuman, 1780–1850), who fought in the failed British Invasions, in 1806, alongside her husband.                                     | <i>Triunfo</i>                        |
| B, 3        | Las cartas de Guadalupe | María Guadalupe Cuenca (Chuquisaca, 1790–1854) was married to Mariano Moreno, an important figure in the 1810 revolution; her letters are historical documents. | <i>Canción</i>                        |
| B, 4        | En casa de Mariquita    | Mariquita Sánchez de Thompson (Buenos Aires, 1786–1868), socialite in whose house the national anthem was sung for the first time in 1813.                      | <i>Refalosa</i>                       |

instead alluded to the sea. This creative decision allowed the authors to tap into popular memory and build on the media coverage of Storni's suicide.

As can be seen in [Table 1](#), the musical genre used for each song was a vernacular rhythm associated with the corresponding female figure by region or character.<sup>51</sup> For example, 'Gringa chaqueña' is set to a *guarania*, a vernacular rhythm from the Chaco region and Paraguay. 'Juana Azurduy' is written to a *cueca*, a vernacular rhythm derived from the *zamacueca* and originating in the Andes region (northwest of Argentina, north of Chile, Bolivia, and Perú), where the historic character lived. Also from the northern part of the country, including the province of Tucumán, the *trunfo* rhythm is used to musicalize 'Manuela, la

51 The vernacular rhythm or musical genre of each song indicated on the table with italics is identified as such on the piano score by Ariel Ramírez and Félix Luna, *Mujeres argentinas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Lagos, 1970). Seen as reprinted by Melos.

tucumana'. This vernacular dance was associated with the Independence Wars, from which its denomination was derived ('triufo' means triumph or success). Curiously, the only musical genre that is repeated, the *zamba*, was applied to sing the stories of the two twentieth-century heroines who also worked as teachers (Rosario Vera and Alfonsina Storni). It can be easily related to Vera, who lived in a region where the *zamba* was a popular musical form.<sup>52</sup> Even if Storni's connection with this vernacular rhythm is weaker, since she lived in San Juan, a province adjacent to La Rioja, only for four years (1896–1900), the repetition of the *zamba* on the LP is coherent with the popularity of this vernacular rhythm.<sup>53</sup>

One of the main characteristics of the musical discourse of the folk boom in Argentina (and in Chile)<sup>54</sup> between the 1940s and 1960s was the codification of ongoing cultural negotiations of nation, class, and identity featuring the combination of folk rhythms and popular topics with traditional Western musical instruments and textures.<sup>55</sup> The proliferation of musical groups and vocalists embracing vernacular music was supported by the broadcasting system and the publishing houses on the premise that this repertoire reflected national identity. This can be corroborated in the commercial strategy of the record label (Philips), as it transpires from a discourse analysis of the texts and images featured on the LP packaging.

The biographical note on Ramírez included on the record sleeve endorsed his knowledge of vocal music by mentioning that he had 'a classical music education, accentuated by trips to Europe in which he studied aspects of Medieval and Renaissance music'. In order to address the potential concern and cultural bias that academically trained musicians could not possibly write authentic popular music, his resumé mentioned his ethnomusicological expeditions: 'Long research trips through Argentine and [Latin] American provinces allowed him to collect the formative elements of our country's vernacular music, which he has returned,

52 The colonial couples dance known as *zamacueca*, performed in the working-class neighborhoods of Lima derived into the Argentine *zamba* and the Chilean and Argentine *cueca*. The *zamba* is a partner dance form that is sung and danced in rural areas of Argentina's Northwest region. In 6/8 metre and sometimes described as a 'scarf dance' because its pantomimic choreography includes a handkerchief as a seductive element, its structure consists of an introduction, usually played by guitar, an A section (usually of 12 bars), repeated musically but with a different text (A') and a B section (usually called a chorus, refrain or *vuelta*, alluding to the choreography). This structure is repeated, sometimes preceded by an instrumental interlude. Mark Brill, *Music of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 336–8, and 'Zamba', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 6th edition, ed. Joyce Kennedy, Michael Kennedy, and Tim Rutherford-Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), [www-oxfordreference-com.libproxy.wlu.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780199578108.001.0001/acref-9780199578108-e-9938?rskey=zHD8EX&result=9822](http://www-oxfordreference-com.libproxy.wlu.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780199578108.001.0001/acref-9780199578108-e-9938?rskey=zHD8EX&result=9822).

53 See Pablo Vila, 'Música popular y auge del folklore en la década del "60"', *Crear en la cultura nacional* 2/10 (1982).

54 '[D]iferentes sectores de la sociedad se movilizaron en torno de la música popular, con el objetivo de seleccionar un determinado repertorio como representante de la identidad nacional. Tales iniciativas atravesaron a los académicos vinculados a la Universidad de Chile, cuyas investigaciones abordaban el folclore y la música docta.' Tânia da Costa Garcia, 'Canción popular, nacionalismo, consumo y política en Chile entre los años 40 y 60', *Revista Musical Chilena* 212 (July–December 2009), 11.

55 According to Díaz, Ariel Ramírez, Félix Luna, and Mercedes Sosa were among the artists who expanded the classical paradigm of Argentine folk music, reaffirming the notion of *música popular de raíz folklórica* as an authentic popular expression, a true national art. Díaz, *Variaciones sobre el ser nacional*, 144.

enriched, in his various compositions.<sup>56</sup> While the first part of the sentence aims at giving more credibility to his popular music compositions, the adjective 'enriched' hints at the added value of his academic background. The similarity with Mercantilism, one of the main colonialist economic models by which the raw material extracted from the colony is given back as a finished, enriched product, is underlying in this affirmation. Moreover, it places Ramírez within the legacy of Alberto Williams (1862–1952), the founding father of Argentine music nationalism,<sup>57</sup> who was trained at the Schola Cantorum in Paris and composed art music inspired by songs and dances of the *gauchos*, *payadores*, and other inhabitants of the rural countryside.<sup>58</sup> Rather than appropriating the vernacular culture (the folklore), both composers borrowed and built on some of its elements. Part of Ramírez 'enrichment' was the instrumentation, which included the organ and the electric harpsichord, although they are absent in 'Alfonsina y el mar'. This innovation is justified by mentioning that the organ has 'accompanied human singing for centuries in its most solemn moments',<sup>59</sup> thus placing the new compositions in a more universal context.

### Judging an LP by its cover: historiography, disembodiment, and gender politics

As a cultural practice, popular music participates in the production and circulation of meaning. At the same time, meaning in popular music is the result of a complex negotiation between actors and processes. The writer of the lyrics, the composer or arranger, the producer, the performers, the cover designer, and the promoters are some of the actors involved in popular music production who participate in the creation of musical meaning.<sup>60</sup>

Aligned with the recording label (Philips) and the publishing company (Editorial Lagos), the marketing of the album *Mujeres argentinas* and the songs within it – through the graphic

56 '[Ramírez] tiene una formación musical clásica, que acentuó con viajes a Europa donde estudió aspectos de la música medieval y renacentista. Largas giras de investigación por el interior argentino y de América le permitieron recoger los elementos formativos del folklore de nuestro país, que ha devuelto enriquecido en sus diversas composiciones.' [Unsigned], Liner notes to *Mujeres argentinas*.

57 On Alberto Williams, see Melanie Plesch, 'From 'Abandoned Huts' to 'Maps of the Pampas: The Topos of the Huella and the Representation of Landscape in Argentine Art Music', in *Studies on a Global History of Music: A Balzan Musicology Project*, ed. Reinhard Strohm (London: Routledge, 2018); Silvina Luz Mansilla, 'La "Vidalita" de Alberto Williams como caso paradigmático de construcción canónica en el llamado nacionalismo musical argentino', *Boletín de la Asociación Argentina de Musicología* 27/68 (2012); Carmen García Muñoz and Ana María Mondolo, 'Williams, Alberto', in *Diccionario de la música española e hispanoamericana*, ed. Emilio Rodicio Casares (Madrid: Sociedad General de Autores y Editores, 2002), vol. 9, 1023–7.

58 Williams also founded dozens of music schools and disseminated his ideas through books, methods, and periodical publications. See, for example, Alberto Williams, *Orígenes del arte musical argentino. Estética, crítica y biografía. Tomo IV de las Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: La Quena, 1951).

59 '[E] instrumento que desde una distancia de siglos acompañó el canto humano en sus más solemnes momentos, se incorpora a temas enraizados con los ritmos, las melodías y las tradiciones nacionales.' Translation and emphasis by the author. [Unsigned], Liner notes to *Mujeres argentinas*.

60 By equating these actors with the quadrants of the 'circuit of culture' their participation in the production of meaning becomes more evident. See Paul Du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay and Keith Negus, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997), 3; and Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997).



**Figure 1** Cover art on the album *Mujeres argentina*.

design of the LP packaging and the sheet music, commercialized in pairs – tapped into a nationalistic narrative that emphasized Argentina as a country closely connected to its native culture but also aware of its European heritage. The figure of the *gaucho*, the mythic inhabitant of the *pampas*, has been identified in Argentine literature, visual arts, and music as the source of such national identity.<sup>61</sup> The visual discourse and commercial strategy embrace this narrative through the seemingly disparate combination between realism and naïve aesthetics.<sup>62</sup>

The historiographic narrative that was central to the songs of the album is clearly reflected on the LP cover art (Figure 1). The choice of photography as a medium to illustrate the cover aims at stressing the realism of the approach. The use of a drawing or painting would have emphasized its fictional components. The narrative conveyed by the photographic composition is straightforward. An open book titled *Mujeres argentinas* occupies the centre of the lower half of the image, placed on a red velvet cloth beside a pair of glasses, a vintage pocket watch, and an oil lamp. In another version of the cover art, the oil lamp has been replaced by

61 For an examination of the construction of nationalism in Argentine art music, see Plesch, 'From "Abandoned Huts" to "Maps of the Pampas"'; Melanie Plesch, 'Demonizing and Redeeming the Gaucho: Social Conflict, Xenophobia, and the Invention of Argentine National Music', *Patterns of Prejudice* 47/4–5 (2013); and Deborah Schwartz-Kates, 'The Gauchesco Tradition as a Source of National Identity in Argentine Art Music (ca. 1890–1955)' (PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 1997).

62 In art history and literature, realism is a movement or style representing familiar objects as they are. The LP cover photographic composition uses realism to stress the veracity of narrated facts. Naïve style, on the other hand, tends to alter the scale and perspective of objects to simplify their representation. It comes across as a visual depiction produced by a child or by someone with little or no formal training. The vignettes representing each heroine on the inner sleeve are depicted in this style.

an electrical lamp, and the red of the cloth seems more subdued.<sup>63</sup> The objects appear against a white wall onto which the arabesques of a Spanish colonial ironwork project curved shadows.

The composition of the cover art alludes to historiography (the writing and study of history) and to Argentina's Spanish colonial past. However, it is men who write and study this history; there are no feminine references beyond the word 'mujeres' ('women') and Mercedes Sosa's name on the frontispiece of the book, above those of the authors.<sup>64</sup> Because of its place in the composition, instead of signifying fertility, here the colour red may point to a particularly difficult chapter in Argentina's early history as a nation. 'Rojo punzó' ('dark red') was the distinctive colour of the *Federales*, followers of Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793–1877), who was the governor of Buenos Aires Province and the main leader in the Argentine Confederation from 1835 to 1852. This could have been a way of alluding to a period in Argentine history that, even if absent from the narrative built through the heroines, was important in Argentine national identity. However, the red velvet may have also been used to stress the high value of the objects placed on it.<sup>65</sup>

Given the title and the content of the album, which explores the lives and passions of heroic women who participated in the building of the nation, it is particularly striking that there are no feminine allusions to be found on the cover art. The contrast between the univocal presence of women in these songs and their absence from the cover art lies precisely in the tension between practice and theory, between women as bodies and men as minds. 'This association of the body with the female,' observes Judith Butler, 'works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom.'<sup>66</sup> Following this premise, for the narrative to gain effectiveness and credibility it needed to be told in a disembodied context.

It may be precisely to emphasize the importance of these heroines that their bodies are not represented. As Cusick argues, theory has privileged the study and representation of minds, rather than that of bodies.<sup>67</sup> By avoiding the representation of their bodies, the designers *masculinize* or hierarchize the role of the heroines. In a similar way, Díaz observed that the absence of iconic reference to the rural, folkloric life, from Ramírez's 1963 and 1964 LPs'

63 The other version has slight differences in the composition and the objects displayed in it (the ironwork, the ornamentation of the frontispiece, the lamp, the red velvet, the glasses, and the watch).

64 It should be remembered that Luna wrote many texts on Argentina's history, including the best-seller *Soy Roca*, in which he told the story of Alejo Julio Argentino Roca Paz (1843–1914). Roca was an army general who served as President of Argentina (1880–86 and 1898–1904). The main representative of the Generation of the 1880s, Roca commanded the 'Conquest of the Desert' in Patagonia, a series of military campaigns against the Indigenous peoples.

65 There are some similarities between the cover art of *Mujeres argentinas* and that of *Coronación de folklore (Crowning of Folk Music)*, recorded in 1963 by Ariel Ramírez, Eduardo Falú, and Los Fronterizos (Philips, 82009 PL). A golden crown encrusted with precious stones is suspended against the backdrop of red velvet, similar to a theatre curtain. The crowning of folk music, according to Díaz, signifies its legitimation as a high art. See Díaz, *Variaciones sobre el ser nacional*, 113–19.

66 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 16.

67 Cusick, 'Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem', 16.



cover art was part of the strategies for dignifying and legitimizing the genre.<sup>68</sup> The asymmetry between these pair of opposites (men/women; urban/rural; middle-class/lower-class; academic music/popular music) is clear evidence of the tensions present in Argentine culture. Sosa's picture, included on the inner sleeve, is the only human figure represented on the record, embodying the eight women celebrated in the album.<sup>69</sup>

Mercedes Sosa attracted the audience's attention from an early age, winning a singing competition in her native San Miguel de Tucumán (northwest of Argentina) as a teenager. In 1963, together with Tito Francia, Armando Tejada Gómez, and Oscar Matus – who was Sosa's husband at the time – she signed the manifesto of the *Nuevo cancionero* (*New Songbook*), an artistic movement that demanded a place in the field of folk music, adhering to progressive ideological ideals.<sup>70</sup> Her solo career was nationally launched after her appearance at the famous Cosquín Festival in 1965, mentored by vocalist Jorge Cafrune (1937–78). By the late 1960s, Sosa was a prominent artist, and her political and moral values were closely intertwined with her artistic career. This becomes clear through the way she was presented as part of the promotion of *Mujeres argentinas*:

Mercedes Sosa's artistic career did not need to make concessions nor force its own spirit to achieve success. In the selection of her repertoire, in the manner of her rendition, in the line that characterizes her performance, Mercedes Sosa has always been *authentically faithful* to herself and *to her mission as a performer of the native song*, as she feels it.<sup>71</sup>

Authenticity, fidelity, and her connection with Indigenous roots (through the use of the adjective 'native') are values that define her role in this discography project. Her ethnicity and her social and political activism, as well as her undeniable talent, made Sosa the perfect

68 According to Díaz, Ariel Ramírez, Félix Luna, and Mercedes Sosa were among the artists who expanded the classical paradigm of Argentine folk music, reaffirming the notion of folk music as an authentic popular expression, a true national art. Díaz, *Variaciones sobre el ser nacional*, 112–15.

69 However, since it is a cropped version of the one that was used on the cover of her 1966 LP *Hermano* (Brother) (Buenos Aires: Philips, 1966, 82122 PL–Vinyl, LP, Album, Mono), also published by Philips, Sosa's picture may function as a subtle product placement.

70 For an analysis and critique of their manifesto, see Díaz, *Variaciones sobre el ser nacional*, 146. For a discussion on art in the political context in northern Argentina, see Fabiola Orquera, 'Art, avant-garde, and politics in northern Argentina in the 1960s: *Zafra* by Ariel Petrocelli, Pepe, and Gerardo Núñez', *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies/Revue canadienne des études latino-américaines et caraïbes* 42/2 (2017); Illa Carrillo Rodríguez, 'Latinoamericana de Tucumán: Mercedes Sosa y los itinerarios de la música popular argentina en la larga década del sesenta', in *Ese ardiente jardín de la república. Formación y desarticulación de un "campo" cultural: Tucumán, 1880–1975*, ed. Fabiola Orquera (Córdoba, Argentina: Alción, 2010). Sosa was always politically engaged. She grew up in a *Peronista* home, visited Castro's Cuba and had to exile from Argentina during the 1970s in order to survive. She openly supported later Peronist-derived governments, such as the Kirchnerist in the 2000s.

71 'La de Mercedes Sosa es una carrera artística que no necesitó hacer concesiones ni forzar su propio espíritu para llegar al éxito. En la elección de su repertorio, en la forma de su interpretación, en la línea que caracteriza su actuación, Mercedes Sosa se ha mantenido en una auténtica fidelidad a sí misma, a su misión de intérprete del canto nativo, tal como ella lo siente.' [Unsigned], Liner notes to *Mujeres argentinas*, 3.

performer to incarnate these eight heroines, including Alfonsina. The singer was presented as the embodiment of the authentic Argentine woman.<sup>72</sup>

Sosa's life would also mirror some aspects of those of the heroines she incarnated. Like Storni, she raised a son almost on her own while developing a career that was not without its challenges. Like many of the heroines, she fought for her political ideals.<sup>73</sup> This is stressed in the promotional message:

Without doubt, the audience will agree that only Mercedes Sosa could assume the risky task of evoking these eight female characters to which she had given the truth and the communication that the musical and poetic portrayals demanded, recreated by her privileged voice.<sup>74</sup>

Here, Sosa's performance is linked again to values of 'truth' and 'communication', while her privileged voice is also recognized. Through Sosa's rendition of 'Alfonsina y el mar', these values were symbolically transferred to the problematic figure of Storni, which helped to make her more suitable for mass consumption.

On the inner sleeve, the heroines have been identified by vignettes. The synthesis achieved with this creative decision is successful in evoking stories through attributes. A seahorse illustrates the section on 'Alfonsina y el mar'.<sup>75</sup> It conveys naivete, sets the scene at the bottom of the sea, and attenuates the tragic aspects of the story. It is synthesized in the following way:

Alfonsina Storni proudly lived her fate of being a woman made for poetry, with dignity and courage. And one night, she slowly entered the sea as if she were to marry immensity, perhaps seeking the happiness that life did not give her or the poems that she had not yet created.<sup>76</sup>

The trope of marriage as women's natural destiny is combined with a more realistic view of her unhappy life, which seems to be linked to her gender and career choice. However, the ending of the paragraph is curious: 'Ariel Ramírez has successfully endowed this zamba with the beauty that its theme deserved, surrounded with a suggested melancholy, Félix Luna's

72 'Sosa became a star by reinventing herself as an embodiment of indigeneity' (Matthew B. Karush, *Musicians in Transit: Argentina and the Globalization of Popular Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 143). About Mercedes Sosa from a globalized perspective, see, Karush, *Musicians in Transit*, 142–78.

73 Sosa's husband divorced her after eight years of marriage. She was banned and forced into exile during the military regime. Affiliated to the Communist Party, she visited Cuba in 1974, invited by the Casa de las Américas. See 'Mercedes Sosa: "No necesito hombres"' ('Mercedes Sosa: "I don't need men"'), *Clarín*, 28 April 2006, updated 15 March 2018, [www.clarin.com/ediciones-antiores/necesito-hombres\\_0\\_SyObHVH1Atx.html](http://www.clarin.com/ediciones-antiores/necesito-hombres_0_SyObHVH1Atx.html).

74 'A no dudarlo, el público coincidirá que sólo Mercedes Sosa podía tomar a su cargo la riesgosa tarea de evocar estos ocho personajes femeninos a los que ella ha sabido darles la verdad y la comunicación que exigían las estampas musicales y poéticas recreadas por su privilegiada voz.' [Unsigned]. Liner notes to *Mujeres argentinas*, 3.

75 The other vignettes are a cooking pot (for Manuela, la tucumana), a clay amphora (Las cartas de Guadalupe), a harp-sichord (En casa de Mariquita), a wild flower (Gringa Chaqueña), a rifle (Juana Azurduy), an ink pot and a writing feather (Rosarito Vera, maestra), and a tipi (Dorotea, la cautiva). Sosa et al., *Mujeres argentinas* (record sleeve).

76 'Alfonsina Storni vivió orgullosamente su fatalidad de mujer hecha para la poesía, con dignidad y valentía. Y una noche, se internó lentamente en el mar como si fuera a desposarse con la inmensidad, acaso iba a buscar la felicidad que no le dio la vida o los poemas que todavía no había creado.' Sosa et al., *Mujeres argentinas* (record sleeve).



**Figure 2** Cover of the original sheet music of 'Alfonsina y el mar' (Buenos Aires, Editorial Lagos, 1969).

beautiful poem evokes this singular woman in her stellar, definitive moment.<sup>77</sup> As it has been mentioned, it seems unfair that her suicide is highlighted here over Storni's important professional achievements and public recognition. However, the association between the poet and the sea had been established by Storni herself, through interviews and through her own work.

The original sheet music of 'Alfonsina y el mar' and 'Gringa chaqueña' were published together with a cover illustration by the painter Raúl Russo (1912–84) that feeds the poetic narrative of a young girl sleeping at the bottom of the sea and echoes Storni's verses (Figure 2).<sup>78</sup> It is part of the Colección Canción Estampa, a series of sheet music published

77 'Ariel Ramírez ha conseguido dar a esta zamba la belleza que su tema merecía, rodeando de una melancólica sugestión el hermoso poema con que Félix Luna evoca a esta singular mujer en su momento estelar, definitivo.' Sosa et al., *Mujeres argentinas* (record sleeve).

78 'Duermo en una cama / un poco más azul / que el mar.' ('I sleep on a bed / a little bluer / than the sea.'). 'Yo en el fondo del mar' ('I at the bottom of the sea'), Storni, *Poemas*, 76. See original cover in [Unsigned], *Canción Estampa*. Editorial Lagos (Buenos Aires: Lagos, 1973), 52. Catalogue of the exhibition that took place in Buenos Aires (Salas Nacionales de Exposición, Ministerio de Cultura y Educación de la Nación, 17–30 May 1973). The other songs in *Mujeres argentinas* also appeared in pairs in the same collection: 'Manuela, la tucumana' and 'Juana Azurduy', with a cover illustration by

by Editorial Lagos in the 1960s and early 1970s through the collaboration of composers, poets, and visual artists.<sup>79</sup> These low-cost cultural objects participated in the shaping of the concept of Argentine folk music or 'popular music with folk roots'. An exhibition of the series took place in 1973 in the National Exhibition Halls, in the Ministry of Culture and Education, which speaks of their commercial and cultural impact. The exhibition catalogue celebrates them as an experience of popular art, addressed to 'the man in the street and in every latitude of the country'.<sup>80</sup> Gender, class, and nation markers are part of the cultural coordinates that define the product. The generic use of 'man', meaning men and women, excludes nevertheless female consumers; 'the street' identifies middle- and low-class sectors; and 'every latitude of the country' clarifies that they are not created thinking only of Buenos Aires consumers but also of the whole nation.

### Alfonsina as a mermaid: infantilizing a feminist

Decades after its release, when 'Alfonsina y el mar' was established as the album's hit, the composer and the lyricist provided diverging accounts of the process that led to its creation.<sup>81</sup> The composer recalled that, after reading some of Storni's poems with Luna and looking at the press articles on her tragic death, Ramírez sat at the piano and improvised a musical phrase that would later become the introduction of 'Alfonsina y el mar'.<sup>82</sup> Luna's account of the facts differed from those of the composer. In his memoirs, Luna recalled that Ramírez played for him a melody on a zamba rhythm, undecided on what female figure it would musicalize. 'We were at his home, said Luna, and he [Ramírez] made me listen to a new musical theme he had composed . . . and I told him: this zamba will be called "Alfonsina y el mar" . . . I locked myself in a room and wrote. The first stanza came out in one piece.'<sup>83</sup> Despite this sudden inspiration, the song took longer to be written. Luna worked

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Santiago Cogorno (p. 21); 'Las cartas de Guadalupe' and 'Rosarito Vera, maestra' with a cover illustration by Horacio Butler (p. 18); and 'Dorotea, la cautiva' and 'En casa de Mariquita' with a cover illustration by Raúl Soldi (p. 54).

79 Musicologist Silvina Mansilla examined the convergence among poetry, visual art, and music in the Colección Canción Estampa, and argued that Rómulo Lagos and his publishing house played an important role in Argentina's folk music boom. Their main office became a meeting point for folk musicians and poets that migrated from the provinces to Buenos Aires. Silvina Luz Mansilla, *La obra musical de Carlos Guastavino. Circulación, recepción, mediaciones* (Buenos Aires: Gourmet Musical Ediciones, 2011), 156.

80 '[E] público en impresionante número es el principal protagonista. Este hecho . . . da al folklore en Argentina una categoría de arte de masas, donde la música y la poesía encuentran un cauce propicio para su desarrollo. Es ante el sentimiento cierto de este hecho donde nace nuestra inquietud de incorporar el lenguaje plástico a la portada de las obras que salen de nuestros talleres. Ellas van destinadas por su costo y obviamente por su contenido, al hombre de la calle y de todas las latitudes del país.' Rómulo Lagos y Juan José Barbará, 'La Canción Estampa, origen y sentido de una experiencia de arte popular', [Unsigned], *Canción Estampa*, 5.

81 A Google search on 5 July 2021 with 1,510,000 results for 'Alfonsina y el mar' is comparable to 1,350,000 for 'Juana Azurduy', against, for example, 23,600 for 'Gringa chaqueña'. However, on Spotify, 'Alfonsina y el mar' gives 1,000 entries against 119 on 'Juana Azurduy' ('Manuela, la Tucumana', 13; 'Las cartas de Guadalupe', 12, etc.).

82 Ramírez, 'Alfonsina y el mar, Ariel Ramírez cuenta cómo la compuso (progr. TV Roxana Kreimer)' (see note 50).

83 '[E]stábamos en su casa . . . y me hizo escuchar el tema nuevo que había compuesto. . . le dije: esta zamba se va a llamar "Alfonsina y el mar" . . . Me encerré en una habitación y me puse a escribir. La primera estrofa salió entera.' Luna, *Encuentros*, 35, quoted in Mamani, 'Heroínas, mártires y cautivas', 155.

on the lyrics for many months. He explained: 'I had read her poems, and what I wanted to do was something unrelated to the macabre event of her suicide. Nothing bitter nor melancholic. I wanted Alfonsina to be seen as if surrendering [to the sea], where she ended up being embraced by everyone.'<sup>84</sup> The song's lyrics are indeed derived from some of Storni's works, combining poetic images present in 'Voy a dormir' and 'Yo en el fondo del mar' ('I on the Sea Bed').<sup>85</sup>

Once the song was composed, Ramírez and Luna shared the piece with Mercedes Sosa, for whom the melody had been written. As Ramírez recalls, Sosa listened to the music twice, read the lyrics, and then sang the song. With tears in her eyes, Sosa hugged both men declaring that 'she was certain that with that song they would reach every corner of the country'.<sup>86</sup> Even if these words cannot be confirmed and may be part of a *post factum* explanation of the song's popularity, they provide an account of Sosa's emotional connection with the song. Her nuanced performance of the piece was instrumental in providing an engaging musical representation of Storni that was embraced by international audiences.

Written according to the traditional structure of a zamba, the lyrics comprise six verses, of which the third and the sixth are identical, since they correspond to the song's chorus.<sup>87</sup>

Por la blanda arena que lame el mar,  
su pequeña huella no vuelve más.  
Un sendero solo de pena y silencio llegó  
hasta el agua profunda.  
Un sendero solo de penas mudas llegó  
hasta la espuma.

On the soft sand that brushes the sea,  
Her little footprint will no longer return.  
A lonely path of sadness and silence reached  
The deep water.  
A lonely path of mute sorrows reached  
The foam.

Sabe Dios qué angustia te acompañó  
qué dolores viejos calló tu voz,  
para recostarte arrullada en el canto

Only God knows what anguish accompanied  
you  
What old pains your voice shushed,  
To lay down in the singing

84 'Había leído sus poemas, y lo que yo quería hacer era algo que no tuviera que ver con la cosa macabra del suicidio. Ni tampoco con algo amargo o melancólico. Quería que se viera a Alfonsina como en una especie de entrega, y que se reflejara que terminaba siendo acogida por todos ahí en el mar.' Ramírez, quoted in Fernando D'Addario, 'Esa música del alma: la historia de la zamba que todos cantan', *Página 12*, 25 October 1998, 33, [www.pagina12.com.ar/1998/98-10/98-10-25/pag33.htm](http://www.pagina12.com.ar/1998/98-10/98-10-25/pag33.htm).

85 See Storni, 'Yo en el fondo del mar' and 'Voy a dormir', in *Poemas*, 76–7 and 93. For a close reading of the intertextualities between the song's lyrics and Storni's poetry, see Cecilia Ramírez, "'Alfonsina y el mar": homage et permanence de la figure et de l'œuvre d'Alfonsina Storni', *ILCEA* 38 (2020).

86 Ramírez, 'Alfonsina y el mar, Ariel Ramírez cuenta cómo la compuso (progr. TV Roxana Kreimer)'.  
87 The harmonic and melodic treatment of the song applies minimal variations to the vernacular tradition. The beginning of 'Alfonsina y el mar' follows a subdominant–dominant–tonic pattern. The melody is built on a descending motif with an ornamented incipit (similar to a grupetto). The third time that the motif is repeated the melodic line is developed by addition in an ascending gesture that reaches  $d^2$  before descending to the tonic ( $c^1$ ). The chorus is built on the same musical theme, only with more dramatic enunciation as it reaches the climatic point ( $eb^2$ ). The chorus, and eventually the song, finishes in a series of ascending, chromatic progressions, reaching the last note on the tonic ( $C_1$ ) and on the word 'sea'. The lyrics have been translated from Ramírez and Luna, *Alfonsina y el mar*, 2.

de las caracolas marinas.  
La canción que canta en el fondo oscuro  
del mar, la caracola.

Te vas Alfonsina con tu soledad,  
¿Qué poemas nuevos, fuiste a buscar?  
Una voz antigua de viento y de sal  
te requiebra el alma y la está llevando  
y te vas hacia allá como en sueños,  
dormida, Alfonsina, vestida de mar.

Cinco sirenitas te llevarán  
por caminos de algas y de coral  
y fosforescentes caballos marinos  
harán una ronda a tu lado;  
y los habitantes del agua  
van a jugar pronto a tu lado.

Bájame la lámpara un poco más  
déjame que duerma, nodriza en paz  
y si llama él no le digas que estoy,  
dile que Alfonsina no vuelve,  
  
y si llama él no le digas nunca que estoy,  
  
di que me he ido.

Te vas Alfonsina con tu soledad,  
¿Qué poemas nuevos, fuiste a buscar?  
Una voz antigua de viento y de sal  
te requiebra el alma y la está llevando  
y te vas hacia allá como en sueños,  
dormida, Alfonsina, vestida de mar.

of the conch shells.  
The song that sings in the dark sea bottom  
The conch shell.

You leave, Alfonsina, with your loneliness  
What new poems did you go looking for?  
An ancient voice made of wind and salt  
Flatters your soul and it is taking it away  
And you go yonder, as in dreams,  
Asleep, Alfonsina, dressed in the sea.

Five little mermaids will take you  
Through paths of seaweeds and coral  
And phosphorescent seahorses will form  
A round at your side;  
And the inhabitants of the water will play  
Soon at your side.

Turn down the lamp a little more  
Let me sleep, nurse, in peace  
And if he calls don't tell him that I am in,  
Tell him that Alfonsina will not be coming  
back,  
And if he calls, don't you ever tell him that I  
am in,  
Tell him that I have gone.

You leave, Alfonsina, with your loneliness  
What new poems did you go looking for?  
An ancient voice made of wind and salt  
Flatters your soul and it is taking it away  
And you go yonder, as in dreams,  
Asleep, Alfonsina, dressed in the sea.

The narrating subject changes throughout the poem as different perspectives are presented. The first verse is written in the third person. It is predominantly descriptive, using mostly visual images: 'su pequeña huella' ('her little footprint'), 'un sendero solo' ('a lonely path'), and 'el agua profunda' ('the deep water'). Spatially, it situates the listener as an observer at the seaside, who finds a set of footprints leading to the water. The second verse accentuates the sense of intimacy by using the second person, as if talking directly to the poem's subject. Aural images such as 'calló tu voz' ('your voice shushed'), 'arrullada en el canto' ('lulled by the singing'), and 'la canción que canta' ('the song that sings') predominate here. Kinetic and

visual cues such as 'para recostarte' ('to lay down'), and 'en el fondo oscuro del mar' ('in the dark sea bottom') are provided to accompany the spatial movement from the shore to the deep water. A new setting is established: the seabed. The chorus is also written in the second person, and it becomes more passionate and declamatory by including the question '¿Qué poemas nuevos fuiste a buscar?' ('What new poems did you go looking for?') and addressing the poet twice by her first name. The chorus reaches a climactic point as it suggests that an ancient voice lured Alfonsina's soul and took it away until she became one with the sea.

The predominant affects conveyed by the first half of the lyrics in the song are those of sadness, loneliness, and anguish ('a lonely path of sadness and silence', 'mute sorrows', 'anguish', and 'old pains'), which are softened by the consolation found in the sea, channelled mainly by the conch shells singing and the ancient voice. Despite the use of active verbs, the first half of the song implies that Alfonsina acted not so much of volition but pushed by her anguish and desperation. Tapping into the symbolism of water as the realm of the subconscious, the protagonist walks into the sea looking for poems and lays down, abandoning herself. The poem diminishes the agency of the protagonist by representing her as a girl who acts on impulses and moves as in a dream.

The opening of the second half of the song reinforces Alfonsina's infantilization through a colourful description of the sea inhabitants and how they welcome her as one of them. 'Five little mermaids will take you / Through paths of seaweeds and coral / And phosphorescent seahorses will form / A round at your side / And the inhabitants of the water will play / Soon at your side.' This is one of the happiest images in the song, evoking the innocence of childhood and the tenderness of this fantastic realm.<sup>88</sup> However, the last verse soon breaks the spell. Using the first person, the voice is now Alfonsina's as she talks to her chamber maid. While she lies on her (death?) bed, seemingly unable to take care of herself, she commands and requests help from another female character. The word 'nodriza' has a double allusion in Spanish: it refers both to a nurse and to a wet nurse, again representing the main character as an infant. A masculine figure is alluded to for the first and last time, followed by a farewell: 'Tell him that Alfonsina will not be coming back.' In accordance with the zamba form, the chorus is repeated. As we ponder once more on the motives of her departure, the image of Alfonsina 'dressed in the sea' brings the song to an end.<sup>89</sup> This closing representation fixes the image of a girl who plays in the sea and lives in a fantastic realm, detached from adult agency.

As mentioned previously, even if many of the poetic images used by Luna were adapted from Storni's poems, in particular 'Yo en el fondo del mar' and 'Voy a dormir', by portraying the main character as a young maiden who suffers for love 'Alfonsina y el mar' establishes analogies with other mythological and literary female figures. The lyrics start by representing her as a mermaid (Ariel) or an Ondine, and the ending recalls the conflicted Ophelia, who

88 These poetic images are very similar to the ones used by Storni in 'Yo en el fondo del mar'.

89 'Vestida de mar' means that Alfonsina is *wearing* the sea, as if you wear silk, like how 'vestida de rojo' means dressed in red. This poetic image implies that she is adorned by the substance of the sea that she is becoming one with.

drowns herself in desperation. The dramatic action starts on the seaside, continues under the water and finishes on dry land again, as if Alfonsina had never drowned, as if she died in her sleep. Nevertheless, the repetition of the chorus rightfully contextualizes the ending under the sea.

While the song's poetic representation does convey sadness, loneliness, and melancholy, these affects are countered by implying that her suicide was the fulfilment of an inevitable destiny. The liner notes mention that Storni 'proudly lived her fate of being a woman made for poetry, with dignity and courage'.<sup>90</sup> Even if there might have been some veiled cautionary message for lonely and creative women who defy society's conventions,<sup>91</sup> the authors build on the trope of irrational young females acting out of love for a man. Indeed, the mysterious male character introduced in the last verse of the song points to a possible motive for her suicide related to desire and a frustrated relationship. Not only is this implication unfounded, since all the evidence points to her suicide as a choice based on her health, but it also introduces a male character as a powerful figure in the story, thus detracting from Storni's strength as a feminist figure.

### Zamba, dysphoria, and Argentine national identity

The folk boom successfully created nationalist identity markers by bringing rural music to urban folks through the mass media industry. Sociologist Pablo Vila described this as a process of *nationalization* of urban middle-class sectors as part of a reconfiguration and self-critique after the failure of Frondizi's Developmentalism. They wanted to communicate with and get to know the real country through Argentine literature and the consumption of popular music of folk roots. Vila argues that the zamba in particular was embraced by middle-class audiences as a traditional vernacular genre enriched by more sophisticated poetry, music, and performance.<sup>92</sup>

The choice of vernacular music genres stressed the nationalistic values that *Mujeres argentinas* was intended to support; this was especially important in the case of Alfonsina Storni, the only one among the portrayed heroines who was born in Europe. Storni's Argentinity is emphasized by the melancholic, vernacular gestures of the zamba. While the poetic discourse presents an infantilized and romantic heroine, the musical discourse adds nationalistic overtones through the setting of the verses to a zamba with the predominance of a dysphoric mood. Nationalist overtones are reinforced by Mercedes Sosa's participation in the project. Not only her diction colours the verses with a regional accent but also her

90 'Alfonsina Storni vivió orgulosamente su fatalidad de mujer hecha para la poesía, con dignidad y valentía.' [Unsigned], Liner notes to *Mujeres argentinas*.

91 It has already been argued that the focus on the passional drama of Storni's suicide 'allowed for the veiling of significant points of her social action and transfigured her image into a sort of heroine, very useful for Argentina's decency-oriented middle-class social strata, maybe revealing the intention of washing some of social guilt with regards to the writer's tragedy.' Mamani, 'Heroínas, mártires y cautivas', 159.

92 Vila explains that folk music arrived in Argentine cities through the 1940s inner migration of the rural population. This music was initially rejected by urban culture because of its association to the lower classes but during the Peronist government was gradually accepted by the middle class. Vila, 'Música popular y auge del folklore', 26.



public persona would eventually become the focus of the marketing strategy, a process which stands on her powerful though empathic performance of the song.

Nationalistic undertones are evident in the dysphoric mood that prevails throughout the song. This deep sadness was identified by musicologist Melanie Plesch as one of the recurring topics in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Argentine Nationalist music.<sup>93</sup> The lyrics allude to a final farewell, including phrases such as 'no vuelve más' ('no longer returns') and 'Alfonsina no vuelve' ('Alfonsina is not coming back'), which are markers of sorrow and death. The first group includes verses such as 'pena y silencio' ('sadness and silence'), 'penas mudas' ('inner sorrow'), 'angustia' ('anguish'), 'dolores' ('pains'), and 'soledad' ('loneliness'). Images such as 'el agua profunda' ('the deep water'), 'en el fondo oscuro' ('in the dark bottom'), and 'déjame que duerma, nodriza, en paz' ('let me sleep, nurse, in peace') are also metaphors of death. The music emphasizes the feeling of sadness and longing through the use of the minor mode (C minor), slow tempo, descending melodic progressions, and chromaticism. Plesch has argued that Argentine nationalist style bears a close connection with the guitar. Traditionally, zambas are sung accompanied by the guitar, with the eventual addition of a *bombo legüero*. By imitating the guitar, nationalist composers were not only referencing the instrument's cultural signification but also its gendered suggestion. Plesch writes:

The guitar topos is much more than strumming, arpeggios or melodic performance styles that identify it. . . . [The guitar's] predominantly expressive sense is loneliness and melancholy, its signification is feminine: it is the woman, the partner, and ultimately, the entire nation.<sup>94</sup>

Ramírez's zamba inscribes itself in the nationalist association with loneliness, melancholy, and femininity by including the guitar in the song's first recording and by visiting the topos of the guitar in his piano arrangement of the piece.<sup>95</sup> The descending arpeggio pattern used in the opening bars imitates a guitar arpeggio (Example 1) and the doubling of the melody in thirds of the last phrase of the chorus (b. 34) brings to mind similar idiosyncratic passages in zambas and chacareras performed on the guitar by Atahualpa Yupanqui, guitarist, vocalist, author, and one of Ramírez's mentors.<sup>96</sup>

93 Plesch, "Una pena extraordinaria", 219.

94 'El topos de la guitarra va mucho más allá de la imitación de rasgueos, arpeggios o punteos que lo identifican. . . . [el] sentido expresivo predominante [de la guitarra] es la soledad y la melancolía, su significación es femenina: es la mujer, la compañera y, en última instancia, la nación entera.' Plesch, "Una pena extraordinaria", 222. For an examination of the topos of the guitar in Argentine art music, see Melanie Plesch, 'The Topos of the Guitar in the Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Argentina', *The Musical Quarterly* 92/3–4 (January 2009).

95 Sosa's 1969 version features piano, double bass, guitar, and percussion.

96 This becomes evident in the guitar accompaniment of the song of an audiovisual studio recording that took place in Europe during Sosa's exile. She sings accompanied by guitar (Nicolás Brizuela) and double bass (Eduardo Medina). See Sosa Mercedes, 'Mercedes Sosa-Alfonsina y el mar', 2 October 2010, YouTube, 4:33, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eU1Hpc\\_iqL8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eU1Hpc_iqL8). This performance was included in a special program broadcast by Spanish TV. Miguel de los Santos, dir. and pres. *Retrato en vivo* [Live Portrait]. Written by Eduardo Delgado, staged by Jesús de la Barrera, lighting by Ricardo Fernández Leyva, produced by José Luis García Montero, produced (realizador) by José Manuel Castillejo. 1979. See 'Mercedes Sosa, especial en televisión española (1979)', 28 November 2020, YouTube, 52:49,

**Alfonsina y el mar**  
ZAMBA

Música de ARIEL RAMIREZ  
Versos de FELIX LUNA

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'Alfonsina y el mar' in Zamba style. It consists of two systems of music. The first system is a piano introduction, marked 'PIANO' and 'INTROD. p', with a tempo of 'Tempo di Zamba'. The second system continues the piano accompaniment and includes a vocal line labeled 'Canto' with a 'poco meno' tempo marking. The score is written in a key with two flats and a 6/8 time signature.

**Example 1** The topos of the guitar in the opening bars of 'Alfonsina y el mar', bb. 1–8.

Consider Atahualpa Yupanqui's version of the opening section of 'Zamba de Vargas' as an example of the popularized use of the guitar in Argentine folk music. It combines similar arpeggios to those in the opening bars of 'Alfonsina y el mar' and passages in which the melody is doubled in thirds, usually played on the first two strings of the guitar.<sup>97</sup> It is worth noting the contrast between the short passage (b. 34), in which Ramírez imitates Yupanqui's melodic harmonizing in thirds, and the romanticized use of thirds in the interlude (bb. 32–40).<sup>98</sup> These two aesthetically contrasting usages of thirds provide clear evidence of the integration of both Argentine folk music and Western art music traditions in Ramírez's music.<sup>99</sup>

As Plesch indicates, the topos of the guitar 'does not refer to an actual guitar but to the idea of the guitar, a larger cultural trope within Argentine culture, intrinsically related to the mythologies of national identity and, as such, connected to wider worlds of meaning'.<sup>100</sup> Therefore, by the use of such a topos in his zamba, Ramírez places 'Alfonsina y el mar' in a broader cultural map on which mythologies of national identity have been drafted.

It should be noted that although Ramírez was not part of the Nueva Canción or the Nuevo Cancionero movements, his significant relationship with Yupanqui and persistent

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTqDwQg7a8Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTqDwQg7a8Q). During her exile, Sosa would perform regularly accompanied by guitar, as in the concert offered in Lugano, Switzerland, in 1980. See Mercedes Sosa, 'Mercedes Sosa "Acústico en Suiza" (1980) completo full concert', 30 August 2013, YouTube, 53:46, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_1rPjtnHo2Q&list=RD\\_1rPjtnHo2Q&start\\_radio=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1rPjtnHo2Q&list=RD_1rPjtnHo2Q&start_radio=1).

97 Atahualpa Yupanqui, 'Zamba de Vargas', on *Los ojos de mi carreta* (Buenos Aires: Odeón, 1975).

98 The harmonic language used in the passages in thirds of the interlude can be compared with Delibes' famous 'Flower Duet', from *Lakmé*, with an element of nineteenth-century piano virtuosity in its improvisatory character.

99 An integration of which he was proud, as mentioned in the fragment of his biography commented on earlier.

100 Plesch, 'The Topos of the Guitar', 243.

collaboration with Mercedes Sosa could lead to finding points of contact between his compositions and those of the mentioned artistic movements. Part of a larger Latin American nationalist impulse, this tendency was recognized, already in the 1980s, as one of the most remarkable ones in the continent.<sup>101</sup> However, even if *Mujeres argentinas* drew from previous folk and popular traditions to establish a continuation between past song and new creation, it avoided overt social and political criticism. Although the setting of the verses to a zamba rhythm and the references to the topos of the guitar contributed to the misrepresentation of a poet who spent most of her life in urban centres, they favoured the creation of Storni's image as a nationalistic heroine, an aesthetic strategy for listeners to empathize with her.

### Nation and gender, affect and performance: sounding Alfonsina

The fact that Mercedes Sosa was chosen to record 'Alfonsina y el mar' was undoubtedly instrumental in the song's popularity. In this section, I argue that Sosa's performance, both as a vocalist and as a woman, toned down the patriarchal bias of the song materials. Her vocal performance provided an empathetic and nuanced representation of the song's protagonist. Her political activism and her feminist and civic behaviour through her public persona coloured the stories she told through her songs, among them that of Alfonsina, thus providing a representation more akin to Storni's historic character.

That Sosa's image became closely associated with 'Alfonsina y el mar' is evident in the fact that, in 1990, the sheet music cover of 'Alfonsina y el mar' was illustrated with a full-page photograph of Mercedes Sosa. The vocalist is portrayed in her patriotic persona (Figure 3). Wearing a traditional poncho, an outfit made of a simple cut of dark cloth ornamented with geometric Indigenous designs, Sosa is holding a drum. She keeps the drumsticks in position over the leather membrane and looks upwards and to the left, as if waiting for or receiving divine inspiration. Her black hair falling loosely over her shoulders, lack of makeup, and stoic profile emphasize the authenticity of her national identity as a native *mestiza*, supposedly mixing Calchaquí, Spanish, and French ancestry.<sup>102</sup> The light blue background of the image emphasizes nationalistic connotations in suggesting the colours of the Argentine flag. For the name of the song, the graphic designers chose Christel Wagner Clean font,

101 'Esta necesidad proviene del amplio impulso nacionalista latinoamericano que es una de las tendencias más notables de la cultura de este continente en las últimas décadas.' Eduardo Carrasco Pirard, 'La Nueva Canción en América Latina', *Revista Internacional de Ciencias Sociales. La sociología, los contextos y los creadores* 34/4 (1982), 667. Yupanqui's image appears on p. 671 and Sosa's, on p. 685. She is mentioned as 'la intérprete principal de la música argentina' ('the main performer of Argentine music') (p. 674). Nueva Canción usually identified a Chilean popular music movement in the early 1960s, which was followed by a similarly ideologically engaged movement in Mendoza (a city which is close to the border with Chile), Movimiento Nuevo Cancionero. Recent scholarship has tended to unify them. For a clear synthesis, see María Inés García, 'Antecedentes del Nuevo Cancionero', in *Tito Francia y la música en Mendoza. De la radio al Nuevo Cancionero* (Buenos Aires: Gourmet Musical Ediciones, 2009), 71–92.

102 Sosa's ethnicity as a *mestiza*, supposedly descending from the *Calchaquíes*, Spanish and French, is mentioned in a number of secondary and third sources but the author has not been able to confirm it. See Oscar Chamosa, 'Indigenous or Criollo: The Myth of White Argentina in Tucumán's Calchaquí Valley', *Hispanic American Historical Review* 88/1 (2008).



**Figure 3** Mercedes Sosa was later portrayed on the cover of *Alfonsina y el mar* sheet music (Buenos Aires: Editorial Lagos, 1990). She is holding a *bombo legüero* in a standing performance position, with its characteristic sticks.

emphasizing ingenuity through the volutes ornamenting some letters. The name of the album appears on the top left corner in all capitals using a bold, more neutral font (Mono litrox or Swiss 721 Bold Rounded), similar to the one that spells the vocalist's name, which seems to have been added at a later stage. Oddly superimposed on the image, on one side of the *bombo*, the 'M' of Mercedes is partially veiled by the darkness of the instrument's leather strap. The awkwardness of the design shows that although the publishers wanted Sosa's name to appear on the cover they did not know where to place it, for she could be mistaken as the author of the song. Sosa's Indigenous ancestry and depiction on the cover art matches the discourse of Argentinity and embodies the proper representation of a true Argentine woman. In this sense, Sosa's version of 'Alfonsina y el mar' provided Alfonsina with an Argentine identity, bringing her closer to the popular audience through her cultural appeal.<sup>103</sup>

That Sosa embodied some of the negotiations of gender, nation, and cultural Latin American identity is evident in one of the interviews with Spanish journalist Carmen

103 By 1990, Mercedes Sosa was a celebrated artist around the world.

Rico Godoy, recorded during a successful Spanish tour in 1983.<sup>104</sup> Sosa led the conversation to social issues, stating that 'As a woman, I am concerned about women's problems. In my travels around the world, I am deeply concerned.' Following this cue, Rico Godoy said: 'I assume that, over there, women are at the bottom, they are inferior to men, they go hungry, are sick and die younger . . . I'm referring to the Indians [*sic*] in Argentina, an Argentine proletariat, the peasants in Central America.' The journalist essentialized Sosa to the point of identifying her as an Indigenous woman in Argentina, a proletarian, and suggesting a connection with Central America. These confused and confusing appreciations made Sosa uncomfortable, which can be seen in her moving nervously in the chair, looking up impatiently, and assuming a more confrontational posture. Rather than addressing the issue of nation and correcting the colonial and essentializing appreciations of the journalist, Sosa returned to the topic of gender. Calmly, but with conviction, she denounced the historically and politically based inequity that many women suffered: 'What happens is that women have always contributed to the causes of men. . . . We need men to back us. . . . Often, when women ask for something, it is important for men to lend their support. Because women have always lent theirs to men's causes.' Potentially informed by her own experience, Sosa's account related gender inequity to power imbalance and political history.

Sosa's performance of 'Alfonsina y el mar' can be characterized as uniquely compelling based on a combination of three aspects: the tone and range of her voice, the variety of affects that she conveys through the pronunciation of the lyrics and their phrasing, and the versatility with which she tells the story and impersonates the protagonist, diluting the barriers between subject and object, and transferring her public persona onto that of Alfonsina Storni. The uniqueness of Sosa's tone of voice fascinated not only audiences but also music critics, writers, and musicologists who described its qualities in connection with the life and cultural significance of the vocalist. The power of Mercedes Sosa's voice was usually compared with her political activism. Her obituary in the *Americas* journal stated that she had 'a voice as strong as the will of the disenfranchised masses she passionately defended in song and through personal example'.<sup>105</sup> Argentine writer Ernesto Sabato wrote that 'in Mercedes's voice there is mystery, sweetness, beauty, melancholy, but also the pain of men, the orphanage of children, the urgency of justice, necessary revolutions, and possible Utopias'.<sup>106</sup> According to

104 Wolodarsky, dir. *Mercedes Sosa. Algo más que una canción*, 14 September 2013, YouTube, 55:39, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tz3f8KvMRQI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tz3f8KvMRQI). The interview with Carmen Rico Godoy appeared from 13:00 to 17:00. This documentary is based on footage from Sosa's 1983 Spanish concert tour. Significantly, the tour was promoted as 'Mercedes Sosa, la voz de América' ('Mercedes Sosa, [Latin] America's Voice').

105 Mark Holston, 'Remembering Mercedes Sosa', *Americas* 62/1 (Jan/Feb 2010), 64.

106 'En la voz de Mercedes hay misterio, dulzura, belleza, melancolía, pero también desgarro de hombres, orfandad de niños, urgencia de justicia, revoluciones necesarias y posibles utopías'. Quoted in Sergio Sánchez, 'La mujer que prefirió ser cantora', *Página 12* (Buenos Aires), 2 December 2011, [www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/espectaculos/17-23691-2011-12-02.html](http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/espectaculos/17-23691-2011-12-02.html). See also Rodolfo Bracelli, *Mercedes Sosa. La Negra* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2012). For a discussion on gender tropes and revolution in Argentina, see Illa Carrillo Rodríguez, 'The Revolutionary Patria and Its New (Wo)Men: Gendered Tropes of Political Agency and Popular Identity in Argentine Folk Music of the Long 1960s', in *The Militant Song Movement in Latin America: Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina*, ed. Pablo Vila (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

musicologist Leonardo Waisman, 'the most magical ingredient of Mercedes Sosa's performances is, undoubtedly, the colour of her voice'.<sup>107</sup> To explain the specificity of the dark and deep timbre of Sosa's voice, Waisman compared a 1965 recording with those of three other contemporary female folk music vocalists: Margarita Palacios, Ramona Galarza, and Suma Paz. He concluded that Sosa selected, combined, and refined pre-existing performative folk practices, surpassing her predecessors in quality and subtlety. Through the popularity of Mercedes Sosa's rendition of 'Alfonsina y el mar', her voice became Alfonsina's, transferring to Storni's collective memory the strength and determination that she possessed.

Sosa's provincial diction (the fricative sound of the 'r' in 'requiebra') and the simplicity of her emission (almost deprived from vibrato) matched the rural, folk singing style expected in a zamba. This reinforced the ruralization of Storni's figure implied by the choice of music genre. However, Sosa's performance destroyed any stereotypical representation of the historic character by deploying a variety of affects as opposed to a single one. The affects implied in the text were delivered with an astonishing malleability, easily interchanging roles and developing the dramatic structure that brings the song to life. Sosa's dramatic talent is evident in the way in which she told the story, achieving a remarkable interpretation of each poetic image, stressed by its musical setting. The first verses of 'Alfonsina y el mar' provide an example of Sosa's expressiveness and malleability. By using a breathy voice and singing through a half-smile when describing Alfonsina's small footprint, she emphasizes the tenderness and softness of the opening verses.<sup>108</sup> Gradually, the colour of her voice turns painful as she reaches a climax on the word 'penas' ('sorrow'), the highest pitch in the verse. A similar transformation occurs in the second verse, this time from the uncertainty and sadness conveyed by the first two lines to the pleasure of laying down 'in the singing of the conch shells' and the determination of that conch shell, singing at the bottom of the sea. Sosa conveys these affects by modulating the quality and intensity of her voice and by applying subtle variations to her phrasing. The quality of the voice is altered through the opening and shape of the lips (e.g., stretched in a smile, relaxed and round) and by the relative quantity of air (e.g., using a breathy voice or a more defined one). This is evident in certain words, such as 'solo' ('lonely') and, in the chorus, 'soledad' ('loneliness'). In the latter, the effect is that of a sigh or a repressed sob (*soh-leh-dad*, on three descending notes). In the chorus, Sosa conveys melancholy but also determination. Her powerful voice accompanies the final ascending progression with a softening of the voice that implies resignation and farewell. Her impersonation

107 'Mercedes Sosa aparece con una selección, combinación y refinamiento de prácticas performativas pre-existentes. Con un color de voz y una emisión natural algo cercana a la de Margarita Palacios, de la que también conserva el acento regional, un uso del rubato emparentado con el de Suma Paz y una capacidad de proyectar y sostener los sonidos largos que Galarza le envidiaría, Sosa emplea los ingredientes elegidos de esas tradiciones con una calidad y una sutileza que supera largamente a sus competidoras.' Leonardo Waisman, 'El canto de Mercedes Sosa', paper presented at the Asociación Argentina de Musicología XXIII Conference and Instituto Nacional de Musicología XIX Study Week, Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina, August 2018.

108 That Sosa smiles in certain sections of her performance can be confirmed in a black and white audiovisual studio recording which captures a performance of this song accompanied by guitar and cello. See csilviap, 'Mercedes Sosa-Alfonsina y el mar'.

of Alfonsina in the last verse is very convincing, as she commands the nurse with a tired 'Turn down the lamp a little more', and alludes at her death by an almost inaudible, quasi recitativo, 'in peace'.

## Conclusion

Claudio Díaz has identified Argentine *folklore*, or popular music with folk roots, as one of the fields in which concepts such as nation, justice, art, people, and identity, which are important for Argentine society, were debated and settled.<sup>109</sup> *Mujeres argentinas* participates in this debate by featuring songs that celebrate fictional and real women who were relevant to the country's identity and history. 'Alfonsina y el mar' is, apparently, one of the less political songs in the album. However, as we have seen, ideological elements related to gender, nation, and identity are at play, built around the figure of Alfonsina Storni and her musical representation, as well as that of Mercedes Sosa's performance and public persona.

As a musical dialogue, 'Alfonsina y el mar' brings together actors, ideologies, and scenes from different moments of the tumultuous twentieth-century Argentinean history. The song evokes a socialist and feminist poet who advocated for women's suffrage. Storni was active from 1910, a year that saw the commemoration with pomp of the Centennial of the May revolution against Spanish colonial rule. She died in 1938, at the end of a decade of social and political unrest known as the 'Infamous Decade'. *Mujeres argentinas* was released in 1969, the year of El Cordobazo and El Rosariazo, two popular uprisings of workers, students, and artists in the cities of Córdoba and Rosario that defied the military dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía. The authors of the song were militant radicales who strived to advance their values on nation, identity, and morality through their cultural and artistic output. In fact, the album at the same time reinforces and undermines accepted views about women in contemporary Argentine society. This contradiction was embodied in Mercedes Sosa's figure, as she was capable of recreating the infantilized Alfonsina with conviction and at the same time giving her agency through an empathetic performance. Political ideology is latently present in this seemingly apolitical song. It is embedded in its poetic and musical materials, underscored in its promotional strategies, and finely ingrained in the voice that tells the story. Storni's socialism and feminism are subdued in the musical materials and commercial strategy, but they re-emerge in Sosa's performance and public persona.

In terms of gender, there are clear contradictions in the way Storni is represented as a woman. Misrepresented in the lyrics and the visual discourse, her figure regained agency through Sosa's nuanced and powerful performance. Storni's Argentine identity was reinforced by setting the verses of the song to a vernacular rhythm, applying a traditional treatment in the musical arrangement, and having it recorded by Mercedes Sosa. The sonic, performative, and visual power of Sosa's participation was instrumental in the strategy of constructing an unequivocal national identity for Storni. Indeed, through her artistic and political activism, Sosa became the role model for the aesthetic and ideological discourse that the album sought to endorse.

<sup>109</sup> Díaz, *Variaciones sobre el ser nacional*, 7.

The result of adapting Storni's historical figure in 'Alfonsina y el mar' was twofold. From a gendered perspective, its infantilization and romanticization conformed patriarchal expectations of decorum and middle-class morality dominating women's lives in Argentina in the 1960s. From a national perspective, Storni's white European urban background was imbued with more 'authentic' Argentine values through Sosa's public image and the vernacular zamba musical tradition, thus erasing any anxieties about her identity. These negotiations were possible because of the multimediated art that music is, since 'Alfonsina y el mar' was perceived as text, sound, and image. The powerful media persona of Mercedes Sosa, her ponchos, the truthfulness that she communicated in her singing through the absence of ornamentation or vibrato, and the depth and colour of her voice, all contributed to reflect national and gender values that were appreciated by the audiences, both nationally and internationally.

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