

Music & Musical Performance

Issue 1

Article 2

September 2022

The Other Side of My Heart: Latina Immigrant's Oral History in Music

Lorena Guillén

University of North Carolina-Greensboro, l_guille@uncg.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/mmp>

Recommended Citation

Guillén, Lorena (2022) "The Other Side of My Heart: Latina Immigrant's Oral History in Music," *Music & Musical Performance*: : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/mmp/vol1/iss1/2>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Music & Musical Performance by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

The Other Side of My Heart: Latina Immigrant's Oral History in Music

Lorena Guillén, University of North Carolina–Greensboro

Abstract

The author recorded six women from her local community in North Carolina. They shared and reflected about their dreams and fears while also evaluating the things they gained and lost in moving to the US. This work became a song cycle with music by Argentine composer Alejandro Ruty and lyrics based on the interviews, which the author edited from the exact words they expressed in their conversations. Ruty and the author used fragments of these interviews as part of an audio collage played at the beginning of each song.

Keywords: women, Latin American culture, immigrants, oral history, singers, singing, females

For a long time, I have been fascinated with meaning in speech, not so much the semantic meaning of words and sentences, but the meaning of the vocal inflections we apply to them, the melodic contours and intonation, the pacing, the pauses, and the emphasis or stress on certain parts of words or whole words over others. This is what is known as prosody. Being a musician, a singer, a musicologist, and choral conductor makes me especially sensitive to words and speech. Thus, I started thinking about how to create pieces that could capture the normal speech of common people in musical phrases: basically, how to bring into a song or a movement of a larger work, “oral history,” the stories of people as told by themselves in their own words—how to preserve verbatim their selection of words and even incorporate the sound of their own voices into the composition.

I found a tremendous collaborator who had the same interests and had previous artistic experiences in this field, UNCG associate professor of Music Composition Alejandro Ruty. He accepted to team and develop this idea I had: to create a piece that engages Latina immigrants in retelling their journeys from their countries of origin to the United States. This musical composition would allow me to merge a second personal concern, the need of giving a public voice to Latina immigrants like me. The music could serve as the musical amplification of their stories. The result was the oral-history musical project *The Other Side of My Heart*. This has recently become the core piece of my latest album, which takes its title from that same work, “The Other Side of My Heart” (available on Amazon, Spotify and CD Baby) and which was recorded by the Lorena Guillén Tango Ensemble.

How the Work was Created

Over various conversations' sessions, I recorded six women from my local community in North Carolina. They shared and reflected about their dreams and fears while also evaluating the things they gained and lost in moving to the US. This work became a song cycle with music by Argentine composer Alejandro Ruty and lyrics based on the interviews, which I edited from the exact words they expressed in our conversations. Ruty and I used fragments of these interviews as part of an audio collage played at the beginning of each song. The last component of this project was the collaboration with Chilean photographer Felipe Troncoso (professor at the UNCG Language Department), who developed a series of photos with the same six women that are usually projected along with the piece during live performances. These contain images of significant objects from among these women's possessions and evocative landscapes that illustrate the migratory process.¹

Why Women?

I guess that being a Latina immigrant myself, I wanted to give voice to my peers. As a musician, I have the possibility of expressing my own experiences through my art, and I wished to offer a similar chance to other women like me, to give them a public artistic voice. Music has the ability of expanding and enhancing ideas, so these songs could be the musical amplification of their stories. Especially at this moment in the history of our country, when issues on immigration are at the center of the political discussions and all sorts of misconceptions and stereotypes created, these stories need to be heard. The six women that agreed to participate in this project grasped the potential that this work had of reaching new ears and opening new channels of communication and discussion of issues that otherwise only polarize our society.

Who Are These Women?

In this work, I wanted to cover a wide spectrum of experiences, women of different national, social, and economic origins, to expose the diversity of motivations of the people that usually come to the US from our Latin American countries. I was fortunate enough to get help from various Latino organizations in my community. One thing took me to another, and after a few refusals, I managed to engage six wonderful women who were willing to share their journeys. These courageous people opened up their hearts confiding in me their stories with the hope that those who would listen them, immigrant or national, would identify with that dream of seeking a better life that we all share: that this effort would put faces and real voices to the unknown "immigrant-other."

Another fundamental goal of this project was to expose the many ways immigrants contribute to our society. They are our doctors, our kids' teachers, our nurses, the employee serving us at a shop or cleaning the hotel where we sleep, and much more. Among the six women I got to interview, there is a medical doctor from Argentina, an elementary school teacher, and her daughter, a current university student, both from Colombia. There were also two girls from Mexico who crossed the desert as undocumented immigrants, one brought by her mother—now she is a DACA recipient—and a Bolivian woman who came as a young adult

1. The gallery may be seen at <https://www.lorenaguillen.com/the-other-side-of-my-heart>.

claimed by her mother when the mother got her own US citizenship, after many years of separation.

Interviewees and Their Stories

The following is a summary of their individual stories, which can be heard in my own website (www.lorenaguillen.com):

INTERVIEWEE 1: a medical doctor from Argentina who came for specialization in California. After her initial struggle with the language barrier, she worked extremely hard to adapt to the medical system in this country. At the end, she was offered a job and decided to stay in the US. After a few years, she applied for residency, a green card; seven years later, she went for and got her US citizenship. Currently, she works in family medicine in a practice of North Carolina and lives there with her husband and two kids.

INTERVIEWEE 2: a middle-aged woman from Colombia who came hired as a teacher for a Spanish immersion program in an elementary school. She brought her whole family along with her, a husband and three children. After a few years of living in the US with a working visa, they hired a lawyer to assist with their paperwork application for a permanent residency, a green card.

INTERVIEWEE 3: the youngest daughter of the previous person from Colombia, who was brought by her parents when she was ten years old. As a current young graduate student, she has been honored with various scholarships for her high academic performance. She says that her multi-cultural experience while growing up has exerted a tremendous influence in her choice of career path, which is political science, more specifically the resolution of international conflict. Being bilingual and bicultural has been a plus at every moment of her life.

INTERVIEWEE 4: a young woman from Mexico who was brought by her mother at age twelve along with her younger brother, in search of her father. After attempting every single correct way and being denied any kind of visa to enter the US, her mother decided to cross the desert, walking for three days to be reunited with her husband (whose work accident made him lose one of his legs). This young woman, now an adult with her own family, works for a non-profit organization. She is under the DACA program and waits for a favorable resolution and continuation of her program.

INTERVIEWEE 5: a young Mexican woman who also crossed the border with a cousin as undocumented risking her life at the hands of “coyotes.” She came escaping poverty and looking for better opportunities in this country. She has a teaching degree that cannot be validated here because of her status and has been working in various jobs, from hotel cleaning services to employee at various shops.

INTERVIEWEE 6: a woman from Bolivia who came as a young adult (claimed by her mother who had emigrated many years prior), leaving behind her kids in Bolivia with their grandparents. After getting married and becoming a US citizen, her mother went through a long process to obtain residencies for her three kids. Being the youngest, my interviewee was the first one allowed to come and reunite with her mother. She studied at nursing school and works both in that professional field and as a Spanish interpreter.

Although I was aware of the existence of other archives that contained audio and video interviews with immigrants or about immigration issues in North Carolina, I felt it was important to generate my own records. Both Duke University's "Latino Voices" Language Project 2004–2005: (<https://sites.duke.edu/latinovoices>) and UNC-Chapel Hill's "'New Roots': Voices from Carolina del Norte!" (<http://newroots.lib.unc.edu/>) were conceived with a different aim in mind, which made them unsuitable for my purposes.² Duke's "Latino Voices" was modeled to capture the differences in accents and dialects in the Spanish language from people of different origins, from "chicanos" to various people from Latin American countries. The Chapel Hill "New Roots" project was created to interview all sorts of people that at some point of their lives were involved with the research of immigration issues or immigrant support organizations, from US natives to foreigners, including immigrants. They were asked to reflect about their experiences and understanding of the process of immigration. The intimacy I aspired to create in my conversations was absent. The trust-building as well as the fluid dialogues I aspired to generate with these women were going to be absent if I were to use those other archived interviews. Regardless of my using the same set of prepared questions as a departure point, each conversation developed in different ways according to what each of them wanted to share at that moment and their personal flow of emotions.

These Latina women's voices were extremely compelling, as were the words that they selected to express themselves. As I mentioned earlier, I sought to preserve in this piece the vocal sound quality and tone of their inflections. I was not only interested in the content of their stories, but also in the powerful expression and musicality in their voices. I knew about Alejandro Rutty's previous pieces in which he managed to capture this vocality. We had even collaborated in other project that used audio collages of oral history in a big choral–orchestral piece, so we wanted to recreate that effect now in a smaller, more intimate musical work. *The Other Side of My Heart* became a cycle of six movements: four songs, one pure instrumental movement, and a closing instrumental movement with a superimposed audio collage.

As I had already anticipated, fragments of these interviews were selected, edited, and inserted as part of short collages that the listener gets to hear at the beginning of each song; the original sources anticipate some of the same phrases that would follow as lyrics in the song immediately after. The final movement contains extended fragments of the interviews in an audio collage laid over the instrumental version of the first song of the cycle. The recording of the interviews was done at the highest quality possible in order to obtain good enough sound samples for that purpose.

Organizational Criteria Structuring Interviewee Materials into Individual Songs

After hours of listening to the recordings over and over, I came to the conclusion that a number of common themes become apparent in their individual experiences. It was a matter of reorganizing phrases from the different interviews and transforming their exact words into the lyrics of four songs that would encapsulate these subjects: looking for a better life, reunion with members of their families, kids following their parents, what they could bring and what they left

2. <https://sites.duke.edu/latinovoices> and <http://newroots.lib.unc.edu/>.

behind, friends becoming family in this foreign land, the struggle to learn the new language, feeling between two worlds, and where home is.

This is the final sequence of song-movements of the piece:

- SONG 1: “Many Ways of Arriving”: The ways of arriving to this country.
- SONG 2: “Far Away”: The value of new friendships in the new place in building a new support community.
- SONG 3: “Interlude”: (Instrumental).
- SONG 4: “There is Always a hair in the Soup”: Gains and losses in the process of migrating.
- SONG 5: “Home”: What and where is “home”?
- SONG 6: “Voices”: (Audio-collage of longer fragments of the interviews over the same music of Song 1 but with only the instrumental parts, without the singing vocal melody).

The singing voice of the performing ensemble articulates these multiple narratives and opinions around a common subject in a sort of dialogue. The singer, in this case me, serves as the vehicle of their multiple voices. Since the source of the lyrics is their spoken word coming from the interviews, their phrases cannot be fitted in rhymed verses. However, Rutty’s vocal melodic parts carefully fit the declamatory pace and irregular length in a completely natural manner. The singer ranges from musical phrases that approach a quasi-recitation on a repeated note to captivating over-arching lyrical ones. At moments, in certain songs, the voice mixes with the fabric of the rest of the ensemble in long wordless vocalises that elongate and elaborate over the expressive power of the lyrics articulated a few bars earlier. Many of those long vocalizes are taken over or repeated by the violin part, while at moments violin and voice float together over in melodic duets.

The music composed by Rutty draws from various vernacular Latin American popular musical traditions, which he blends in his own original “pan-Latin” style. One can hear: *new-tango*, the *zamba* from the Argentinian rural pampas, Bolivian high-plateau chanting, native Guarani fiddling and guitar strumming, Uruguayan *candombe*, and jazzy slow ballads. All the songs are scored for voice, violin, piano, electric bass and a small ethnic percussion set (congas, cajón, shakers, and djembe).

The first song, “Many Ways of Arriving,” with its slow cross rhythms and its folk-ballad melody, evokes the Argentine pampas style known as *zamba*. This is a rural type of slow dance in which the two dancers elegantly circle around each other waving handkerchiefs. The cross rhythm that fluctuates between three-four and six-eight recreates the stylized weaving of that choreography in the musical texture resulting from the left hand of the piano and electric bass lines against the piano right hand, violin, and voice.

The second song, “Far Away,” lays the *new-tango* lyrical melodic phrases of the violin, voice, and piano over a slow and stretched Afro-Uruguayan *candombe* rhythmic backbone. Starting in the 1970s, Argentine “new tango” reformed the traditional tango style by expanding its harmonic vocabulary and lengthening its form while still keeping many of its most recognizable rhythmic and phrasing mannerisms. Its most recognizable figure and one of the leaders of this reformation was Astor Piazzolla, but other famous Argentine bandleaders and

composers—such as Horacio Salgán, Osvaldo Pugliese, Rodolfo Mederos—also contributed their personal innovative *new-tango* styles. Rutty has refined over the years his own refined *new-tango* idiom, which he incorporates in this song as well as the third instrumental movement, “Interlude.” The Afro-Uruguayan *candombe*, in its traditional form, is based on the polyrhythmic patterns that a set of three drums (chico, repique and piano) play to accompany a chanting and dancing group. In “Far Away,” the congas, combined with shakers, synthesized the patterns of those three *candombe* drums.

With “Interlude,” the third movement of the piece, Rutty launches a full instrumental *new-tango* counterpoint. A brief piano introduction gives way to a soulful violin melody accompanied by solo piano at first and later electric bass as well (with the addition of shakers and *cajon* in a driving groove). But a few seconds later, the counterpoint between piano and violin gets more intricate, which rushes into a sudden break and the arrival of a middle section. This second part accelerates its rhythmic and harmonic pace and opens to the improvised solos of violinist and pianist, finally returning to the simplicity of the piano intro, now as a postlude.

The fourth song, “There Is Always a Hair in the Soup,” takes its title from a phrase that the mother of one of our interviewees used to say when weighing pros and cons in every decision taken about life. Over a constant four-four pattern of eighth-notes in shakers against an off-beat pulsation of the *cajón*, this song mixes high-plateau folk chanting styles from Bolivia–Argentina, as heard in *bagualas* and *vidalas* with which women sing their *coplas*. The fiddling and guitar strumming used in this movement has a different origin: it is found among the folk music of the native Guaraní people from the Brazilian–Argentine border.

The fifth song, “Home,” is a whimsical jazz-ballad with subtle rhythmic patterns that are reminiscent of South American musical styles. To conclude the cycle, the final movement (“Voices”) brings back the same opening *zamba*-ballad instrumental parts without the vocal melody, substituting instead more substantial audio fragments of the interviews with the six women telling their stories that run through the whole movement. In this way, *The Other Side of My Heart* closes a full circle of exploring emotions, sensations, and real events in the lives of these immigrants set into music that highlights the hybridity and diversity of styles of the Latin American popular and folk repertoire across borders and nations. Coincidentally, many of those same musical styles have been the product of migration, foreign traditions combined with local ones; such is the case of the *tango*, the *candombe*, and the *zamba*.

One may only hope that more listeners get to experience this musical work. Our artistic mission is to make audiences experience a piece of the stories that real people, real immigrants have to tell.³

3. The performance may be viewed at <https://www.lorenaguillen.com/the-other-side-of-my-heart>; for upcoming performances, see <https://www.lorenaguillen.com/>.