

## Article

**Heitor Villa-Lobos's *Magdalena*: classical music, the Broadway stage and the challenges of reimagining*****Magdalena* de Heitor Villa-Lobos: la música clásica, el escenario de Broadway y los retos de la reimaginación**CAROL A. HESS<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** This essay explores *Magdalena*, the sole foray into the Broadway musical by the celebrated Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos, which premiered in 1948. Until recently, “serious” musicology treated the musical only rarely. Nowadays, however, many scholars have analyzed the musical—considered by many the “quintessentially American” genre—from aesthetic, social, cultural, and political perspectives. Musicological study of Villa-Lobos reflects this bias: previously, scholars concentrated on his symphonies, his piano music, his chamber works, and his operas, largely overlooking *Magdalena*. In this project, *Magdalena* is the main focus. I evaluate Villa-Lobos’s status in the United States, relating the reception of his works to prevailing images of Latin American music. I propose that *Magdalena*, known in theater circles as the “Latin American musical,” constitutes a chapter, albeit a brief one, in the discourse of “tropicalization,” a term coined by Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman to refer to the tendency on the part of the mass audience in the U.S. to reduce Latin America to a unitary fantasy, a phenomenon that aptly meshes with some of the values of the classic Broadway musical. Finally, since many classic musicals are now being reshaped in accordance with current sensibilities on race, gender, class, and identity, I offer possible reimaginings of *Magdalena*.

**Keywords.** Broadway musical, tropicalization, Villa-Lobos, Latin American music in the United States, adaptation.

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**Resumen.** Este ensayo analiza *Magdalena*, el único intento del célebre compositor brasileño Heitor Villa-Lobos de componer un musical de Broadway, estrenado en 1948. Hasta poco, la musicología “seria” no se ocupaba del musical. Hoy día, no obstante, muchos investigadores estudian el musical—considerado por muchos como el género estadounidense por antonomasia—desde perspectivas estéticas sociales, culturales y políticas. El estudio musicológico de la obra de Villa-Lobos demuestra esta predisposición: anteriormente los musicólogos se concentraban en sus sinfonías, sus obras para piano, su música de cámara y sus óperas, haciendo caso omiso de *Magdalena*. En este ensayo, *Magdalena* es el foco principal. Evalúo el estatus de Villa-Lobos en los Estados Unidos, identificando temas en la recepción crítica de su obra que reflejan las impresiones de la música latinoamericana en los Estados Unidos. Propongo que *Magdalena*, conocido en ámbitos teatrales como “el musical

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latinoamericano,” constituye un capítulo, aunque breve, del fenómeno conocido como la “tropicalización,” término acuñado por Frances R. Aparicio y Susana Chávez-Silverman para denominar la tendencia por parte del público estadounidense de reducir América Latina a una fantasía unitaria, fenómeno que también corresponde a los valores del musical de Broadway clásico. Por último, ya que muchos musicales clásicos siguen siendo reformulados hoy día de acuerdo con actitudes actuales sobre raza, clase, género e identidad, ofrezco posibles reconceptualizaciones de *Magdalena*.

**Palabras clave.** Musical de Broadway, tropicalización, Villa-Lobos, música latinoamericana en los Estados Unidos, adaptación.

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On 26 July 1948, Heitor Villa-Lobos’s musical *Magdalena* opened in Los Angeles. It was a collaboration with George Forrest and Robert Wright, each skilled in writing both music and lyrics and mainly remembered for transforming classical selections into Broadway tunes.

Probably the best known of their creations is *Kismet* (1953), a reimagining of Alexander Borodin’s music that yielded hits such as “Stranger in Paradise.” Whether drawing on Victor Herbert (*Gypsy Lady*) or Rachmaninoff (*Anya*), Forrest and Wright selected their source material with an eye to tunefulness and audience appeal (McHugh, 2015). In 1944, Forrest and Wright essayed Scandinavia’s bracing fiords in *Song of Norway*, based music by Grieg. For *Magdalena*, they envisioned a sultrier setting, and sought a Latin American composer “who could bring color and authenticity to match the locale,” as their producer Edwin Lester put it (Peppercorn, 1996, p. 228). Villa-Lobos was clearly the man for the job.

By 1948, Villa-Lobos was well known in the United States. Thanks in part to the Good Neighbor Policy, undertaken by the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt to smooth over tensions with Latin America and shore up hemispheric solidarity against European fascism, cultural diplomacy was an important new dimension of North-South relations (Campbell, 2012) (Cándida, 2017). Besides the spate of “Latin” movie musicals Hollywood relentlessly churned out during this period—with their percussion-heavy soundtracks and banana-laden headdresses à la Carmen Miranda—art exhibits, essay contests, and literature prizes took place. The U.S. State Department also sponsored radio broadcasts and exchange visits by classical composers, including Alberto Ginastera (Argentina), Mozart Camargo Guarnieri (Brazil), and many others (Hess, 2013).

Brazil was an especially attractive prize. Its leader Getúlio Vargas, vacillating between the Axis and the Western democracies, strove to present Brazil as a sophisticated society, in part by privileging culture (Levine, 1998). The Vargas regime cultivated Brazilian identity (*brasildade*) while avoiding provincialism as artists and musicians aspired to universalism tinged with Brazilian identity (Williams, 2001). For example, at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York City, the Brazilian architects Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer won awards for the sleek lines and unadorned surfaces of the Brazilian Pavilion, a style applauded as “unmistakably Brazilian and, at the same time, universal” (Cavalcanti, 2003, p. 13). Also at the Fair, two concerts showcased Brazilian classical music, both featuring works by Villa-Lobos (Hess, 2013). In 1944, Villa-Lobos himself visited Los Angeles, New York, and Boston, giving interviews to the press, conducting his music, and burnishing his reputation as “Brazil’s greatest composer” (Stevenson, 1987,

p. 2).

Admittedly, several critics expressed consternation over Villa-Lobos's music, especially his massive orchestral works filled with unrelenting dissonances and unfamiliar Latin American percussion instruments. Villa-Lobos had cultivated this primitivist style in the 1920s while living in Paris, the city that had reacted so vehemently to Stravinsky's primitivist *Sacre du printemps* not long before; indeed, much the way French critics described the *Sacre*, they detected *bruitisme* and "howls of rage" in Villa-Lobos's music (Hess, 2013). Accordingly, at the 1939 World's Fair, one critic called *Choros* no. 8 "the *Sacre du printemps* of the Amazon"<sup>2</sup> (Wright, 1992). Another dubbed Villa-Lobos the "Rabelais of music" (Schwerké, 1925). The mercurial composer always managed to adjust his musical style to the spirit of the moment, however. In 1930, he left Paris and returned to Brazil, coinciding with Vargas's rise to power. Appointed Head of Musical and Artistic Education (Superintendência de Educação Musical e Artística) by the regime, Villa-Lobos promoted both *brasilidade* and universalism: as an educator, he conducted thousands of children performing folk songs, often in soccer stadiums, and as a composer, he sought universalism in what is likely his best-known opus, the *Bachianas brasileiras*, a set of nine pieces that presumably unites the spirit of Brazilian music with the genius of J. S. Bach (Vassberg, 1969). Despite the fugue in the final movement of *Bachianas* no. 7 (or the "baroque" sequences in the "Aria" of *Bachianas* no. 5) few critics take seriously the connection with Bach. Yet in these works, Villa-Lobos proved capable of going beyond jarring sonorities, often simply writing a good tune, that essential ingredient of a Broadway show.

At least one critic of *Magdalena* noted the *absence* of a "hit tune," however. Was this an oversight of the creative team? As Dominic McHugh points out, most musicals are not "works" in the sense we commonly understand the concept, but collaborations that often prove difficult to unravel (McHugh, 2015). *Magdalena*, a prime example of such an arrangement, distinguishes itself from other Forrest and Wright creations in that the team could work directly with a living composer. Misunderstandings nonetheless ensued. Was that perhaps why *Magdalena* failed to yield a hit along the lines of, say, "Strange Music" from *Song of Norway*, which according to Forrest and Wright was recorded by "every singer from Kate Smith to Bing Crosby?" (McHugh, 2015). Was there something about Villa-Lobos's music that refused to be reshaped into a thirty- two-bar song? These are some of the questions explored below.

Another consideration is representation. As it turned out, "matching the locale" was barely a concern for Forrest and Wright given that *Magdalena* isn't Brazilian at all but set in Colombia, on the shores of the Magdalena river. Nor, perhaps, is it even a musical. The program booklet, available at the New York Public Library (NYPL-MGZR) called *Magdalena* "a musical adventure". Critics, too, played with terminology: Howard Barnes referred to "conventional light opera" while Brooks Atkinson vacillated between "musical drama" and "musical play"; another referred to an "operetta" and yet another noted elements of a "pageant" (Barnes, 1948). Louis Biancolli, critic for the *New York World-Telegram*, simply called it "the Brazilian *Oklahoma!*" (Stevenson, 1987). This rather idle comparison invokes the celebrated musical of 1943 by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II in which two conflicting groups in the Oklahoma Territory unite to conquer the American West in the spirit of can-do optimism (Carter, 2007) (Knapp,

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<sup>2</sup> Villa-Lobos reimagined the choro, the Brazilian urban serenade for flute, pandeiro, cavaquinho, and other instruments, in sixteen works for various combinations.

2005).

*Magdalena's* opening in Los Angeles was a success by any standard. An equally brilliant run in San Francisco followed. But New York was far less enthusiastic, and after eleven weeks there, *Magdalena* fell into obscurity (Caracas, 2004). Only the Villa-Lobos centenary in 1987 prompted a revival, in a concert version, which CBS Records released on CD (MK 44945). *Magdalena* has thus left little impact on either classical music lovers or fans of the Broadway musical. Nor have many scholars reflected on it. Lisa Peppercorn, for example, tersely mentions a "mixed reception". Others take a rather sanguine view. Simon Wright, who devotes a single paragraph to the work in his study of the composer, concludes that *Magdalena* is a "light-hearted South American fantasy" (Wright, 1992, p. 128). Evans Haile, the conductor of the 1987 revival, praised *Magdalena* as "an authentic cross-cultural" work, an opinion I questioned in a 2013 study (Haile, 1987).

In this essay, I offer a few additional points. One is that Villa-Lobos's "Latin American musical" constitutes a chapter, albeit a brief one, in the discourse of "tropicalization". Indebted to the late Edward Said's reflections on orientalism, the term "tropicalization", coined by Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman (1997), refers to the tendency on the part of the mass audience in the U.S. to reduce Latin America to a unitary fantasy. Second, I suggest that the premises of tropicalization aptly mesh with some values of the classic Broadway musical. Finally, since many classic musicals are now being reshaped in accordance with current sensibilities on race, gender, class, and identity, I consider possible reimaginings of *Magdalena*.

### 1. *Magdalena*: The Story

First we consider the book, by Frederick Hazlitt Brennan and Homer Curran. Set in "about 1912," *Magdalena* recounts the misadventures of one General Carabana, manager of nearby emerald mines, and its workers, the Muzos, all members of a local tribe (Principal indigenous populations in the Magdalena River basin are the Yariquí and the Panche).

Carabana wields authority from afar, as he is based in Paris, where his lover and personal chef Teresa attends to his various appetites. Also powerful is the Roman Catholic Church, to which some Muzos have converted. One, Maria, expounds on Christian love in her preachments to Pedro, a young, entrepreneurial Muzo who resists her docility—he advocates violence as a means of redressing social inequities—at the same time that he admires her charms. General Carabana is also attracted to Maria, however, and during one of his infrequent visits to the region to quell a strike by the Muzos, plants a bomb in the broken-down bus Pedro drives for a living. Ultimately, Carabana dies of gluttony and Pedro embraces Christianity so that he and Maria may live happily ever after, "deep in the South American jungle" (Haile, 1987, p. 2).

Thus emerge several blatant stereotypes—the inept dictator, the childlike natives, the violent youth who advocates revolution—that have long dominated U.S. attitudes toward Latin America. Yet *Magdalena's* upbeat ending offers a vision of utopia, which as Richard Dyer notes in an oft-cited essay, is a central element of the musical (Dyer, 1981). Key to the Latin American utopia projected in *Magdalena* is the motif of "contrast." Ads for the musical exulted that the Magdalena river flows from "the frozen Andes to the steaming Caribbean"; the jungle, too, teems with contrast, as it is "peopled

by native Indian tribes, some lowly, others descended from the highest pagan culture" who live cheek by jowl with Europeans who occupy the "beautiful ranchos of the Spanish ruling class," opulent dwellings that offset "decadent fishing villages" (Peppercorn, 1996). Not surprisingly, some reviewers applauded *Magdalena* as "a riot of color and excitement," "exciting and varied," or "continuously in giddy motion" (Soanes, 1948). Just as Carmen Miranda's popularity rested on *excess*—oversized headdresses, phenomenally bad English as mandated by scriptwriters, unrelenting energy—*Magdalena* offered similar enticements (Clark, 2002).

To be sure, Latin America is often described as a region of "startling contrasts" (Skidmore & Smith, 2001). Yet as Jon Beasley-Murray has observed, these contrasts are either "celebrated or condemned." Contrast between rich and poor, for example, provokes criticism in both neoliberal and left-leaning circles while the tourist industry hawks "glaciers to beaches to rain forests," resulting in a "fetishism of difference" (Beasley-Murray, 2001, xii-xiii)<sup>3</sup>. At the same time U.S. consumers (and some political leaders) have embraced Latin America's "contrasts," however, they have uncritically regard the region as undifferentiated. (President Ronald Reagan evidently exclaimed "They're all individual countries!" after his 1982 trip to Latin America) (Canon, 1982). This tendency emerges in *Magdalena*. Tongue-in-cheek, the San Francisco-based critic Alfred Frankenstein described "blond, blue-eyed Indians who wear gaucho costumes from the Argentine, Ecuadorian hats and Peruvian ponchos, and sing Brazilian music in perfect English" (Frankenstein, 1948). Contrast is thus a powerful marketing ploy that can be leveled into a homeostatic utopia.

Why would these reductive fantasies appeal to U.S. audiences in 1948? A public opinion survey taken in 1940 by the Office of Public Opinion Research (a non-profit organization based at Princeton University) gives an idea of certain stereotypes then current in the United States. 80% of respondents considered Central and South Americans "dark-skinned," a perception that neatly eliminates huge populations (Skidmore & Smith, 2001). Others included quick temper, laziness, pride, and willingness to submit to authority, the very images Hollywood crafted, ranging from the Latin lover to the spitfire to somnolent Indians (Ramirez, 2000). All fed into the notion that Latin America was little more than a vast stage on which certain "types" parade their predictably flashy habits, clad in either a Mexican serape or a bahiana costume whatever their nationality. The "fetishism of difference" is double-edged: the U.S.'s economic and political superiority over Latin Americans, largely unquestioned, was juxtaposed with the entertaining "ethnic masquerade" offered by the objects of this condescension, requiring only the willingness of U.S. consumers to celebrate "contrast" (Roberts, 2002).

How might some of these less savory images figure in *Magdalena*? As noted, General Carabana embodies the military presence. The fact that he spends most of his time in smart Parisian restaurants and eventually dies from overeating underscores both the inherent gluttony of absolute power and the limitations of local cuisine. As for the Church, Forrest and Wright establish its authority from the opening scene, "The Jungle Chapel," and ultimately confirm it when Pedro embraces Maria's faith. (The name "Maria," who assumes a Christian leadership role when the local padre has to go off on a mission, can hardly be coincidental.) As such, *Magdalena* prompts a question frequently asked in the United States about Latin America: why dictatorships and not

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<sup>3</sup> Translator's Introduction to Sarlo, Beatriz.

democracies? Certain “explanations” have been as misleading as Hollywood’s fantasies. During the 30s and 40s, for example, it was argued that dark-skinned, quick-tempered “Latins” are not only unsuited to democratic institutions but that such institutions are impossible to sustain in “tropical” climates. It was also held that in contrast to “democratic” Protestantism, Roman Catholicism foments blind obedience to authority. Absent in many such discussions was the fact that dictatorships have flourished in Anglo-Saxon countries and that authoritarian regimes in Latin America have been accepted by non-Catholics and non-practicing Catholics.

Realities of contemporaneous Latin American life c. 1948 surface in *Magdalena*, including two academic models then prevalent in the United States. One was the modernization theory, according to which economic growth effected through modernization would ensure a strong middle class, a shift from a rural to an urban society, and equitable distribution of resources such that dictatorships would be less likely to flourish. Pedro, the restless entrepreneur, represents the desire for modernization. In fact, the gap between rich and poor actually increased, and it was in the most economically developed countries —Argentina, Brazil, Chile— that some of the more brutal dictatorships took hold (Latham, 2000). The modernization theory yielded to the dependency theory, which confronted the fact that although Latin America’s one-crop economies and cheap labor enabled some sectors of the population to accrue riches, the wealthy few often failed to reinvest in their respective countries (Packenham, 1992). This is the trajectory represented by General Carabana and his emeralds.

A non-theoretical reality was the political situation in Colombia of 1948. In April, three months before *Magdalena* opened in Los Angeles, Colombia’s liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was assassinated in broad daylight in downtown Bogotá, unleashing a riot in which 2,000 people were killed. After order was restored under a repressive government, rural violence expanded into an undeclared civil war (*la violencia*), in which over 200,000 lives would be lost over nearly twenty years (Safford and Palacios, 2002). To be sure, *Magdalena* is set “about 1912.” Yet that year is also significant in U.S.-Colombian relations, for it saw the completion of Teddy Roosevelt’s autobiography (Roosevelt, 1920). Having previously called the Colombian government a bunch of “jack-rabbits” for refusing to sell him the Panama Canal territory, Roosevelt now described it—in print—as “utterly impotent” and “wicked and foolish.” The twenty-sixth U.S. president also declared that to have acted less aggressively in the Panama Canal matter would have been an act of “sentimentality, which represents moral weakness (Roosevelt, 1920, p. 20).

## 2. *Magdalena*: The Music

Clearly creating a musical—a utopia—from such a range of “contrasts” was a tall order. But Forrest and Wright had a plan, one they discussed with Villa-Lobos in Rio de Janeiro in the spring of 1947. Initially, Villa-Lobos planned to compose an original score for *Magdalena* but was disabused of this notion when Forrest and Wright explained the strategy they had used for *Song of Norway* (Holden, 1987). As the team later recalled:

Painstakingly, we showed him our indexes of Grieg compositions and how we used them: interweaving melodies, elongating phrases, concising, changing tempi and time signatures, re-harmonizing . . . writing some of what we call “glue,” brief transitory passages, original music by us in the Grieg idiom, that made the score “stick” together. (Forrest & Wright, 1987, p. 8)

Several press accounts reported that at first Villa-Lobos “didn’t know what he was signing,” but eventually came to Forrest and Wright “in tears” and agreed to their terms (Holden, 1987). Still, he insisted on doing his own orchestrations, and filled many pages with interludes—glue— that were never used (Caracas, 2004). Long stretches of *Magdalena*’s score are based on existing works, in keeping with Forrest and Wright’s proven strategy and Villa-Lobos’s own practices. As Andrew Porter noted in his essay on the 1987 revival, “how much music Villa-Lobos did compose for it must be in doubt until some Ph.D. candidate gets to work correlating the score against [his] earlier compositions” (Porter, 1987).

The Finnish Villa-Lobos scholar Eero Tarasti has done just that (Tarasti, 1995). He notes, for example, that in the opening number, “The Jungle Chapel”, Villa-Lobos quotes a portion of his *Bachianas brasileras* no. 4, a work for solo piano that Villa-Lobos completed in 1941 and subsequently orchestrated. (Movements 3 and 4 date from 1935 and 1940, respectively) (Wright, 1992). No. 4’s proximity to Bach emerges in the suite arrangement (reminiscent of Bach’s suites for keyboard, orchestra, cello, and violin) and in Bach-derived movement titles followed by Portuguese subtitles, two features of nearly all the *Bachianas*. *Bachianas* no. 4 consists of a Prelude/Introdução (movement 1); Chorale/Canto do sertão (movement 2); Aria/Cantiga (movement 3); Dança/Miudinho (movement 4). Not for nothing did Gerard Béhague consider *Bachianas* no. 4 “perhaps the most Bachian of the set in its techniques” (Béhague, 2001). As Tarasti notes, movement 2 is based on the religious song of the Catholic *sertanejas* (women of the hinterland) of Northeast Brazil. In *Magdalena*, Villa-Lobos juxtaposes the melody of the sertão (the hinterland) with a hint of the tropics, representing the latter with a recurring B flat to suggest the monotone singing of the araponga bird (Tarasti, 1995, pp. 404-406).

As for the action in the opening scene, native women are peacefully weaving and grinding corn under the watchful eye of the Miracle Madonna, safely ensconced in her shrine. Suddenly, the Muzos show their fondness for native amusements by playing a game of *peteca* in the shrine whereupon Maria, shocked, scolds them (in “native” stage talk strangely free of the contractions of American English). Proper reverence is restored when Padre José interjects the sertaneja theme, Much the way Maria and the padre succeed in subduing the irrepressible Muzos, Villa-Lobos’s self-quotation, with its dual reference both to Bach and the Catholic Church, confers legitimacy and authority on the power structure to which Maria—and eventually her entire community—acquiesce. Moreover, the persistent interjection of the araponga bird, redolent of the jungle and its abundant “contrasts” in *Bachianas* no. 4, is ultimately suppressed in favor of a countermelody, here rendered by the sighing voices of the native masses. Other high points include “The Emerald,” with its modal inflections, and “Freedom!”, a boisterous, percussion-heavy paean to manhood.

Pedro, on the other hand, has a very different sort of music. As noted, he exudes raw energy and scoffs at the Church’s emphasis on meekness. Clearly the young man believes in the “things of this world,” among which is the bus he drives. Yet in “My Bus and I,” presumably a hymn to modernization, we learn only of the vehicle’s unreliability: it is “like the Andes, older than forever” and passengers arrive “only twelve hours late.” By using children’s songs to introduce the number, Villa-Lobos effectively ridicules Pedro’s aspirations, and a few scenes later, in “The Broken Pianolita,” Pedro’s plight is all the more acute. A Muzo elder sings of the river while Pedro feeds coins into a decrepit

player piano and several Muzo youths dance energetically, kicking the old piece of junk every time it breaks down. Imperturbably the Old One sings on, finishing the scene with the traditional song “Remeiro de São-Francisco” (Oarsman of the San Francisco River), from the composer’s first collection of *Modinhas e canções* (1933-43). Challenging the calm of the river, however, is a passage filled with parodic dissonances and metric disruptions, against which the mechanical workings of the piano go awry and explode, along with the impatience of the frustrated young men.

### 3. “Fine Score Fails to Carry the Day”: Reception

As noted, *Magdalena* was a hit in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Most of the singers had some operatic experience. Irra Petina, who played Teresa, the Parisian cook, had appeared as Carmen at New York’s Metropolitan Opera, and Dorothy Sarnoff, who sang the role of María, had sung in *Faust*, *La Bohème*, and other operatic classics.<sup>4</sup> Even John Raitt, who won the 1945-46 Broadway Critics’ Award for his performance in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical *Carousel*, had sung the leads in *The Marriage of Figaro* and *The Barber of Seville*. Hugo Hass, a native of the former Czechoslovakia who played General Carabana, was more experienced in theater and film. Jack Cole, the future choreographer of *Forrest and Wright’s Kismet* and other classics such as *Man of La Mancha*, created the “flamboyant and exotic native dances,” as the critic Hortense Morton of the *San Francisco Examiner* described them (Morton, 1948). Hovering in the background was Villa-Lobos himself. The more colorful aspects of his biography were floated in the press and in program booklets, thanks to which audiences could learn that he had once joined an expedition into the Amazon forest to study indigenous culture, a “perfect adventure for his creative temperament, inclined as it was to the native, bizarre and exotic”; consequently, he composed music originating in “primitive folk sources . . . authentic material [found] in the *Magdalena* score” (Musical comedies. *Magdalena*-MGZR, s.r., p. 7). Surely Villa-Lobos himself concocted these tales. Quite the raconteur, he once told his Parisian public of his capture by cannibals, who tied him to a pole and danced wildly around him in “preparation for a roast of human flesh” (Mariz, 1981).

Apropos *Magdalena*, critics highlighted Villa-Lobos’s affinity with both his native land and the jungle. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “all his life long Villa Lobos has listened to the music of Brazil—to the songs of children, the chants of Indians, the dances of Negroes, and those who toot, scrape, and sing in the cafes of Rio de Janeiro” (Frankenstein, 1948). Another critic noted that Villa-Lobos had “taken native songs and rituals and translated them to a contemporary idiom . . . tempering monotonous jungle rhythms with singing phrases,” whereas another explained that “the ‘Rabelais of modern music’ had dipped into primitive folk sources of South America, particularly from the jungle areas along Colombia’s Magdalena River” (Zolotov, 1948). As we have seen from our discussion of Villa-Lobos’s sources, these statements are true only of the *sertaneja* theme.

California critics also dwelt on spectacle, relying on adjectives such as “lavish,” “breath-taking,” “overpowering,” and “exhilarating” (*Magdalena* Makes Bow in Los Angeles, 1948, p. 27). One quipped that in Colombia, “there is apparently no letup in communal fiestas, tribal ceremonies and semi-pagan dancing parties” and that “even a

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<sup>4</sup> Background on the singers and other members of the artistic team is found in Program booklet. Clippings file, MGZR (NYPL), pp. 6-8.



native insurrection takes on the quality of a ballet" (Hobart, 1948). Others referred to the treatment of religion, with Morton praising Christianity's ultimate triumph over "primitive superstitions"; another juxtaposed the "Christianized Muzos" to the "crumbling ruins of the ancient pagan civilization" (Morton, 1948). To be sure, no one took Brennan and Curran's book all that seriously. Frankenstein (1948) proposed that "*Magdalena* does not qualify as a scientific study in South America folk lore," adding, "it was never intended to be such".

In general, Villa-Lobos's score won kudos. Marjory Fisher praised the "exotic melodies and Latin American rhythms" and Fred Johnson detected "freshness of melody" (Fisher, 1948). Others expressed reservations, however. Although Hobart (1948) found the music "as opulent and luxuriant as the Colombian jungle itself" it was possibly "too esoteric for the average showgoer," since its "many idioms ranged from barbaric savagery, through Puccini-esque romanticism, to the most solemn religious fervor". Alexander Fried (1948) of the *San Francisco Examiner* noted that although Villa-Lobos's music "brims with energy and sophisticated color" it "stays so loud and high-strung that it batters you and wears you out". Observing that "the score could well use a hit tune or two", Fried posited one explanation for this lapse: because Villa-Lobos had "earned his fame in present-day concert music even in the most appealing of his Latin melodies, he has never invaded juke box territory". As a result, *Magdalena*'s score was "operatic-symphonic" and "on the whole not as Latin as you might expect".

When *Magdalena* opened in New York on 20 September 1948, reviews ranged from tepid to indignant. Some critics were dazzled by the sheer cost of the production, with Sam Zolotov (1948) of the *New York Times* giving the most extensive accounting. Referring to the "sun-kissed" production from California, he observed that "the sum expended on [*Magdalena*] hovers around the \$360,000 figure," largely funded by individuals who had profited so lavishly from *Song of Norway*. Mostly, however, critics trashed the book, despite the fact that Brennan and Curran had attempted to ameliorate some its silliness. Cecil Smith (1948) called it "hopeless," adding that its conflicts, "involving Christianity vs. paganism and capital vs. labor . . . tell its story fuzzily, preachily, and without resemblance to life". Howard Barnes (1948) noted the "rambling plot" and sensed that even the principals had a hard time with it, whereas Atkinson complained of the "unintelligible" story. Howard Taubman (1948) the distinguished music critic for the *New York Times*, reminded his readers that in any show, "there must be a story of some credibility or imagination to make it go," features markedly absent in *Magdalena*.

Critics were divided on the choreography. Barnes (1948) praised "striking dancing" whereas Smith disliked "Jack Cole's treatment of the pseudo-ceremonial dances, which fall back equally upon studio exercises and pictorial movements". As for scenery, Smith (1948) lambasted the "stylized settings, made partly of sponge and plastic" and Barnes merely observed that "a great deal of fake food is dragged on and off stage" (Smith, 1948). Smith also grumbled that "all the music emanating from the stage was blighted by the use of a public-address system, which was entirely unnecessary, and merely hardened the timbre of every sound." As a result, "many of the spoken words were half unintelligible," which, he believed, was "a mercy" (Smith, 1948).

Like their California counter parts, New York critics struggled to characterize Villa-Lobos's score. Even while acknowledging the composer's celebrity, several saw the music as perilously close to old-fashioned operetta or even opera. Taubman, for

example, reported that at the premiere, “a lady was heard murmuring to her neighbor during the second act, more in bewilderment than disappointment, ‘I thought this was a musical’”. Taubman (1948), then explained that “the one word that causes Broadway to shudder almost as much as the ugly four-letter ‘flop’ is ‘opera,’ probably because they are regarded as synonymous”. Barnes (1948) noted the score’s confused identity, observing that “My Bus and I”, “The Emerald” or “Freedom!” are the sort of songs you might expect to find in an operetta about a mythical European kingdom as well as Colombia”. Smith (1948) took up a similar theme, declaring that “the music, for all its South American rhythmic patterns and unwonted percussion instruments, still falls between the provinces of Broadway and the concert hall, without fulfilling enough of the demands of either.” In sum, “Mr. Villa-Lobos—perhaps through inadequate knowledge of the North American stage—has allowed his talents to be associated with a bromidic, laborious production, of which no genuine artist could possibly approve”. Smith’s conclusion was damning: *Magdalena* was “one of the dullest and most confused operettas in recent memory”.

Atkinson (1948) was even more outspoken. Like his colleagues, he noted the confusion between operetta and Broadway styles, observing that the creators of *Magdalena* had “set the art of drama back several generations and [were] uninterested in the modern achievements of *Brigadoon*, *Finian’s Rainbow*, the Kurt Weill *Street Scene*, to say nothing of *Oklahoma!*” He allowed that Villa-Lobos had written “a fine meditative poem about a jungle river and several ruefully beautiful religious songs, written for several voices and chorus and an amusingly orchestrated burlesque of a broken-down mechanical piano,” adding that “disentangled from the appalling libretto and lyrics the score might be stimulating”. Despite this hopeful possibility, *Magdalena* was “one of the most over-poweringly dull musical dramas of all time” (Atkinson, 1948). Further, Atkinson opined—without any factual basis—*Magdalena* was “the sort of academic chore that put the Manaos [sic] opera house out of business”.

A lone—and powerful—voice in favor of the music was Howard Taubman’s. Whereas others were unable to “disentangle” the music from the confused production, the distinguished music critic for the *New York Times* praised Villa-Lobos’s harmonic variety and imagination, insisting that the score of *Magdalena* was “unquestionably one of the most complex and fanciful a Broadway show has ever had, written with a subtlety and variety—for principals, chorus and orchestra—almost unparalleled on a Broadway stage” (Taubman, 1948). Yet ultimately the headline for Taubman’s own review, “Fine Score Fails to Carry the Day,” sealed *Magdalena*’s fate.

That all critics were unaware that *Magdalena*’s “ethnic masquerade” was filled with characters destined to remain backward and exploited should give us pause. Oblivious to its frothy treatment of dictatorial ineptitude, authoritarianism, labor inequities, poverty, and backwardness —not to mention Pedro’s fondness for violence— only confirmed the oft-repeated *bon mot* attributed to the journalist James Reston that “[U.S.] Americans will do anything for Latin America except read about it” (Wiarda, 2001).

#### 4. Reimagining?

This willingness to bypass the social and political implications in *Magdalena*—and the extent to which its creators trivialized them—is a tribute both to the Broadway musical’s

inherent utopianism and the sensibility of the 1940s in the United States. It was not until the 1987 concert performance at New York's Alice Tully Hall that any critic so much as noticed *Magdalena's* problematic content. That lone critic was Andrew Porter of the *New Yorker*, who simply observed, "the book is drivel," adding, "in some aspects actually unpleasant" (Porter, 1987). He elaborated no further.

Yet no less than Howard Taubman had admired Villa-Lobos's score, while other critics acknowledged its potential. Perhaps *Magdalena* ought not be relegated to the dustbin of the composer's vast output. But how do we proceed in accordance with twenty-first-century sensibilities? Especially since the murder of the African American George Floyd at the hands of four police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota in May 2020, which sparked a so-called Racial Reckoning in the United States and worldwide, many classic works of art are being reshaped to fit the present. Two years before that galvanizing event, New York City's Heartbeat Opera offered a new reading of *Fidelio*, the opera by Beethoven and his librettist Joseph Sonnleithner. A tale of unjust incarceration and the ultimate triumph of liberty, *Fidelio* details the fate of Florestan, condemned to solitary confinement for political activity but saved by his loyal wife Leonora who, disguised as a man, infiltrates the prison as a guard. Beethoven's music is by turns stirring (as in Florestan's "Gott! Welch Dunkel hier," a musical monologue that culminates in a paean to freedom) or tender (as in the quartet "Mir ist so wunderbar," as each character sings of the pain and ecstasy of love). A high point is the chorus "O welche Lust, in freier Luft," sung by the incarcerated men who revel in the fresh air during their brief recreation period in the prison yard. In the Heartbeat Opera production, Florestan (now Stan) is imprisoned for his activism in the Black Lives Matter movement whereas Leonora (Leah) is hired as a prison guard to secure his escape. Selected arias and ensembles are sung in the original German with the spoken dialogue in English. Most moving of all is "O welche Lust." Sung by actual prisoners recruited from various prisoner education programs in the U.S. carceral system, it's projected through a video montage. The audience looks directly into the eyes of the incarcerated men, all singing—in German—Beethoven's hymn to life-giving hope (Tsioulcas, 2022).

Also ripe for reimagining is the musical *West Side Story*, a tale of poverty, gang violence, and star-crossed lovers à la Romeo and Juliet. A collaboration among Leonard Bernstein (composer), Stephen Sondheim (lyricist), Arthur Laurents (librettist), and Jerome Robbins (choreographer), *West Side Story* premiered on Broadway in 1957, with Carol Lawrence, a White actress in the leading role of the Puerto Rican immigrant, María, who falls in love with Tony, a Polish-American member of the White street gang, the Jets. The musical is probably most familiar to viewers in its 1961 film version (Richard Wise, dir.) with Natalie Wood, of Russian-Jewish parentage as María, and the Puerto Rican actor Rita Moreno in the supporting role of Anita. Other Puerto Rican characters wear brownface and speak broken, heavily accented English, including Bernardo (George Chakiris), the leader of the Sharks, the Puerto Rican gang (See, 1990, p. 4).

In 1984, Deutsche Grammophon released a recording (415 253-4GH2) with Bernstein conducting the Spanish tenor José Carreras, who sang the role of Tony, and the Australian operatic soprano Kiri Te Kanawa as María. (A DVD on the same label titled *The Making of West Side Story* gained notoriety for Bernstein's repeated corrections to Carreras's diction in rehearsal.) In early 2020, Ivo van Hove directed a Broadway revival, controversial for its largely colorblind casting, which to many viewers obscured the racial strife fundamental to the plot (Schwartz, 2020).

In late 2021, Stephen Spielberg's *West Side Story* was released. Much has been written on his many changes to Laurents's book, including comeuppance for Moreno, who now sings the famous number "Somewhere", previously a duet between Tony and María. During the making of the film, Spielberg consulted Puerto Ricans, resulting in frequent assertions of Puerto Rican identity. Some critics remained unconvinced, however, with one concluding that, given its prior history, *West Side Story* was simply "unsalvageable (Lee, 2021). Members of the Latino/a/x community are especially vocal on this point. Aurora Flores-Hostos, for example, recalls her older relatives' revulsion toward *West Side Story*, which they considered one more reference to "the Puerto Rican problem". "In the end", Flores-Hostos asserted, "you need more than just an advisory board. We need our stories told, our way" (Flores-Hostos, 2021). Surprisingly for critics of a musical—and unlike the critics of *Magdalena*—few reviewers discuss Bernstein's score vis-à-vis Spielberg's conception. The moments of complex polyphony, various "hit tunes," and the musical characterization of the rival gangs (cool jazz for the Jets, in "Cool," and Caribbean percussion instruments and sesquiáltera for the Sharks, in "America") all remain intact. But Spielberg omitted one striking musical moment from the 1961 film: a simulated rape scene. When Anita tries to deliver a message from María to Tony, she confronts the Jets, who hurl racial epithets at her and rough her up so that she is reduced to lying flat on her back on the floor while the Jets thrust the body of one of their own, back and forth, over her. It was such a powerful scene that once in rehearsal Moreno broke down and began to cry. And the music for this shocking moment? While the Anglos enact a rape over Anita's brown body, we hear nothing less than the main melody of "America", which Anita had sung earlier with such panache and optimism. A more gut-wrenching critique of overweening U.S. power and systemic racism could hardly be imagined. One wonders why Spielberg suppressed it.

Reimaginings of *Oklahoma!*, to which *Magdalena* was loosely compared, are also instructive. Rodgers and Hammerstein's tale of the push westward by White U.S. settlers has repeatedly been tweaked. The sentiment proclaimed in the final chorus ("we know we belong to the land") falls flat on twenty-first-century ears, since at least some U.S. schoolchildren today study the Trail of Tears and other Indian removal projects. In 2010, Arena Stage in Washington D.C. mounted a multiracial, multi-ethnic production, giving an "encore run" the following year (Collins-Hughes, 2018). A production by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival took another perspective, with the two couples, one comic and one serious, presented as two same-sex relationships.

Other directors have taken even greater risks: in the 2012 production by the Seattle 5th Avenue Theater, the "villain", Jud, is a Black man, the only person of color among the principals. Although the director Peter Rothstein intended to challenge the utopia that *Oklahoma!* promises by highlighting racial inequity, many resisted seeing Jud targeted far more than if he were played by a White man. The Broadway revival of 2019, which emphasizes both a broken justice system and gun violence, was alternately praised for its sensitivity to current reality and ridiculed as "Woke-lahoma". Less direct—but no less powerful—is the 2019 HBO series *Watchmen*, a critique of white supremacy replete with musical references to Rodgers's score. Pushback to such reimaginings came in a 2021 production in Roseland, Virginia, produced and directed by Brian Clowdus, an avid supporter of Donald Trump, and who purported to deliver *Oklahoma!* without any hint at "wokeness", As Hannah Lewis (2021) points out, Clowdus's traditional rendering constitutes a "statement" in and of itself.

Is *Magdalena* a candidate for reimagining? In 1961, thirteen years after its New York premiere, Taubman published an essay on recent developments in the Broadway musical, in which he asked readers of the *New York Times* "does anyone remember *Magdalena*, which had a score by Heitor Villa-Lobos that was like an endless freshet of inspiration?" Assuming that most would have forgotten *Magdalena*, Taubman (1961) explained that "the show was a failure because the book was a clumsy hash." Still, he maintained, *Magdalena* remained "the finest, most sophisticated Broadway score in a generation".

In saving Villa-Lobos's "sophisticated score," how might we reimagine *Magdalena*? Perhaps it could be staged as a tale of environmental degradation. Perhaps the Catholics could advocate for liberation theology, challenging Church hierarchy and highlighting Jesus's defense of the poor and disenfranchised. Given the racial makeup of the principals, Carabana could be cast as Native or Black, thus putting himself in the place of the natives he seeks to exploit. What if Pedro were White? Would he really have so much trouble getting that bus to start? All these adjustments would deepen the tensions, musical and dramatic, during the high point of the score, "The Broken Pianolita." Thus the virtues of *Magdalena*'s score could potentially serve a sensibility very different from that of its original context and open up a new chapter in the history of this problematic work.

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\*NYPL = New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

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