
6-24-2013

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**“Music in the Blood”:
Performance and Discourse of Musicality in Cuban Ballet Aesthetics**

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Dance Chronicle 36/2 (2013), 218-42

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2013.792325>

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Abstract: *Alicia Alonso contended that the musicality of Cuban ballet dancers contributed to a distinctive national style in their performance of European classics such as *Giselle* and *Swan Lake*. A highly developed sense of musicality distinguished Alonso’s own dancing. For the ballerina, this was more than just an element of her individual style: it was an expression of the Cuban cultural environment and a common feature among ballet dancers from the island. In addition to elucidating the physical manifestations of musicality in Alonso’s dancing, this article examines how the ballerina’s frequent references to music in connection to both her individual identity and the Cuban ballet aesthetics fit into a national discourse of self-representation that deems Cubans an exceptionally musical people. This analysis also problematizes the Cuban ballet’s brand of musicality by underscoring the tension between its possible explanations—from being the result of the dancers’ socialization into a rich Afro-Caribbean musical culture to being a stylistic element that Alonso developed through her training with foreign teachers and, in turn, transmitted to her Cuban disciples.*

The Cuban ballerina Alicia Alonso explained that the distinctive manner in which dancers from her country perform works such as *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* defines a national style in the interpretation of these European nineteenth-century ballets. In her view, “the Cuban national culture, with its particular aesthetics,” informs her countrymen’s approach to this adopted foreign legacy.¹ In the 1940s and 1950s, Alonso became one of the most respected performers of such works while she was a star with Ballet Theatre and the Ballets Russes de Montecarlo. Over the next decades of her long stage career, she continued to dance the classics in Havana, New York, London, Paris, Copenhagen, Moscow, and St. Petersburg, among other important ballet centers. She had learned the choreography from Russian and British dancers well steeped in it—including Alexandra Fedorova, Alicia Markova and Anton Dolin—and passed it down to generations of Cuban dancers.² *Giselle*, *Coppélia*, *Swan Lake*, *Don Quixote*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and other nineteenth-century works became cornerstones in the repertory of the Ballet Alicia Alonso, founded in 1948 in Havana and renamed Ballet Nacional de Cuba (BNC) in 1959.

The close linkage of the Cuban ballet to its European sources justifies Alonso’s claim that “classicism is the foundation of each aspect of the Cuban ballet’s artistic life.” Yet, these dancers put their own stamp in their embodiment of a European tradition. In Alonso’s view, the Cuban ballet exhibits a national aesthetics indicative of the dancers’ “physique, culture and temperament.” Setting herself as an example, she insisted that her cultural identity made her dance differently from other countries’ ballerinas: “It’s my tradition, my culture [...] my background, my own taste.”³ This is consistent with the view that ballet comprises a number of

national schools, such as the French, Danish, Russian, and British, defined by distinctive practices in pedagogy, choreography, and performance that reflect national traditions and identities. Alonso proposed that a Cuban school is part of this world.

The fact that Cuban dancers formulate their own aesthetics in nineteenth-century European ballets reflects the very relationship between choreography and performance: embodied choreography absorbs characteristics of the dancers bringing the movement to life. Alonso explained that, aside from the choreographic particularities of the Cuban productions of the classics, in these works the Cuban aesthetics is evident in a dancing style marked with a series of nuances and subtleties.* She described such a style as not a radical departure from these works' performance traditions but rather as "a way of dancing ballet" with the "peculiar expressive sense" of Cubans, defined by "the accent we put on certain things [and] the importance that we attribute to others." The ballerina enumerated particular elements that she rooted in the island's culture, expressing her conviction that "the idiosyncrasies of a people find clear expression in its dancers." For instance, she brought attention to a way of acting that engages the body as a whole, in which she saw a projection of the rich gestural expressivity of Cuban bodies. She also referenced the deep sense of dialogue and complement in duets between male and female dancers, something that in her view is traceable to Cuban social dance practices. And, she argued that the BNC's *corps de ballet*, whose composition illustrates the nation's demographics, contributes a unique multiracial look as well as exceedingly attuned dancing to compensate for its heterogeneous appearance.⁴

Elaborating on the topic, Alonso indicated that a certain brand of musicality distinguishes her country's ballet dancers: "We move in a peculiar way, and we use the music in a very special way when we dance both folkloric and theatrical forms." She explained that, in the case of ballet's vocabulary, this is noticeable through the distinctive "musical execution ... of the same steps in use by other dancers, companies and schools." Offering a specific example, Alonso commented that she liked to play with *rubato*, slowing down on certain beats and then speeding up to stay in tempo: "I like to change from moving very slowly to very fast." This was a preference that she attributed to her cultural background: "It has to do with our character, with our culture, with the way we are. We Cubans can act very slowly and, all of a sudden, get very excited."⁵

In this article, I take a close look at Alonso's formulation of musicality as a marker of Cuban aesthetics. Footage of her performances, complemented by the commentaries of those who saw her dance, confirm that a particular way of responding to music distinguished her style. Not only did Alonso have a propensity to play with *rubato*, but she also emphasized *legato* phrasing, contrasted markedly slow and fast tempos, and, instead of over-relying on rhythmic counts, took musical cues from multiple aspects of a composition—including the melodic designs, instrumentation, dynamics and emotional tone. She regarded this type of musicality as more than a trait of her individual style; as indicated above, she related it to her national culture and proposed that it was common to all ballet dancers from the Island.[†]

* This article is not concerned with how faithful the Cuban productions of these works are to the original choreographies and styles.

† Musicality, for the purposes of this essay, is defined as the particular manner in which dancers are sensitive and react to music: how they perceive and respond to a composition, complementing its musical qualities through

Are there possible sociological and pedagogical explanations for a Cuban brand of musicality? One hypothesis is that such a sense of musicality encodes Cuban aesthetic values that ballet dancers acquire early in life through socialization in the local dance culture. Alonso also recognized that her ballet training with foreign teachers informed her type of musicality and that she, in turn, influenced the performance style of generations of dancers in her country. In addition to considering these points, I analyze the Cuban ballet dancers' musicality from the perspective of discourse. Although ultimately realized in performance, the aesthetics of the Cuban ballet has been constituted discursively. Not only do Alonso's writings and interviews attest to this, but her references to musicality were embedded into a national narrative of self-representation that deems Cubans an innately musical people. All this suggests that the musicality of Cuban ballet dancers exists at the intersection of socialization, pedagogy, and discourse.

THE PERFORMANCE OF A CUBAN MUSICALITY

A sophisticated sense of musicality was one of the features that cemented Alonso's artistic reputation. Dancer and choreographer Anton Dolin, who in the 1940s worked with her in Ballet Theatre, judged that this was among the talents on which her success rested: "One of the greatest assets that Alonso had since the very beginning of her great career was her wonderful musicality. She is an extraordinarily musical dancer."⁶ Artists at the rank of prima ballerina are expected to master complex rhythmic structures, to phrase movement in varied manners, and to respond to music with precision, eloquence, and creativity. In Alonso's case, these abilities were especially refined. She frequently received praise for the ways in which she reacted to music and executed movement with an intrinsic musical quality. Critics exalted this aspect of her dancing, as seen in reviews of her *Giselle* over several decades. After she performed this ballet in the Soviet Union in 1957, Tatiana Vecheslova commented that part of the ballerina's perfection was her ability to perceive the vibrations of the music. In 1967, Alonso's appearances in the same work in London prompted John Percival to observe that she made the movement sing. Her musicality also impressed Juan Arnau when she danced *Giselle* in Barcelona in 1971: "Yes, music; and how deep, how beautiful and, above all, how lyric! In her dancing Alicia Alonso displays a superior technique but first she makes music. Alonso's musical phrasing shows her mysterious power for creating nuance and giving birth to a world of subtle emotions." Performances in Rome in 1978 elicited similar observations from Vittoria Ottolengui, who described Alonso as "an incredibly fascinating dancer of profound musicality."⁷

The BNC's film of *Giselle* (1963), with Alonso in the title role, captures the elements that earned her these comments.⁸ Phrasing is a key feature in Alonso's physicalization of the music. For her, phrasing is also a tool in character development, particularly in the second act, in which Giselle has become a ghost of the forest. Alonso's accented *ritardandos* help her convey the quality of the Romantic score but also the ethereality of Giselle. These gradual delays in tempo make her movements seem light and diffuse, as it corresponds to the ballet's image of a

movement, and how they infuse movement with intrinsic musical effects. Here, the focus is on Alonso's style as an example of the Cuban ballet dancers' musicality since, for decades, she was the best exponent of the Cuban ballet as a dancer as well as a pedagogue, choreographer, and artistic director who shaped the practice of this dance form among her countrymen. Future research could address documentation of the musicality of other Cuban dancers.

weightless, ungraspable spirit. In one sequence of the second act's *pas de deux*, Giselle and Albrecht (performed by Azari Plisetski) repeatedly exchange their places on stage. Four times, they pass each other traveling sideways in a phrase consisting of *soutenu*, *tombé*, *chassé* and *assemblé battu*. Each time, in preparation for the *pas tombé*, Alonso stands *en pointe* in the fifth-position *soutenu*, with arms raised high. Sustaining this precarious pose as long as possible, she retards the initiation of the *pas tombé*. The music, as played in the film, already includes *rubato* as Giselle moves from the *soutenu* into the *pas tombé*. Still, Alonso manages to magnify the effect by staying *en pointe* even beyond the music's delayed beat. She starts tilting to the side almost imperceptibly, slowly going off balance and yet prolonging the *soutenu* pose. In this battle with gravity, she continues to tilt until her balance is so precarious that the *tombé* cannot be postponed any longer. Rushing into it, she catches up with the music. With such interplay of *ritardando* and *accelerando*, she adds rhythmic gradation to the choreography but also conveys the notion that Giselle's ghost is not bound to the tyranny of gravity.

Footage of Alonso as Odile in *Swan Lake*'s Black Swan *pas de deux* (from 1968 and with Plisetski as her partner) corroborates how her use of *ritardando* and *accelerando* served both musical and dramatic purposes.⁹ In her performance of the *adagio* she approaches movement sequences with the type of phrasing described above, luxuriating in a prolonged gesture and then swiftly moving into the next action, or vice versa. These moments infuse her dancing with an elastic sense of musicality that rewards viewers with its dynamism. At the same time, such an alternation between delaying and hastening highlights Odile's character as a seductress who is both voluptuous and imperious. This is seen when Alonso, supported by Plisetski, executes sequences of multiple pirouettes. It is remarkable how she varies her speed while spinning, slowing down almost to a halt in a display of seductive sensuality, or rushing into vertiginous turns that convey Odile's perverse exhilaration at commanding the prince's desires.

Another distinguishing element of Alonso's musical phrasing was the linking of individual steps into a continuous flow, an effect designated as *enchaînement* in ballet terminology and equivalent to musical *legato*. In the scene from *Giselle* mentioned earlier the ballerina must hold a series of poses that punctuate the choreography with brief moments of stillness and highlight the languorous lines of the Romantic silhouette. However, rather than standing still in these poses, Alonso moves through them without pauses, fusing the culmination of one phrase with the preparation for the next one. Arriving at a pose, she makes the previous movement linger, collecting her arms and head while a serene but deep inhalation animates her torso. Then, without breaking the flow, she subtly initiates gestures that lead into the following phrase, engaging each bodily part sequentially in delicate progression: her chest leans forward, her arms reach ahead with a slight undulation, and her head rises in the direction of the next movement. As an effect of moving through poses without pausing, her *Giselle* reverberates as a winged creature that floats, gleams, and never quite alights.

The same duet from *Giselle* stands as an example of the ballerina's striving for continuous flow, even in technically complex passages. In one of the partnering sequences Alonso starts by balancing in an *arabesque en pointe*, facing away from Plisetski, and then steps backward, turns toward him, runs, and leaps up to his arms. He catches her and, raising her high above his head, rotates her in midair. She lands, assisted by him, into a fourth-position lunge with her back arched in a pronounced *cambré*, her head almost touching the floor. In an

impressive display of *legato*, Alonso performs the sequence seamlessly from beginning to end, with a smoothness that masks its difficulty—compounded by the partnering work, changes of directions, bodily hyperextensions and transitions through low, middle, and high spatial levels. When the sequence is repeated one more time, her sense of *legato* is impeccable again. Essential to the flowing quality of her interpretation is the uninterrupted movement of the arms, whose ample circular gestures infuse the passage with a sense of silky effortlessness.

Reviews of Alonso’s performances and observations by her colleagues underscore that this type of flowing *enchaînement* defined her style both musically and dramatically. Contributing an insightful comparative perspective, critic Walter Terry described the ballerina’s style as “more flowing and passionate” when he contrasted her interpretation of *Giselle* to those of contemporary dancers Nora Kaye, Alicia Markova, and Galina Ulanova. Likewise, John Percival noted the superlative sense of *legato*—“breathtaking in its smooth flow”—that Alonso brought to *Giselle*.¹⁰ Choreographer Agnes de Mille, who for many years worked with Alonso in Ballet Theatre, eloquently confirmed these views:

Other dancers go through the schooled positions and transitions with varying degrees of expertise. Alicia murmurs, sighs, seems to be talking. There are no positions, no transitions, only yieldings, bestowings, yearnings, gestures that are serenely loving and of a continuing, living breath. She moves in life. Her feet, her torso, her arms, neck, and eyes, are one continuing action, taking their dynamics from her meaning.¹¹

There is a clear sense in this passage that Alonso’s phrasing served an extra-musical purpose: her articulation of movement conveyed psychological and physical aspects of the roles that she danced. This connection between musicality and expressiveness was hinted at, too, in Terry’s juxtaposition of the adjectives “flowing” and “passionate” to describe Alonso’s *Giselle*.

Another aspect of Alonso’s conception of musicality was the adoption of a strikingly slow tempo in *adagio* passages, as illustrated in a 1977 videorecording of Odette and Siegfried’s duet in *Swan Lake*’s second act (danced with Jorge Esquivel). Alonso executes the choreography in nine minutes and fifteen seconds, which is significantly longer than performances of the same scene in films and videorecordings of other celebrated Odettes with whom her stage career overlapped. The *adagio* takes Maya Plisetskaya seven minutes and six seconds in a film from 1957. Meanwhile, Margot Fonteyn completes the sequence in less than seven minutes in a videorecording from 1966. In the case of Natalia Makavora, the same passage takes seven minutes and thirty-three seconds in footage from 1982.¹² The fact that Alonso’s performance lasts approximately two minutes longer than those of her peers is due to her markedly slower tempo rather than to differences in the four adaptations of Lev Ivanov’s choreography.[‡] A videorecording of the Cuban ballerina in the *pas de deux* from *The Nutcracker* (from 1982, with Esquivel) corroborates her preference for dancing the *adagios* of nineteenth-century duets in a more leisurely manner than they are done conventionally.¹³

[‡] Although there are minor choreographic discrepancies in the four ballerinas’ interpretations, they all dance Tchaikovsky’s musical passage in its integrity, with the exception of Fonteyn, in whose performance a few bars are cut at the end.

Alonso's slowed-down performances were painstaking in their attention to detail. The dancer used the extra time to indulge in filigreed gestures, establish a deep rapport with her partner, and relish the precision of her technical execution. She put attention not just on the choreography's signature steps and poses but also, as de Mille observed, the transitions between these salient moments. With time to articulate her movement more precisely, she made the transitions significant and expressive in themselves. In the scene from *Swan Lake*, her portrayal of Odette is the more poignant because of the way in which she highlights every detail. She lingers in her hand gestures, head movements and facial expressions, giving the viewers a chance to appreciate these elements more closely. Critics noticed that this slowness imbued Alonso's dancing with clarity and expressivity. In spite of categorizing this type of tempo as unorthodox, Ann Barzel concluded that the ballerina used it in a manner that filled "every fleeting second with her beautiful and meaningful dance" and Spanish dramatist Francisco Nieva remarked that it served the purpose of emphasis and allowed viewers to "read the choreographic design more legibly than in the case of other artists."¹⁴

Although Alonso would not acknowledge it, her reason for dancing at a slower tempo was probably related to her advanced age and vision problems. She was fifty-seven and sixty-two years old, respectively, when the cited videorecording of *Swan Lake* and *Nutcracker* were made. In what is a well-known fact of her legendary career, she was legally blind by this time. Yet, the ballerina explained the practice not as the result of physical limitations but as a matter of style. She argued that the aim of her idiosyncratic tempo in *Swan Lake* was to enjoy extra time to explore in more detail all the choreographic elements supporting the construction of character: "There is so much to pack into it, so much to do, that I have to discover all the possibilities and meanings in the role."¹⁵ Reviews of her performances indicate that she contrasted the very slow passages with hasty scenes that showcased intact agility and virtuoso technique. After a performance of *Giselle* in Montreal in 1967, Don McDonagh commented, "The at times excessively changed tempos were handled flawlessly as Miss Alonso moved from adagio to allegro more smoothly than one would have thought possible." Similarly, in a review of the same performance Doris Hering took notice of Alonso's contrasting tempos and peerless technique. But after praising the ballerina's "exquisite technical flourishing," Hering objected to how "she now plays too much with the tempi, contrasting excessively slow passages with sudden accelerandos."¹⁶ This is the case in a videorecording of *Giselle* (from 1980, with Vladimir Vasiliev) in which Alonso tarried in the *adagio* of the second act's *pas de deux* only to throw herself into a swift performance of the ensuing variation—she was famous for the speed with which she beat her feet in this solo's multiple *entrechats*.¹⁷ It may be possible that, in face of the physical limitations that came with advanced age and faulty eyesight, the ballerina reserved this type of vigorous panache for passages in which she felt confident, while taking extra time for *adagio* work where the required smoothness, strength and balance must have been challenging.

This analysis makes it clear that a very individual sense of musicality was recognizable in Alonso's dancing. For the ballerina, however, this musicality was much more than an individual trait. She claimed that it was a marker of the Cuban aesthetics in ballet, a common feature among dancers from her country. Discussing its specific manifestations, she moved between giving examples from her own dancing and making generalizations about her countrymen's style, as when she commented on the sense of flow in *enchaînement*. She identified it in her own dancing: "I do [*Giselle*] like a chain... one movement flowing into the next, one feeling or expression

evolving into the next, a progression going from place to place ... Everything, every step, has a continuity.”¹⁸ At the same time, she argued that all ballet dancers from the island follow a similar approach in “their way of melding the steps.” She elaborated on how this sets Cubans apart, “[In the Cuban school] movements are not disjointed but elastic and linked to each other. In other schools, the movements are sharper ... and drier However, in our case I see and believe that movements are more linked and more elastic.”¹⁹

In a further attempt to describe this Cuban musicality, Alonso asserted that when she danced it was noticeable that she followed the melody rather than the rhythm. She recounted having gained awareness of this when choreographer George Balanchine, an acknowledged expert on the relation between music and dance, brought it to her attention: “It was Balanchine who made me conscious of a feature of my dancing that I possessed by instinct and of which I was unaware. One day, after seeing me dance the second act of *Swan Lake*, he commented: ‘You, your arms, dance to the melody more than to the rhythm.’”²⁰ As in the case of phrasing, Alonso advanced the notion that all ballet dancers from the island share this “instinct.” In her view, Cubans are specially attuned to melody (even in their mode of speaking) whereas dancers from other schools relate primarily to rhythm in taking cues from the music: “Our inspiration comes from the melody. It inspires us more than rhythm.... We dance and *speak* more to the melody than to the rhythm.”²¹

This claim deserves examination. On the one hand, it contradicts the broadly accepted idea that rhythm is the core element of a Cuban musicality deeply connected to Africanist aesthetics—a contradiction discussed later in this article. On the other hand, the opposition between melody and rhythm is problematic because, in spite of Balanchine’s observation, it is unclear how Alonso might have reacted to these two entities separately. In the scores of ballets such as *Swan Lake* and *Giselle*, rhythm and melody do not work independently but are seamlessly interrelated. Melodic contours are shaped not only by tones but also by the time intervals between notes. Hence, a dancer who follows a melody is, as well, following its rhythmic pattern.

Rhythm, a common denominator of music and dance, often serves to organize the relationship between musical and choreographic meters in dance rehearsals and performances: many dancers count the beats in the music or the choreography as a way to keep the right tempo and memorize steps. Alonso, however, expressed aversion to the practice of counting on the grounds that it was anti-musical. She recounted her incompatibility with the method during performances of Eugene Loring’s *Billy the Kid* with the Ballet Caravan in the late 1930s: “[It was] too much mathematics for me. There came one moment I used to go crazy and he would laugh. He made me count so much before I came out.” Similarly, Alonso refused to learn the choreography through counts when Balanchine created *Theme and Variations* for her in 1947, even if counting was the easiest way to sail through a dizzyingly fast solo in which a five-beat choreographic meter overlapped with a four-beat musical meter. In this instance, tuning in to the music was not practical: it could distract her from the choreography because the two did not go together. Alonso could have disregarded the musical meter and, instead, focused on the choreographic meter. Yet, she thought that not paying full attention to the music would make her performance mechanical. Aiming to relate her steps to the score, the ballerina studied the passage in detail with Ballet Theatre’s resident conductors Max Goberman and Ben Steinberg: “I studied

to be able to do it well without counting because I hate counting when I dance. I like to dance with my ear, with the music, without counting.”²²

Consistently, Alonso described her responsiveness to music as an immersive experience in the sounds of a score, involving multilayered reactions to several elements beyond rhythm:

In every ballet that I danced, in moving my head, arms and upper body I picked cues from the instruments. I moved my arms and head with different force according to the instrument playing at the moment. If it was a violin, the movement could be soft and *legato*. If it was a trombone, the gesture could be strong and *staccato*. You take advantage of the sounds to give different values to the movements of your body, especially your arms and head. You don't dance only with your legs. Your instrument is the whole body. It speaks the feelings in the music.²³

This statement sheds light on how she reacted to orchestration (a violin or trombone), as well as to other qualities that she perceived in terms of phrasing (*legato* or *staccato*), dynamics (soft or strong) and emotional content. Together with melodic and rhythmic designs, these elements colored her response to music. In view of this, Alonso's proposition that Cuban dancers take cues from more than rhythm seems to capture not as much an opposition between melody and rhythm as skepticism about a musicality based on beat counting. A Cuban musicality seems to be complex and value responses to multiple elements of the music.

In summary, Alonso's performances, her own propositions, and the testimonies of commentators point to a number of features that distinguished her sense of musicality: propensity to play with *rubato*, *ritardando*, and *accelerando*; accentuation of the *legato* quality in *enchaînement* passages; preference for contrasting very slow and very fast tempos; and responsiveness to a rich variety of elements in the process of taking cues from the music. Alonso's argument that these features expressed not her individual style but a national aesthetics raises the question of how they could be specifically Cuban. As seen so far, she attributed this sense of musicality to the national culture. Her explanation considered the island's Spanish and African heritages as well as the local environment and social behavior: “I believe it comes from our folklore. It's the Spanish and African influences. I don't know how to explain it, but it also seems to me that it has to do with our climate and the characteristics of our ambience. There is a certain sensuality that we capture in our way of dancing, in our movements.”²⁴

This interpretation, although intuitive and tentative, is not implausible. It echoes the notion that the body is a social entity expressive of the culture in which it exists. Pierre Bourdieu proposes that the specificities of a culture are physicalized in its people's gestures, postures, movements and bodily actions, including dancing.[§] Socialization into the native culture shapes his definition of *habitus*: “a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in

[§] Bourdieu argues that education and family upbringing endow individuals with not only specific ways of perceiving themselves and being in the world but also with a repertory of bodily practices in accordance with the norms of their culture, gender, social class and geographical location. Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique: Précédé de trois études d'ethnologie kabyle* (Geneva: Droz, 1972), translated as *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977)..

particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination” to act, feel, think and *move* in certain ways.²⁵ Bourdieu stresses that the *habitus* is “durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions.”²⁶ In view of this, the musicality of Cuban dancers, being a bodily practice, could reflect their socialization into certain dance aesthetics and ways of responding to music prevalent in their national environment.

Alonso’s supposition that the Cuban ballet dancers’ musicality is informed by the aesthetics of the island’s folkloric and social dances carries weight and should be considered—although verifying such a hypothesis is beyond this article’s scope and methodology. Certain parallels are evident between the approaches to musicality of ballet dancers and social dancers in Cuba. Ballet dancers’ extensive use of *rubato*, *ritartando*, and *accelerando* finds a counterpart in social dancers’ elastic approach to rhythm in syncopated Afro-Cuban forms. Likewise, ballet dancers’ emphasis on *legato* phrasing has a correspondence in the fluid polyrhythmic movement of dancers of *son*, *casino*, and *timba* (Cuban varieties of salsa that are among the island’s most popular dance forms). These parallels may be fortuitous or attributed, perhaps, to ballet dancers’ assimilation of the Cuban social dance aesthetics.

Building upon Bourdieu’s theories, Sheenagh Pietrobruno argues that Caribbean people acquire the skills required in Afro-Caribbean social dance at a very early age through extensive participation in dancing in the context of family and community life. She explains that, just like everyday gestures, the bodily isolations predominant in Cuban dance are internalized by experiencing the family dance culture, not through conscious imitation but by means of practical mimesis, a form of unconscious acquisition intrinsic to socialization. In this process some ways of moving become deep-seated knowledge, instinctual bodily habits.²⁷ Bodily isolations, in point, are responsible for the strong sense of *legato* in many Cuban dance forms. In *son*, for instance, the isolation and opposition of knees, hips, ribcage, shoulders, and head result in flowing *legato* motion, as the movement constantly bounces from one bodily part to another one and soft contractions of the torso make the spine undulate with a liquid quality. Even in moments punctuated with sharper contractions the movement ripples through the body with a reverberating sense of *legato*.** How probable is it that Cuban ballet dancers’ accentuation of *legato* in *enchaînement* expresses a disposition, internalized early in life, to phrase movement with the fluid quality of forms like *son*? Could it be that, due to socialization, they favor a manner of moving that they find aesthetically pleasing and physically gratifying? The present analysis can only speculate about these possibilities. Nevertheless, Bourdieu’s and Pietrobruno’s postulates establish a strong sociological basis for explaining the Cuban ballet dancers’ musicality as a manifestation of the Cuban cultural environment.

THE CUBAN MUSICALITY IN DISCOURSE

Beyond performance, it was in discourse that Alonso integrated her ideas about musicality into representations of the Cuban ballet’s national identity. Only in articles and interviews could she index the Cuban musicality’s constitutive features, cast them as expressive of the local culture, and argue that they set the island’s dancers apart. This discussion took place within a broader discourse that constructs musicality as an important signifier of Cuban character. References to

** For a visual reference, see *Son Cubano*, DVD (Seattle: Academy of Cuban Folklore and Dance, 2009).

music, musicality, and musical life are part of the narrative of what it means to be Cuban. Such mentions are not fortuitous: music is among the most prominent examples of the amalgamation between African and European elements from which the national culture emerged. This is a notion that illustrious jazz pianist Jesús “Chucho” Valdés voices explicitly when he asserts, “Our music is our identity.”²⁸

Music-related images inform representations of a Cuban identity not only in ballet but also the visual arts, literature, and music. Landmark works of art considered to epitomize a Cuban character illustrate this point. The artistic output of the 1920s through the 1940s provides a relevant sample of such works, since those were decades of intense nationalism in which the island’s artistic production was largely driven by efforts to express a Cuban voice. In this period, many artists and writers conveyed a sense of locale through references to music. In *El triunfo de la rumba* (1928), Eduardo Abela suggested a Cuban atmosphere by depicting a mulatto mermaid leading a parade of drummers on a sandy beach.²⁹ The vivid painting, which almost vibrates with sound, evokes Afro-Cuban musical traditions. Meanwhile, Nicolás Guillén, one of Cuba’s most important poets, imitated the structures and sonorities of *son* in his works and directly referred to this musical genre in the titles of his books of poems *Motivos de son* (*Son motifs*, 1930), *Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas* (*Chants for soldiers and sones for tourists*, 1937) and *El son entero* (*The whole son*, 1947).³⁰ Similarly, in *Electra Garrigó* (1948), a classic of Cuban theater, playwright Virgilio Piñera used *décimas*, ten-verse stanzas typical of the country’s rural music, as part of his creolization of Sophocles’s *Electra*.³¹ These examples, while limited in their scope, contextualize Alonso’s references to the musicality of Cuban ballet dancers in a larger discourse of national self-representation that links music and identity.

As Stuart Hall affirms, discourse is instrumental in the production of national identities:

A national culture is a *discourse*—a way of constructing meanings which influences and organizes both our actions and our conceptions of ourselves. National cultures construct identities by producing meanings about “the nation” with which we can *identify*; these are contained in the stories which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are constructed of it.³²

As part of this symbolic process, according to Hall, memories, stories, myths, metaphors and common beliefs are interwoven into narratives “told and retold in national histories, literatures, the media, and popular culture.” The trope of the musical Cuban—the myth that the Island’s inhabitants are instinctively musical or carry music in their blood—feeds into the country’s cultural narratives. Essentializing one aspect of the Cuban character, the image is self-stereotypical: not every Cuban is musical and it is unlikely that there is such a thing as innate musicality. Rather than speaking to facts, the trope signifies a perceived common element among the members of the national community.^{††} As such, it pervades narratives of self-representation among the Island’s musicians and dancers. Salsa icon Celia Cruz, a contemporary of Alonso, embodied the metaphor in her hit “Mi vida es cantar” (*Singing is my life*, 1999). The song is a

^{††} Directing attention to the relationship between imagery and factuality in the context of national identities, Benedict Anderson points out that national communities “are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.” B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, second edition (New York: Verso, 1991), 6.

personal statement of her deep involvement with music: “It happens that I carry the song within me ... / Singing is my life. / That’s why I sing, sing, sing. / I was born a singer ... / I have to sing wherever they call me. / I was born singing and I will die singing.”³⁴ In these lyrics Cruz depicted her musicality as an inescapable vital force. This idea reappears, as the image of carrying music in one’s blood, in an interview of legendary percussionist Tata Güines. He recalled his beginnings in music at the age of six:

My father, José Alejo Vasallo, was a member of the Partagás Band. During a ball at which the band was playing, I dared to go on stage. I started playing the claves. When he noticed me, my father got me off the stage with a spanking. A few weeks later I dared to go on stage again. But this time my uncle Ángel, who played the double bass in the band, stopped my father: “Leave the kid alone! He carries the music in his blood!”³⁵

Asked if he ever received formal musical training, the drummer replied emphatically, “Never! I was born with it.”

Like Cruz and Güines, other Cuban musicians from Alonso’s generation alleged that their musicality was innate. The renowned Latin jazz and salsa percussionist Mongo Santamaría related that, since his childhood, it was always his ambition to play the drums. “The music... it’s in my blood,” he said, and added, “I started playing [the drums] when I was 8 or 9 years old. I taught myself.” For Omara Portuondo, the female singer of the band Buena Vista Social Club, her musicality has been viscerally connected to her Cuban blood as well. She confessed, “I couldn’t sing like I do if I wasn’t Cuban. It’s something in the blood.” Also, reminiscing how her career took off when she was still a child, famous vocalist Olga Guillot Cuban concluded, “I already had it in my blood.”³⁶

The trope of the musical Cuban is recognizable, too, in Alonso’s account of her initial dance experiences, which were intertwined with a love of music. Commenting on her early attraction to dance, she noted that a powerful predisposition to respond to music prompted her first dance movements:

In my most distant memories, the action of dancing was already my preference above all the games and amusements belonging to childhood. I feel that I have been dancing all my life ... As far as music goes, I could only conceive it in terms of movement. Upon hearing any music, I immediately covered my head with a shawl or a piece of fabric that simulated long hair and I started to improvise strange dances that the music suggested to my imagination.... For my mother, my penchant for dancing was a big relief. If she wanted me to leave her alone, all she had to do was to play a music record and, instantly, she cast a dancing spell on me.³⁷

In articles and interviews, Alonso recounted her beginnings in dance with the hyperbolic strokes typical of fables and stories, always placing her responsiveness to music as the seminal force behind the desire to move and become a dancer. Consider another iteration of the story:

I believe that [my passion for dancing] began right when I started to walk... Since I heard the first musical notes in my childhood, I reacted to them by dancing, by moving to them. Of course, I did not know anything about dance. There was nothing except social dancing at the time, but I did not move in the fashion of social dancing; I moved according to my emotional response to the music.... I think that all my movements were *à la* Isadora Duncan, whom I had never seen.... Ever since, I dance whenever I listen to music.³⁸

The motifs that constitute the trope of the musical Cuban (innateness, naturalness, spontaneity) are the same in the narratives of Alonso and the cited Cuban musicians.^{‡‡} The ballerina's repeated assertions that she had been responding to music and dancing all her life, since she could walk and as far back in time as her most distant memories, tap into the image that Cubans are musical by birth. She echoed the view, expressed by Güines and Santamaría, that the musicality of Cubans is natural and not acquired through formal training. According to Alonso, her ability to channel music predated her ballet studies. Musicality was a predisposition for her: she danced "upon hearing any music," to the "first musical notes." Furthermore, she highlighted the spontaneity of her childhood dances, which stemmed from her imagination and did not conform to the social dances of the era or any other codified dance forms. Reinforcing the idea of naturalness, she even invoked the style of Duncan, the modern dance pioneer who changed the course of dance history by advocating a natural, spontaneous manner of dancing in response to music.

Alonso gave accounts, too, of her relationship to music as an adult. She dramatized her sensibility to music outside professional life. When a journalist asked her if she listened to music at home, she replied that she did "throughout the whole day at work but not at home" because it prompted her to dance and kept her from resting, both physically and mentally. "For me, listening to music means starting to move immediately. It makes me exhausted. My brain does not stop," explained the dancer.³⁹ She repeated this idea at age seventy-five when the host of a TV show inquired if it was true that music made her tired: "I immediately start seeing movement. I see it in my mind: I see dancers entering and exiting the stage. I see them running.... And it makes me tired. In classical music concerts I end up totally exhausted. In the case of popular music, I start marking the rhythm with my feet and, all of a sudden, my legs have a life of their own."⁴⁰ These statements render a picture of hypersensitivity to music. Just like Cruz and Güines, Alonso portrayed her musicality as a force acting upon her in an overpowering manner. Here lies another thread of the trope: musicality and love of music being beyond the Cubans' will. If Cruz sang, "I have to sing wherever they call me," an indication that there was no other choice for her but to sing, Alonso claimed that it was not within her power to suppress her spontaneous responses to music.

Alonso's adoption of the trope points to the entanglement of individual and national narratives of identity. Individual identity takes shape in dialogue with the narratives of a larger

^{‡‡} Alonso reiterated such recollections in other interviews. See Alicia Alonso, "El latinoamericano se expresa con todo el cuerpo," interview by Alberto Dallal, in *Balletomanía* (Mexico City) vol. 1, no. 2 (Nov.Dec. 1981): 2024, reprinted in Alicia Alonso's *Diálogos con la danza*, fourth edition (Mexico City: Océano, 2004), 243; and "Alicia Alonso, Living on the Tips of Her Toes," interview by John M. Kirk and Leonardo Padura Fuentes, in *Culture and the Cuban Revolution, Conversations in Havana* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 48.

group or culture, as in the case of the nation. Paul Ricoeur proposes that it is through the act of narration that individuals make meaning of their lives and establish their identities. According to Ricoeur, in the same way that in literature we recognize recurrent or innovative plots—archetypal stories solidified over time in popular myths and legends, and stories that depart from the archetypes and experiment in the narrative domain—in life “it is possible to apply the play of sedimentation and innovation ... to our understanding of ourselves.”⁴¹ In other words, being aware of the vast repertory of narrative prototypes that circulate in their culture, individuals make the choice to narrate their lives as conforming to or departing from these templates. In this sense, Alonso’s assimilation of the trope of the musical Cuban is an act of self-representation in which she retells events from her life following the contours of an archetypal Cuban myth, adapting to her own circumstances the recurring story that a Cuban is born with a talent for music, grows to fulfill this innate talent in a natural manner, experiences musicality and responsiveness to music as a force beyond her own will, and continues to express such visceral connection to music for the rest of her life.

Alonso’s recycling of the trope, however, is only one aspect of a two-way process. The intersection of a personal narrative like the ballerina’s and the collective narrative that defines the nation also means that the broader picture of the nation is fed by personal stories. As Couze Venn proposes, the mutual feeding of biographical accounts and national narratives invests the concept of nation with “an experiential thickness that unites self-identity and national identity in the imaginary.”⁴² Moreover, since Alonso cites the musicality of Cuban dancers when formulating the identity of the Cuban school of ballet, the trope also operates at the intermediate level of institutional discourse. This popular metaphor cuts across the individual, institutional, and national narratives of, respectively, Alonso, the Cuban ballet, and the nation. A circular logic binds the three narratives together, with Alonso and the Cuban ballet calling upon musicality as an explanation of their Cubanness, and simultaneously invoking Cubanness as the reason for their musicality.

DISSONANT NOTES, SHIFTING MEANINGS

Alonso’s discourse on musicality simultaneously reinforced and contested the larger Cuban discourse of self-representation. In recycling the trope of the musical Cuban and contending that musicality is an essential identifier of ballet in her country, she bolstered the prominent place of music in national narratives of identity. However, she introduced an unorthodox perspective when she downplayed rhythm and attributed the Cuban dancers’ sense of musicality to their responsiveness to elements such as melody, orchestration, and phrasing. The dominant narrative of Cuban music confers centrality to rhythm. Composer and musicologist José Loyola Fernández illustrates this point by arguing that rhythm is the principal organizing element in Cuban music and dance. In his view, polyrhythm takes precedence over melody and harmony to determine the eminently danceable character of most of the country’s musical genres.⁴³ Beyond a purely musical perspective, rhythm also serves as a metaphor of Cuban and Caribbean cultures. Literary critic Antonio Benítez Rojo underlines that association: “The notion of polyrhythm (rhythms cut through by other rhythms, which are cut by still other rhythms) ... may fairly define the type of performance that characterizes the Caribbean cultural machine.”⁴⁴ In contrast to Loyola Fernández’s and Benítez Rojo’s adherence to the dominant narrative, Alonso contributed an alternative representation of what it means to be musically Cuban. She exerted agency in

proposing a style of dancing that decenters rhythm as symbolic of a national aesthetics. Formulations of a Cuban identity in terms of musicality are open to contention. This captures the fact that national identities, being ongoing processes rather than fixed states, exhibit dynamic qualities. They are malleable and always evolving. National discourses of self-representation are heterogeneous: multiple narratives coexist that articulate varied, even divergent, definitions of a shifting and contested national self.^{§§}

These narratives are not straightforward accounts or logical arguments. They contain paradoxes that expose the fractures, contradictions, and ambiguities of national cultures. An example of this are the gray areas that occur in the act of delineating what is unique to the nation vis-à-vis what is inherited from foreign sources. Ballet, an imported art strongly associated with European traditions, is prone to cause such controversy when defined in terms of a Cuban character. As seen earlier, Alonso proposed that the Cuban ballet was firmly rooted in a European classicist legacy and yet able to express a national spirit in areas such as musicality. In her statements, however, even this Cuban musicality was the subject of ambiguous explanations. It is difficult to reconcile Alonso's attribution of her musicality to Cuban culture and her acknowledgment that Russian pedagogues shaped the manner in which she responded to music. Indeed, she credited teacher Nikolai Yavorsky and choreographer George Balanchine for passing to her some of the very same elements that she identified as markers of a Cuban style. She traced her musical sensibility and attention to phrasing to her early training with Yavorsky: "He didn't only just keep the tempo, but he was very fussy that everything should be so with the music. ... That's why I think one of my ways of dancing, particularly, is that I don't dance with the timing of the music; I keep the timing, but the thing I use more is the phrasing, the melody."⁴⁵ Similarly, she noted that Balanchine influenced her manner of reacting to music: "I got from him exquisite details of music and movement.... He thought not only of time, of beat, but of melody. To this day, I think of that as being very important to us dancers: to dance with melody, the phrased melody, the breath-phrase."⁴⁶ Furthermore, Alonso recognized that it was after working with Balanchine that she began modulating her dancing in relationship to cues from the various instruments in the orchestra: "He would not listen to the music as a whole, but to each instrument, particularly. I learned from him that, and many things. But one of the things that I have become very conscious about is what instrument is playing which part. Is it a cello? Is it a violin? Is it the first violin?"⁴⁷

It is difficult to make sense of Alonso's attribution of her musicality to both her Cuban sensibility and her Russian training. The two different explanations suggest that her musicality was a hybrid product: it incorporated stylistic elements acquired from foreign pedagogues while expressing a Cuban disposition to dance in a certain manner, probably determined by the national *habitus*. This would be in accordance with her own hybrid status as an artist born and raised in Cuba but trained in a European art with foreign teachers. Alonso's fluid formulation of

^{§§} Explaining the heterogeneous character of narratives of national identity, Ruth Wodak and collaborators detail a range of strategies at play in their formulation. Construction narratives aspire to establish a certain national identity by consensus. Perpetuation narratives seek to reinforce a national identity under threat. Transformation narratives look to replace an established national identity with a new one. Finally, destruction narratives aim to dismantle an existing national identity without putting a new one in place. Homi Bhabha, too, recognizes that national identities are subject to contestation. In his view, individuals and communities have agency in constructing new narratives of the nation. R. Wodak et al, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1999), 33; *Nation and Narration*, ed. H. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 2-3.

these opposite views may also illustrate how, through different narratives of self-representation, she grappled with two aspects of her artistic persona, sometimes highlighting one at the expense of the other. One narrative stressed her position as the paradigmatic exponent of a Cuban style of ballet firmly anchored in the national culture. The other emphasized her standing as heir to European traditions. Her discourse reflected the intersection of nationalist and cosmopolitan perspectives.

Narratives of identity might be the means by which individuals attempt to reconcile and interweave life events into cohesive accounts, but rather than being definitive they are bound to vary depending on the specific purpose and context of the narration. In the process of characterizing themselves, individuals often attribute shifting meanings to the same event. New interpretations of it emerge that stand in opposition to previous ones.^{***} Such fluctuating meanings should not be dismissed for their contradictory character but considered for how they shed light on the narrators' transformations and dilemmas. In Alonso's case, the quandary of establishing a direct connection to ballet's European sources while simultaneously developing a distinctive Cuban aesthetics spoke to important political considerations about the validity of Cubans practicing this art. The ballerina's ascription of her musical sensibility to the lessons that she learned from Yavorsky and, above all, a consecrated figure such as Balanchine strategically situated her as the rightful inheritor of a European legacy. By insisting on the fact that she studied and collaborated with a number of European teachers and choreographers—also including Mikhail Fokine, Bronislava Nijinska, and Antony Tudor, to name just a few—the dancer sought not only to illuminate her artistic lineage but also to dispel the notion that, as a Latina, her position within the world of ballet was peripheral. Meanwhile, as part of a different narrative suited to postcolonial imperatives shaping Cuban artistic production under the government of Fidel Castro, Alonso cast the aesthetics of the Cuban ballet as an expression of the national culture. She insisted that the Cuban ballet, far from blindly copying a European model, had reformulated it by bringing a unique voice and original aesthetics to it.^{†††} Her radically different interpretations of musicality, whether the result of an analytical slippage or a savvy political gesture of self-representation, attest to what a thorny task it was for her to reconcile simultaneous affiliations to European classicism and Cuban nationalism. Yet, these two accounts acted together toward the same goal of validating the work of Alonso and the Cuban ballet, for if one claim sought recognition for Cuban dancers by means of highlighting their strong connections to a European tradition, the other one defended the maturity of the Cuban school of ballet by asserting its distinctiveness and thus situating it on a par, as a finished product, with other established schools of longer history.

Issues of pedagogy further complicated Alonso's claim that a common sensibility and cultural environment was the cause of her and other Cuban ballet dancers sharing the same type of musicality. While Alonso's and those dancers' socialization into a same *habitus* makes such a scenario plausible, it is likely that, in the same way that the ballerina learned values of musicality from her teachers, she transferred her own kind of musicality to those other Cuban dancers. A

^{***} Wodak and her collaborators maintain that narratives of identity entail the possibility of rearranging and reinterpreting past events. R. Wodak et al, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 15.

^{†††} For a more detailed discussion of Alonso's dual identity as an heir of European tradition and a Cuban renovator of ballet see chapters 3 and 4 in L. Tomé, *The Cuban Ballet: Its Rationale, Aesthetics and Artistic Identity as Formulated by Alicia Alonso*, Ph.D. diss. (Temple University, Philadelphia, 2011).

point of reference for generations of her countrymen that followed in her steps, she played a pivotal role in shaping a Cuban aesthetics in ballet, projecting the individual characteristics of her dancing upon the collective style of the school. “The truth is that I have served the role of a model through the different stages of the Cuban school of ballet,” she acknowledged, bringing attention to the fact that her taste informed the training methods that have guided the education of dancers in her country. Aside from influencing a training methodology, she set stylistic references from the stage. In her view, this consolidated the emergence of a national style: “[Cuban dancers] have a reference to look at, which determines the goals they strive for. In my opinion, this is one of the reasons why the Cuban school has made such fast progress and developed so quickly: having me as an example to look at.”⁴⁸ This opens the possibility that highly individual aspects of her style, such as the use of phrasing to enhance character construction and an approach to tempo suited to her physical skills after she had passed a certain age, and in light of eyesight problems, might have filtered into the aesthetics taught to Cuban ballet dancers.

The videotape *Alicia Alonso Coaching Excerpts from Theme and Variations* (1998) demonstrates how Alonso’s pedagogy emphasized the transmission of musicality.⁴⁹ In this taped rehearsal, she asks the dancers over and over to clarify rhythmic accents, phrase the steps in certain ways, and adjust the movement to the music’s tone and orchestration. For example, she urges them to dance incisively in the ballet’s first scene, with dry accents that capture the sharp *staccato* of the music. She also insists that in this section they move during the upbeat and hold their poses on the beat. Going over the ballet’s second *pas de deux*, Alonso emphasizes that both soloists should link phrasing to breathing—a strategy that generally infuses phrasing with a sense of flow. Halfway through this duet, when the music shifts to a tone of daydreaming playfulness, Alonso appeals to the dancers’ use of *épaulement*, asking them to move the head, shoulders, and torso in a way that reproduces the new quality in sound. She gives them imagery to achieve the effect, prompting them to act “silly” as if they were jumping over puddles of water. Later, when the music moves from the intimacy of a violin solo to a lively brass fanfare, Alonso prompts the dancers to readjust their movements and perform in a manner that is “strong and alive.” These indications reveal the importance that she attributed to matters of musicality while coaching and teaching other dancers. They also make it evident that she intended her disciples to reproduce, in particular, some of the distinctive aspects of her own sense of musicality.

A pedagogical interpretation of the musicality of Alonso’s disciples points to the extent to which her idiosyncrasies became institutionalized within the Cuban ballet and informed the performance style of dancers nationwide—a process facilitated by the fact that, since 1959, most ballet training in the country has taken place within the state-funded network of schools established by the ballerina and her husband at the time, pedagogue Fernando Alonso. This situation is not unique to the Cuban ballet. A number of choreographers, dancers, and teachers are routinely credited for their role in shaping balletic styles in certain nations. Such is the case of August Bournonville in Denmark, Marius Petipa and Agrippina Vaganova in Russia, Frederic Ashton and Margot Fonteyn in England, and George Balanchine in the United States. These figures’ stylistic peculiarities, having infiltrated training methods, repertory, and performance canons, have contributed to the collective aesthetics of national communities of dancers over several generations. Such amplification of individual traits is common within ballet, a bodily and oral tradition in which influential teachers, choreographers, and dancers effectively shape the

artistic identities of large numbers of disciples. Yet, few figures do so to the extent of someone like Alonso, who established style parameters at the level of a national population of dancers.

From this analysis emerges a jagged picture of Alonso and the Cuban ballet dancers' sense of musicality: represented as an expression of their native culture but partially credited to foreign input, attributable to unconscious socialization and yet actively transmitted through ballet pedagogy, symbolic of a national style but traceable to one particular dancer, conforming to common metaphors in the Cuban discourse of self-representation but departing from the dominant narrative about Cuban musicality and rhythm. These paradoxes do not so much cast into question the existence of the Cuban ballet's particular aesthetics, exemplified by a certain type of musicality, but rather they expose the complexity of articulating such aesthetics in terms of a Cuban identity. If anything, these contradictions highlight Alonso's agency in formulating symbols of national identity in the context of the Cuban school of ballet, regardless of any inconsistencies in her statements. Approaching the Cuban dancers' style as a spontaneous manifestation of their national culture, taste, or *habitus* provides only partial insight into its nature. To an extent, their musicality may consist of the rendering of European choreography or steps through Cuban bodies and subjectivities marked by the native culture. Yet, this musicality is also associated with the Cuban ballet's pedagogical lineage, going back to Alonso's training with foreign figures, which provided her with performance values that she developed into a highly individual style that, in turn, has served as an all-important reference to other dancers from the island. The Cuban brand of musicality, thus, emerges from the intersection of the native and the foreign, the cultural and pedagogical, the individual and the collective. Significantly, these dancers' attention to musicality resonates with a larger Cuban narrative of self-representation in such a way that practice and discourse reinforce one another, coalescing around the image of Cubans as a musically gifted people. Beyond the elucidation of Alonso's stylistic features, an intertextual examination of the topic reveals how discourse serves an integrative function: it binds individual and national narratives and invests performance with symbolic meanings. At the same time, it is the scrutiny of discourse that exposes the ambiguities that make musicality a complex marker of the Cuban ballet's national identity.

NOTES

¹ All translations from Spanish to English are by the article's author. Alicia Alonso, "La danza: triunfo ilimitado de nuestras culturas," speech in acceptance of a *doctor honoris causa* degree from the University of Guadalajara, Mexico, Dec. 3, 2002, in *Cuba en el Ballet* (Havana), no. 100, Jul.–Dec. 2002, 70.

² For a biography of Alonso see the chapter on the ballerina in Miguel Cabrera, *Ballet Nacional de Cuba: medio siglo de gloria* (Havana: Ediciones Cuba en el Ballet, 2000), 42–59. In English, see Walter Terry, *Alicia Alonso and Her Ballet Nacional de Cuba* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1981). The genealogy of Alonso's performances and productions of these ballet classics is established in Alicia Alonso, "Performing Giselle," in Charles Payne, *American Ballet Theatre* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 333–42; and Alicia Alonso, "Dos personajes en una obra magistral," in Ballet Nacional de Cuba, *El lago de los cisnes*, souvenir program, Havana, Oct.–Nov., 2002, 11–15.

³ Alicia Alonso, “El clasicismo hoy y mañana,” in *Cuba en el Ballet*, vol. 6, nos. 1–3 (1995): 15; “La danza: triunfo ilimitado de nuestras culturas,” 70; and “Alicia Alonso’s Passion and Exuberance,” interview by Samuel B. Cherson, in *Performing Arts Review*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1978): 292.

⁴ Alonso referred to the Cuban aesthetics in the course of several articles and interviews. See Alicia Alonso, “La danza: triunfo ilimitado de nuestras culturas,” 70; “Pero el artista sí,” interview by Rogerio Moya and Raúl Rivero, in Rogerio Moya, *Estrictamente personal* (Havana: UNEAC, 1985), reprinted in Alicia Alonso, *Diálogos con la danza*, fourth edition (Mexico City: Océano, 2004), 282; “Sobre la escuela cubana de ballet,” in *Diálogos con la danza*, third edition (Madrid: Editorial Complutense: 1993), 19–26. Also, see Alicia Alonso and Ramona de Súa, “Definir cómo bailamos,” interview by Pedro Simón, in *Cuba en el Ballet*, no. 104 (Jan.-Apr. 2004): 20–33; and quotes from Alonso in Pedro Simón, “La escuela cubana de ballet,” in *Conjunto* (Havana) no. 17 (Jul.–Sep. 1973): 95–97.

⁵ Alicia Alonso, “Pero el artista sí,” 282; “Seguiré bailando eternamente,” interview by Hugo García Fernández, in *Juventud Rebelde* (Havana), Dec. 29, 2001, 7, reprinted in Alonso’s *Diálogos* (2004), 336; and “Interview with Alicia Alonso [sound recording],” conducted by Doris Hering on July 21, 1979, Oral History Archive, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁶ Dolin made his remark in “Alicia Alonso,” telecast aired on WNET/13, New York City, on May 9, 1971, available in the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁷ The other quotes in this paragraph are from the following sources: John Percival, “Caribbean Classic,” in *Dance and Dancers* (London), Jan. 1967, 42. Excerpts of Vecheslova’s and Ottolenghi’s reviews are reproduced, in Spanish translation, in *XLV Aniversario de Alicia Alonso en el personaje de Giselle* (Havana: Ediciones Gran Teatro de la Habana, 1988), no page numbers. Arnau is quoted in Francisco Rey and Pedro Simón, *Alicia Alonso: órbita de una leyenda* (Madrid: Sociedad General de Autores de España, 1996), 114.

⁸ *Giselle*, film, dir. Enrique Pineda Barnet, featuring Alicia Alonso, Azari Plisetski and the Ballet Nacional de Cuba (Havana: ICAIC, 1963), released in VHS (West Long Branch, NJ: Kultur Video, 1995).

⁹ *Alicia Alonso, Prima Ballerina Assoluta*, DVD (Pleasantville, NY: Video Artists International, 2005).

¹⁰ Walter Terry, “American Ballet Theatre,” in *New York Herald Tribune*, Sep. 20, 1958; John Percival, “Caribbean Classic,” 42.

¹¹ Agnes de Mille, *Portrait Gallery* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 81.

¹² “Alicia Alonso: Adagio del segundo acto, *Lago de los Cisnes*,” footage of Alicia Alonso and Jorge Esquivel in *Swan Lake*, 1977, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTVCaWap-Jo> (accessed

Jan. 11, 2012); *Swan Lake*, film featuring Maya Plisetskaya, Nikolai Fadeychev and the Bolshoi Ballet (Moscow: Central Documentary Film Studio, 1957), reissued in VHS (West Long Branch, NJ: Kultur, 1984); *Swan Lake*, film featuring Margot Fontey, Rudolf Nureyev and the Vienna State Opera (Munich and Vienna: Unitel/Neue Thalia Film, 1966), reissued on DVD (New York: PolyGram, 1998); *Swan Lake*, videorecording featuring Natalia Makavora, Anthony Dowell and the Royal Ballet (West Long Branch, NJ: Kultur, 1982).

¹³ “Alicia Alonso, *Cascanueces*, Ballet Nacional de Cuba,” footage of Alicia Alonso and Jorge Esquivel in the *Nutcracker pas de deux*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jcIGX-ep3dA> (accessed June 10, 2012).

¹⁴ Ann Barzel, “Tres bailarinas en la historia de la danza,” in *Cuba en el Ballet*, vol. 8, no. 2 (May–Aug., 1977): 46; Francisco Nieva, “Como nunca se había bailado,” in *Cuba en el Ballet*, no. 93 (Jan.–Apr. 1999): 31.

¹⁵ Quoted in Ann Barzel, “Tres bailarinas en la historia de la danza,” 46.

¹⁶ Don McDonagh, “Alicia Alonso Dances *Giselle* with Canadian Cast,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1967, 37; Doris Hering, “The Unavoidable Decade,” in *Dance Magazine* (Aug. 1967), 36.

¹⁷ *Giselle*, DVD, featuring Alicia Alonso, Vladimir Vasiliev and the Ballet Nacional de Cuba (Pleasantville, NY: Video Artists International, 2007).

¹⁸ Quoted in Walter Terry, *Alicia Alonso and Her Ballet Nacional de Cuba*, 82.

¹⁹ Alicia Alonso, “Bailar ha sido vivir,” interview by Lester Tomé, in *El Mercurio* (Santiago, Chile), Nov. 19, 2000, E24; Alicia Alonso and Ramona de Súa, “Definir cómo bailamos,” 21.

²⁰ Alicia Alonso, “George Balanchine: el gran músico de la danza,” first published as “*Tema y variaciones a 40 años de su estreno*,” in *Cuba en el ballet*, vol. 6, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 1987): 24–26, reworked into a second version for the program notes of a gala in tribute to George Balanchine by the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Oct. 20, 2000, reprinted in Alonso’s *Diálogos* (2004), 136–39.

²¹ Italics in the original. Alicia Alonso and Ramona de Súa, “Definir cómo bailamos,” 20.

²² Alicia Alonso, “Interview with Alicia Alonso,” conducted by Marilyn Hunt, Nov. 19–21, 1977, typescript, Oral History Archive, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, 30, 101.

²³ *Alicia Alonso Coaching Excerpts from Theme and Variations*, VHS (New York: The George Balanchine Foundation, 1998).

²⁴ Alicia Alonso and Ramona de Súa, “Definir cómo bailamos,” 20.

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- ²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique: Précédé de trois études d'ethnologie kabyle* (Geneva: Droz, 1972), translated as *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 214.
- ²⁶ P. Bourdieu, *Questions de sociologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980), translated as *Sociology in Question*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1993), 86.
- ²⁷ Sheenagh Pietrobruno, *Salsa and Its Transnational Moves* (New York: Lexington Books, 2006), 113–16.
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