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ROUNDTABLE

Race(ism) and Art Music in Argentina: Analyzing Alberto Williams' 'La patria y la música' (1921)

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Abstract

At the turn of the twentieth century, numerous Argentine intellectuals embraced positivist thinking in order to claim the 'superiority' of the white race and exclude the indigenous and African-descendant population from the foundational mythologies of the Argentinian nation-state. Darwin's ideas on evolution – especially the concept of 'survival of the fittest' as filtered through the work of Herbert Spencer – coloured the discourses of a myriad of Argentine intellectuals, including artists. The creation of a nationalist music was a foremost concern among Argentine composers, who, influenced by these ideas, believed an Argentinian 'high' art should 'elevate' folk music through European techniques. In this paper, I concentrate on composer Alberto Williams to see how his career and relevant position in the musical milieu influenced and shaped the construction of an Argentine musical canon. I particularly focus on Williams's speech, later published as an article, titled 'La patria y la música' ('Fatherland and music'), to examine how his ideas on 'music evolution' and 'race', influenced by racial scientific ideas taken from European Positivism and Social Darwinism, shaped the discourses and development of a national (or nationalist) music in Argentina at the end of the nineteenth and through the twentieth centuries.

Keywords: Argentina; race; art music; Alberto Williams; Zenón Rolón

Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, European trends of thought such as positivism and Social Darwinism were very influential in Latin America, not only in the sphere of science, but most strongly in politics and the construction of nation-states.¹ The heterogeneous populations that constituted these 'newly independent' countries were at the core of the problems that elite governments (composed by white European descendants, or *criollos*) believed they were facing in their quest to build homogeneous nation-states. Different countries had different approaches to this situation depending on the size of their indigenous and Afro-descendant populations.

In the case of Argentina, by the end of the nineteenth century there were several indigenous populations across the country. Usually portrayed by white Argentinians as 'inferior' or 'savages', many

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¹Paola Cortes-Rocca, 'Positivism in Latin America', *The Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by Sangeeta Ray, Henry Schwarz, José Luis Villacañas Berlanga, Alberto Moreiras and April Shemak (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2016).

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of them were killed during expeditions to expand the territory occupied by the new states, or were segregated and excluded from cities and citizenship altogether. At the same time, while there used to be a significant Afro-Argentine community at the beginning of the nineteenth century, towards the end, this population was significantly reduced. As George Reid Andrews writes, this decline in the Afro-Argentine population has traditionally been attributed to four factors: ‘the abolition of the slave trade; high mortality rates and relatively low fertility rates among the Afro-Argentine population; very high death rates among black males during the wars of the 1810–70 period; and race mixture and gradual lightening’.²

While Andrews proves that the population decline of the Afro-Argentines was not as steep as had once been argued, his study highlights the discourses that were used to render them invisible – discourses fostered by governmental elites that promoted a teleological view of Argentine nationality dependent on ‘evolution’, ‘progress’ and white ‘superiority’.³ Darwin’s theories of evolution and ‘natural selection’ as filtered through the work of Herbert Spencer, coloured the discussions of Argentine intellectuals, including artists.⁴

The creation of a nationalist art music was a foremost concern among Argentine composers, who, influenced by these ideas, believed an Argentinian ‘high’ art should ‘elevate’ folk music through European techniques. However, not all musics from Europe were accepted in the same way. And while German (by which was also meant ‘Aryan’) music was seen as the model for Argentine nationalist music, other musics from Europe – but especially Italian – were viewed as problematic, not only in terms of the music itself, but also in light of the political situation of Italian mass migrations to Argentina. While a large part of the Argentine intelligentsia defended a model of German absolute/symphonic music (including Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*), the Argentine-Italian community supported and continuously attended the opera.

In this article, I concentrate on composer Alberto Williams to describe how, through his career – achieved by his work (as a musician, composer and pedagogue) and privileged position –, he became a powerful figure in the Argentine music milieu. This allowed him to disseminate his evolutionary narrative on Argentine music through his many public and published discourses. I particularly focus on Williams’s speech, later published as an article, titled ‘La patria y la música’ (‘Fatherland and music’), to examine how his ideas on ‘music evolution’ and ‘race’, influenced by racial scientific ideas taken from European positivism and Social Darwinism, shaped the discourses and development of a national (or nationalist) music in Argentina at the end of the nineteenth and through the twentieth centuries. This exploration of Williams’s ideas on national art music and its origins allows me to reflect, in particular, on the scarce attention that the work of Afro-Argentine composer Zenon Rolón (a contemporary of Williams) has received during the twentieth century.

This paper intends to foreground the idea, discussed in the introduction to this round table, of ‘Western music’ not as cohesive and unified but as a malleable object, that has been adapted and moulded in different contexts (in my particular case study, Argentina) but that has managed to establish a global connection through modern technological practices and the dissemination of Western discourses and ideologies, which in turn have produced new forms of ‘Western music’.

Alberto Williams: family and musical genealogies

In Alban Ramaut’s introduction to the book *Généalogies du romantisme musical français*, the author begins by describing the term ‘genealogy’ according to how it was originally coined by the *Dictionnaire de*

²George Reid Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800–1900* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 68.

³See also the introduction to *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina*, ed. by Paulina Alberto and Eduardo Elena (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁴Adriana Novoa and Alex Levine, *From Man to Ape: Darwinism in Argentina, 1870–1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

l'Académie française in 1762, and how it changed in following editions.⁵ While in the first edition genealogy was defined as 'an enumeration of ancestors or relatives', the ninth edition of 2005 also includes the description that explained the term as the 'origins of a history of a group, a domain, an idea'.⁶ Ramaut then traces the historical challenges that the concept of genealogy as a sort of unflawed consanguinity posed during the eighteenth century, especially by the *encyclopédistes* D'Alembert and Diderot in the wake of the French Revolution, creating a 'desire to re-found the genealogy of France not on blood but on spirit'.⁷ While this definition was intended to counteract the entitlement produced by blood lineages, it potentially reinforced other types of entitlement. This could explain Alberto Williams's approach to genealogy, making him the descendant of Europe not only by blood, but also by musical and intellectual spirit. We can trace this history by looking at his biography.

Alberto Williams was born in 1862 into a well-to-do family.⁸ Regarding Williams's family tree, biographer Jorge O. Pickenhayn says that both of his parents were born in Argentina, but on his father's side his grandparents were English (his grandfather, Benjamin Williams, was born in Exeter and married Fanny Blackett from Dover), and on his mother's side they were *criollos*, who had some filial connections with the Spanish nobility.⁹ Williams also claimed that he inherited his interest in (and talent for) music from his family.¹⁰ Pickenhayn also points out, based on Williams's late writings, that he considered his parents and grandparents musical amateurs, while he was the 'firstborn' professional musician.¹¹ This statement will also prove useful in understanding the narrative of 'progress' (in this case musical progress) and 'evolution' of the arts, thus presenting Williams's identity as a professional musician as a consequence of the status and advancement of the arts in the development and evolution of the fairly new Argentine nation.

According to his biography, Williams's first piano lessons were provided by a German musician, followed by some lessons by another German teacher at his primary school, and he later entered the Escuela de Música y Declamación de la provincia de Buenos Aires (School of Music and Declamation of the Province of Buenos Aires). When he was nineteen, in June 1882, he received a four-year bursary from the Province of Buenos Aires to travel to Paris to continue his piano studies. The request to obtain a bursary was encouraged by his uncle, Amancio Alcorta (named after Alberto's grandfather and Amancio's own father), a lawyer who held several political appointments throughout his lifetime.

While Williams started his studies in Paris towards the end of 1882 (he turned twenty in November of that year), interestingly enough, in the records of the Conservatoire de Paris his age is given as one year younger – i.e. eighteen –, falsifying his birthdate to comply with the institution's age-limit rules. He extended his studies for three years after the end of his bursary, until being dismissed by the Conservatoire based on Article 60 of its bylaws.¹² During his last year in Paris he also took private composition lessons with César Franck. The French experience would certainly have had an impact on what he would consider his 'musical genealogy'. His piano studies with Georges Mathias would give him the chance to

⁵*Généalogies du romantisme musical français*, ed. by Olivier Bara and Alban Ramaut (Paris: Vrin, 2012), p. 12.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷'Le désir de refonder la généalogie de la France non sur le sang mais sur l'esprit'. *Ibid.*, p. 15. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

⁸Most of Williams's biography is taken from Jorge O. Pickenhayn, *Alberto Williams* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1979). For an analysis of Williams's biographies and the role they played in the creation of the Argentine composer as a canonical figure see Adriana Cerletti, "'La ilusión biográfica o el arte de la con-memoración": un acercamiento al estudio de las biografías del compositor Alberto Williams', in *Commemoraciones. Problemas y prioridades de los estudios musicológicos actuales en Latinoamérica. Actas de la XXII Conferencia de la Asociación Argentina de Musicología y las XVIII Jornadas Argentinas de Musicología* (Buenos Aires: AAM-INM, 2016), pp. 28–46.

⁹Pickenhayn, *Alberto Williams*, p. 20.

¹⁰Alberto Williams quoted in Pickenhayn, *Alberto Williams*, pp. 21–22.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²This is noted in Williams's student register at the Conservatoire held at the Archives nationales (AJ/37/354-2). Article 60 entitled the institution to terminate the studies of any pupil who after three years had not been admitted for competition, or who had competed but had not won any prizes. See Pierre Constant, *Le Conservatoire National de Musique et de Déclamation. Documents historiques et administratifs* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1900), p. 263.

consider himself the ‘grandchild’ of Frédéric Chopin (since Mathias had studied with Chopin), while his studies with César Franck made him one of the latter’s musical ‘children’.¹³

Williams would later become a vigorous defender of Wagner’s music,¹⁴ and so would follow a similar path to that of his composition teacher: Williams primarily cultivated genres of absolute music such as overtures, symphonies and chamber music (even though he would later embrace a nationalist style more in line, perhaps, with the musical doctrines of Vincent d’Indy), and he became a paternal figure to his students, not in the same affectionate way as *père* Franck, but with a more severe (yet kind) presence, as ‘the patriarch’.¹⁵

Williams’s ubiquity

After his return from Paris, Williams began to gain importance in the musical milieu of Buenos Aires. During 1890, he began offering piano concerts at different venues where he played German and French repertoire, while including some of his own work. By 1891, his symphonic music also started to be played, and he also began to appear in the musical scene not only as a pianist, but also as a conductor.

In 1888, a National Conservatoire was founded. Alberto’s uncle, Amancio Alcorta, seeing that his nephew was struggling to find the position he wanted after his return from Paris, offered him the possibility of becoming the Conservatoire’s director, although the position was already occupied by the musician Juan Gutiérrez. Williams claimed that he preferred to create his own institution, and in 1893, he founded the Conservatorio de Música de Buenos Aires.¹⁶ Oscar Olmello and Manuel Massone cite Williams’s decision to found his own teaching institution as one of the factors that led to the closure of the National Conservatoire.¹⁷ They also mention that while the National Conservatoire aimed at a pedagogy that trained music teachers, Williams’s conservatoire, shaped after the Conservatoire de Paris, was intended to produce performers.¹⁸

Williams’s conservatoire was so successful that he started to open branches in other parts of the country, creating a sort of ‘franchise’ or ‘leasing’ that enabled him to reach many places which were run independently, but with his endorsement. By the 1920s, there were over a hundred of these conservatoires.¹⁹ This caught the attention of foreign musicians touring in the country, as we can see from Arthur Rubinstein’s memoirs:

¹³*La Quena. Número especial de homenaje a la memoria de César Franck en el Centenario de su nacimiento*, 4.13 (December 2022). D’Indy’s list of Franck’s pupils does not include Williams. Timothy Flynn mentions that ‘given the great variety of composers claiming to have studied with Franck after the composer’s death, d’Indy wanted to provide an accurate listing of actual students of the master’. Timothy Flynn, *César Franck: An Annotated Bibliography* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2019), p. 32 n. 18. Yet this seems to portray d’Indy as a ‘gatekeeper’ or zealous guardian of Franck’s legacy; that Williams studied with Franck is proven by a letter written by the latter, stating that the Argentinian had been his student for the year of 1889, and could be considered one of his favourite students. This letter was published in the special issue of *La Quena* cited at the beginning of this note, in celebration of Franck’s centennial anniversary. I also thank Pablo Williams (grandson of Alberto) for sharing a scanned copy of the original letter.

¹⁴His first passionate support for Wagner’s music appeared in an article published, while in Paris, in the Buenos Aires newspaper *El Diario* in 1884; cf Pickenhayn, *Alberto Williams*, p. 31.

¹⁵For the conception of Williams as a ‘musical patriarch’ see Adriana Cerletti, ‘Tras las huellas del “Patriarca”: La revista *La Quena* como órgano de legitimación en la figura y la estética de Alberto Williams’, *Revista Argentina de Musicología*, 15–16 (2014–15), 321–38.

¹⁶Oscar Olmello and Manuel Massone, ‘La crisis de 1890. Divisoria de dos modelos antagónicos de educación musical en Argentina’, *Resonancias*, 22.42 (2018), 33–52 (p. 43).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 44–45.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 47–49.

¹⁹A detailed description of these branches can be found in the Appendix to Vanina Paiva, ‘Alberto Williams y la configuración de la música nacional. La institucionalización de la formación musical en Argentina en el período 1893–1952’ (unpublished master’s thesis, Universidad Nacional de San Martín, 2019), pp. 2–27.

The composer Alberto Williams was a pupil of César Franck. He started what became a strange phenomenon in Argentina when he founded the first conservatory in Buenos Aires, which he named after himself. It had an extraordinary success, with hundreds of young music students flocking there. As well, it developed that he was a commercial genius not unlike the great North American money-makers.²⁰ Selecting the best of his pupils, he would send them out to the larger provincial towns such as Rosario, Córdoba, Mendoza, and others to open ‘Alberto Williams Conservatoires’ and, once established, they would provide him with a good percentage of the receipts. I found, on my arrival [in 1917], a veritable conservatory empire.²¹

Despite Rubinstein’s inaccuracies (e.g. Williams’s was not the first conservatory in Buenos Aires – nor was it, in fact, named after the composer), he certainly portrays the success and expansion of Williams as a music educator. As such, Williams was responsible for the education of generations of Argentine musicians in their practice, but also in their thinking via his publishing company, La Quena,²² which published all his scores, pedagogy manuals, writings and public presentations.²³ In 1919 he started publishing a music magazine also called *La Quena* as the official journal of the conservatory, which lasted seventeen years.²⁴ Yet this was not the only space where Williams thrived. He also occupied powerful positions that determined musical taste, and which benefited his own pupils.

Regarding the former, as mentioned before, Williams was a supporter of Wagnerian music, and he organized a Wagner Festival, followed by three other concerts between 1894 and 1895, for which he also acted as conductor. In this he enjoyed the support of a group of intellectuals gathered at the Ateneo, an institution that would be in charge of defining the values of an ‘Argentine’ aesthetic according to the cultural and governmental elites of the country (with aesthetic but also political consequences that will be discussed in the following section).²⁵ These concerts organized and conducted by Williams continued during the first years of the twentieth century under the support of the National Library, whose director at the time was the French intellectual Paul Groussac.²⁶

In respect of the advancement of his pupils, Williams would become the vice-president, and later president, of the Comisión Nacional de Bellas Artes,²⁷ an institution which, under the support of the Ministerio de Justicia e Instrucción Pública, was in charge of the ‘Premio Europa’. This prize, in imitation of the French Grand Prix de Rome, gave scholarships to artists (painters, sculptors and musicians) to continue their studies in Europe; but instead of Rome they would be able to choose an institution in

²⁰The fact that Rubinstein compares Williams’s enterprise to commercial endeavours in the United States is interesting, since one of the constant criticisms made by Argentine (and other South American) intellectuals about the USA was its mercantilism. See José Ignacio Weber, ‘La “cultura estética” de Miguel Cané, Alberto Williams y el Ateneo. Discurso y argumentación esteticista en torno al Festival Wagner 1894’, *Revista Argentina de Musicología*, 12–13 (2012), 315–42 (pp. 321–22).

²¹Arthur Rubinstein, *My many years* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), pp. 7–8. Also quoted in Olmello and Massone, ‘La crisis de 1890’, pp. 46–47.

²²The *quena* is a type of flute from the Andes.

²³According to Roberto Buffo, the publishing house was an enterprise of Williams together with the Catalan Gurina, and was originally named Gurina y Cía. After the death of Gurina, Williams renamed it to La Quena. Roberto Américo Buffo, ‘La música orquesta de Alberto Williams: perspectiva histórica y analítica’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Universidad Católica Argentina, 2016), p. 37. The Catalan community of Buenos Aires fostered Wagner’s music through the creation of the Asociación Wagneriana de Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires Wagnerian Association) in 1912. About this institution see Silvina Mansilla, ‘La Asociación Wagneriana de Buenos Aires: instancia de legitimación y consagración musical en la década de 1912–1921’, *Revista del Instituto de Investigación Musicológica ‘Carlos Vega’*, 18 (2004), 19–38; and Josefina Irurzun, *Una afición transatlántica. Cultura musical e inmigración catalana en Buenos Aires (1880–1920)* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2021).

²⁴The journal’s logo combines the lire and the *quena*, which represent European and South American music. For an extensive analysis see Adriana Cerletti, ‘La imagen sonora de la nación: El logo de la revista *La Quena* como símbolo de la intersección entre lo autóctono y lo europeo en la música de Alberto Williams’, *Cuadernos de Iconografía Musical*, 2.1 (June 2015), 39–67.

²⁵Weber, ‘La “cultura estética” de Miguel Cané, Williams y el Ateneo’, p. 319. See also Lilia Ana Bertoni, *Patriotas, cosmopolitas y nacionalistas. La construcción de la nacionalidad argentina a fines del siglo XIX* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2007), pp. 173–211.

²⁶Pickenhayn, *Alberto Williams*, pp. 40–41.

²⁷Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes <<https://www.anba.org.ar/academico/williams-alberto/>> (accessed 15 June 2023).

various European cities, depending on their discipline (painters could choose between Berlin, Munich, Paris, London, Rome, Florence or Naples; sculptors could go to Berlin, Munich, Paris, Rome, Florence, Milan or Naples; and musicians had the options of Berlin, Leipzig, Munich, Vienna, Paris, Brussels, Milan or Naples).²⁸

It is not surprising then that many of the musicians who received the Premio Europa had been direct students of Williams or had studied at his conservatoire. Because of the age limit of the competition (which allowed the participation of musicians under the age of thirty-five), it makes sense that those who chose to go to Paris sought their music education at the Schola Cantorum and not at the Conservatoire de Paris, since the former did not have an age limit. It is also possible to think that Williams would have been interested in continuing the formation of his pupils under the Germanist/nationalist aesthetic that Vincent d'Indy (another 'son' of *père* Franck and so, Williams's musical 'brother') cultivated and taught.

Unwanted musics

The mass migrations of Italians – among smaller migrations of people from other parts of western and eastern Europe and some other places – to Argentina by the end of the nineteenth century produced a reaction from the local elites. While the intellectuals of the 1850s saw the migrations of Europeans as the basis on which to build a nation that could become progressive and civilized,²⁹ the reality was that, by the end of the nineteenth century, the people who migrated to Argentina were generally not from the expected countries of northern Europe that those intellectuals had in mind, but from southern Europe; many of the Italians were socialists and anarchists from poor backgrounds, and as such suddenly became a threat to the Argentine elites. As a reaction, the government passed a law, drafted by Miguel Cané in 1899 and approved in 1902, called 'Ley de Residencia' ('Residence Law'); this allowed the Executive Power to expel, without the intervention of the Legislative Power, any foreign person deemed reprehensible or dangerous to the country.

This anti-Italian sentiment did not go unnoticed in the art music scene. Italian music and musicians were widespread in Argentine culture, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, Buenos Aires had at least five opera theatres where mostly Italian opera could be heard.³⁰ The outbreak of World War I created tensions among the different communities residing in Argentina (especially in Buenos Aires), and after the war, many Italian or Italo-Argentine musicians refused to play Wagner's music, leading to Wagner's operas tacitly being banned from the main theatres, such as the Teatro Colón.³¹

The nationalist music critic Gastón Talamón wrote about it in an article titled 'La guerra artística' ('Artistic war'):

We have been banned from listening to works composed by Wagner. Nobody protests. [...] What is Wagner accused of? Being German. But, weren't Bach, Mozart, Schumann, Weber, Mendelssohn, Beethoven and a hundred more, to whom this prohibitive decree does not apply, also [German]? The modern and scientific concept of nationality, and above all of race, does not admit that they will spring forth by spontaneous generation.

A long process of evolution and elaboration, of environmental and climactic influence, of tradition and inheritance, are the factors that create an ethnic entity; not a simple and passing historical date, war or treaty. This is why, by means of logic and justice, it is inadmissible to consider as an odious

²⁸ *Boletín oficial de la República Argentina*, 20 September 1899, pp. 1668–72.

²⁹ See, for example, Juan Bautista Alberdi, *Bases y punto de partida para la organización política de la República Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación, 2017). The first edition is from 1852 and served as the basis for the 1853 Argentine Constitution.

³⁰ See Enzo Valenti Ferro, *Historia de la ópera argentina* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1997).

³¹ Margarita Zelarayán, 'El impacto de la Primera Guerra Mundial en la vida musical de Buenos Aires: el teatro Colón in obras de Richard Wagner. Temporadas 1918–1919' (unpublished monograph for the course *Música Latinoamericana y Argentina*, given at Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2007).

German only he who had been born after the death of Beethoven and acted after the 1870 war, while the others are still considered as valued artists.³²

Talamón represented the voice of many fervent music nationalists who believed that the path to create national Argentine music should follow the path of German composers up to Wagner, justified by applying a scientific racial discourse of lineages and genealogy. His claim does not end there, but goes to the extreme of discussing how the ‘Ley de Residencia’ should work if applied to music:

[...] if today we should have to apply the residence law to foreign composers, the first victim wouldn't be Wagner, but several French and Italians, since the ways of the latter are those that wreak havoc on Argentine music, and slow down the emergence of a national school that can prove to the world that America knows how to think and how to feel. The governments of France and Italy should be careful, because if Argentina decides to imitate your artistic criteria – which we hope won't happen – the first victims would be Debussy and Puccini.³³

Talamón's ‘germanophilia’ is certainly stronger than Williams's, who does not seem to have made any similar public claims during these years, despite his esteem and love for Wagner's music.³⁴ Yet, the relationship that both the critic and the composer had with part of the Argentine-Italian community was certainly strained, as we can attest by reading the constant mockery and criticisms that they received through the pages of the music journal *Disonancias* (1927–32).³⁵

Williams's writings

Williams published all of his work through La Quena, leading eventually to the seven volumes that compile his ‘complete works’. When read together, these suggest that he was influenced by an array of theories and authors not always complementary to each other, and which in some cases could be considered rather contradictory. If we contrast, for instance, his Romantic musical nationalism,³⁶ based on the notion of a native folk, with his ideas of ‘natural selection’ – and the supposed ‘inferiority’ of those same native peoples – as fostered by Social Darwinists, we find something of a paradox. José Ignacio Weber explains this paradox – following Oscar Terán's analysis of the discourse of Argentine intellectual Miguel Cané – as a tension between an ‘aesthetic culture’ that cultivated traditional values of ‘harmony and beauty’ and a ‘scientific culture’ that fostered the ideas of ‘civilization’ and ‘progress’;³⁷ a contradiction idiosyncratic to the late nineteenth-century Argentine intelligentsia.

Williams's writings seem to combine German philosophical ideas from Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer, notions of progress and modernization from French positivist thinkers such as Comte and Taine,³⁸ and Herbert Spencer's interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution. While Williams seems to

³²Gastón Talamón, ‘La guerra artística’, *Apolo*, 1.1 (March 1919), 18–21 (pp. 18–19).

³³*Ibid.*, p. 20. Also quoted in Weber, ‘La “cultura estética” de Miguel Cané, Alberto Williams y el Ateneo’, p. 317.

³⁴A few years before the beginning of World War II, Talamón's germanophilia started to display signs of antisemitism by linking musical prowess to race (e.g. by claiming that Jews could only be ‘imitators’ but could never achieve genius). See Glocer, *Melodías del destierro. Músicos judíos exiliados en la Argentina durante el nazismo (1933–1945)* (Buenos Aires: Gourmet Musical, 2016), pp. 42–48.

³⁵See Juan Bühler, ‘Una sinfonia de desagradables sensaciones auditivas. La revista *Disonancias* y su defensa de la música italiana en Buenos Aires. 1927–1932’, in *Dar la nota: El rol de la prensa en la historia musical argentina*, ed. by Silvina Mansilla (Buenos Aires: Gourmet Musical, 2012), pp. 165–96.

³⁶See Jean H. Delaney, ‘Imagining *El Ser Argentino*: Cultural Nationalism and Romantic Concepts of Nationhood In Early Twentieth-Century Argentina’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 34 (2002), 625–58; and Roberto Buffo, ‘La problemática del nacionalismo musical argentino’, *Revista del IIMCV*, 31 (2017), 15–54.

³⁷Weber, ‘La “cultura estética” de Miguel Cané, Alberto Williams y el Ateneo’, p. 321.

³⁸Oscar Terán, *Positivismo y nación en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Puntosur Editores, 1987).

follow Herder's lead in establishing folk origins for his form of musical nationalism,³⁹ he never makes any direct allusion to the German thinker.

Williams continuously discusses the figure of God, not necessarily in a religious way, but rather as the main creator of forms, while humans were the creators of beauty.⁴⁰ Following his German philosopher models, Williams believed that musicians were meant to create beauty through sound, understanding music as a living organism that is shaped by the composer.⁴¹ In what seems to be a clear replication of Schopenhauer's ideas, Williams claims that the creation of a 'universe of sounds' would produce the kind of contemplation that would 'redeem us from the misery of life and pain',⁴² and puts music above all the other arts.

Regarding the origins of Argentine art music, Williams unashamedly claimed to be its founder. Williams's story is well known among scholars of art music in Argentina, since he told it several times both to students at the Conservatoire and to public audiences during speeches. In 1890, just a few months after his return from Paris, Williams decided to visit with friends some rural areas in the Province of Buenos Aires, which he had missed during his otherwise urban Parisian experience. While there, he encountered some *gauchos* (the Argentine equivalent of American cowboys), who sang and improvised folk tunes to the accompaniment of a guitar. These players were called *payadores*, and they would also engage in a sort of 'musical duel' (or *payada*) in which two *payadores* would alternate improvised verses, responding to each other. Williams claimed that through this experience he realized he could distinguish himself from his European teachers by embedding folk elements into art music. His *El rancho abandonado* ('The abandoned hut'), composed in that same year, then became 'the cornerstone' of Argentinian art music.⁴³ Williams went on to say that 'those are the origins of Argentine musical art: the technique was given to us by France, the inspiration by the *payadores* from Juárez'.⁴⁴ This anecdote – narrated by Williams more than forty years later, as Oscar Olmello and Andrés Jorge Weber highlight –⁴⁵ created a myth of origin, establishing a musical genealogy that could include or exclude music and musicians according to their educational and/or ethnic backgrounds.

'La patria y la música'

In tune with his other writings, in 1921 Williams published an article in his journal *La Quena*, in a section called 'Musical aesthetics', titled 'La patria y la música' ('Fatherland and music'). (He had already presented this same text during a 1910 convocation speech at the Conservatory and its branches.)⁴⁶ This article exposes Williams's support for colonization and white (or white-assimilated) folk cultures as the means to create an Argentine music.⁴⁷ Yet the concept of race, as Williams uses it, has many layers. As Julie Brown writes:

³⁹See Philip V. Bohlman, 'Herder's Nineteenth Century', *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, 7.1 (2010), 3–21.

⁴⁰Alberto Williams, '¿A qué venimos los músicos?', *Obras Completas*, 7 vols (Buenos Aires: La Quena, 1924–52), IV: *Estética, Crítica y Biografía* (1947), pp. 62–64.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 65–67.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵Oscar Olmello and Andrés Jorge Weber, 'El rancho descuidado. La lógica oportunista de Alberto Williams', 433". *Revista Online de Investigación Musical*, 9.18 (2017): 1–12 (p. 2).

⁴⁶This earlier version of 'La patria y la música' is published in Alberto Williams, *Obras Completas*, III: *Alocuciones, discursos y conferencias* (Buenos Aires: La Quena, 1947), pp. 176–92.

⁴⁷It is important to highlight, as mentioned in the previous section, that Williams's ideas on positivism and Social Darwinism could have been influenced not necessarily directly, by reading European authors, but by looking at interpretations of local authors, which would in turn combine different, sometimes personal, takes on modern theories. However, it is difficult to know which authors Williams might have been reading, since he does not mention them.

Racial categories created primarily by Europeans as a result of their contact with, and subordination of, non-European peoples through colonialism and imperialism vary significantly during this time [1880s–1930s]; sometimes they reflect very closely race science’s focus on physical difference, at others they co-opt the term to signify less specific identities; often they move smoothly from one to the other.⁴⁸

This malleability of the term ‘race’ is what will help us understand Williams’s own complex racial discourse. Williams begins his article by defining the ‘Fatherland’ as a ‘cluster of families’.⁴⁹ These families, according to him, adapt to the soil and multiply. He then goes on to say that heritage is important to continue forging the Fatherland, and that it is also appropriate to raise high (metaphorical) walls that will ‘protect the Fatherland from the irruptions of savages, and inferior and antagonistic peoples’, so as to preserve its originality. These walls, however, should apparently not impede contact with other peoples, so as to avoid stagnation. Here Williams uses China as an example, claiming that, due to its lack of contact and exchange with other cultures (by which he principally means European ones) its ‘primitive’ civilization became crystallized and could not move forward.⁵⁰ So even if Williams defends the importance of originality, he also believes that it has to be accompanied by progress, clearly following here the ideas of French positivism. As Laura Malosetti Costa explains (with particular reference to painting), ‘the arts were seen as the last, most complete and perfect expression of the progress of nations. The tone was frankly positivist and showed an optimism based, precisely, on those three factors that Hippolyte Taine said determined artistic practices: the race, the environment, and the moment.’⁵¹

Williams then argues that Argentina has had its own walls against the ‘Indian deprecations’ and the neglect and selfishness of the colonial regime in the form of the brave soldiers and *gauchos* who fought against them. He continues by saying that:

In our days, the Fatherland tends to erase the borders, overflowing with trains, automobiles, blimps and airplanes, like waves in an agitated sea; it tends to constitute, with the flower of the Aryan race, with the European race of the Mediterranean and the West, and the migrations to both Americas, a sole immense Fatherland, a Fatherland of super European men, and its sons the super American men, upon whose forehead shines the divine sparkle of genius [...]⁵²

We see again a veiled reference to a German philosopher, in this case Nietzsche, when Williams refers to these European and American *übermenschen* (although not in the sense of Nietzsche’s Atheist, but in its racial approach). We can see here how Williams justifies colonization as a path to ‘progress and modernization’ and claims – following his logic and the metaphor of the family used at the beginning of his text – that the heirs of the Americas could only be the European descendants. As we can see from this extract and what follows, Williams’s racial classification into ‘Aryan’ (i.e., white), ‘yellow’, and ‘black’, seems to come from Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau’s *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (1853–55). Williams continues with some racist remarks, based on ideas advanced by Social Darwinism:

⁴⁸Julie Brown, ‘Introduction – Music, History, Trauma: Western Music and Race, 1883–1933’, in *Western Music and Race*, ed. Julie Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xix. Unfortunately, most of the existing bibliography on Western music and race has barely acknowledged the role of Latin American art music in these discourses. I have discussed this problem elsewhere; see Vera Wolkowicz, *Inca Music Reimagined: Indigenist Discourses in Latin American Art Music, 1910–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 38–39.

⁴⁹Alberto Williams, ‘Estética Musical. La patria y la música’, *La Quena*, 2.6 (March 1921), 5–11 (p. 5).

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹Laura Malosetti Costa, *Los primeros modernos. Arte y sociedad en Buenos Aires a fines del siglo XIX*, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2021), p. 56.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 6.

The filter of natural selection has been separating the human races through the ages into three distinctive groups: blacks, yellows, and whites, which are like the successive faces⁵³ of the same evolution.

The intelligence of the white triumphs everywhere. More than any other men, the white has the mysterious intuition of beauty, and tries hard to beautify the place he inhabits. [...]

The black race tends to disappear, the yellow is fossilized [...]. The fatherlands that don't create will never be able to dominate the world; because the empire of strength expires fast, and the only thing that survives is the creative mind. [...] America must reject all attempts at colonization by the black and yellow races; reserving its ample territory for the superior race that discovered and populated it. The Indian dies out in America because he does not adapt to the European civilization that penetrates it [...].

America has to be not only for Americans, but also for those who are fittest to populate and civilize it, for the most intelligent, the wisest, the most industrious and artists, for the most active, energetic entrepreneurs, for the most fertile in action and thought, for the most harmonious, and most beautiful in body and soul.⁵⁴

Williams continues to discuss which of the Europeans are for him worthy of becoming Americans, naming the Spanish, the Italian, the French, the German and the English. This is unsurprising, given his personal history, in terms of both his familial lineage and his 'spiritual' heritage born of his studies in France. Yet, it slightly deviates from the racial classifications within the European races that Gobineau makes between north and Mediterranean Europe. This in turn is not surprising, if we think of Williams's own 'Mediterranean' (i.e. Spanish) heritage, thus moving away from the biological discourses of Gobineau and towards the concept of 'Latin race' that was strategically used by Spanish and Latin American intellectuals as a counter-discourse to the racial biological categories created by French and English imperialism.⁵⁵ However, the idea of the 'Latin race' was also used to give Spain its lost sense of empire, going back to the racial classifications of the colonial Spanish caste system, in which the white Spanish were superior not necessarily in terms of race, but mostly in a genealogy of blood and class, when compared to the indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples.⁵⁶

However, as we have seen, Williams was also critical of the 'neglect and selfishness of the colonial regime'. Yet, this is not contradictory if we understand that Williams is trying to support a new Latin American, or in this case Argentine, *übermensch* that descends from Europeans but is also different from them. And while Spanish and Italians seem to be part of the 'right Europeans', when he talks about European musical legacies, Williams focuses on German music, and more specifically on Wagner's musical genealogy, which he traces back to Bach. Using again the metaphor of the family, Williams claims that Bach is Wagner's artistic grandfather, Beethoven his father, and Weber and Mendelssohn his older brothers.⁵⁷

Williams's evolutionary ideas are used not only to lay claim to European music legacies, but also to reflect on the folk music that he felt should be used as inspiration to create works of art. After discussing the Europeans that America seems to deserve, Williams argues that he has not deliberately omitted the indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, but rather that he understands that life is progress and the 'extinction of the yellow and black races' is inevitable. This expression seems to be in tune with the local scientific discourses of his time. As Novoa and Levine explain: 'In the waning decades of the

⁵³In the version published in the music journal *La Quena*, the word that is used is 'faces' (in Spanish also spelled as 'fases'), but in the transcription that appears in his complete works from 1947 it appears as 'phases' (in Spanish 'fases'). See Williams, *Obras Completas*, III, p. 179.

⁵⁴Williams, 'Estética musical. La patria y la música', pp. 6–7.

⁵⁵See Joseba Gabilondo, 'Genealogía de la "raza latina": Para una teoría atlántica de las estructuras raciales hispanas', *Revista Iberoamericana*, 75.228 (July–September 2009), 795–818.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 797.

⁵⁷Williams, 'Estética musical. La patria y la música', p. 9.

nineteenth century, the association between evolution and extinction [in Argentine scientific discourse] became increasingly close, and, in consequence, progress in the evolution of the nation was best demonstrated by evidence for the extinction of those less favored by nature'.⁵⁸ The fact that most of Williams's works were based on *criollo* music – that is, the music of white settlers that appeared after colonization – could explain his choice. Even if these musics have indigenous and African influences, by the beginnings of the twentieth century, they were mostly understood as a 'white' product. Williams also claims some inspiration from the indigenous Inca past, which can be heard in his *Canciones Incaicas*. Yet these Inca sounds were seen as pertaining to a remote past and were romanticized to fit these national forms of art music, which were very different from the folk indigenous genres that were present in the Andean region during Williams's life. This explanation coincides once again with Novoa and Levine's argument regarding the views of indigenous people in the Argentine context, especially after the military campaigns led by the Argentine government in the late 1870s in which indigenous peoples were exterminated and displaced; they claim that 'from 1880 on, the Indians were no longer considered part of the contemporary Argentine population and were represented in scientific discourse only as tokens of an extinct past, of prior stages in the country's evolution'.⁵⁹ Clearly Williams' choice of the indigenous past was not naive since he did not choose the music of other inhabiting relegated indigenous groups, but specifically chose the Incas, which were known to have undertaken an imperial expansion before the arrival of the Spaniards, and who subjugated the groups living in contemporary north-west Argentina.⁶⁰

Although he did not use tango elements in his works (except for the *milongas*, which, in his case, derive from a rural style), many scholars have found Williams's defence of the *tango* genre surprising, given that many nationalist intellectuals thought that the real folklore was that of the countryside, and that *tango* was viewed as a musical degradation of the city slums.⁶¹ But if we consider Williams's racial arguments about progress and modernization, the creation of a music developed in the city by European immigrants, yet different from the sounds of Europe, could clearly be understood as the type of inspirational source that would create a national music on his own terms.

Zenón Rolón, the 'forgotten' composer

When tracing the history of Argentine art music, Williams labels the previous generation of composers as 'predecessors' – suggesting that, while related to his own music through their European style, they were limited in their use of 'national' materials drawn from (the proper) folk cultures. If Williams was the 'founding father' of Argentine art music, as he himself proclaimed, his predecessors included the previous generation of composers – his grandfather, Amancio Alcorta, among them.

When Williams talks about his own generation,⁶² he mentions composers either born in Europe or otherwise of European descent, including Herman Bemberg, Justin Clérice,⁶³ Julián Aguirre, Francisco

⁵⁸Novoa and Levine, *From Man to Ape*, p. 100.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁶⁰Mónica Quijada Mauriño makes an interesting analysis of the use of the Inca past as an origin for the Argentine nation as developed by Argentine intellectual Vicente Fidel López; he tried to make a 'scientific' argument through a comparative linguistics analysis, based on other European authors, claiming that Quechua (the language of the Incas) was an 'Aryan' language. Mónica Quijada Mauriño, 'Los "incas arios": historia, lengua y raza en la construcción nacional hispanoamericana del siglo XIX', *Histórica*, 20.2 (December 1996), 243–69.

⁶¹See Chapter 7 in Marina Cañardo, *Fábricas de música. Comienzos de la industria discográfica en la Argentina (1919–1930)* (Buenos Aires: Gourmet Musical, 2017), pp. 207–39.

⁶²It is possible that Williams understood 'his generation' to be the composers active around the same time as him, although those mentioned had very different ages, some of them being older and some younger than him.

⁶³According to Juan María Veniard, his name was Justino Clérigo and he was of Italian descent, but he changed his name to sound more French some time after his arrival in Paris, where he became quite a prominent figure in the city's popular music scene. Juan María Veniard, 'Clérice, Justin [Justino Clérigo]', *Diccionario de la Música Española e Hispanoamericana*, ed. by Emilio Casares Rodicio, 10 vols. (Madrid: SGAE, 1999–2002), III (1999), 764–65 (p. 764). However, this affirmation is

Hargreaves, Arturo Berutti, Héctor Panizza and Celestino Piaggio.⁶⁴ A significant omission is the Afro-Argentine composer Zenón Rolón. Williams's slip was unlikely an innocent one, since it would have been difficult for Williams not to have at least heard about Rolón, especially since Justin Clérico (mentioned by Williams among his contemporaries) was Rolón's student.⁶⁵

Rolón was about six years older than Williams, but died in 1902 at the age of 46. His music trajectory was that of a professional composer. According to Pablo Cirio, Rolón began his studies with Alfredo Quiroga, an Afro-Argentine organist at the church of La Merced, and in 1873 obtained a government scholarship to continue his musical studies in Florence.⁶⁶ (This was nine years before Williams received his funding to study in France.) Rolón came back to Argentina in 1879 and not only continued his work as a composer, but also co-founded a printing press where he published scores of his own works and other Argentine composers. While Rolón's works do not necessarily foster nationalism in Williams's style, they could be clearly defined as nationalist: he wrote patriotic marches, rural folk songs and *tangos* for what we could consider to be the first national *zarzuelas*. But even if we exclude a genre like the *zarzuela* as a form of high art – following Williams's parameters – Rolón also composed symphonies, operas and sacred music, sometimes inspired by national topics.

As Cirio explains, Rolón was also influenced by ideas of progress, mostly understood as a moral value and from a European standpoint. In a pamphlet written by Rolón and titled 'Dos palabras a mis hermanos de casta' ('Two words to my caste brothers') he:

[...] insisted on portraying education as the only way of emancipation from the burdens of servitude, internalized through the imposition of slavery and the habits of complacent reverence toward former masters. In conceiving the opposite of advancement not as 'stagnation' but as 'backwardness', he noted that in the realm of the social his fellows had not only disregarded education but chosen to live an idle, immoral, and depraved life. [...] The benefits of the progress brought about by occupational training, the formation of guilds, and education in general could translate into a moral gain in favour of equality and against discrimination.⁶⁷

Yet, even if Rolón fostered ways to 'progress' and 'adapt' to the white society he was immersed in, it apparently was not enough for Williams, who never mentions Rolón in any of his vast range of writings.

While Williams does not mention Rolón in his writings, it would be completely unfair to say that he was forgotten from Argentina's musical historiography. His name appears – mostly in passing – in many Argentine music history books, such as the second volume of Vicente Gesualdo's *Historia de la música en Argentina* (1961), Mario García Acevedo's *La Música Argentina Durante el período de la Organización Nacional* (1961), Roberto García Morillo's *Estudios sobre música argentina* (1984) and Juan María Veniard's *La Música Nacional Argentina* (1986); however his works and influence in the creation of a national music are yet to be discussed.

Conclusion

Williams's ideas were not written in isolation, but were rather a product of their own time. As exposed throughout these pages, the European scientific trends that advanced ideas about race and justified forms

contradicted by Clérico's records at the Conservatoire de Paris, where both parents are mentioned as being French (the document is available in microfilm at the Archives Nationales AJ/37/355/1).

⁶⁴All of these composers had also studied music in Europe: Bemberg and Piaggio studied in Paris, Aguirre in Madrid, Hargreaves in Florence, Berutti in Leipzig and Milan, and Panizza in Milan.

⁶⁵Norberto Pablo Cirio, 'Black Skin, White Music: Afroporteño Musicians and Composers in Europe in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century', *Black Music Research Journal*, 35.1 (Spring 2015), 23–40.

⁶⁶According to Vicente Gesualdo, he studied in Florence at his own expense. See footnote 29 in Vicente Gesualdo, *Historia de la música en la Argentina*, 2 vols. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Beta, 1961) II, pp. 467–68.

⁶⁷Cirio, 'Black Skin, White Music', p. 32.

of racism, from positivism to Social Darwinism, were strongly engrained and adapted to the situation in Argentina, not only in scientific discourses, but also within politics and the arts. These ideas influenced not only the selection of native musics in the creation of a national one, but also a selection from among European musics, which elevated certain genres above others (such as the dichotomy of symphony and opera).

The belief in a white European superiority in the creation of art music was sustained by figures such as Williams, who also had the power to perpetuate a particular musical canon that was mostly inherited from that ‘European family’, and which also excluded relevant figures, such as Rolón, who have played an undeniable role in the history of Argentine art music.

The European concepts of ‘progress’, ‘industrialization’, ‘civilization’ and ‘universality’ were all included under the umbrella-term ‘modernity’, and in the last decades of the nineteenth century resonated powerfully around the globe: from South America to the Middle East and South Asia, as addressed by Jacob Olley and Richard David Williams in this round table. Yet, as they also discuss, these concepts were not always dealt with in the same way. There is no doubt that the question of race (and thus, ‘evolution’ and ‘racial superiority’) impacted differently on how modernity was embraced, understood, reshaped and (partially) contested in each of these places. Thus, following postcolonial theories, we can address these modernities as ‘alternative’ or ‘subaltern’, so as to avoid Eurocentric judgement.⁶⁸

As an Argentinian musicologist myself, it is still challenging to produce research on music that for the European and the anglophone musicological discipline has been seen as (and for some still is) ‘irrelevant’ for not having any ‘artistic’ value, unless it is different enough to be studied as a sociological or ethnological object. This approach has been justified by focusing on the level of miscegenation and supposed ‘otherness’ of Latin American subjects, while also hiding the social and economic inequalities that has excluded part of this region’s art music from the Western canon. While the combination of modernist techniques and styles with ‘native’ sounds (more often than not, imaginary rather than ‘authentic’) have proved attractive, other forms of Latin American art music have been ignored. It also reflects another problem found in this literature which, while useful to understand the region on a bigger scale, tends to homogenize rather than highlight its differences. That is, for example, that while Cuba and Brazil have a large black community that has had a direct impact in their (music) histories, those in other countries (such as Argentina or Chile) did not – yet their impact still needs to be explored. The same can be said regarding the indigenous communities, which are bigger in countries such as Mexico or Bolivia, that have had a different impact in their music histories when compared to other countries. Furthermore, the important and extended impact of European art music with its surrounding ideologies, and the questions and challenges this posed for Latin American composers in the creation of art music, has mostly been overlooked. At the same time, the debates on race, otherness and the Western canon discussed in current Anglo-European musicology have influenced the work that is produced in Latin America, in a paradoxical case of ‘neo-(de)colonialism’. In this respect, I believe that the recent paradigm-shift towards global music studies, even if flawed (as Richard David Williams shows), functions as a more honest way of showcasing particular musics and historical situations that are traversed by changes that happened elsewhere. It is, thus, through a thorough reading of the many layers of similarity and difference combined with a ‘more nuanced understanding’ (as described by Jacob Olley in his introduction), that we will be able to move forward towards a less Eurocentric, more ‘global’ history of music.

⁶⁸Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008 [2000]); Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); *Decentering Musical Modernity: Perspectives on East Asian and European Music History*, ed. by Tobias Janz and Chien-Chang Yang (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2019).