



Review

López-Cano, Rubén. *La música cuenta: Retórica, narratividad, dramaturgia, cuerpo y afectos (Music Tells: Rhetoric, Narrativity, Dramaturgy, Body, and Affects)*. Barcelona: ESMUC, 2020.

FRANCISCO JAVIER ALBO
Georgia State University, Atlanta

The book is available online free of charge. A PDF file of the full text can be downloaded through the ESMUC (Escola Superior de Música de Catalunya) library webpage. It includes links to audiovisual materials (scores, illustrations, and audio and video recordings): <http://www.esmuc.cat/L-Escola/Serveis/Biblioteca/Publicacions/Llibres/La-musica-cuenta.-Retorica-narratividad-dramaturgia-cuerpo-y-afectos>.

Rubén López-Cano is a scholar with a vast knowledge and interest in a disparity of topics and disciplines: in a biographical profile available online, he is described as a musicologist specialized in music rhetoric of the 17th and 18th centuries, musical semiotics, cognitive musicology and philosophy, artistic research, audiovisual musicology, gesture and body in musical performance, urban music, and contemporary ethnomusicology. Dr. López-Cano studied at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Mexico City, and Universidad de Valladolid (Spain). He currently teaches at ESMUC (Barcelona) and is a frequent guest in many universities throughout Latin America. Information about the author, including a list of publications, can be found in the ESMUC webpage (in Spanish): <http://www.esmuc.cat/spa/Titulo-superior-de-musica/Professorat/Lopez-Cano-Ruben>.

La música cuenta: Retórica, narratividad, dramaturgia, cuerpo y afectos is a voluminous textbook targeted to university and conservatory students, including “performers, singers, conductors and composers,” whom López Cano refers as “my colleagues.” The purpose of the book, he explains, is to clarify the different possibilities of extracting meaning from musical works—hoping that future professional musicians will be able to add a layer of interpretation to the pieces they perform or study.

In truth, *La música cuenta...* is much more than a textbook. It is one of the first (if not the first) scholarly—yet accessible for students—exhaustive book on musical narratology, semiotics and music hermeneutics written in Spanish, for Spanish-speaking readers. From basic definitions to specific examples in musical works of different periods and genres, López Cano manages to explore the whole gamut of angles that current, post-modern musicology (or, rather, “New Musicology”) offers in the field of text interpretation. The back cover informs us that the book contains the “tools necessary to imagine musical performances of great intensity, full of emotion and expressive intent” for which he gives the tools needed for “artistic interpretation and performative musical analysis.”

López Cano’s own definition of music is an eloquent declaration of principles: music is not a collection of “inert, passive sonic objects.” The expressive content of music, its meaning, is

revealed through episodes of “tensions and distensions, retentions and propulsions, changes of speed, doubts, blows and moments of rapture, terrifying and jubilant cries...” Music seems to move through different emotional states, which reach our intellect or our heart in ways that seem to “speak” like the actors do on a stage or the characters in a novel. *La música cuenta* thus proposes strategies based on tools used in semiotics, rhetoric and hermeneutics that can be used to analyze the expressive meaning of music. With these tools, López Cano claims, the performer should be capable of unraveling the mechanisms that make each musical piece become a dramatic piece. “Each musical work is a piece of time encapsulated,” he writes. To understand the vicissitudes contained in that space of time, its “mountains and valleys,” and their effect on us while we listen *empathically*, is the ultimate purpose of the book (p. 34).

The book is divided into 10 chapters, followed by three addenda: an imaginative and witty chapter entitled “Secuencias falsas” (“outtakes”), a glossary, and a bibliography. Chapter One revolves around the main premise of the book: music does tell stories, it contains things that can be interpreted. In chapter two, López-Cano inventories the tools with which one can extract that meaning. In a meticulous, rationalistic, almost Cartesian way (lest we forget that the author is a Baroque specialist) the reader is invited to select those tools depending on the focus of the analysis (rhetoric, semiotics, or hermeneutics). In each one of the following chapters, the author applies those tools to an array of well-known works of the Western art music repertory, including, among other pieces, the madrigal *Dispietata Piedade* by Sigismondo D’India (Chapter Three), Strozzi’s “Lament” *Lagrima mie* (Chapter Four), Mozart’s Piano Concerto K. 466 (Chapter Seven), and Schubert’s Piano Sonata D. 960 (Chapter Eight). Chapter Two, “Music and rhetoric, semiotics, and hermeneutics” is probably the most valuable for the student (and the researcher) because it contains a comprehensive list of definitions of terms and concepts that not only are often elusive and slippery but also can easily overlap each other. Regarding this issue, López Cano disentangles the potential confusion by asserting that there is no such thing as independent musical semiotics and hermeneutics; they are part of general semiotic and hermeneutic concepts, theories and discourses. Dismantling limits and boundaries allows us reach a greater variety of interpretations’ that is, ultimately, “the purpose of this book” (p. 46). Chapter Six revolves around Beethoven’s *Serioso* String Quartet, Op. 95, in particular the coda of the last movement—a passage that has elicited a great deal of controversy among performers and scholars. It is probably the weakest. The author gives an exhaustive, if rather dry, list analyses by many authors from as back as the 1800s. Unfortunately, his interpretation does not seem particularly original or distinctive from those by other authors’.

Chapter Seven is particularly engaging. It is titled “Topic Theory in Its Labyrinth” and reviews a variety of discourses on Latin American folk and popular genres, clearly a topic dear to the author. With this deliberate bifurcation, López Cano subtly inserts politics of diversity in his discourse, problematizing issues that often elude the average scholar of “art music” who might regard them as conflictive—and thus chooses to avoid them altogether. With this, he expands the scope of his exploration and invites the reader to reflect on the particular vision of the world through the lens of the “West”—a vision that, he claims, other artistic manifestations and disciplines (specially literature and cinema) have already anticipated (but music has not).

López Cano’s friendly approach and highly expressive language is one of the most precious assets of the book. His writing style is direct and clear and imaginative, and often witty. Combined

with his vast erudition, it helps clarify the abstractness of some topics, terms and notions that the average student may find dry or obscure. In addition to the friendly approach, he applies a rationalistic approach—a kind of “doctrine of affects”—directed to clarify some terms and notions that the student may find dry or obscure. Each concept is illustrated and substantiated by examples extracted from scholarly theories and methods by various scholars in the last 30 or so years (mostly Anglo-Saxon). He is also unapologetically subjective, and likes to interpolate personal statements, phobias and phobias. Not because one’s feelings or emotions necessarily count, he explains, but because those subjective claims may generate interpretations to which others may relate. Examples of this approach abound through the pages. For example, he soon reveals his (Mexican) nationality and surreptitiously invites the reader to think of possible implications: he lives in Catalonia, a rather convulse region (or nation, to an increasing number of politically active Catalonians), the result of nationalistic yearnings and political conflicts with the Spanish government. Elsewhere, he relates to the hardships endured by himself and his readers because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The dedicatees of the book are the ones “who’ve made it possible, and the ones he wishes the reader to keep in mind,” that is, his fellow Mexican citizens, who are also enduring the hardships resulting from political corruption and the violence of the drug cartels. López Cano does not shy away from revealing (subtlety) his political inclinations. They occasionally surface, for example, when he declares that he admires the Peruvian-Spanish right-wing writer Mario Vargas Llosa but deplors his political beliefs. I believe that establishing this form of camaraderie between him and the reader is beneficial to the latter. Here is an example: in the introduction of the book, he gives a brilliant, highly idiosyncratic interpretation of Vermeer’s famous painting *The Love Letter* (1669). He clearly states that he is not an erudite on Seventeenth-century Flemish art. It may be an excuse, but is in fact a welcome one, because it helps dispel insecurities in the reader. In the end, something is clear: if the author shows his insecurities, acts subjectively, and encourages subjective interpretation, why can’t the reader, in her analysis? López Cano’s seemingly nonchalant approach (always substantiated by his impeccably erudite analysis) is precisely one of the greatest assets of the book: it is what he tells, but, more importantly, *how* he tells it.

Once again, the book’s main asset is its novelty within musical scholarship in Spanish language. It should benefit the many Spanish-speaking students in American universities, for whom certain musicological topics like hermeneutics may be easier to understand in their native language. The book should be promoted in Music Schools, Music History Departments and University libraries across America.

Albo, Francisco Javier. “Review: López-Cano, Rubén. *La música cuenta: Retórica, narratividad, dramaturgia, cuerpo y afectos* (Music Tells: Rhetoric, Narrativity, Dramaturgy, Body, and Affects). Barcelona: ESMUC, 2020. *Diagonal: An Ibero-American Music Review* 6, no. 2 (2021): 123–125.