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## Juan Luis Guerra's Honest Don Giovanni: Structural Considerations in 'Como abeja al panal'

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### **Abstract**

Juan Luis Guerra's songs often draw from a variety of sources of inspiration, from Dominican merengue to Mozart, from Monet to García Lorca. In this article, I explore the parallels between Guerra's "Como abeja al panal" and "Là ci darem la mano" from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. I argue that Guerra's arrangement of the text and the supporting musical devices both on and beneath the surface, mirror Da Ponte's and Mozart's for Don Giovanni and Zerlina's duettino. Although the voice in "Como abeja al panal" is honorable and Don Giovanni's is decidedly not, the dramatic elements in both dialogues are supported by echoing musical structures. I conclude that, although Guerra's protagonist is the antithesis of Da Ponte's, the use of a structural strategy similar to Mozart's in "Como abeja al panal," allows Guerra to deliver a complex multilayered message of persuasion, inequality, honesty, chivalry and romantic love.

**Keywords:** caribbean music, wolfgang amadeus mozart, bachata, dominican republic

### **Resumen**

Las canciones de Juan Luis Guerra se basan en una variedad de fuentes de inspiración, del merengue dominicano a Mozart, de Monet a García Lorca. En el presente artículo, se exploran los paralelos entre "Como abeja al panal" de Guerra y "Là ci darem la mano" del *Don Giovanni* de Mozart. Se argumenta que la organización del texto y los recursos musicales de Guerra tanto en la superficie como debajo de ella, reflejan aquellos de Da Ponte y Mozart para el duettino entre Don Giovanni y Zerlina. Si bien la voz de "Como abeja al panal" es honorable y Don Giovanni ciertamente no lo es, los elementos dramáticos en ambos diálogos se apoyan en estructuras musicales comparables. Se concluye que, aunque el protagonista de Guerra es la antítesis del de Da Ponte, el uso de una estrategia estructural similar a la de Mozart en "Como abeja al panal" permite a Guerra comunicar un complejo mensaje de persuasión, desigualdad, honestidad, caballería y amor romántico.

**Palabras clave:** música caribeña, wolfgang amadeus mozart, bachata, república dominicana

By early 1990, Juan Luis Guerra (born 1957) was already a household name in most of Latin America and beginning to be globally known. The success of his albums with 440, mainly *Ojalá que llueva café* ("I wished it rained coffee," 1989), had earned Guerra and his band a permanent spot in radio charts throughout the Spanish-speaking world, as well as across markets –the album's sales internationally were historic for a Caribbean artist. *Ojalá que llueva café* opened the doors to a global audience, not only relying on sophisticated music drawing from several roots and influences, but also through colloquial lyrics which touched on universal themes of hope in the midst of hardship, inequality, social politics, the plight of the disenfranchised and, of course, love. Guerra showed the richness and diversity of his native Dominican Republic through innovation in music and poetry. While still sailing

on the wake of this album's success, Juan Luis Guerra released *Bachata Rosa* (1990), largely considered to be his most successful album, which earned the artist his first Grammy in 1992. If *Ojalá que llueva café* had paved the way to global renown, *Bachata Rosa* certainly confirmed it. The album registered record-breaking sales even across the language barrier, reaching Platinum in the United States and Gold in the Netherlands.

At present, in the streaming platforms era, Juan Luis Guerra remains a fixture in global charts and in awards ceremonies, celebrated as songwriter, arranger and producer. He has been called the "Tropical Mixmaster," "a poet [...] a formidable musician," "possibly the most important Latin/Tropical artist of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries."<sup>1</sup> Guerra has received over thirty Recording Academy awards as well as accolades from *Billboard* and *Lo Nuestro*, among others. His musical influences are as diverse as the Caribbean itself: merengue, son, bachata, zouk, jazz, blues, rock and roll, afropop, Mozart, Debussy, Ravel, Reich.<sup>2</sup> The elegant simplicity of Guerra's lyrics, often vividly metaphoric, can reveal complex layers of meaning which serve as commentary on the human experience, particularly of Caribbean peoples. From the intimate ("Merengue de cuna," 2019) to the political ("Si saliera petróleo," 1992) to the spiritual ("El Capitán," 2014), Guerra's words resonate with his ever-increasing, diverse, global audience.

The first single from *Bachata Rosa* was originally conceived as a jingle for "Somos un pueblo que canta" ("We are a people who sing"), an advertising campaign in the Dominican Republic produced by Fernando Rivas. Juan Luis Guerra was to be the author of all the music for the campaign. The stanzas which would later become the opening section of "Como abeja al panal" ("Like a bee to the honeycomb") appeared split into two television spots which aired in 1989. During the recording sessions for the spots, Guerra decided to combine the jingles into a song, an idea he shared with Rivas.<sup>3</sup> "Como abeja al panal" was soon after recorded and published ahead of the album's 1990 release. The tone of the advertisements set the stage for the scene depicted in the song. Rivas proposed to give a voice to the people from the Dominican countryside who struggled to view themselves as having a unified "national" identity. The spots showcased local folklore, everyday scenes from life outside Santo Domingo, and the people from the countryside.<sup>4</sup> The commercials tell the story of a townsman who courts a woman from an affluent family, despite objections from them. Guerra's exploration of familiar themes from his previous work (love, tradition, inequality) became his first dive into bachata. The campaign became quite popular and is recognized as a turning point in Dominican advertising.<sup>5</sup> Guerra's resulting song was an immediate global success.

In this article, I discuss the compositional strategies in "Como abeja al panal" and its parallels with the structure of Don Giovanni and Zerlina's duettino "Là ci darem la mano" from Wolfgang

<sup>1</sup> White, "Juan Luis Guerra's Frenetic 'Fogaraté';" Lechner, "Juan Luis Guerra Con Huella Propia En La Música"; Prunes, "Ojalá Que Llueva Café Review."

<sup>2</sup> Rosado, *Juan Luis Guerra Como Compositor, Arreglista y Productor*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> García and Zayas, "Roger Zayas: La Historia Completa de Juan Luis Guerra y 4.40."

<sup>4</sup> Cruz and Rivas, "'Somos Un Pueblo Que Canta'... Nandy Rivas: El Hombre Que Elevó El Orgullo Dominicano En Una Campaña de Ron."

<sup>5</sup> Reyes, "Somos Un Pueblo Que Canta."

Mozart and Lorenzo Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni*, K 527 (1787). Mozart's influence on Guerra is palpable on the surface in songs such as "Lacrimosa" (Fogaraté, 1994), but this impact can also be heard in deeper layers of construction. I argue that the structural framework of "Como abeja al panal" mirrors Mozart's deployment of progressively shorter exchanges between the two characters. This device communicates an additional layer of symbolic meaning to the characters' interaction, which in *Don Giovanni*, connects to the larger story of the opera.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Guerra's duet is shaped in ever shorter text deliveries, a device which, I propose, acts as a musical allegory of the progression of the rapprochement between the protagonists. In "Là ci darem" as in "Como abeja al panal," inevitably, the couple sing together at the culminating point of the piece, concluding the goal-oriented process which generates the musical structure of both. Beyond the music, I also discuss the literary and social intertextuality between the scene depicted in Guerra's song and *Don Giovanni*. I conclude that, although Guerra's protagonist is the antithesis of Da Ponte's, Guerra applies a structural strategy similar to Mozart's in the composition of "Como abeja al panal," allowing the songwriter to deliver a complex multilayered message of persuasion, inequality, honesty, chivalry and romantic love.

### Juan Luis Guerra in Scholarship

Despite Guerra's success and notoriety, there have been few scholarly approaches to his music, lyrics or to the social phenomena associated with 440's output. Shortly after the release of *Bachata Rosa* though, Guerra began to be noticed by academics. Semiologist Julieta Haidar analyzed the intersection between music and poetry in Guerra's songs, framing her work on theoretical foundations from Ferdinand de Saussure to Roman Jakobson. Haidar considers the "historical-social-cultural dimension" of the artist without dislodging from the multilayered individuality which produces the artistic discourse.<sup>7</sup> While not engaging with a particular case study, Haidar discusses some of the most popular singles then, including "Visa para un sueño," "Burbujas de amor" and "Ojalá que llueva café," concluding that Guerra's lyrics "constitute poetic discourses [...] based on complex metaphoric constructions," which are, consequently, not meant as isolated allegories, but as a matrix of meaning.<sup>8</sup> The author attributes the success of this approach to "the articulation achieved by the composer between aesthetic and quotidian dimensions."<sup>9</sup>

The same year, anthropologist Deborah Pacini-Hernandez published a scholarly review of *Bachata Rosa* which was also intended as "a commentary on some of the major issues raised by this recording concerning the internationalization of American popular music and its relationship with the world beat phenomenon."<sup>10</sup> While praising Guerra's previous work, particularly in terms of the diversity of his musical influences and his eclectic integration of Caribbean genres, Pacini-Hernandez questions Guerra's use of the bachata as a musical platform for four of the album's tracks ("Bachata Rosa," "Estrellitas y duendes," "Burbujas de amor" and "Como abeja al panal"). The addition of *Rosa* to the title, the author notes, "might be a deliberate method of distinguishing his bachatas from their

<sup>6</sup> Throughout my discussion, I will refer to Charles Burkhart's work on "Là ci darem la mano," where the author discusses the implications of deeply rooted rhythmic devices on the narrative of the scene. See (Burkhart 1991)

<sup>7</sup> Haidar, "La Música de Juan Luis Guerra y El Grupo 4:40. Expresión Cultural y Poética," 196.

<sup>8</sup> Haidar, "La Música de Juan Luis Guerra y El Grupo 4:40. Expresión Cultural y Poética," 205.

<sup>9</sup> Haidar, "La Música de Juan Luis Guerra y El Grupo 4:40. Expresión Cultural y Poética," 202.

<sup>10</sup> Pacini-Hernandez, "Bachata: From the Margins to the Mainstream," 359.

decidedly non-rosy predecessors.”<sup>11</sup> Having devoted her doctoral dissertation to the popular Dominican genre, Pacini-Hernandez explains her concerns on the basis of an understanding of bachata not only as a kind of music exclusively practiced by then marginalized sectors of Dominican society, but also as a cultural phenomenon which transcends music production. The term bachata, the author claims, was even problematic for performers themselves, some of which embraced being called *bachateros* while others maintained that “their music is simply bolero.”<sup>12</sup>

Pacini-Hernandez considers Guerra’s rethinking of Dominican bachata as appropriation, based on the fact that he “is a sophisticated, college-educated, economically comfortable urban intellectual” in search of the “exotic appeal of an outlaw genre.”<sup>13</sup> This, despite the fact that Juan Luis Guerra is himself a Dominican, whose experience growing up was marked by the “surreal world” of stark contrasts left on the wake of Rafael Trujillo’s thirty-one-year dictatorship.<sup>14</sup> The assertion may also be contrasted with the origin of Guerra’s first public incursion into bachata within the frame of the “Somos un pueblo que canta” advertising campaign, oriented towards the acknowledgment of Dominican traditions. Pacini-Hernandez would reinforce her position in a 1995 book on bachata. In the introduction of this work, the author cautions readers that “it would be a disservice to bachata’s originators to focus too much attention on Guerra,” whom she calls a “Johnny-come-lately to bachata’s long and difficult trajectory,” distanced from “the experience of poverty and desperation that nourished the genre.”<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, the author offers illuminating commentary on “Como abeja al panal.” Released as a single in 1990 before *Bachata Rosa*, the song was Juan Luis Guerra’s first published bachata-infused arrangement. The song is divided into two parts, the second of which soars in a son rhythm, slightly faster than the opening bachata-bolero. The initial section in the song correspond to the original arrangements for the television commercials. Pacini-Hernandez submits that this structure “suggested [Guerra] was not committed to bachata.”<sup>16</sup> However, I propose that the bipartite form functions mainly as a dramatic device that supports a point of inflection in the storytelling, just as the change to compound meter does in Don Giovanni and Zerlina’s duettino on bar 50 –more on this below. I would also suggest that the use of son for the second part of the song reflects Guerra’s already tried method of combining various genres within a single song, a practice that Pacini-Hernandez had already acknowledged: Guerra “had long been committed to recognizing and valorizing Dominican folk genres” while using this creative musical platform to discuss socially-relevant issues: migration, poverty, inequality.<sup>17</sup> Musically, the author does recognize that “Como abeja al panal” shared more with “street-level bachatas” than the work of other contemporaneous

<sup>11</sup> Pacini-Hernandez, “Bachata: From the Margins to the Mainstream,” 363.

<sup>12</sup> Pacini-Hernandez, “Bachata: From the Margins to the Mainstream,” 361–362.

<sup>13</sup> Pacini-Hernandez, “Bachata: From the Margins to the Mainstream,” 362.

<sup>14</sup> White, “Juan Luis Guerra’s Frenetic ‘Fogaraté.’”

<sup>15</sup> Pacini-Hernandez, *Bachata. A Social History of a Dominican Popular Music*, xxii–xxiii.

<sup>16</sup> Pacini-Hernandez, *Bachata. A Social History of a Dominican Popular Music*, 207.

<sup>17</sup> Pacini-Hernandez, “Bachata: From the Margins to the Mainstream,” 360.

bachata innovators such as Sonia Silvestre and Jorge Taveras, who had recently recorded songs by Luis Dias (*Yo Quiero Andar*, 1990):

Guerra's guitar work, while revealing his advanced training, imitated the bachatero's guitar style, and his vocal style subtly approximated their melodramatic way of singing. Guerra also used synthesizers to enhance the production, but they remained in the background, allowing the traditional guitar-maraca-bongo sound texture to be in the foreground.<sup>18</sup>

However, Pacini-Hernandez observes, Juan Luis Guerra's lyrics were "chaste, delicate and refined" with "images of love and courtship" which were diametrically opposed to those by Dias in *Yo quiero andar*, whose words told the tales of the barrios, of the poor, of the marginalized.<sup>19</sup> The author quotes an interview with Sonia Silvestre, who recalled that Guerra was "a little scandalized" with her album, not only because it approached the bachata, but because its lyrics "used the language of the street."<sup>20</sup>

While Pacini-Hernandez recognizes Guerra's talents as songwriter, arranger and producer, and credits him for contributing to the popularization and internationalization of Dominican music genres, the author does insist throughout her work that the social separation between Guerra and a more raw, marginalized bachata separates him from original bachateros. Speaking of "Burbujas de amor," for instance, Pacini-Hernandez states that Guerra's metaphor "does not reflect particularly well the impoverished material world of a typical shantytown dweller."<sup>21</sup> As counterpoint, Haidar affirms that Guerra's "articulation between musical and verbal languages" which is "new, aesthetic and communicative [...] explains the acceptability of his production, which transcends social, cultural, generational and sexual differences, among others."<sup>22</sup>

I would indeed suggest that Guerra sets to examine social differences through a form of expression that harmonizes the poetic with the literal, the factual. In "Me enamoro de ella" ("I fall in love with her," *Mientras más lo pienso... tú*, 1987), for example, Guerra explores the predicament of a character who is ill-fatedly in love with a woman with rather different means and opportunities, expressive of the post-Trujillo world of contrasts that Guerra described to White: "Montada en un mercedes / Automático dos puertas / Yo rodando en ONATRATE / Con un pie adentro, otro afuera."<sup>23</sup> Another example can be found in "Como abeja al panal" itself, a song about a male protagonist who is courting a lady of an upper class, well-aware of his circumstances, but confident that their mutual

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<sup>18</sup> Pacini-Hernandez, *Bachata. A Social History of a Dominican Popular Music*, 207.

<sup>19</sup> Pacini-Hernandez, *Bachata. A Social History of a Dominican Popular Music*, 207.

<sup>20</sup> Silvestre, as quoted in Pacini-Hernandez, *Bachata. A Social History of a Dominican Popular Music*, 207.

<sup>21</sup> Pacini-Hernandez, "Bachata: From the Margins to the Mainstream," 362.

<sup>22</sup> Haidar, "La Música de Juan Luis Guerra y El Grupo 4:40. Expresión Cultural y Poética," 197.

<sup>23</sup> White, "Juan Luis Guerra's Frenetic 'Fogaraté.'" ONATRATE (Oficina Nacional de Transporte Terrestre) is a reference to the Dominican Republic's public transportation system. "Riding in a Mercedes / A two-door automatic / Me, rolling in ONATRATE / with one foot inside, one foot outside."

love will overcome social barriers. Inequality has been a pervasive issue in Guerra's work, one which he has approached from several avenues, from the intimate to the universal.

While Pacini-Hernandez is considering several social issues and the historical struggle of traditional, street bachata in her definition of the genre, I suggest her labeling of Juan Luis Guerra as an "outsider" in light of his refined musicianship and poetic lyrics can cloud the fact that many of these songs actually criticize the social divisions imposed on Dominicans in particular and Latin Americans in general by outside observers (or by one social group over another).<sup>24</sup> Pacini-Hernandez's argument concerning Guerra's foreign nature to bachata because of a remoteness from the original practitioners is also paradoxical considering that before *Bachata Rosa* was released, Guerra had already approached a diversity of Dominican and Caribbean genres from similarly disenfranchised populations in his previous albums, something which has been praised by the author.<sup>25</sup>

Guerra's choice of a bachata/son bipartite structure for "Como abeja al panal," I propose, rests on an outline of the dramatic construction of the lyrics. In the bachata section, the protagonist presents an almost chivalric courting, singing from a place of scarcity, though sincerely. In the second part, as the lovers come closer to accepting one another, a celebratory music accompanies their ever-shorter interactions until they inexorably sing together. I suggest that this strategy shares significant structural elements with Mozart's "Là ci darem la mano" and, moreover, is employed within an effort to convey a triumph of love between individuals of distinct social classes –in Don Giovanni, the persuasion is perverse, aggressive and insincere, but in Guerra, the hero is honorable, aware of his modest means but genuine in his affections and understanding of his beloved's hesitations. Through similar devices, he becomes an antithetic version of Don Giovanni: humble and honest. I argue below how musical structure is used in both duets as a strategy to express the texts and to reinforce the dramatic points of inflection of the stories while connecting each narrative to their respective wider cultures, using similar constructions and musical/literary devices. I likewise discuss the intertextuality between the two literary discourses within their social-historical contexts. First, however, I explore Juan Luis Guerra's musical relationship to Mozart.

### **Dancing to the *Dies Irae*: Allegory in Juan Luis Guerra**

Juan Luis Guerra is a self-proclaimed Mozart enthusiast. He has said that kinship with the masters of the past is "what inspires him the most to experiment with music."<sup>26</sup> This statement comes on the back of the release of *Todo tiene su hora* (*Everything in its own time*, 2014), where Guerra's arrangements incorporate, for example, a clarinet and strings chamber ensemble within a cha-cha ("Para que sepas") and tubular bells in a bachata that also relies on doo-wop choruses and a tonewheel organ ("Tus besos"). The songwriter credits his love for Ravel, Debussy, Bach and Mozart for the unique acoustic instrument combinations in his arrangements.<sup>27</sup> Guerra has certainly showed

<sup>24</sup> Pacini-Hernandez, *Bachata. A Social History of a Dominican Popular Music*.

<sup>25</sup> Pacini-Hernandez, "Bachata: From the Margins to the Mainstream."

<sup>26</sup> La República, "Juan Luis Guerra Reza «para Que El Señor Derrame Su Paz Sobre México»."

<sup>27</sup> La República, "Juan Luis Guerra Reza «para Que El Señor Derrame Su Paz Sobre México»"; Rosado, *Juan Luis Guerra Como Compositor, Arreglista y Productor*.

an inclination for the use of non-orthodox instrument combinations in his music. The listener can hear oboe solos, timpani, French horns and several others that are not commonly found in a Caribbean popular recording. His interest in the orchestral sound has even led him to include large ensembles in a number of songs. For some, he has even recruited specialists in order to realize his vision, as is the case with “Cuando te beso” (“When I kiss you,” Areíto, 1992) and “Lacrimosa” (Fogaraté, 1994); both songs feature lush orchestral arrangements penned by Dominican composer José Antonio Molina, a Manhattan School of Music and Juilliard School alum.<sup>28</sup>

The latter, “Lacrimosa,” is a peculiar case within this orchestral-infused arrangement practice in Guerra’s Music. The composer uses Mozart’s harmonic initial progression of the “Lacrimosa” from the *Dies Irae* sequence of the *Requiem*, K 626 (example 1).<sup>29</sup> Guerra has, furthermore, named the song after its model.

Guerra shapes his melodic setting of the word “Lacrimosa” after Mozart for the first phrase and retains the rising melodic motion over a modified version of the original progression for the second. Here, poignantly, the word “claves” (“stab”) is set on the dominant of the relative, the point of departure from the harmonic minor. “Amor” (“love”), at the end of the line, is sung over the dominant of C. The rise in Mozart’s Lacrimosa is from the ashes to final judgment, set with dramatic chromaticism, underlined by a crescendo and punctuated by timpani and trumpets. In Guerra, the rise is toward the memory of the love that once was, a temporary respite in C major before circling back to the tonic.

Guerra’s song is about love lost, and the final section from the *Dies Irae* is concerned with the sorrowful day when the guilty shall be judged, “*judicandus homo reus.*” By creating this multilayered message, Guerra brings the heightened sense of pathos from Mozart’s setting of the “Lacrimosa” as a commentary on the grief experienced by the voice of the song: “I sing / The bitterness of my heart / Today I remain with but a thread of light / And I lose it with you.”<sup>30</sup> References in Guerra’s lyrics to tears and weeping –both literal and allegorical– reinforce the association. Guerra is, in effect, equating the sorrow of abandonment with the agony of death and symbolically ascribing to the pain of his grief the severe and perpetual nature of final judgment. This approach to Guerra’s symbolic use of music connects with Haidar’s view of his text metaphors and allegories as a matrix of meaning.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, allegory is a resource that Guerra also uses in lyrics. Examples of Guerra’s matrix of meaning range from subtle additions of a symbolic layer through the inclusion of a signifier within a new context, to overt instances such as direct quotations. An instance of the former can be found in “Dime Nora mía” (*Todo tiene su hora*, 2014). Here, Guerra describes a house that he has acquired for his wife in New York City, “With a garden of colors / So you can paint your flowers / As Monet, his

<sup>28</sup> Janina Rosado, personal communication, August 12, 2024

<sup>29</sup> “Lacrimosa, / a dagger is your love, / Do not stab me for I still live / healing the nights of love that I gave you” (Juan Luis Guerra, “Lacrimosa,” chorus). All translations from Spanish throughout this article are mine.

<sup>30</sup> “Canto / La amargura de mi corazón / Hoy me queda un hilito de luz / y lo pierdo contigo” (Juan Luis Guerra, “Lacrimosa”).

<sup>31</sup> Haidar, “La Música de Juan Luis Guerra y El Grupo 4:40. Expresión Cultural y Poética.”

agapanthus.”<sup>32</sup> Guerra is calling not only on the serene image of the French impressionist capturing his garden in Giverny; he is also inviting connotations of peace after turmoil, Monet’s heroic deed of creating beauty through the aftermath of the Great War. Nora, through the symbolic act of painting, becomes in the song a bringer of peace, no matter how challenging the odds or difficult the past. Monet’s *Agapanthus* (2014–2026) is exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan.<sup>33</sup> The latter practice, direct quotation, is perhaps best illustrated by “Frío, frío” (Areíto, 1992), where Guerra cites verses from García Lorca’s “Balada Interior” (*Libro de poemas*, 1921), evoking in his own song the fragility of love, the awakening from innocence and the despair explored by the Andalusian poet.

By combining the use of textual and musical allegory in his “Lacrimosa,” Guerra crafts a complex message that is carried by an otherwise simple song in the voice of a hurt lover. This complexity, I suggest, is not designed for immediate perception, but for prolonged and gradual immersion by the listener. It is perhaps difficult for a listener familiar with Mozart’s *Requiem* not to identify the musical reference, but the more subtle subtext of inexorability, eternity and desolation in the original’s text only progressively makes its way to Guerra’s listener, nurturing and informing the experience of perception with each audition. Guerra has consciously made decisions within his “Lacrimosa” that reflect Mozart’s melodic gestures, harmonies and text setting. The resulting intertextuality can be heard and discerned by listeners aware of both pieces, but those who are not will still grasp a sense of pathos, despair and longing despite unfamiliarity with the model. This, I suggest, is the result of Guerra’s deliberate use of a *compositional strategy* to deliver a message which, in the particular case of “Lacrimosa,” aligns with Mozart’s model at surface harmonic and melodic levels.

Mozart’s influence, although a declared source of inspiration in Guerra’s music, is likewise audible in contexts where there is no explicit reference to a model on the surface of the music, nor the intention to allude to an existing composition. I propose that connections at a deeper compositional level can be identified between Guerra’s “Como abeja al panal” and the duettino from *Don Giovanni*. I argue that structural elements in text organization, form and rhythm in the arrangement of Guerra’s “Como abeja al panal” delineate an intriguing dialogue with the internal structure and delivery strategies used by Mozart in “Là ci darem la mano.”

### From Seville to Santo Domingo

“Como abeja al panal” presents a persuasive dialogue between two would-be lovers within a rural setting, beginning as a bachata accompanied by a sparse rhythm section and obbligato guitar. The male protagonist opens with a plea supported by a promise of “sacred marriage.” It is clear from the beginning (in C major) that Guerra intends to illustrate the unattainability of the man’s loved one, therefore declaring a conflict which will ultimately be resolved by the persuasive discourse. A clue to the bucolic environment is provided by the borrowing of a popular country saying in the second stanza: “Las palmas son más altas / y los puercos comen de ellas.”<sup>34</sup> The verses, within the context of Guerra’s song, point to the seeming doom of the affair, a poetic depiction of the nature of the

<sup>32</sup> “Con un jardín de colores / Para que pintes tus flores / Como Monet agapantos” (Juan Luis Guerra, “Dime Nora mía”).

<sup>33</sup> Claude Monet is a frequent trope used by Guerra, frequently in connection with the Giverny paintings. See further examples in “Para que sepas” (*Todo tiene su hora*, 2014) and “Como yo” (*La llave de mi corazón*, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> “Palm trees are taller / yet pigs feed off them” (“Como abeja al panal,” stanza 2).

wedge between the lovers suggesting social inequality, as in “Me enamoro de ella.” Haidar has indeed noted that this metaphor “[disqualifies] social differences and prejudice, in favor of equality among human beings,” while the task may appear daunting, there is hope.<sup>35</sup> The stage is now set for courtship. After a modulation to E major before the third stanza, the woman confirms the obstacle, but hints that it exists because of her circumstance and not by her own design. Displeased, she apologizes for not being able to comply, though tentatively:

Créame que mucho lo siento / *Believe me, for I much regret it*  
 Pero qué dirán de mí / *But, what will they say of me?*  
 Tengo un amor de pasión / *I have a passionate love*  
 Por eso es que a otro yo / *And therefore to another*  
 No le puedo dar el sí / *I cannot say yes*

Up to that point, Guerra had used four verses for each stanza. The extended stanza, then, acquires special significance: although there is hope, the obstacle is daunting (more on this below). In a further plea, the man responds by introducing the metaphor which gives the song its name. As a counterweight to an apparently unsurpassable hurdle, the man declares the inevitability of their love. Just as a bee will certainly return to the hive with nectar as part of the apian community’s survival, so will the lovers finally fulfill their mutual longing. Here, the arrangement breaks into a son, where the interactions of the characters become ever more compressed. While he reiterates his plea, she progressively transforms her hesitancy into acceptance, until their song becomes interwoven and they sing together in a powerfully symbolic verse: “Amarnos toda la vida,” (emphasis mine) the first instance of a first-person plural in the song. Their love is now fulfilled.

In “Alfin siam liberati–Là ci darem la mano,” Don Giovanni attempts a not-so-honorable conquest of Zerlina, who is betrothed to Masetto. He manages to isolate her from her party with Leoporello’s complicity, and then proceeds to pressure her into bedding him through flattery, by demeaning Masetto and by addressing her lower social status. How does Guerra’s honest courtship scene in the Dominican countryside relate to an ignoble, manipulative and aggressive seduction of a bride-to-be by a notorious libertine on her wedding day? The first parallel is that both are persuasive dialogues, and both in the country. In both, a sense of urgency and inevitability is driven by a progressive shortening of dialogue exchanges. Mozart achieves this first by interlocking the initial stanza of each character, then by reiterating their third shared stanza with dovetailing iterations. This compression has been studied by Charles Burkhart, who provides a detailed structural analysis at global and local levels with the purpose of establishing how internal rhythm operates in order to mirror the sense of urgency on the surface, thus creating an effective multilayered message. Of the general structure of the setting, Burkhart observes:

Throughout the first two-thirds of this number the two sing separately, back and forth. The Don’s part being characterized by ever shorter measure groups as he presses his suit with ever-increasing insistence, while Zerlina’s part, though it reflects the Don’s foreshortenings, is most notable for its ever longer extensions as she wrestles with her conscience and stalls for time. Her eventual capitulation is followed at once by two striking events—a change to 6/8 meter, and the singing of the two together for the first time—both of which symbolize the change in their relationship. It’s a different duettino now.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Haidar, “La Música de Juan Luis Guerra y El Grupo 4:40. Expresión Cultural y Poética,” 205.

<sup>36</sup> Burkhart, “How Rhythm Tells the Story in ‘Là Ci Darem La Mano,’” 21.

Mozart makes the most of Da Ponte's text through several musical devices which occur both on the surface of the music and beneath. Zerlina's text and melodic extensions function as a portrayal of the character's reluctance, thus emphasizing her wavering determination, "Ma può burlarmi ancor [...] non son più forte."<sup>37</sup> In contrast, Don Giovanni's iterations are ever shorter and hurried until his speech interrupts hers, driving the sense of urgency. It is not a proposal; it is a command in disguise. Burkhart underlines how the rhythm of the accompaniment switches from a pressing figure for the Don to longer note values for Zerlina's extensions and hesitations.<sup>38</sup>

Burkhart's reading of the duettino offers a lens through which we can explore the conversation between Guerra's characters in "Como abeja al panal." While the underlying nature for romantic persuasion differs, both Don Giovanni and the man in Guerra's song are attempting to convince a hesitant interlocutor. There is a strong impediment in both scenes: a groom on the one hand and external social barriers on the other. Both men seek to increase the sense of inevitability through urgency, and this is confronted with faltering resolve by both women (in Guerra, punctuated by the chorus between soneos). Once this resolve gives way fully, the characters sing together for the first time and, in both Mozart and Guerra, the first word they sing together is in the first-person plural: Andiam/Amarnos. There is a clear intertextuality (whether or not intended by Guerra) in the design of the dialogue and its delivery. This transcends into the musical devices which outline and demarcate the structures of both pieces. Table 1 shows the main structural events and signposts in "Là ci darem" and how they correlate in text, music and meaning in "Como abeja." The duettino is partitioned by bar numbers, while the events in Guerra's song are indicated by timestamps.

**Table 1.** Musical events in Mozart-Da Ponte's "Là ci darem la mano" and Juan Luis Guerra's "Como abeja al panal."<sup>39</sup>

| Events (text / music)                                                                                                                                                    | Là ci darem la mano | Como abeja al panal |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Introduction (instrumental)                                                                                                                                              | -                   | 00:00–00:06         |
| Long exchanges between characters<br><i>Presentation of musical materials, melodic extensions her phrases</i>                                                            | 1–18                | 00:07–01:32         |
| He presents arguments, she wavers toward acquiescence<br><i>Progressively shorter exchanges (Guerra switches to son)</i>                                                 | 19–35               | 01:33–03:13         |
| He insists, she is close to agreeing<br><i>Phrases are closer and/or dovetail</i>                                                                                        | 36–49               | 03:14–03:37         |
| Agreement, verb in first-person plural "Andiam / Amarnos," then celebration, again in exchanges<br><i>They sing together for the first time (Mozart switches to 6/8)</i> | 50–72               | 03:38–03:51         |
| Reaffirmation<br><i>They sing together once again</i>                                                                                                                    | 73–78               | 03:52–03:55         |
| Codetta (instrumental)                                                                                                                                                   | 79–82               | 03:56–04:00         |

Structural parallels in deeper levels of Guerra's song with Mozart's duettino can be drawn from this partition, which follows the dramatic architecture of both dialogues. The strategies used by Mozart and Guerra to show each female character's tentativeness are revealing. In "Là ci darem,"

<sup>37</sup> Burkhart, "How Rhythm Tells the Story in 'Là Ci Darem La Mano,'" 23.

<sup>38</sup> Burkhart, "How Rhythm Tells the Story in 'Là Ci Darem La Mano,'" 24.

<sup>39</sup> Timestamps use the official Youtube release for reference: <https://youtu.be/vtTNvDUDaCc?si=2YNEmyWJi1jELku>.

this can be heard first in bars 15–18 with an extended cadence over a modified repetition of “ma può burlarmi ancor” and then once again in bars 25–28 of the duettino. As Burkhart affirms, “Mozart composes her hesitation.”<sup>40</sup> Guerra takes a different approach on the surface, but with a similar goal. First, the inclusion of a muted trumpet solo [01:32] functions as a reflective extension of her opening quatrain (stanza 3). The musical interlude, though brief, provides tension within the dramatic structure of the dialogue. Second, the aforementioned addition of a fifth verse to the fourth stanza, confirms the extension strategy. The text of her two stanzas is charged with meaning. Her hesitation, although strong, is externally motivated, thus allowing for the possibility of a joyful resolution in the end. Extension through both text and music, I suggest, accentuates both her reluctance to comply and underlying hope beneath rejection.

A further instance of deeper structural correspondence is what Burkhart calls “the Don’s foreshortenings,” his ever-increasing urgency represented by DaPonte in shorter iterations. If Zerlina’s hesitation is set to extensions, the contrary applies to Don Giovanni. His aggressive responses begin at first after a complete cadence in bar 19, but arrive gradually closer to the end of Zerlina’s pleas, until eventually his words dovetail hers, generating a sense of intensifying pressure which is supported by the shorter values in his accompaniment. In “Como abeja,” once the son section begins [01:33], the dialogue becomes increasingly compressed, alternating with the chorus, which also later dissolves into single words to allow for dovetailing of the lovers’ interlocking dialogue, beginning in [03:14]:

Chorus: Quiéreme  
 Him: Solamente una vez, mira  
 Chorus: Búscame  
 Her: Para que sane mi herida  
 Chorus: Júrame  
 Him: Y una mañana al despertar  
 Chorus: Bésame  
 Her: Seré una ola en tu vida  
 Chorus: Quiéreme  
 Him: Quiéreme que solo en ti me hundo de amor  
 Chorus: Búscame  
 Her: Quiéreme que estoy viviendo en tu corazón  
 Chorus: Júrame  
 Him: Júrame, labio a labio, bajo el cielo  
 Chorus: Bésame  
 Him and her together: Amarnos toda la vida  
 (“Como abeja al panal,” emphasis mine)<sup>41</sup>

This is reminiscent of the compressed dialogue between Don Giovanni and Zerlina in bars 30–43, where Mozart weaves text from all previous stanzas is woven together in alternation, inevitably leading to overlap ([D] Là ci darem la mano / [Z] Vorrei e non vorrei...). This achieves both purposes discussed herein: showing Zerlina’s dissolving reluctance and illustrating the Don’s persistent siege.

<sup>40</sup> Burkhart, “How Rhythm Tells the Story in ‘Là Ci Darem La Mano,’” 23.

<sup>41</sup> “Love me / Just once, look / Look for me / So that my wound heals / Promise me / And one morning, upon waking / Kiss me / I’ll be a wave in your life. / Love me / Love me, for only in you I dive / Look for me / Love me, for I live in your heart / Promise me / Promise me, lip to lip, under the sky / Kiss me / To love each other forevermore.”

This dialog is succeeded by Zerlina's climactic extension toward "Andiam" over a dramatic pause in the dominant.

The bliss which follows when Zerlina and Don Giovanni sing together, the resolution of the Don's intentions, is comparable both musically and dramatically to Guerra's lovers' "Amarnos toda la vida." At this point of the song, the listener receives confirmation that she has acquiesced, despite her initial reservations. As in "Andiam," the first-person plural "Amarnos" is significant, as it reveals commitment. It is a clear sign that the courtship is successful. While "Andiam" in the duettino leads to a fleeting moment with likely dire consequences, Guerra's "Amarnos toda la vida" embodies a permanent, honorable vow. In both cases, however, the first-person plural serves as a dramatic resolution to the persuasion set in the text and supported by gestures on the surface and deeper structural devices in the music.

One further question remains: Do these dramatic and musical devices, both on the surface and beneath, generate deeper layers of meaning in both scenes? As in "Lacrimosa," there is a symbolic layer of meaning embedded in Guerra's structural choices for "Como abeja al panal" which is not immediately apparent. This subtext involves a theme commonly addressed in Guerra's lyrics: social division.

### Within the Beehive

I have pointed towards the theme of inequality as a thread woven in both "Là ci darem la mano" and "Como abeja al panal." Indeed, class separation is essential for Da Ponte's drama, since it is the platform which allows the title character to aggressively address Zerlina from a position of power. Over the course of their dialogue (which begins in the previous recitative, "Alfin siam liberati"), Don Giovanni deploys a two-pronged attack: on the one hand, he showers Zerlina with compliments while, on the other, asserts his superior social position. Both strategies are pursued with equal determination, and with the same purpose: to disarm her and, eventually, to dominate her. It is clear from Guerra's lyrics that there is also a persuasive discourse in play in "Como abeja," but with a markedly different goal. The key to how these two dialogues interact in a deeper level of meaning is, I suggest, social inequality.

While class as a theme is overtly expressed between the characters in *Don Giovanni* and indeed explored in the entire scene, Guerra offers this fact obliquely, as I have hinted above, through metaphor and circumstance. The popular verses "Las palmas son más altas / y los puercos comen de ellas" would seem to suggest that the man in the song is addressing a woman of a higher social status. Furthermore, by using this metaphor, he is acknowledging the division and declaring he will not be deterred by her apparent unattainability; after all, he opens his plea by assuredly stating that he knows his affection to be corresponded ("Yo sé que soy de tu agrado").<sup>42</sup> In her subsequent response, by expressing that she has been forbidden from contacting him (presumably by her parents), the character comforts her suitor, but critically confirms the asymmetry of their circumstances to the listener. It is a doomed relationship. As in Don Giovanni's scene with Zerlina, class conflict is the essential space where the stories flourish.

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<sup>42</sup> "I know you are fond of me" ("Como abeja al panal," verse 1).

I suggest that mirroring the structure of Mozart's setting as well as key musical devices from "Là ci darem la mano," allows Guerra to evoke the marked separation between the characters of the original. The compositional strategies discussed above allow for a recontextualization of fundamental elements of *Don Giovanni*'s drama: the scope of the impediment between Don Giovanni and Zerlina (generated by a vast social difference), the difficulty of overcoming the obstacle and the urgency to accomplish this within the reduced (dramatic) space of a dialogue. These elements are now, through mirroring structure and delivery, an essential part of Guerra's world set in the Dominican countryside. Even though Guerra's protagonist and his purpose are honest where the Don's are not, the urgency to overcome a seemingly unsurpassable barrier, quite suits the bucolic courtship scene in "Como abeja al panal." I would further suggest that, as with "Lacrimosa," a listener need not be fully aware of the model in order to grasp the deeper connotations being evoked. Guerra's composition and arrangement function as a complete recontextualization of a musical structure designed not to convey the Don's ill intentions, but rather his determination, her faltering reluctance and their inevitable union. These, ultimately, serve the purpose of supporting and driving the storyline, culminating in a multilayered message which addresses the intricacy of human emotion.

### Final Considerations

Juan Luis Guerra's music has recurrently addressed issues of social inequality and injustice in his lyrics throughout his career. In "Como abeja al panal," these are suggested through metaphor and allegory, also hallmarks of Guerra's work. Allegory and allusion also work in sound: Guerra crafts musical landscapes which are sometimes overt, but often concealed within the processes which govern his structures. I have argued that the latter is the case with "Como abeja al panal," where Guerra mirrors the dramatic musical structure in "Là ci darem la mano." Guerra's relationship with Mozart has been established not only by the songwriter/arranger's output, but also by his own acknowledgment. A keen bond with the masters of centuries past serves as a source of inspiration and compositional models. This is immediately audible in "Lacrimosa," but not apparent in "Como abeja al panal." The similarity between the duettino's structure and Guerra's song not only helps to create a dramatic footprint for a persuasive courtship dialogue between would-be lovers with hurdles to overcome; I suggest it also provides a platform for commentary on social divisions at a deeper level of cognition which revisit the listener upon each hearing. "Como abeja al panal," although not explicitly a song about inequality, joins a wider corpus of Guerra's works which address inequality from several angles, from "Me enamoro de ella" and "Si saliera petróleo" to "Elena" (*Mudanza y Acarreo*, 1985) and "Apaga y Vámonos" (*A son de Guerra*, 2010). Guerra's sophisticated use of musical devices and literary resources over a vast output certainly merits more attention from scholars, as does the combined artistic strategies which he employs in order to explore and comment on complex human and social issues.

## Music Example 1a. Mozart: choral extract from “Lacrimosa,” Requiem, K. 626 (Bärenreiter)

a)

Soprano  
Contralto  
Tenore  
Basso  
Violoncello,  
Basso ed Organo

La - cri - mo - sa di - es il - la, qua re - sur - get  
La - cri - mo - sa di - es il - la qua re - sur - get  
La - cri - mo - sa di - es il - la qua re - sur - get  
La - cri - mo - sa di - es il - la qua re - sur - get  
ex fa - vil - la ju - di - can - dus ho - mo re - us  
ex fa - vil - la ju - di - can - dus ho - mo re - us  
- ex fa - vil - la ju - di - can - dus ho - mo re - us  
ex - fa - vil - la ju - di - can - dus ho - mo re - us

*p*  
*cresc.*  
*f*  
*cresc.*  
*f*  
*cresc.*  
*f*  
*cresc.*  
*f*

## Music Example 1b. Guerra: “Lacrimosa,” Fogaraté (1994), chorus

b)

Chorus:

La - cri - mo - sa, un pu - ñal es tu ca - ri - ño,  
No me lo cla - ves que aun vi - vo cu - ran - do las no - ches de a mor que te di

*p*  
*cresc.*  
*f*

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