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## Politics, Music and Irony in Alejo Carpentier's Novel *La consagración de la primavera* (*The Rite of Spring*)

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Political and musical subjects have a prominent presence in the work of Alejo Carpentier (1904–1980), a noted Cuban writer and music critic who coined the concept of ‘the real marvellous’ (‘lo real maravilloso’) and exerted a crucial influence on the writers belonging to the so-called Latin American Boom. The present study deals with the performative effects of music upon Carpentier’s political fiction and the ways in which music performance is used to convey political ideology. Focusing on the 1978 novel *La consagración de la primavera* (*The Rite of Spring*), in which Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* has a central role, this article discusses the ironies that result from a politicised interpretation of the ballet and the ideological contradictions produced by performances of the militant song “L’Internationale”.

Following the fiftieth anniversary of the Cuban Revolution in 2009 and the bicentenary of the start of political emancipation of Spanish American countries from Spain in 2010, it seems fitting to examine Alejo Carpentier’s recurring use of political revolutions in his novels.

*El reino de este mundo* (1949, *The Kingdom of this World*) deals with the Haitian Revolution that led to the abolition of slavery and the establishment of the first Latin American free republic at the turn of the nineteenth century. Crucially, ritual chanting incites slaves to begin revolutionary actions against their white masters<sup>1</sup>. *El reino* was a product of Carpentier’s trip to Haiti, where he conducted extensive research on Voodoo music. It was in the Prologue to this novella where he first conceptualised the notion of ‘the real marvellous’ (‘lo real maravilloso’), widely acknowledged as the beginning of literary Magical Realism.

*El acoso* (1956, *The Chase*) deals with the 1930s student-led revolution that overthrew Cuban dictator Gerardo Machado, in which Carpentier personally participated. For the author, that revolt ‘was heroism for the sake of heroism, it was outrage, it was rebellion for

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<sup>1</sup> For a study on Voodoo chants in Carpentier’s *El reino de este mundo*, see Birkenmaier (2004).

the sake of rebellion’, adding that *El acoso* ‘is the story of a wasted effort’<sup>2</sup>. To accompany the useless political sacrifices and anti-heroic story of the main character of this novella, Carpentier uses Beethoven’s *Eroica* Symphony, a work that has long been taken as an emblem for the hope of freedom and escape from tyranny. The *Eroica* is significant in terms of the structure of *El acoso* too. Carpentier attempted to parallel the length of the symphony with both the timeframe of the action and the time it takes to read it. He also tried to integrate the model of sonata form, deliberately directing readers to these analogies<sup>3</sup>.

In opposition to the portrayal of politics without purpose in *El acoso*, the novel *La consagración de la primavera* (1978, *The Rite of Spring*) presents a triumphant depiction of the Cuban Revolution<sup>4</sup>. Carpentier stated that in this novel, he aimed to ‘give expression to *the epos* of a revolutionary epoch in the world, concerning Latin America and my country’<sup>5</sup>. *La consagración* responds to his own call to turn current socio-political events into literary topics, as explained in his essay “Problemática de la actual novela latinoamericana” (1964):

[W]here there are strata of humanity present, in conflict, ascending or descending, in misery or opulence, in bankruptcy or prosperity, the subject matter becomes epic material for the novelist. [...] Important events are happening [...] and the novelist must place himself in the front row of spectators. [...] There, in the expression of the boiling of that human plasma, lies the authentic epic material for our novelist. Those who could follow the Cuban Revolution closely could well understand that, and in the following years, they began [...] to write novels that prove to be epic.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> “[...] era el heroísmo por el heroísmo, era la indignación, era la rebelión por la rebelión [...]. [*El acoso*] es la historia de un esfuerzo inútil” (Carpentier 1963/1985: 92).

<sup>3</sup> For a study of Carpentier’s analogies with musical form and musical time, see Chornik (2007).

<sup>4</sup> *La consagración de la primavera* is published in French as *La danse sacrée* and in German as *Le Sacre du printemps*. It is yet to be published in English. Translations given in this article are mine.

<sup>5</sup> “[...] expresar *el epos* de una época revolucionaria en el mundo, en lo que concierne a América Latina y a mi país” (qtd. Osorio 1980/1985: 486).

<sup>6</sup> “[...] donde hay bloques humanos en presencia, en pugna, en ascenso o descenso, en miseria u opulencia, en quiebra o encumbramiento, la materia a tratar, para el novelista, se torna materia épica. [...] Grandes acontecimientos se avecinan [...] y debe colocarse el novelista en primera fila de espectadores. [...] Ahí, en la expresión

Central to *La consagración de la primavera* is Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. This piece is widely considered revolutionary for its bursting rhythmic irregularities and groundbreaking harmony. In the novel, it is used as a means to express not only innovative aesthetic ideas but also revolutionary political impulses. The latter conveys much irony, for *The Rite* grew out of, and was re-absorbed into, Western capitalist culture. Moreover, Stravinsky held strong anti-revolutionary political views. After the victory of the Bolsheviks, he became a resentful tsarist patriot, recoiling into a hard-line monarchism (cf. Taruskin 1996: 1514). He also had sympathy for fascism, as seen in a letter he wrote to the music critic Alberto Gasco: "I don't believe that anyone venerates Mussolini more than I. To me, he is the *one man who counts* nowadays in the whole world. [...] He is the saviour of Italy and – let us hope – of Europe." (Qtd. Paddison 1993: 306)

Crucial to this and other ironies that emerge out of *La consagración* is the reader's knowledge of composers, musical works, performers and socio-political contexts referred to in the text, on which Carpentier relies.

### 1. The Militant *Rite*

The story of *La consagración* is set against some of the most significant historical events of the twentieth century, culminating with the failed U. S. invasion of the Bay of Pigs. Vera, the heroine, is a White Russian ballerina working for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Despite her anti-revolutionary views, she gets involved with a left-wing intellectual named Jean-Claude. Vera makes a trip to Benicassim (eastern Spain) to visit the Frenchman, who has enrolled as a militiaman with the International Brigades against Franco. There she meets Enrique, a bourgeois Cuban architect also fighting against Franco who later becomes her partner. After the death of Jean-Claude, Vera and Enrique flee war-devastated Europe to settle in Cuba, where she develops a social-artistic project involving the creation of a new cho-

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del hervor de ese plasma humano, está la auténtica materia épica para el novelista nuestro. Bien lo entendieron aquellos que pudieron seguir de cerca el proceso de la Revolución Cubana y comienzan [...] a escribir novelas que resulten épicas." (Carpentier 1964/1990: 43f.)

reography for Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* with Afro-Cuban dancers.

Vera first thinks about *The Rite* during her train journey to Spain through the Pyrenees. Her head whirls with thoughts about The Chosen One (in Stravinsky's ballet, the character that is sacrificed to the God of Spring in order to gain his benevolence) as she gets closer to the battlefield where Jean-Claude lies wounded. 'They all cried ... And I also feel like weeping, at this moment, surrounded by awakening travellers', thinks Vera mournfully<sup>7</sup>. Once she recovers from the shock produced by the death of Jean-Claude, Vera returns to working life with renewed spirit, performing in a number of Diaghilev's productions. When the Ballets Russes begin rehearsing *The Rite of Spring* – 'whose score was already played everywhere, but which, as a ballet, continued to be a failed work'<sup>8</sup> – The Chosen One returns to her mind, this time directly linked to her own traumatic experiences with political revolutions:

[...] when I was getting close, marking the steps, towards The Chosen One of today [...] I could not see *the one who was to die*, but the one who suffered her death in lifetime, who would embrace, cry, sob for it, a hired mourner of herself, as I would take on, cry, sob, during solitary nights in my hotel, my despair caused by an idea – the *Idea*, the eternal *Idea*, religious or political, always tied to the existence of a sacrifice, the *Idea* to which I was paying my own tribute without having ever accepted it.<sup>9</sup>

Vera sees herself as the victim of an unjust fate to which she has not surrendered. Her sacrifice is not anchored in an ancient tribal world nor does it defy the dark forces of nature, but is an all-too-present

<sup>7</sup> "Lloraron todos ... Y yo también tengo ganas de llorar, en este momento, rodeada ya de viajeros que despiertan." (Carpentier 1978/1998: 97)

<sup>8</sup> "[...] cuya partitura se tocaba ya en todas partes, pero que, como ballet, seguía siendo una obra malograda." (ibid.: 307) Here Vera seems to be a mouthpiece for Stravinsky, who preferred *The Rite* as a concert work and was unhappy with the original 1913 production. The composer highlighted that *The Rite* "exists as a piece of music first and last." (Stravinsky 1921: 9)

<sup>9</sup> "[...] al acercarme, marcando los pasos, a la Virgen Electa de hoy [...] no veía a *la que iba a morir*, sino a la que padecía su muerte en vida, que la asumía, la lloraba, la sollozaba, plañidera de sí misma, como yo asumía, lloraba, sollozaba, en las noches solitarias de mi hotel, mi desesperanza causada por una idea – la *Idea*, la eterna *Idea*, religiosa o política, unida siempre a la existencia de un sacrificio, *Idea* a la que estaba pagando el tributo de mí misma sin haberla aceptado jamás." (Carpentier 1978/1998: 309)

destiny that threatens to continue till eternity. It is the power of her own imagination that liberates Vera from her sorrows:

I continue marking the steps of the *Danse sacrale*, but after the final chord, bizarrely brought by the flutes' chromatic scale, I think about a second ballet which could begin here, one never written, and which perhaps never will be written: the Gods are not satisfied with the sacrifice. They ask for more. [...] And the past sacrifice will be forgotten [in order] to organise a New One, as there will always be good reasons to do so ... And I interrupt my daydream about that imaginary ballet, complementary to the other one, which would be, really, the never-ending ballet, [while] feeling, one morning, rebellious and hard, suddenly liberated from depression and stress.<sup>10</sup>

Once settled in Cuba, Vera is invited to witness a ritual Afro-Cuban ceremony taking place in a deprived area of Havana, which instantly revolutionises her artistic thought. She first thinks about staging *The Rite* with non-professional Afro-Cuban dancers, revealing a clichéd statement of racial prejudice towards blacks – that they have a 'natural' sense of rhythm reflecting their 'primitive' nature:

Here *The Rite of Spring* could be staged, with people like the ones we have just seen dancing. With what they have inside, with their sense of rhythm, there would be little to add. They would quickly understand Stravinsky's rhythms, and one would see a dance truly subject to elementary and primeval pulses, very different from the choreographic monstrosities we have seen so far.<sup>11</sup>

Vera persuades the untrained dancers to take part in an experiment in her studio: to improvise to a recording of *The Rite of Spring*. Their response to Stravinsky's music prompts her to take on her long-dreamed project to create a new choreography for the ballet. Through *The Rite*, not only does she defy the apartheid-like social order of pre-

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<sup>10</sup> "Sigo marcando los pasos de la *Danse sacrale*, pero, al sonar el acorde final, extrañamente traído por una cromática de flautas, pienso que aquí podría empezar un segundo ballet, jamás escrito, y que acaso no se escriba nunca: los Dioses no se dan por satisfechos con el sacrificio. Piden más. [...] Y se olvidará el pasado sacrificio para organizar uno Nuevo, pues buenas razones habrá siempre en ello ... E interrumpo mi divagación en torno a ese imaginario ballet, complemento del otro, que sería, en verdad, el ballet del nunca acabar, sintiéndome, una mañana, rebelde y dura, repentinamente liberada de la depresión y del agobio." (Carpentier 1978/1998:309–311)

<sup>11</sup> "Aquí podría montarse una *Consagración de la primavera* con gente como la que acabamos de ver bailar. Con lo que llevan dentro, con su sentido del ritmo, habría poco que añadir. Entenderían muy pronto la rítmica de Stravinsky, y se vería una danza realmente sometida a pulsiones elementales, primordiales, bien distintas de las birrias coreográficas que hemos visto hasta ahora." (Ibid.: 399)

revolutionary Cuba by working with black dancers, but she also becomes sensitised to the economic inequalities and the harsh political climate of Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship<sup>12</sup>. During the 1950s, as the political atmosphere in Cuba thickens, Vera abandons her *Rite* project as she finds endless difficulties in realising it. The Cuban Revolution has a redeeming effect on Vera, who eventually accepts a historical fate 'whose fundamental ideas coincided with those of the grand and only Revolution of the time'<sup>13</sup>. After Enrique's brave participation in the Battle of the Bay of Pigs, Vera finds the inspiration to take up her *Rite* project again.

## 2. "L'Internationale": Utopia and Showcase

Intertwined with Stravinsky's composition is "L'Internationale", a militant anthem written by the French woodworker Eugène Pottier (1816–1887) during the Paris Commune, and set to music by the Belgian composer Pierre Degeyter (1848–1932). This song was adopted world-wide by communist, socialist, social democrat and anarchist movements, and became the official anthem of the Soviet Union until 1944. Commonly sung with the hand in a clenched fist, the song is a stirring call to build a new society, as the chorus tells:

C'est la lutte final:  
Groupons-nous, et demain,  
L'Internationale  
Sera le genre humain.<sup>14</sup> (Pottier 1966: 101)

For Vera, "L'Internationale" is a shadow that follows her everywhere. As a young child, she hears it sung by Bolsheviks. She and her family escape the October Revolution to settle in France. There she hears the anthem sung by the dancers of Diaghilev's troupe and later by the supporters of the French Popular Front. When she visits Jean-Claude

<sup>12</sup> Vera's social-artistic initiative bears certain resemblance to the dance project *Rhythm is it!*, in which hundreds of children and teenagers coming from disadvantaged areas of Berlin danced to *The Rite* performed by the Berliner Philharmoniker under Simon Rattle. For more information about this project, see Bleek (2003[?]).

<sup>13</sup> "[...] cuyas ideas fundamentales coincidían con las de la grande y única Revolución de la época." (Carpentier 1978/1998: 765)

<sup>14</sup> "Then comrades, come rally / And the last fight let us face / The International / Unites the human race." (Pottier/Degeyter 1932: 1)



in Spain, she hears “L’Internationale” sung by the celebrity American black singer and actor Paul Robeson with the participation of a multitude of partisans in many languages. (Carpentier here presupposes an informed reader who knows not only that the real-life Robeson was the first major singer to perform African-American folk songs and spirituals on an international stage, but that he was overtly involved with the socialist cause and anti-colonialist movements, regularly performing for the poor and the oppressed<sup>15</sup>.) On hearing Robeson’s performance, Vera feels

taken over by the masculine impetus of a revolutionary song loaded down with history. And it is History which leads me – I think – as, by profound conviction, because of the trauma undergone in childhood, I reject – I loath – any idea of revolution.<sup>16</sup>

When a partisan asks her whether she is moved by “L’Internationale”, she coldly replies: ‘Well, anthems are always impressive. They come with their load of collective emotion’, and adds with derision: ‘I am very moved by *God Save the Tsar*.’<sup>17</sup> Despite her ideological reservations about “L’Internationale”, Vera is deeply impressed by the powerful and mystical artistry of Robeson, seeing this in terms of a Kantian sublime: ‘[...] in the giant Paul Robeson I found a different power, that of firm belief, totally independent of the words that he was conveying: the power of art, of transcendent eloquence, magnificent, universal and timeless.’<sup>18</sup>

In Robeson, Vera finds the overwhelming charisma and inspiration which she once admired in the acclaimed Russian ballerina Anna

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<sup>15</sup> During the Spanish Civil War, Robeson actively supported the International Brigades against Franco, performing in Benicassim and other locations (cf. Boyle/Bunie 2001: 383). For Robeson’s music repertoire, see Pencak (2002) and Hagopian (2002), for his political activities, see Foner, ed. (1978).

<sup>16</sup> “[...] arrastrada por el másculo ímpetu de un canto revolucionario cargado de historia. Y es la Historia, la que me lleva – pienso – ya que, por convicción profunda, por el trauma recibido en la infancia, rechazo – aborrezco – toda idea de revolución.” (Carpentier 1978/1998: 262)

<sup>17</sup> “Buena: los himnos siempre son impresionantes. Vienen con su carga de emoción colectiva, a mí me emociona muchísimo *Dios salve al Zar*.” (Ibid.: 269)

<sup>18</sup> “[...] en el gigante Paul Robeson hallaba yo otra fuerza de convencimiento, totalmente independiente de las palabras que acarrea: fuerza del arte, de la elocuencia trascendida, magnificada, universal y sin tiempo.” (Ibid.: 259)



Pávlova, her all-time model. She fantasises about the two artists dancing and acting a scene from Shakespeare's *Othello*:

An impossible, exotic *pas de deux*, absurdly incongruous, but harmonious nevertheless, realised in my imagination, between the black giant whom I saw here, and the ethereal Mallarmesque swan that lived in my memory, and even more now that the grandson of slaves, at the request of English and Yankee listeners who were eager to hear him in a brief dramatic action, addressed the invisible whiteness of Desdemona – dying swan, identified with Anna dancing her own death – in the topmost monologue of the Shakespearean tragedy:

*It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul;  
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!  
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,  
Not scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,  
And smooth as monumental alabaster.  
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.*<sup>19</sup>

(As an actor, the real-life Robeson excelled in the title role of *Othello* and in the musical *Show Boat*. The real-life Pávlova's most famous role was the Dying Swan, subject of innumerable postcards. She became a renowned figure while working for the Imperial Russian Ballets, before she escaped the Bolshevik Revolution. Despite her association with Diaghilev's groundbreaking Ballets Russes, Pávlova danced mainly to a conventional classical and romantic musical repertoire – allegedly she turned down the lead role in Stravinsky's *The Firebird* because she thought the music was too complicated. Carpentier's readers might recognise that Pávlova's artistic interests, her relations with audiences and her political consciousness were very different from Robeson's.) The lines from *Othello* recalled by Vera, recited by Robeson in the particular context of the anti-fascist struggle, appear to point to political commitment and sacrifice rather than conveying the themes of love and jealousy of the original play. One may suggest that this scene signals the moment when the heroine begins to question her own conservative political views. The lines

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<sup>19</sup> “Un imposible, exótico *pas de deux*, contrastado hasta el absurdo, aunque armonioso a pesar de todo, se concertaba en mi imaginación, entre el gigante negro que aquí veía y el etéreo cisne mallarmeano que habitaba mi recuerdo, y más ahora que el nieto de esclavos, a pedido de oyentes ingleses y yankis [sic], deseosos de escucharlo en una breve acción dramática, se dirigía a la invisible blancura de Desdémoma – Desdémoma, cisne agónico, identificado con Anna bailando su propia muerte – en el monólogo cimero de la tragedia shakesperiana: [...]” (Carpentier 1978/1998: 259)

from the play may also be linked to the fundamental notion of the sacrifice to the collective in Stravinsky's original *The Rite of Spring*. Years later, Vera's own reinterpretation of *The Rite* with Afro-Cuban dancers plays a key part in her ideological transformation, from staunch anti-revolutionary to supporter of the Cuban Revolution. As a consequence of her radical changes, Pávlova falls from her imaginary pedestal:

And today I would look at that portrait [Pávlova's] once again, realising that a change in the way of contemplating it had occurred in me overnight. [...] I suddenly thought that she, the Incomparable, would have hated the show [Vera's *Rite*] that, after years of effort, I was to present to the world.<sup>20</sup>

Subsequently, following her husband's revelation of sexual betrayal, a heart-broken Vera flees to the most isolated corner of Cuba, where she plans to lead an eventless life. She is unaware that the country is on the brink of a socialist revolution, naively thinking that there, "L'Internationale" *'in truth, had never been heard'*<sup>21</sup>. She soon hears the anthem sung by supporters of the Cuban Revolution, which she will eventually embrace.

"L'Internationale" is of key significance to the hero's story. On his journey to the Spanish battlefield, Enrique first comes across "L'Internationale" in the hustle and bustle of a train station:

"L'Internationale", enormous, multitudinous, terrifying, from platforms full of people, and in the wagons which now begin to roll, sounding solemn, overwhelming – like a *Magnificat* sung in a high-vaulted nave, on the *organum* of the locomotive that, with a long whistle, sets off for the Pyrenees.<sup>22</sup>

Like Vera, Enrique attends Robeson's concert in Benicassim and is particularly touched by his performance of "L'Internationale". This experience will have important repercussions after he leaves Europe. Once settled back in Cuba, Enrique travels to the U. S. to buy archi-

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<sup>20</sup> "Y hoy miraba ese retrato [de Pávlova] una vez más, dándome cuenta de que un cambio se había operado en mí de la noche a la mañana en la manera de contemplarlo. [...] Pensaba de repente que ella, la Incomparable, habría detestado el espectáculo [*La consagración* de Vera] que, tras de un esfuerzo de años, iba a presentar al mundo." (Carpentier 1978/1998: 574)

<sup>21</sup> "[...] *para decir la verdad, no se había oído nunca*" (ibid.: 651).

<sup>22</sup> "[...] enorme, multitudinaria, tremebunda, en andenes repletos de gente, y en los vagones que ya empiezan a rodar suena, solemne, sobrecogedora, *La Internacional* – tal *Magnificat* cantado en nave de altas bóvedas, sobre el *organum* de la locomotora que, con un largo silbido, toma el rumbo de los Pirineos." (Ibid.: 226)

ecture publications and music scores for Vera. In New York City, he meets up with his frivolous cousin Teresa and takes her to a restaurant frequented by members of the American avant-garde. Enrique shows some frustration when his cousin, on hearing Edgard Varèse at work next door, questions whether his music – ‘panting and spasmodic roaring from an enormous though unidentifiable wounded animal’<sup>23</sup> – has any artistic value at all. Varèse’s music is still in the background at the point when Teresa decides to drag Enrique to the Rainbow Room, a luxurious cabaret frequented by the jet set. He greatly enjoys the vaudevillian combination of song, dance, magic tricks and stripping. Yet his mood changes dramatically at the end of the show, as he tells us how

the orchestra, with a certain solemnity, began to play a piece which to me was extremely familiar, tremendously familiar, dramatically familiar. But, no. It couldn’t be. Here? In the Rainbow Room? I had drunk something, and mixing wine and whisky had been a bad idea. I must have got the wrong music. It must be something by Tchaikovsky (maybe that martial Scherzo in the *Pathétique*...), or, perhaps, I don’t know, something by Wagner (I can’t quite recall that march from *Tannhäuser* right now...) [...]. But no, no, no, no! There are no doubts now. There are no doubts. And twenty-four girls enter, all of the same look and height, cast in the same mould, wearing ermine hats, red jackets, red-striped skirts, red boots, and begin dancing symmetrically, in an almost military manner: back to the dance floor, dividing into two rows, groups crossing, geometrical figures – then they line up again, divide into two rows again, the groups cross back again, they make more geometrical figures, then they turn again and again, marking time, before a final deployment and line-up. And they raise the left fist ... And the audience of the rich, of the wealthy, of film stars [...], the whole of show-business Broadway, of advertising, of trade, the members of Boards of Directors and PR heads, who have gathered here tonight, they clap, clap, clap, endlessly. And the conductor makes a sign to his musicians. *Bis. Bis. Bis.* And so they play it again. And there is no possible doubt. It is *that*.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> “[...] bramidos jadeantes, espasmódicos, de un enorme aunque inidentificable animal herido.” (Carpentier 1978/1998: 418)

<sup>24</sup> “[...] la orquesta, con cierta solemnidad, empezó a tocar una música que me era sumamente conocida, tremendamente conocida, dramáticamente conocida. Pero, no. No podía ser. ¿Aquí? ¿En el Rainbow Room? Había bebido algo, y la mezcla de vino y whisky [sic] era muy poco recomendable. Debo haberme equivocado de música. Debe ser algo de Tchaikovski (acaso ese *scherzo* marcial de la *Patética* ...), o, tal vez, de Wagner (no recuerdo bien, en este momento, la marcha de *Tannhäuser* ...) [...]. Pero no, no, no, no. No hay dudas ahora. No hay dudas. Y entran veinticuatro *girls*, todas iguales en pinta y estatura, cortadas por el mismo patrón, llevando bonetes de armiño, casacas rojas, faldas listadas de rojo, botas rojas, y empiezan a bailar

Enrique's account of the piece he knows so well yet cannot name conveys obvious dramatic irony, as the reader quickly realises that *that* is "L'Internationale". He first thinks of Wagner's and Tchaikovsky's marches, which are of undoubted musical similarity and share with "L'Internationale" a vital, majestic and triumphant character. The audience of the cabaret, which Enrique perceives as ideologically despicable, reminds him of the uses of these composers by certain non-socialist societies: Wagner by the Third Reich and Tchaikovsky by the Russia of the Tsars. (Throughout the novel, the music of Wagner and Tchaikovsky is associated with negative events and political attitudes. Wagner's operas are linked to fascism, for instance in the discussion of American opera productions during the Second World War [cf. Carpentier 1978/1998: 418f.]. Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* signals anti-revolutionary attitudes [cf. *ibid.*: 269; 653], and his Fifth Symphony is the background against which Vera learns about the death of Jean-Claude [cf. *ibid.*: 305].)

When Enrique finally recognises "L'Internationale", he experiences a dreadful ideological dissonance as he hears it in the most distant and inappropriate context he can imagine for it. The perversely trivialised cabaret version violently clashes with his memories of the impetuous combatants singing along with Robeson. The dancing-girls are fake protesters who do not incite their audience to arise nor to build a new socialist society. Instead of addressing hungry workers, the girls amuse the rich, achieving a disturbing subversion of the original utopian message of the song. The anthem's rebellious lyrics are not sung, yet the performance tradition of raising the left fist is incorporated in the coercive choreography, which evokes totalitarianism<sup>25</sup>.

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simétricamente, de modo casi militar: vuelta a la pista, división en dos filas, cruce de grupos, figuras de geométrica ordenación – y vuelta a la pista, re-división en dos filas, re-cruce de grupos, re-figuras, y más vueltas y revueltas, marcando el paso, hasta un despliegue y alienación final. Y levantan el puño izquierdo ... Y el público de ricos, de adinerados, de estrellas de cine [...], el todo Broadway del *show-business*, de la publicidad, de los negocios, la gente del patronato y de las relaciones públicas, que aquí se ha congregado esta noche, aplaude, aplaude, aplaude, interminablemente. Y el director de orquesta que hace una seña a sus músicos. *Bis. Bis. Bis.* Y vuelve a escucharse lo de antes. Y ya no hay duda posible. Es *eso*." (Carpentier 1978/1998: 420f.)

<sup>25</sup> The incongruous message produced by the cabaret performance may find a contemporary parallel in the 2007 rap version of Richard Makela, aka Monsieur R

The play on utopia and capitalism in this scene recalls Bertolt Brecht's satirical treatment of political themes, particularly in the final scene of *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1927–1929), co-written with Kurt Weill. This opera is about an amusement town called Mahagonny, where money alone rules. The town is founded to provide satisfaction and pleasure to people, and is finally destroyed by those same desires. In the end, while the city perishes in flames, the characters march carrying placards with inscriptions such as “For The Prolongation Of The Golden Age”, “For Property”, “For The Buying And Selling Of Love”, “For Freedom For The Rich” and “For Brute Stupidity” (Brecht 1929/1997: 63–65). Carpentier, in the satire on the travesties of capitalism in the Rainbow Room scene, seems to reverse Brecht's concept of defamiliarisation (*Verfremdung*) as he does not cause alienation but hilarity<sup>26</sup>.

Enrique is so altered by the misuse of “L'Internationale” that he needs to leave the cabaret, dragging Teresa with him. On their way to their hotel, they have a sharp ideological disagreement over the song:

“Do you know what has just been played here? ‘L'Internationale!’” – “So what?” – “‘L'Internationale’ by Degeyter; the one that Paul Robeson sung for us in Benicassim; the one that was chanted, in twenty languages, by the combatants of the International Brigades.” – “So what?” – “‘L'Internationale’. The title says everything.” – “So what?” – “That, damn it, can't be sung in a cabaret. I never believed that I'd see such a thing. Just thinking about it makes my blood boil.” – “But it seems OK to me. You know that, sooner or later, we – the rich – will get screwed. So it's better if we get used to hearing ‘L'Internationale’”. – “But not like this. And especially not in the Rainbow Room. Also, I see a bad omen in this: those who so easily accept what they loathed yesterday, will be the first ones to renounce, tomorrow, what they applaud today. ‘L'Internationale’ was not made for them.” ... We were speeding in a taxi, to the hotel: “To know what

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(2007). Here, all stanzas are declaimed over a typical rap rhythmic backing, and the refrain is sung by the chorus girls in a hilariously sensual manner. As a result, the original militant character of the song is washed out. More generally, the genre of rap, which has become a thriving multi-million industry in the last decades, is easier to identify with commercial attitudes than with revolutionary ideals.

<sup>26</sup> According to Brecht, contradictory social reality should be portrayed in a shockingly unnatural manner in order to alienate the viewer. He called his work ‘socialist realist’ despite his experimental political aesthetics diverging from the homonymous Soviet doctrine, which aimed to represent the socialist struggle in a positive way according to canonical models.

'L'Internationale' means you have to have known hunger, exploitation, misery, unemployment."<sup>27</sup>

In her black-humour response to Enrique's objection to the cabaret "L'Internationale", Teresa is suggesting that the revolutionaries will usurp the power of the rich ruling class. Obviously, the rich cannot get used to "L'Internationale" because their privileged status is in contradiction with the ideological content and purpose of the song. Following Enrique's diatribe against the capitalist audience of the cabaret, Teresa calls his bluff and dares him to demonstrate his commitment to the socialist utopia:

– "But I don't believe that you have known much in the way of hunger and misery in your life. You sang 'L'Internationale' in Spain, but it seems to me that you haven't sung it for a long time." – "That's why I am nothing. Neither bourgeois nor proletarian. Neither fish nor fowl." [...] "Are you still angry?" – "I can't help it." "We saw the twelve o'clock show. They will repeat it at two, with the same 'L'Internationale' at the end. You still have time." – "For what?" – "To go there, to throw a bomb. It would blow up the whole Rainbow Room, and it would be a magnificent apotheosis, with fireworks and everything." – "I'm not a terrorist, I don't have bombs, nor would I throw them if I had them. Nothing is achieved by throwing bombs." Teresa, with an uninhibited gesture, took her shoes off: "Good. As you don't want to blow up the Rainbow Room, come to bed with me."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> "¿Sabes lo que acaba de tocarse aquí? ¡La Internacional! – '¿Y qué?' – 'La Internacional de Degeyter; la que nos cantó Paul Robeson en Benicassim; la que fue coreada, en veinte idiomas, por los combatientes de las Brigadas Internacionales.' – '¿Y qué?' – 'La Internacional. El título lo dice todo.' – '¿Y qué?' – 'Que eso, carajo, no es para que se baile en un cabaret. Jamás creí que vería semejante cosa. Es que, de sólo pensarlo, se me revuelve la sangre.' – 'Pues, a mí me parece muy bien. Tú sabes que, tarde o temprano, los ricos tendremos que jodernos. Por lo tanto, más vale que uno se vaya acostumbrando a oír *La Internacional*.' – 'Pero no así. Y menos, en el Rainbow Room. Hay, en todo esto, una frivolidad, una novelería, que me indignan. Además, veo un mal agüero en ello: quienes con tanta ligereza aceptan lo que ayer aborrecieron, serán los primeros en renegar, mañana, de lo que hoy aplauden. *La Internacional* no se hizo para ellos.' ... Rodábamos ya en un taxi, hacia el hotel: 'Para saber lo que significa *La Internacional* es necesario haber conocido el hambre, la explotación, la miseria, el desempleo.'" (Carpentier 1978/1998: 421f.)

<sup>28</sup> "– 'Pues, yo no creo que tú hayas conocido muchas hambres y muchas miserias en tu vida. Cantaste *La Internacional* en España, pero me parece que hace tiempo que ya no la cantas.' – 'Por eso es que no soy nada. Ni burgués ni proletario. Ni chicha ni limonada, como se dice.' [...] '¿Te sigue la rabia?' – 'No puedo remediarlo.' – 'Vimos el *show* de las doce. Lo repetirán a las dos, con la misma *Internacional* en fin de espectáculo. Todavía tienes tiempo.' – '¿De qué?' – 'De ir allá, a tirar una bomba. Volaría el Rainbow Room entero, y sería una magnífica apoteosis, con fuegos

Unable to show his heroism to Teresa and reconcile his ideological frustrations, Enrique resigns himself to making love to her, marking the beginning of an affair of a quasi-incestuous nature which will last many years. (Wagner having been already invoked in Enrique's erroneous musings on the cabaret performance, the cousins' relationship brings to mind his *Ring* cycle. These operas feature various adulterous and incestuous lovers including Wotan's illegitimate children Siegmund and Sieglinde, whose offspring Siegfried loves Brünnhilde, the banished Valkyrie and Wotan's daughter.)

For Enrique, being immersed in the luxurious world of the Rainbow Room – 'the most affluent atmosphere I had ever breathed in'<sup>29</sup> – does not seem to pose a problem at first. After the politically-twisted performance of "L'Internationale", that same space turns knotty, reflecting his own ideological conflicts. Teresa, light-hearted, perceives and reacts to the anthem very differently. She exploits the irony conveyed by the performance in a particularly close-to-the-bone manner, unmasking the contradictions between her cousin's upper-class background and his revolutionary raptures, preaching and actions. Naturally, Enrique does not accept her defiant suggestion that he return to the dance hall to destroy it, and feels pushed into admitting the uselessness of his political endeavours: 'nothing is more annoying than another's correct apprehension of unwelcome evidence'<sup>30</sup>.

Immediately following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, the cousins meet up at the mansion of their aristocratic aunt, who has just left for Miami. Teresa persuades her lover to try out their aunt's bed, 'an unpolluted couch'<sup>31</sup>. The cousins' affair, triggered by their disagreement over the Rainbow Room "L'Internationale", is 'consecrated' in the bed of their anti-revolutionary aunt. While Teresa undresses, she asks, "Listen ... Didn't Wagner compose something called *The Consecration of the House*?" – "That was Beethoven.

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artificiales y todo.' – 'Yo no soy terrorista, no tengo bombas, ni las tiraré si las tuviese. Nada se consigue con tirar bombas.' Teresa, con gesto desenfadado, se quitó los zapatos: 'Bueno. Ya que no quieres volar el Rainbow Room, acuéstate conmigo.'" (Carpentier 1978/1998: 422)

<sup>29</sup> "[...] la más millonaria atmósfera que yo hubiese respirado nunca" (ibid.: 420).

<sup>30</sup> "[...] nada resulta tan irritante como la acertada visión ajena de una molesta evidencia" (Ibid.: 424).

<sup>31</sup> "[...] un lecho impoluto" (ibid.: 716).



You're mixing everything up tonight."<sup>32</sup> The original Spanish title of the novel, *La consagración de la primavera*, allows the confusion with Beethoven's little-known overture, *Die Weihe des Hauses* (*The Consecration of the House*, 1822), and also preserves the religious connotations of the original title of Stravinsky's work, which is translated into Spanish as *La consagración de la primavera* (hence the title of the novel). Teresa thinks of a very respectable piece by Beethoven but incorrectly attributes it to Wagner, whose works contain several pairs of illicit lovers. Enrique shows an impressive erudition when remembering the correct title of Beethoven's obscure overture, which contrasts with his mistaking of "L'Internationale" for Wagner and Tchaikovsky during the cabaret show when the performance context impacts so strongly on what his ears can tell him. Now, although he can correctly attribute *The Consecration of the House* to Beethoven, Enrique does not notice that the title of the overture suggests Stravinsky's ballet about the ritual killing of a sacrificial virgin, even though his wife Vera has been working on this piece for many years.

### 3. Conclusion

The performance of music plays an important role in Carpentier's political fiction. In *La consagración de la primavera*, it is intricately tied to revolutionary politics and generates layers of irony in relation to events inside and outside the novel.

The scene at the Rainbow Room cabaret illustrates Carpentier's use of performance as a platform to convey irony and ideology. There is dramatic irony in the hero's mistaken identification of the militant song "L'Internationale" with Wagner and Tchaikovsky, which derives from the music as it is being divorced from the words. The musically-informed reader can appreciate the undoubted musical similarity between the socialist anthem and the marches by Wagner and Tchaikovsky, and also the clash between the revolutionary message of the song and the ideologies associated with the former composers. There is a level of situational irony, where the anthem is used as a showpiece in a nightclub, which embarrasses and angers

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<sup>32</sup> "Oye ... ¿Wagner no compuso algo que se titula *La consagración de la casa*?' – 'Fue Beethoven. Esta noche lo enredas todo.'" (Ibid.: 717)

Enrique. Another level of irony, shared by the hero and the reader, is the clash between Paul Robeson's idealistic performance of "L'Internationale" earlier in the novel and the commodified version of the same music in the cabaret. The conflict between revolutionary ideals and commercial entertainment produced by the cabaret version of "L'Internationale" results in an unexpected ironic outcome: Enrique falling for his capitalist cousin Teresa. Their sexual relationship is reminiscent of Wagner's incestuous characters and may be interpreted as a critique of the decadence of capitalism. There is further irony in Teresa's confusion of titles of musical works by Wagner and Beethoven, and in Enrique's missing of the religious connotations of the original title of Stravinsky's ballet.

The heroine's social-artistic *The Rite of Spring* project with Afro-Cuban dancers is fundamental to her conversion from staunch anti-revolutionary to supporter of the Cuban Revolution. Through *The Rite*, Vera becomes sensitive to the racial and economic inequalities of Batista's regime. The Cuban Revolution and the impulses conveyed by "L'Internationale" have a positive effect on her, as she is finally able to bring her artistic project to fruition.

An informed reader with knowledge of the political attitudes of Stravinsky and the composition and performance history of his *Rite* may recognise the irony in Carpentier's use of this piece to convey left-wing impulses. The defeat of capitalism and the possibility of moral change in *La consagración* may appear ironic to the contemporary reader, given the collapse of socialist regimes beginning with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the profound ideological crisis that Cuba presently experiences. This is an additional irony that Carpentier could not possibly have foreseen.

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