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Maestra Digna Guerra and her Role in the Promotion of Choral Music in Post-Revolutionary Cuba

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

MAESTRA DIGNA GUERRA AND HER ROLE IN THE PROMOTION OF CHORAL MUSIC IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY CUBA

By

Melissa Bumbach

A DOCTORAL ESSAY

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

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A doctoral essay submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
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MAESTRA DIGNA GUERRA AND HER ROLE IN THE PROMOTION OF
CHORAL MUSIC IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY CUBA

Melissa Bumbach

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Maestra Digna Guerra is a significant figure in Cuban choral music. She has led the Coro Nacional de Cuba, one of the country’s most prominent choral institutions, for more than 40 years. A founding member of the university-level Instituto Superior de Música (ISA), she served as the head of the choral conducting department at both the ISA and the Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA) and trained many of the next generation of choral scholars and educators. Under her direction, the Coro Nacional de Cuba has grown to include two chamber choirs, Coro Entrevoces and D’Profundis, as well as the children’s choir Coro Nacional Infantil. Guerra has also led the Coro de la Radio y la Televisión, the choir of the Opera Nacional de Cuba, and served as assistant conductor of the Orquesta Sinfónica de Cuba, in addition to being a highly-sought international clinician and adjudicator. Guerra’s work with the cantorías, a community music project for underprivileged children, has provided music education for hundreds of Cuban young people. This paper examines Maestra Guerra’s career, including national music and government positions as well as international engagements, with overviews of the Cuban music education system in the post-Cuban Revolution era, the Cuban professional choral...
system, the structure and activities of the *Coro Nacional de Cuba*, and the development of choral music in Cuba since the Cuban Revolution.
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I thank the Cuban Heritage Collection for awarding me a graduate fellowship which opened the doors of Digna Guerra’s educational history and gifted me the discovery of a concert program from 1960 in which my grandfather Rafael Odio was featured as a soloist in Manuel Ochoa’s Coro de Madrigalistas. I am grateful to the Miami Institute of the Americas for awarding me a Tinker Field Research grant that permitted me to travel to Cuba for the first time in my life, meet a cousin I had never before met in person, and conduct research to document the exceptional life and career of Maestra Digna Guerra. I am grateful to the Frost School of Music, Weeks Music Library, and Head of the library, Nancy Zavac for the support and resources they provided me. One of the most valuable parts of my education has been sharing the knowledge and friendship of my colleagues. I am grateful to have studied and worked alongside immensely talented individuals from the choral conducting, music education, vocal pedagogy, and composition departments at UM that will be lifelong friends and continual professional inspiration.

I dedicate this paper to my four grandparents, who sacrificed everything they knew in their beloved Cuba in the early 1960s to bring their young families to the United States to enjoy the storied American dream and its accompanying freedoms. My maternal grandfather Rafael Odio sang in the 50s/60s-era Cuban male quartet Los Bucaneros,
passing down his love of music and showmanship to myself and my cousins. My paternal grandmother was an inspiration to me in her dedication to scholarship, receiving her doctorate in pedagogy at the University of Havana in 1952 and recertifying as a teacher after exile in the Professional Training Program for Cuban teachers at UM.

I equally dedicate this paper to my parents Michael and Sofia Lenz, who raised me and my brothers Steven and Andrew to want for nothing while teaching us to live a life of faith, love, humility, and generosity. My parents instilled the value of education in me by constantly reminding me of the importance of earning a college degree. I also thank my wonderful, large, supportive Cuban and Bumbach families, especially my cousin Elizabeth Romanyk for being my cheerleader and my treasured confidant.

I am greatly blessed to share my life with my best friend, the love of my life, and my husband of 10 years, Matthew Bumbach. I could not have imagined completing this journey without his support, encouragement, and inspiration. My favorite part of this musical life is sharing it with you.

It is my sincere desire that this essay honors the life’s work of Digna Guerra. I am grateful to Guerra, to her husband Benjamín, and her daughter Natacha for making me feel so welcome in Havana. I also thank Guido López-Gavilán, Leonor Suarez, Delfina Acay, Ladys Sotomayor, and Yamila Monje for their generosity and openness in sharing their earnest respect and love for Digna Guerra in our interviews together. I am thankful for the expertise of Catalina Villamarín, who transcribed and translated many hours of interviews and shared the experience of her impressions with me as she completed the process.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Guerra and Cuban Choral Movement

Digna Guerra is one of the most influential living figures in Cuban choral music. As the conductor of the country’s flagship choral ensemble the Coro Nacional de Cuba and one of the founders of the Instituto Superior de Música, one of the country’s tertiary music institutions, Guerra has the unique perspective of a public figure whose work began in the early years of the Cuban Revolution, shaped by its influence and in turn shaping the emerging and now flourishing music education and performance establishments of modern day Cuba.

Maestra Digna Guerra has been the conductor of one of the most prominent choral ensembles in the country since 1975. She has made valuable and considerable contributions to the field choral music in Cuba and to a generation of students, singers, and composers. The Coro Nacional’s important status as the main representative choir in the nation’s capital is exemplified by notable performances involving the choir in recent years, including a performance of the Cuban and U.S. National Anthems at a baseball game attended by U.S. president Barack Obama and Cuban president Raúl Castro as well as a performance with the Rolling Stones later that week.¹ Among many accomplishments in service to her country, Guerra is recognized for her promotion of choral music at all age levels in Cuba as an example of a successful lifelong music-

making structure, her work with Cuban composers, and her successful legacy of students and singers. The pedagogical methods and philosophy Digna Guerra has propagated in Cuba has great value for choral conductors across the world. As Cuban Vice-Minister of Culture Abel Acosta said at the first ACDA Cuba/US Choral Symposium in Havana, Cuba in the summer of 2012, “We have so much more that unites us rather than divides us...”

Cuba has a long and rich history of choral music spanning more than four centuries. After the Cuban Revolution, the island underwent many related changes, including a nationalistic cultural movement resulting in a restructured music education system and the formation of new choral performing ensembles. Performing artists are important cultural ambassadors for their country. Choral music has played an important cultural role within the nation of Cuba and as an export of Cuban culture within the international choral community. Choirs outside of Cuba have much to gain by examining the success of Cuban professional choirs and by becoming familiar with the culturally unique choral music by Cuban composers. The inception of the Cuban professional choral system coincided with the “triumph” of the Cuban Revolution in 1959. The island was swept with patriotic fervor, resulting in the formation of multiple amateur choirs to celebrate the victory of the newly-formed government. Similar nationally fueled developments in the musical arts occurred throughout Latin America in the early 20th century.

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6. Ibid.
century.\textsuperscript{7} The genesis of the professional choral movement in the United States also occurred around this time.\textsuperscript{8} One of the amateur Cuban choral groups formed in 1960, the \textit{Orfeón Santiago}, was awarded a grant from the Department of Culture and Education of the Provincial Government and went on to earn first prize in a Cuban choral festival a mere five months after their formation. Multiple developments in choral music soon followed, including the national promotion of Cuban choral composers, the formation of additional grant-funded choirs, the establishment of multiple national and international choral festivals held in Cuba, and the rapid conversion of the \textit{Orfeón Santiago} into a professional choir at the suggestion of a new government organization, the National Council of Culture. Many choirs, the \textit{Orfeón Santiago} included, specialize in Cuban choral music and seek to promote Cuban culture as part of their mission.\textsuperscript{9}

**Interest in Cuban and Latin American Choral Music**

Despite their close geographical proximity, there is less awareness of the popularity and high quality of choral singing in Cuba in the United States than there is internationally due to the restricted communication between the two countries.\textsuperscript{10} Amateur choirs are more prevalent than professional choirs in the United States, with the latter making up just 12% of overall choral participation.\textsuperscript{11} Comparatively, Cuba has a more

\textsuperscript{7} Cristian Grases, "Nine Venezuelan Composers and a Catalogue of their Choral Works," (2009), 23.

\textsuperscript{8} Joshua J. Oppenheim, "Overview of America's Professional Choirs: Considerations for Establishing, Maintaining and Succeeding in the Creation of a Professional or Community Choir in the United States," (2006), 1.


\textsuperscript{10} José Rivera, "Cuban Choral Music," 6.

robust system of professional choirs, with one to two residing in each of its fourteen provinces. The city of Havana alone houses eight professional choirs.\(^\text{12}\) Cuba has also been well represented at international choral festivals within Europe and across the Americas, even hosting such events, both to great acclaim.\(^\text{13}\)

Due to the restricted political relationship between Cuba and the United States, there is limited academic literature available about Cuban professional choirs. Cuban choirs are prominent on the global stage, but underrepresented in American scholarship. The prevalence and cultural admiration of professional choirs in Cuba as well as the prominence of exemplary Cuban choirs in international choral competitions\(^\text{14}\) make this a phenomenon worthy of study. Growing interest in Latin American choral music in the United States as evidenced by the growing but still-limited number of choral music series focusing on Latin American repertoire\(^\text{15}\) points to the need for a closer look at the processes and individuals producing successful performances of this type of literature.

Within the past 30 years, new choirs have been formed in the United States specializing in Latin American choral music in response to this interest, among them, Cantigas in Washington, D.C.,\(^\text{16}\) Latin American Choral Ensemble ¡Cantemos! at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, FL, and Amazonia Vocal Ensemble in Miami, FL.\(^\text{17}\)

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14. Ibid.


*Cantigas* gave their final farewell concert in June of 2016, with conductor Diana Sáez explaining the dissolution of the group after 25 successful years as follows: “I’d like to think we’ve made our mark. In choral music I see that the trend has changed for the better, and I see more and more choirs performing whole concerts of Latin American music.”¹⁸ In spite of growing interest, there is a marked absence of Latin American music studied in undergraduate and graduate degree programs,¹⁹ justifying a need for further examination and dissemination of this repertoire. Diana Saez wrote,

Knowledge about Latin American music has never been more relevant than today, when Latinos have become the largest minority population in the United States. It is our responsibility as music educators to provide our students and singers a well-rounded education that includes music from places other than those that represent only the Western European tradition. It is our duty to expose them to a diverse repertoire…²⁰

Latin American choral music is notably lacking in choral programming in the United States, due in large part to its limited availability within the body of published choral repertoire.²¹ It was not until the foundation of two major music publishers in the 1980s that regularly incorporated culturally diverse repertoire—*Earthsongs* and *World Music Press*—that music from Latin American countries began to appear more regularly in publication.²² Likewise, in the area of Latin American composition, limited research has been done specifically on choral music.²³ Several scholars adding to the body of literature in this area include Maria Guinand, Cristian Grases, and José Rivera. Another

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20. Ibid.


challenge preventing more programming of Latin American choral music is hesitance on the part of classically-trained Western choral directors to perform music outside of their training and experience. Of the limited Latin American music that is available, Cuban music remains a small portion of the countries represented. Subsequently, very few scholarly publications exist on performance practice for Cuban choral music. Notable exceptions include José Rivera’s 2014 *Choral Journal* article on Cuban choral music, the introduction to Cuban choral director and composer Electo Silva’s collection of Cuban choral arrangements, *30 canciones populares cubanas*, currently unavailable in the United States outside of a few university libraries, and Beth Gibb’s dissertation on selected works from this collection. Manuscripts of Latin American choral music have been available for decades and have been passed along from director to director, however, many quality arrangements of popular and folk music being performed in their respective Latin American countries remain unpublished. It is thanks to the focused efforts of organizations such as the American Choral Directors Association and the International Federation for Choral Music that this gap in representation is gradually closing. In this document, I provide notable twentieth-century Cuban composers as well

25. Ibid.
as guidance on the interpretation of Cuban choral music from the perspectives of Guerra and several other Cuban choral conductors, singers, and a composer.

**Method and Background**

This essay examines the career and influence of Digna Guerra, conductor of the *Coro Nacional de Cuba*, named head of the choral department of the *Escuela Nacional de Arte* (ENA), one of the founders of the *Instituto Superior de Arte* (ISA), choral director of the *Opera Nacional de Cuba*, and previously director of the *Coro de la Radio y la Televisión* (Radio and Television Choir). She also formed the acclaimed and internationally touring chamber choir *Coro Entrevoces*, taken from the singers of the *Coro Nacional*, her umbrella organization and which U.S. choral music education professor José Rivera described as “one of largest and best-established professional choirs in the country.”

I drew from multiple participant perspectives in conducting this research, including Digna Guerra herself as well as colleagues, students, and singers under Maestra Guerra to provide additional context. There is significant usage of quotations to remain faithful to both the content and the spirit of the participants’ responses.

Four types of data collection were included with the purpose of providing as complete a picture of Guerra’s experience and influence as possible on a single field research trip.

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1. Observations of rehearsals, performances, and events, including participant-observation within activities of the organization

2. Interviews with Digna Guerra, educator and composer colleague Guido López-Gavilán del Rosario, former student and current professional choral conductor Leonor Suárez Dulzaides, former student and retired colleague Delfina Acay Espinosa, current private student, singer, and Coro Nacional conductor colleague Ladys Sotomayor, and longtime Coro Nacional singer Yamila Monje Rodríguez

3. Documentation including letters, emails, newspaper and magazine articles, schedules, administrative documents and sheet music related to the Coro Nacional during Maestra Guerra’s tenure as well as documentation from Guerra’s educational institutions, additional institutions of employment, and events such as workshops and lectures

4. Audio-visual materials including photographs, audio recordings, and video recordings provided to and recorded by the researcher

Data was collected during the course of a one-month in-residence research fellowship at the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami in Miami, FL and a one-week field research residency in Havana, Cuba from July 1-9, 2016 where I attended events as part of the international choral festival CorHabana managed by Maestra Guerra, toured the rehearsal facilities of the Coro Nacional de Cuba, conducted semi-structured interviews with Dr. Digna Guerra and her colleagues, students and singers, and collected relevant documents. Participants were selected purposively under advisement. All interview questions were starting points, with opportunities to build on
the responses given with prompting questions and comments. I kept a field notebook to record observations during and after events that occurred during the course of my visit. I analyzed collected data based on the development of a set of emergent themes, which were refined as they emerged. These themes corresponded with the areas of investigation and were refined as the study progressed via the process of inductive reasoning. Measures included interview questions and a checklist of artifacts to obtain as part of the study. Permission was attained verbally and audio recorded at the beginning of each interview.

The University of Miami was uniquely positioned to further research in this area with its special library collection, the Cuban Heritage Collection, one of very few repositories for first-hand sources referencing the development of this topic and a wealth of information on the Conservatorio Amadeo Roldan which Digna Guerra attended and her professor Manuel Ochoa contained in the Manuel Ochoa Papers. Miami’s large Cuban-American population and the closest proximity to the island nation in the country make it especially suited to such an investigation. My research was funded by a Goizueta Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship with the University of Miami Cuban Heritage Collection special library collection and a Tinker Field Research Grant from the Miami Institute for the Americas.

Limitations, Suggestions for Further Research

It was beyond the scope of this study to provide histories of other prominent choral directors in Cuba, to examine the entire Cuban music education and professional choral systems or to do an in-depth case study of the Coro Nacional de Cuba. It was also beyond the scope of this research study to examine more than one professional choir in
Cuba in depth. This study was limited to an overview of relevant topics and the history and impact of a single director, Digna Guerra. It is important to note that the conclusions and statements presented in this essay are from the lens of the participants.

My interest in Cuban choral music stems from my heritage as the child of two Cuban immigrants and a life’s worth of stories from the island. This research trip made possible for me an emotional first visit to the birthplace my parents left as young children in the early 1960s after the Cuban Revolution, and the homeland to which they have never returned. The timeliness of recent and significant change in the political relations between the U.S. and Cuba also partially spurred my interest in examining this topic. However, current relations at the time of the writing of this document remain uncertain under a new U.S. presidential administration, potentially affecting future travel and therefore cultural exchange between choirs and choral conductors in Cuba and the United States. To illustrate the relevance of the original timing of this study and hopefully even now herald the beginning of many such future exchanges, I share the convergence of two first visits for political ambassadors from the U.S. and Cuba. On the same day that Maestra Digna Guerra visited the University of Miami—in a city with strong but often contentious ties between Cubans on the island and Cuban-American exiles—for the first time on her way back home from a United Nations women’s summit, U.S. President Barack Obama communicated the following on his first full day in Cuba: “It’s humbling


to be the first U.S. president in nearly 90 years to visit a country and a people just 90 miles from our shores."35

Suggested areas for further research include the Cuban choral system from children and youth choirs through the multiple forms of adult choirs offered in the country as well as Cuban choral composers and arrangers. Many countries, especially those in Latin America, currently benefit from cultural and musical exchanges with Cuban musicians. With the rich musical environment in Cuba in the area of choral music, it is particularly worthwhile to examine how choirs and conductors in Cuba and the United States can continue to build bridges of collaboration and goodwill regardless of the political relationship between the two countries.

CHAPTER II
POST-REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS, EDUCATION,
AND MUSICAL ENVIRONMENT IN CUBA

Overview of Digna Guerra’s Influence on Cuban Choral Music

Digna Guerra (see fig. 1), or as she is commonly known by her singers and students, “Maestra” or “profe”, which is short for profesora (professor), is by many accounts a beloved teacher, mentor, conductor, pianist, international clinician, and one of the most important living figures in Cuban choral music. Her role as the conductor of the most prominent national choral ensemble undoubtedly elevates her status, but her identity is said to be even more renowned. Suarez described the phenomenon as follows:

I think that, regardless of the history that Coro Nacional has, I think the choirs are their conductors. [Famous Cuban poet and patriot José] Martí said once that music is a man escaping from himself. And that, to me, is applicable to the choir. The choir is the conductor. Even Coro Nacional, with all its history, a conductor coming in could’ve elevated it or simply erased it in history. And Digna not only elevated it, but multiplied it with Entrevoces, with DʼProfundis, with the childrenʼs choir; itʼs now a choral society. She didnʼt only become a part of Coro Nacional; she multiplied it. Digna made Coro Nacional grow and turned it into a society. Itʼs her.36

Aside from her role as figurehead of choral music in Cuba, Suarez shared that “she has created sort of a choral aesthetic. She has taught so many students, and has created this choral society with all the maestros in Cuba. The maestra has advocated for the choral movement at every level and now, as a deputy, she is constantly raising the flag of the choral movement both national and internationally.”

Guido López-Gavilán del Rosario, internationally active composer and conductor, is a professor of orchestral conducting as well as department chair at the Instituto Superior de Arte. Lopez Gavilan studied alongside Digna at the Escuela Amadeo Roldan.

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conservatory in the late 1960s along with his wife Teresita Junco. When asked about the
influence Guerra has had on Cuban choral music, he responded, “Well, a lot, because this
is one of the choirs that has served as a standard. One of the choirs that has been a guide.
For the younger ones, even the ones in the same generation, *Coro Nacional* is an
excellent choir wherever you go, and it is the biggest choir we have. It has around 50
members…”38 Her influence is also discernible in the choral tone that is particular to
choirs on the island:

> Generally speaking, Cuban choirs have been developing a very particular way of
sounding, because they tend to be in smaller choirs, with supple voices, most of
them with clear white voices, and most of them are young, very rhythmical, very
free, very Cuban. And Digna has been a part of this way of sounding. Even
though she has a big range of possibilities of sound, a very wide range to tackle
music from many angles. Without a doubt, she has been a great influence in
Cuban choral music as a teacher, but mostly, as an example to listen.39

Yamila Monje Rodríguez is a singer in one of the *Coro Nacional’s* select chamber
choirs, *Coro Entrevores* (see fig. 2). At the time of the interview, she had been singing
with the group for 16 years, having been selected for the group in the year 2000 at 19
years old.

39. Ibid.
Monje spoke of Guerra’s influence not just on her own ensembles and other professional choirs, but also on other conductors, children, and local communities. Monje shared, “She has advanced choral music; she goes to the provinces and helps the choirs, and their conductors. She is a person who is fully aware of the Cuban choral movement. And who cares, and is actually working on a project that integrates schoolchildren and gets them involved in choral music.” Monje explains that one of the Maestra’s goals is “to help people have a broader understanding of choral music. Of the beauty of choral music. So she has spearheaded these projects. What she is proposing is very important to the

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community: both for children and for youth. To have choral projects. To immerse the community in that.”

Changes in Cuba After the Revolution

January 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1959 is considered the “triumph” of the Cuban Revolution, when President and dictator Fulgencio Batista fled Cuba in the early hours of the morning upon news of his impending defeat. Digna Guerra was 13 years of age when Fidel Castro victoriously marched into Havana with his fellow revolutionaries. One goal of the new government was to bring about equality among all segments of the country, from the rural \textit{campesinos} to the urban middle and upper class. This prioritized development in underserved rural areas included basic services including “schools, universities, health clinics, theaters, electricity, [and] running water.”

Equal access to education was symbolic in that “illiteracy and lack of education meant silence, marginalization, and oppression. Mass education was a key means of overturning centuries of inequality and empowering the poor.” This transformation of social structures was in large part in pursuit of the creation of a new revolutionary culture that encompassed an extraordinary expansion of cultural opportunity, including the literacy campaign and the expansion of schooling at all levels, and the proliferation of cultural institutions like libraries, museums, publishing, theaters, local, regional and national places and spaces for producing and participating in cultural activities – the democratization of culture. It created institutions and poured resources into literary, visual, and performing arts.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
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Conversely, this availability of artistic training and encouragement of expression existed within a limiting societal and governmental framework.

Virtually everybody who studies culture in Cuba confronts the apparent paradox in revolutionary cultural policies and developments. On one hand, the Revolution has fostered, democratized, and contributed to all areas of culture in ways unprecedented in Latin American history. On the other hand, the Revolution has controlled, censored and restricted cultural production to the extent that numerous authors and artists have chosen exile, and many Cubans complain about the limits on what they can read, listen to, see, or do. Since the advent of the internet, this contradiction may have become even more acute.\(^{45}\)

A professional organization dedicated exclusively to choral music does not exist in Cuba, however, within the umbrella of the Cuban Ministry of Culture is the Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (The National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists), known as UNEAC. Guerra serves as Vice-President of this association.

Now, we [Vocal Sine Nomine] belong to an institution that is called Centro Nacional de Musica de Concieritos (The National Center of Concert Music), and that belongs to the Instituto Cubano de la Musica (The Cuban Institute of Music), which in turn is part of the Ministry of Culture. Therefore, in that chain in which the Ministry of Culture it is the biggest institution, there is a group to which all choral conductors in Havana belong, and that is the Programa de Desarrollo de la Musica Coral (Choral Music Development Program). All of this is attached to the Instituto Cubano de la Musica and the Ministry of Culture. Therefore, for example, the Programa de Desarrollo de la Musica Coral includes all musical education too. We not only have to do with the schools (where we get assistance from school teachers, who have hands on experience making plans and programs), but also professional choral music development, and all of this is directed by maestra Digna, of course.\(^{46}\)

The UNEAC also organizes festivals such as the long-running Festival de Musica Contemporânea de La Habana (The Contemporary Music Festival of Havana). Cuban composer and conductor Guido López-Gavilan notes that new music in Cuba exhibits

\(^{45}\) Aviva Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution*, 89

\(^{46}\) Leonor Suarez, July 7, 2016.
common modern elements such as digital media, while continuing to exhibit nationalistic traits. Of the festival, López-Gavilan said,

There is a strong a creative environment, it’s solid. The younger kids are very eager, like they usually are. They are up-to-date with the new trends: electroacoustics, and what’s happening in the world. It is a very general characteristic, although not everyone does it, but in one way or another, the Cuban element is reflected in music of our time. Whether it is in electroacoustics, piano and voice, piano solo, or violin. The presence of our national music is very strong in our music.”

Cuban Music Education System

This expansion of the education system and national cultural activity included widespread access to music education. Present-day Cuban professional choirs owe much of their great success to the talent and skill of their singers, many of which trained in specialized education tracks intended to prepare performers. Digna Guerra acknowledged the Revolution in permitting her to develop her natural musical talent in these newly developed institutions and was instrumental in the curriculum development of the newly-established university-level institution, the Instituto Superior de Artes. The Cuban music education system provides those students that are accepted into its specialized levels of education with exceptional training and experience to prepare them for professional music-making. Students are prepared to begin their career immediately following secondary school graduation and enjoy the prestige of a profession that is highly valued within their culture.

Cuba’s secondary music education system is outlined in the ethnographic research of Lisa Lorenzino. Lorenzino identifies two separate streams of music education within

47. Guido López-Gavilán, July 5, 2016.

the state-sponsored schools. The first stream is the ‘General Stream’, beginning in preschool and extending through the 7th grade and intended to provide a general music education to all students. Lorenzino explicitly emphasizes the additional choral opportunities offered to students as follows:

From grade 8 onwards, no formal music education exists in general stream public education in Cuba; neither is there time allotted for any fine art at this level (UNESCO, 2006). The Cuban government, by means of the Ministry of Culture (MINCULT, instead supports a large number of artistic community organizations that enable high school students to be involved in music-making outside of the classroom setting (Moore, 2006)…A strong nationwide choral movement additionally provides high-level musical experiences for this age group.49

The second stream is termed the ‘Specialized Stream’ and is divided into three levels. The first level, nivel básico, is either a seven-year course of study beginning in the 3rd grade or a five-year course of study beginning in the 5th grade. The second level, nivel medio, is a four- or five-year course of study beginning in the 10th grade. The third level, nivel superior, is a five-year course of study at the university level. Nivel básico and nivel medio are offered in all of Cuba’s provinces, and nivel superior is offered at two institutions in Havana and Camaguey.

Digna Guerra is a founder and retired professor of the university-level Instituto Superior de Artes (Superior Institute of Art, known as the ISA) in Havana. Students being educated within the Specialized Stream are prepared to perform and teach music professionally. All music education and any necessary class materials are provided by the government.50 In terms of professional training and eligibility for practice, Suarez specified that it is a requirement to receive choral training “to be a conductor if you can

graduate school at the intermediate level… but every conductor in Havana is a graduate at the superior level.”

Music education for students in the Specialist Stream provides a complete and demanding education that prepares students for a wide range of musical endeavors. Soon after he gained power, Fidel Castro began eliminating private music schools by nationalizing the country’s music conservatories and establishing the Escuelas de Arte. The Escuela Nacional de Artes (ENA) opened in 1961 for students from 8-18 years of age. The fine arts schools provided training in multiple art forms, while the conservatories were exclusively dedicated to the study of music. In order to attend schools within the Specialist Stream, students must pass a difficult entrance exam. Once admitted, classes, materials, and even room and board for non-local students is provided at no cost to the student. Post-secondary programs are meant for students whose intent is overseas performance careers. At the nivel básico, students are mandated to perform in ensembles. For the first two years, choir is required. After the first two years, their ensemble is chosen based on a principal instrument. At the nivel medio students select a major of music theory or choral conducting. At this level, students complete two semesters of apprenticeship, one in a classroom setting and one in a professional performance setting. Cuban repertoire is emphasized throughout alongside Western music. Teacher training varies, with Specialized Stream teachers not required to receive a five-year diploma from the Pedagogical Institute and often graduating from the

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Specialized Stream themselves, at the *nivel medio* or a higher level. Some teachers hail from the Cuban army or community bands.\(^{52}\)

**Choral Music in Cuba from Post-Revolution Era through Present**

According to Guerra, prior to the Cuban Revolution, the choral movement in Cuba was largely private and comprised of few isolated ensembles. One notable exception was the *Coral de La Habana*, founded by María Muñoz de Quevedo, and a small choir as part of the organization Proartes Musical\(^ {53}\) as well as conductor and educator Manuel Ochoa’s *Coro de Madrigalistas*. Today, the opportunity to participate in choral music is available at all age levels, from young children to elderly citizens in retirement homes. Community children’s choirs called *cantorías* offer musical instruction and performance opportunities, there are amateur choirs for adults, an established national professional choral system, and singing ensembles for older populations.

Professional choral singer Yamila Monje shared, “There is a choral movement from the very little kids up to the elderly. In fact, I can tell you that some retirement homes, where the elderly live, there are places that have their little choir. Yes: there are many groups of grandmas and grandpas who participate. Here in Cuba there is a festival, which is the festival of the older adult. They sing and dance, and they also perform in senior citizen choirs.”\(^ {54}\) Guerra described the choral climate in Cuba as being in very good standing. Because we have worked since the early years right after the triumph of the revolution to create an audience that understands choral music, that likes it, we have turned them in to choral music enthusiasts. There is an

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audience now. Wherever you go, no matter the venue, there are always people who want to listen to the choirs. It’s great. And the state has given us possibilities, because music is state funded. We get a salary for doing this.  

Leonor Suarez drew attention to the specific audiences that individual choirs now tend to attract, many of which are non-musicians themselves. She explained that choirs have been educating their audiences and cultivating a taste for choral music. Admission, when it is charged, is inexpensive. Some concert venues charge a fee the first time and then waive the fee for future performances, which helps keep costs down for the choirs. A part of developing an audience for choral music is the development of the cantorías, or community children’s choirs, whose member grow up to sing or appreciate choral music. A challenge Suarez shared in building a classical choral audience is a common trend worldwide: with a propensity toward popular music—for Cubans, usually danceable as well—it can be difficult to rival such attendance at a classical concert. However, most Cuban choirs perform numerous arrangements of popular and folk music as part of their general repertoire.

**Professional Choral System**

After the “triumph of the Revolution” 56, as many Cubans commonly refer to the 1959 revolution in which Fidel Castro came to power, a heady idealism lead to the formation of numerous amateur choral ensembles stemming from a culture in which “all of Cuba sang.” 57 The choirs that demonstrated a certain level of excellence were identified by various governmental cultural institutions and became semiprofessional

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56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
choirs. Along with the newly established *Escuela Nacional de Música*, musicians began gaining training and experience. Eventually, this led to formal auditions to form fully professional, government-sponsored choirs.

Leonor Suarez is the conductor of *Camerata Vocale Sine Nomine*, a professional male chamber ensemble. This ensemble is unique in Cuba, specializing in early music and featuring countertenors, a voice type that was common in early music. Suarez commented that when in the United States, she is asked frequently about the phenomenon of professional choirs in Cuba. She says the term ‘professional’ applies because the organizations are state institutions, the singers receive salaries, and “every day we come to work, which is like our office, we go to our choir rehearsal, we rehearse, and every month we must meet the programming goals that are planned one year in advance, and then we add everything that gets thrown in along the way.”

There is required monthly programming which must be submitted each year. It is supplemented according to conductor approval as requests for additional performance engagements arise. Suarez is also frequently asked about the musical training of the singers. She responded that both music school graduates and non-music school graduates sing in professional choirs.

While this position is the singers’ main job, some have additional side jobs. Yamila Monje, a veteran member of the *Coro Nacional*, succinctly confirmed, “We are professionals. We are paid to sing.” The salary for conductors is “quite modest”, and the singers’ salaries are “a little less, but there’s not a huge difference.” Because singing does not produce physical goods, thus not bringing in income, professional choirs must

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60. Leonor Suarez, July 7, 2016.
be subsidized by the state. There are also monetary bonuses for additional important events. Each province in Cuba has a professional choir. The cities of Cienfuegos, Santiago de Cuba, and Villa Clara have two, while eight are located in Havana.

Leonor Suarez described the responsibility of conducting a professional choir as “very big” and getting “bigger every day.”61 While her ensemble has at most 12 singers, she asserted that the conductor does much more than serve as musical director. Among her responsibilities, she listed repertoire selection, overall conception, administrative duties and commitments from their parent Cuban institution, and even individual singer vocal development. Regarding the latter, some singers receive private lessons through the ISA or through private means, and one member of her choir is responsible for giving individual singers vocal instruction each week. Since “[she] can’t leave the voices of [her] choir in the hands of anyone,” this is an effective way to achieve the sound she envisions “because there is an affinity between him and I, vocally.” There is also the typical myriad of details that accompany the planning of concerts, including uniforms, paperwork, collaboration with staff such as producers that occasionally assist the conductor. While Suarez could not speak for other choirs, she expressed that “the main load of everything, everything, everything falls on the choir conductor. Musical and beyond.”62 Suarez asserted that amateur community choirs in Cuba—those who sing at a church or workplace and whose singers do not receive salaries—are struggling. She related that “after 1990, with the economic climate of what we call the ‘special period’, amateur choirs took a hit because, obviously, if people have more difficulties and have to work more to meet their needs and can’t rehearse, well that affects the amateur choir

62. Ibid.
movement and these types of choirs."63 This is opposed to the professional choirs, which are committed to the ensemble as their principal employment.

Ladys Sotomayor is the conductor of D’Profundis, a second chamber choir selected from the members of the Coro Nacional de Cuba. She holds one of Digna Guerra’s coveted few private conducting studio slots and is under her direct advisement as a Coro Nacional chamber choir conductor. At the time of the interview, she was among the Cuba’s younger conductors at 25 years old, having sung with Coro Nacional for five years and conducted D’Profundis for four years. Sotomayor’s perspective of conducting a professional choir was reflective and philosophical. She admitted that as many soon realize, everything that is required of a conductor is not taught in school. With 22 singers currently in D’Profundis,

> there are 22 different personalities, 22 different music levels, 22 different educations, and the conductor (me, or anyone else), has to have the magic to join the all of these different characters and make it look seamless. To unify everyone’s thoughts as much as possible. You’ll never make it one, but at least that they can respect each other’s ideas. Respect that if this is a straight line, even if you don’t agree, you do it like that for the choir. That is very hard, and sometimes you have to impose yourself...most of the time you have to impose yourself or, as they say popularly, ‘the lion will eat you.’ And you will never learn that at school."64

She emphasizes that preparing for the role of conductor in an academic setting with only a piano does not prepare one for, among many things, work with vocal timbres and correcting pronunciation. Her conducting training with D’Profundis under Guerra’s direction is unique in that it is practical and has circumvented university training at the ISA. She asserted that conductor preparation should be practical, for example:

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64. Ladys Sotomayor, interview with Melissa Bumbach, Havana, Cuba, July 7, 2016.
Learning how to clash with the choir, with all the problems that brings. This is what strengthens you and builds you as a genuine conductor. Because it’s not all music. And you have to learn how to face that because if you don’t, you will end up crying in a corner. There is a phrase the maestra [Digna] gave me, and she doesn’t like it, but for me it’s the reality in every choir: a choir is a group of happy people conducted by an unhappy person. In a broader sense, this is not so accurate. But in some concerts, it’s like this. Your head explodes...Digna told me, ‘but it’s not like that!’ And I said, ‘Maestra, with all due respect… You know it’s like that!’ because as a conductor, you fight: ‘Why is this like that? Why isn’t this working out? Why not? And why are you talking? But be quiet! Why haven’t you learned your music?’ and then, when everything works out, everyone is happy, but the one who stays thinking, ‘Well, what do we have for tomorrow? But why did they talk? Why did…?’ And I think this is the case around the world.65

CHAPTER III

THE MUSICAL LIFE AND CAREER OF MAESTRA DIGNA GUERRA

Childhood

Digna Guerra Ramirez was born on August 6, 1945 in Havana, Cuba, the daughter of a housewife and a mason. She, her parents, and her two brothers lived in a solar, or an apartment within a larger building. Guerra loved music from early childhood. In her words, “Music was everything to me.”66 Although her family was of very modest means and did not own a television, she would spend the day listening to her family’s small radio. Her teacher discovered her aptitude for music in kindergarten. Rather than playing outside during recess, she would stand next to the piano until her teacher insisted she join the other children. After being discovered returning to the piano to attempt to play, her teacher finally allowed her to do so.

She sits me down at the piano and I start to play all the songs I had learned at kindergarten. I played the melody of the songs. But then she notices I am doing something else with my left hand. I mean, I was trying to play the harmonies of each song. At that age… I was four years old! So, then they sent to call my mom and they told her “Digna has a great talent for music,” and they said, “Do you have a piano at home?” My godfather had given me a little toy piano, but the black keys didn’t work. But I would play on it everything I heard on the radio. I would spend all day trying to play on the toy piano the melodies on the radio.67

On Fridays at Guerra’s elementary school, students attended an assembly where they sang the national anthem, celebrating holidays or anniversaries honoring important historical figures such as Cuban poet José Martí, and were dismissed to the school’s anthem, a march. Guerra played the march on the school’s piano, unable even to reach

67. Ibid.
the foot pedals, and was subsequently asked to play it in the official school ceremony. She was then asked to conduct the elementary school band. “I was a tiny little thing and the baton was a little stick they gave me to conduct [see fig. 3],” she said with amusement at the recollection.

Figure 3. Digna Guerra conducting her elementary school band. *Source:* Digna Guerra personal collection.

These were Guerra’s musical beginnings. Her mother soon enrolled her in a local music school near her apartment, where she began study of piano, solfege, and music theory.

Guerra said with prescience, “So, my life took its course…”

Guerra shared two stories recounting how she was able to pursue musical study in spite of her family’s poverty. The first concerned her study at a music conservatory:

One day, my dad, in his work as a mason, was called to work at Iglesia de Paula [a Baroque cathedral in Old Havana]…The archive of Cuban music was located there, and my dad worked on the restoration of the church…My dad went to the man who was the director of the archive, Udilio Urfé, and said: “You know? I have a daughter who likes the piano very much…and I would like to get a scholarship for her to attend the conservatory.” You were only admitted on a scholarship; you couldn’t pay your way in, just like that, you needed a scholarship. So, this man told my father: “Oh, you must be one of those fathers that wants their daughters to play the piano to entertain visitors.” You know, that is the mentality of the upper-middle class, right? And my dad says “No, no, no, no! She plays. You have to hear her play.” So, the man says “Ok, bring her.” And he took me to the church one day, and I played and got the scholarship.

The second anecdote—one of the most illuminating about Guerra’s formative years—concerned her beloved piano. While her mother was able to enroll her in music classes at a local private conservatory, she had no way to practice at home.

When I was still at the music school around the corner from my house, I went out with my friends to a cafeteria nearby to get something to drink…and we started a conversation: “What about the class, what about the piano, what about this, what about that…?” And I say, “It’s okay, but I don’t know, because I don’t have a piano and the teacher tells me that if I don’t have one I can’t continue in class, because you need to study, it doesn’t happen just like that, etc.”

There was a man listening to our conversation from the table next to us. He walked over to our table and said: “Look, I heard your conversation. There’s a man who has a show on television, and his name is Diego Gonzalez Alonso, also known as Tendedera. People call him Dieguito Tendedera. His show goes up every Tuesday at 10pm, it’s a show called Tertulia. Why don’t you write a letter to this man and tell him that you’re a little girl, that your family is poor, that you don’t have money to buy a piano, that piano is your passion, but you can’t study?”

So, he borrowed a piece of paper from the cashier and says “Okay, let’s see, let’s
write this letter: You see, I am a poor girl… blah, blah… piano is my life, but I can’t afford one…etc.” So, the man folded the letter and took it with him.

And well, that happened and I went on with my life. That was just a moment and I forgot about it, and went back to school. The next week—no one in my building had a television. Just one person had one. Because everyone there was very poor, everyone had a radio but only one lady had a television—but I remember we were sleeping, and all of a sudden there was a knock on the door and we could hear this lady’s voice “Raquel! Raquel!” (Raquel was my mom) “Wake up! Your daughter just won a piano!” …Because this man delivered the letter and Diego Tendedera read the letter on air and said he wanted all the artists to collaborate to buy a piano for the little girl called Digna Guerra. I will be forever grateful for this, because we wouldn’t have been able to afford this. My dad, with his little earnings, just couldn’t.

Figure 4. Digna with her parents at her 15th birthday. Source: Digna Guerra personal collection.

…throughout the week, artists would chip in and the show would air on Tuesdays. They said, “Mr. So and So donated 100 pesos. John Doe donated this much…” He did a fundraiser, and finally the man bought me a piano, and the piano got to our building, and it was quite the event! Just imagine: two adults and three children living in a room. My mom and dad slept on the big bed, my brothers slept in a twin iron bed, and I slept in a cot. Where would the piano go? Because the room only had space for the beds, a closet, there was a tiny kitchen
all crammed in the corner, everything in a small rectangle. And my dad says, “It doesn’t matter. We’ll figure it out.”

The day came when the piano arrived at our building. All our neighbors were pretty excited and said, “How beautiful!” and things like that. I couldn’t believe I had a piano. So, I told my mom “Put my cot under the piano.” It was an upright piano and I slept under it. At night, I would go like this, caressing it. Just hiding under it… Because it was the greatest thing in life for me. I think back on that and I’m filled with so much joy, because my mom and dad [see fig. 4] worked so hard to see me succeed.

**Education and Career**

Guerra completed her primary studies in music under professors Ofelia Busquet and Fé Castillo. She was later accepted to the *Conservatorio de la Habana* (Conservatory of Havana), where she specialized in piano with Maestra Esther Ferrer and received instruction in choral conducting with Gisela Hernández. In her fifth year of studying at the music conservatory in Havana, Cuban conductor Manuel Ochoa returned from Vienna with plans to establish the *Escuela Coral de la Habana* (Choral School of Havana), for the purposes of training choral conductors and singers. Ochoa was well-known for his ensemble, the *Coro de Madrigalistas*, who performed masterworks with orchestra, were featured on Cuban television, recorded albums, and notably revived and performed the music of Esteban Salas which had been misplaced for 150 years. Ochoa eventually exiled to Miami after the Cuban Revolution, where he founded the Miami Symphony Orchestra.

Guerra studied choral conducting and singing at the *Escuela Coral de la Habana* (Choral School of Havana) created in 1963 by Ochoa at the *Conservatorio Amadeo Roldán*.

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72. Digna Guerra, Curriculum vitae.
Guerra received influential mentorship and instruction under the direction of Professor Ochoa and received training in vocal performance under Zoila Gálvez. While at the conservatory, Guerra studied with famed percussionist Domingo Aragú, founding member of Cuba’s National Symphony Orchestra and author of an important percussion manual *Instrumentos cubanos de percussion*. She played alongside him in the orchestra for five years, sharing that this experience was “very important because reading also gives you great sight-reading skills. The symphony gives you great sight-reading, especially when you’re not playing. You have to be listening, counting, because you have to come in at the right time. This practice is very important, and it impacts directly your sight-reading and it was a great experience, too. I have tried to grasp whatever is within my reach to enrich my knowledge of music. Both musically and culturally, because this also has an influence.”

Guerra did not fulfill all of the prerequisites for entrance to the Escuela Coral (see fig. 5), but she applied regardless. Upon receiving the highest score on the entrance exam, Ochoa responded, “It doesn’t matter. You’re in.” This was the start of her choral career.

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76. Ibid.

Ochoa played a great part in my life. He taught me how to move my arms, he taught me... I learned so many things from him, really. But above all, he was a charismatic person, like a magnet. Because that’s what a conductor needs to be like, a magnet that attracts. Without losing your hierarchy, because to me (and I always say this to my students) respect lies in the baton... You could shout “Silence! Get out! Ahhh!” But if you’re not respected as a musician, people will ignore you. But when there is respect, people here say, “Whatever you give, they will take.”... I remember the day I graduated people would say “She’s just like Ochoa!” because I absorbed everything I could of what he projected as a musician and artist. Because he was truly an artist. 77

Guido López-Gavilán was a fellow student of Guerra’s at the Conservatorio Amadeo Roldán and shared in many of her significant professional and life events in these early years. He describes his personal relationship with her during this time period as follows:

Digna is my sister. Because we have known each other since that time back in the sixties, when we started to study music, and get involved with the choir…We were always together and sang songs. The closest ones were Digna, Teresita Junco (she was my wife until she died some years ago), [renowned Cuban pianist, composer, and educator] Frank Fernández, and me. We created a quartet with which we sang the new songs by Portillo de La Luz, Jose Antonio Mendez… We would go on around the clubs in Havana, we would sit by the Malecón to sing, or we would even rehearse a song while sitting in a bus. Those were beautiful times, happy times like all the time in your youth.

Those were also special times. With the triumph of the revolution, the country had this beautiful effervescence; really unique. Many things were being created from the choir school, the national symphony, the national ballet. It was the time when choir festivals were being created. The first festivals in Santiago de Cuba were being created, choirs from many different places started to come.

Digna was a very talented girl. Hardworking; a girl from an underprivileged family. Her mother, Raquel, was almost like our mother too. And we would always be inventing something musical, something to share. We were classmates, and together with Manuel Ochoa, we were the closest ones. We have practically been family ever since. We have shared work... I love her and admire her deeply...I’ve seen her how she has grown to be a well-respected personality, who gets more admiration in the choral world every day.78

Eventually, a course opened at the conservatory to train art instructors to create musical ensembles. According to Digna, “Fidel had talked about that during the first years of the revolution.”79 Digna enrolled in the course, which led to experiences teaching a wide range of choirs including children’s choirs, youth choirs, company employee choirs, and military choirs. Upon graduation, an important step in Guerra’s career occurred when she was hired as a singer at the Coro de la Radio y la Televisión (the Television and Radio Choir). Six months later, in 1965, conductor Octavio Marín

became ill, and Guerra began conducting the choir. She held that position for four years. Guerra was next hired in 1966 to teach choral music at the Conservatorio Amadeo Roldán where she was once a student. She was appointed the head of the department of choral conducting at the Escuela Nacional de Artes (National School of Arts, ENA) in 1969. Meanwhile, she was appointed the choir conductor of the Ópera Nacional de Cuba (National Opera of Cuba). At the Ópera Nacional, she collaborated with opera companies from Germany, Bulgaria, and Poland. During that period, the following operas were performed under her direction: Beethoven’s Fidelio in collaboration with the Leipzig Opera, Halka by Polish composer Stanislaw Moniuszko in collaboration with the Warsaw Opera, Il Trovatore with the Bulgarian Opera, Tosca, Il barbiere di Siviglia, Pagliacci, and Cavalleria rusticana.\(^{80}\)

After her tenure at the Ópera Nacional, Guerra traveled abroad to Germany where she studied conducting at the Hochschule fur Musik “Hanns Eisler” on a scholarship. There, she studied choral conducting with Professor Horstmüller, piano with Eberhardt Rebling, and voice with Willie Feldman. Upon her initial arrival in Germany, Guerra described finding herself alone and questioning arriving so early in June when classes did not begin until October. Guerra decided to use the time to study the books and repertoire the school provided to prepare for her admission exams, among them, Carmina Burana and Gluck’s Orfeo ed Euridice. She was especially motivated because poor performance on the admission tests would mean being sent back early to Cuba. After the conducting exam, conductors were also required to take a piano exam. Upon being asked to play a sonata, her advanced skill level led the instructors to recommend that she also major in

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80. Digna Guerra, Curriculum vitae.
piano performance. Guerra had positive relationships with all of her instructors at the
program. The sight-reading professor for the program was also the conductor of the opera
chorus for the Leipzig Opera. He took particular interest in Guerra; she described him
saying, “‘Yes, yes. I heard all about you when the company went to Cuba.’ And he gave
a huge pile of things to read and I read them. ‘Now this,’ and I read it. ‘Now that,’ and I
read it. So, he said ‘Oh, what am I going to do with you?’ Because I finished with
everything. Bing! Bang! Boom! I read everything…everything. He was very happy.’” Her
piano professor was so pleased with her work that he recommended she remain in
Germany to enter a Bach competition due to her aptitude for hearing harmony and
polyphony. She described her skill in this fashion:

I hear a lot internally. My classmates and I had a game of guessing keys, but then
it would modulate, but for me to guess the symphony I would have to wait a
while, because I had to hear everything inside: the woodwinds, the brasses, the
strings. Until the melody came forth, because it’s the last thing I hear. The melody
is the last thing I hear. I hear from the inside out. And people would ask me: “You
don’t know what this is?” But I would tell them to wait, and I would listen from
the bottom up, and then I would find the melody and say “Oh! It’s this!”

Guerra received the highest exam scores in all specialties. Due to this achievement, she
graduated with honors with special congratulations from the jury and received a
scholarship to specialize in orchestral conducting.

Guerra’s study abroad was a formative experience. From the start, the exposed
nature of the entrance exams challenged Guerra’s self-perception. For the conducting
exam, students rehearsed with the conservatory choir; the piano exam was performed
before a live audience. Guerra reminded herself, “‘You must prove yourself and show
what you’re worth, but until people see it, they won’t be convinced.’ So, I struggled a lot

at first, and I felt uncomfortable with people like that. Until one day, I stood in front of a mirror and said ‘Digna, why are you doing this? You came here to study. Clean! Clean! Clean!’ And I got over it. But I would still get upset at times.”

Another impactful element was Guerra’s immersion in a foreign culture. She related, “I am thankful for the time I spent in Germany, because culture there is so refined, very rich. Sometimes I miss it and I say, ‘Oh how I wish to go to Germany just to sit in a concert!’ Because the musical atmosphere is so refined, and they are so disciplined, so precise…I like that a lot as well.”

A misperception of her identity by some of her colleagues left her defensive.

I had a classmate in choral conducting who used to be a Thomaner, which means he was one of the children who sang at the Saint Thomas church in Leipzig. There’s an ultra-famous choir there, called the Thomanerchor. So this stuck-up Thomaner kid asks me “Is there television in Cuba?” So, I told him “No, in Cuba people still live in trees like monkeys!” Yes, yes. That drove me crazy, and there were three more like him. I would answer back and please! My whole first year was like that.

Once her studies were complete, Guerra returned to her island, declining the offers to continue her work in Europe. “In the end, I didn’t stay for the Bach competition. I said “No, I want to go back home, I miss my mom.”

82. Digna Guerra, July 7, 2016.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid.
85. Ibid.
Debut at *Coro Nacional de Cuba*

Guerra returned from her studies in Germany in 1974, and in 1975, was appointed the conductor of the *Coro Nacional* (see fig. 6). Concurrently, the organization *Consejo Científico Metodológico* (Scientific Methodological Council) was formed with the purpose of founding the country’s premier arts institution, the university-level *Instituto Superior de Artes* (Superior Institute of Arts), commonly referred to as the ISA. Guerra is a founding member of the ISA, which was officially founded in 1976, and an integral part of the original curriculum design. She was named the head of the choral department and retains the title of Associate Professor. Around this time period, Guerra was also named an Assistant Director of the *Orquesta Sinfónica de Cuba* (Symphonic Orchestra of Cuba) under the direction of Maestro Leo Brouwer. Guerra described herself as restless, which led to her creation of *Coro Entrevoces* (meaning “between voices”), a chamber ensemble made up of selected members from the *Coro Nacional*, in 1981. Guerra asserted that she felt “truly satisfied” with the many awards and accomplishments of the group under her tenure, describing them as “capable of the most amazing feats”.

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86. Digna Guerra, Curriculum vitae.
Musical Influences and Other Musical Pursuits

When asked about her musical influences, Guerra quickly responded:

Musically, Ochoa. Of course he holds a special place. My choral conducting professor in Germany, who used the movement of his hands… Because I conduct more with my hands than with my arms. I am very intimate in my conducting, very inside the body. That is what I teach: from the conductor’s point of view, the movement is guided by the hands. The hand draws the music. I learned a lot from this professor, his name was Horstmüller. 88

As for additional instruments she learned in her courses of study, Digna shared an experience she had learning and teaching accordion from her term as an arts instructor (see fig. 7):

When you are an arts instructor, you have to learn to play guitar and accordion, because you have easy access to them. Because back in the day you couldn’t just find a piano anywhere, you know? So, I learned to play the accordion, and I love how it sounds. So much so, that while I was still a student I was chosen to perform with the professional accordion ensemble. Because I immediately figured out all the buttons and how to work them, so I joined the group and said “Okay! This is nice!”

One noteworthy accomplishment was unfortunately sullied by controversy. Guerra wrote a book titled *El Canto* (Singing). She described the regrettable event with displeasure:

The Ministry of Education asked me to write that book for daycare educators. For the teachers that work with children in these institutions, which in some cases are even newborns. Since they teach them to sing, the book was meant to tell them what was appropriate so that their voices wouldn’t get damaged. So, then I started to write the book by chapters, and there was this consultant the ministry hired to

89. Digna Guerra, July 7, 2016.
oversee where I was in the process. I asked a girl from the music institute to help me as a collaborator…when the book was published, the name of the ministry’s consultant appeared on top of mine. As if she had been the main author. That book was a fraud, a big fraud, and I even made a public accusation. But the book had already been printed and was distributed like that. That woman’s name is there, and my name is under it, as the co-author…she has never dedicated her life to conduct a choir.  

Guerra authored a second text, El Director (The Director), which is used as a reference in the area of choral conducting.

Alongside her many accomplishments as a pianist and conductor, Guerra is also a trained singer (see fig. 8). Guido López-Gavilán shared one such collaboration. In 1979, Digna sang as the alto soloist in the quartet for Beethoven’s ninth symphony, conducted by López-Gavilán. This event was the first time that was performed after the triumph of the revolution. It hadn’t been played since, and it generated a mythical environment…We took on the task of organizing a choir with everyone who was just starting to sing at the schools, with professional choirs…We did it with the national symphony…It was a great success, and we had to repeat it more than once. People couldn’t fit at the theater; it was a beautiful moment.

Other works in which Guerra has performed as a vocal soloist include Vivaldi's Gloria, Pergolesi's Stábat Mater, the world premiere of Michel Legrand's Concerto Oratorio, and Mikis Theodorakis’ oratorio Canto General based on poems of Pablo Neruda.

93. Digna Guerra, Curriculum vitae
Guerra’s formal vocal training has also allowed her to sing solos with the Coro Nacional in the past. She no longer sings due to vocal issues that have arisen after years of long and demanding work hours and lack of time and discipline to allow herself to heal. She would vocally demonstrate in rehearsal or private solo vocal coaching, and this sometimes led to her singing the solos herself. “I would tell people, ‘Perform this solo like this, do this or that’ and in the end, they would ask me, ‘Profe (Prof/Teach), you should sing it.’ And well, I would end up singing it.”

CHAPTER IV

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL WORK AND AWARDS

Coro Nacional de Cuba

The Coro Nacional de Cuba began in the Sierra Maestra mountains by Fidel Castro’s rebels as they prepared for the Cuban Revolution, which ended in victory in 1959. Cuban revolutionaries Ernesto “Ché” Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos took charge of all cultural aspects of the choir and many soldiers joined the ensemble. As the revolution came to a close, conductor Serafín Pro Guardiola took over direction of the choir, which was renamed the Coro del Teatro Nacional (Choir of the National Theater) upon their return to Havana. The choir’s primary repertoire of Renaissance music led to another name change to the Coro Polifónico, which then became the Coro Nacional de Cuba not long before Digna Guerra’s appointment. The current iteration of the Coro Nacional began in 1960. The ensemble performed challenging polyphonic repertoire and premiered multiple works, including Shostakovich’s Ten Poems. Pro led the group for 14 years before becoming ill and proposing Digna Guerra as his successor before retiring. When Guerra was named conductor in 1975 (see fig. 9), the ensemble’s performance repertoire was notably lacking in Cuban music, which she was instrumental in increasing. Guerra drew from existing scores as well as commissioning new works and also introduced the choir to Latin American music and African American spirituals, still one of her current specialties.
Figure 9. An early advertisement for the *Coro Nacional* under Digna’s new direction. 
*Source*: Digna Guerra personal collection.

Structure

Guerra is the conductor of the group, having had an administrator to take care of non-artistic logistics from the beginning of her work at the institution. She considers herself the “headquarters.”  

Guerra has also given private conducting lessons in the past, and considered observing her first in Coro Nacional rehearsals to be part of the learning process. Ladys Sotomayor is her only current student as Guerra has been unable to take on additional students at home and from abroad due to her limited time. Additional choir staff includes an administrator, a producer, a secretary, and a cultural activity specialist. Guerra’s husband Benjamin serves as the cultural activity specialist in addition to filling the position of the organization’s manager.

The *Coro Nacional* has approximately fifty singers at any given time. The singers in the large choir also sing in two chamber choirs: *Entrevoces* conducted by Guerra, and

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D’Profundis conducted by Ladys Sotomayor. After *Entrevoces* was formed, the remainder of the singers continued singing in only the main choir. Eventually, Guerra decided to form another choir for those singers as well, which became *D’Profundis*. *Entrevoces* has 20 voices: ten men and ten women. D’Profundis has approximately 30 singers.

![Figure 10. Digna Guerra conducting the Coro Nacional Infantil. Source: Digna Guerra personal collection.](image)

A national children’s choir exists, the *Coro Nacional Infantil* (see fig. 10), which was also under Guerra’s direction until recently. Due to Guerra’s extensive workload, the choir is now under the direction of Sotomayor. The children’s choir is currently at 30 singers, but it was once at 80 children and Guerra intends to raise that number to at least 40-50. In addition to the main children’s choir, there is a choir of “itty bitty” children that Guerra affectionately refers to as *piojitos*, a Cuban term of endearment for small children.
She shared a vignette of a performance with this group: “It’s very funny because each of them is in their own little world. There is one girl in the front row and when the teacher is conducting, this little girl is making faces. Everybody laughs…”96 In the children’s choir, the age limit is 8-14 years. The age limit of the younger children’s choir is from one and a half to three, and there are currently about 40 children in that ensemble. The youngest children’s choir was named Rayitos de Luz (Rays of Sunshine) by its directors, which follows the tradition of directors naming their groups. Guerra prefers names such as “children’s choir” or “the little ones,” since the children eventually move on to other choirs. There are currently singers in the Coro Nacional who were founding members of the children’s choir. Another choir named La Preparatoria (the Preparatory Choir) is made up of older girls training for the Coro Nacional.

The Coro Nacional has over 50 performances per year. In preparation, they have a full-time schedule of rehearsal. Coro Nacional and Entrevoces singer Yamila Monje described a typical week:

We start the day…rehearsing with Coro Nacional…that goes until noon…[We rehaerse] every day of the week. From Monday to Friday, and when we have important events, we even rehearse on Saturdays. This is to guarantee the quality of the concert. [We rehearse] until 11:30 when we have our lunch time. Around 12:30, we reincorporate for Entrevoces. Every project goes to their rehearsal…we rehearse until 2:00 or 2:30 depending on how intense it is…if we are still learning, we all rehearse by part (the sopranos, the tenors). But if not, we are set. Because first comes the learning and then comes the big assembly where we work with Digna, and she knows what she wants.97

The choir itself is funded by the state. On top of their national choir salaries, Entrevoces and D’Profundis receive separate salaries for their chamber ensembles duties.

“It’s a double salary because it’s double the work, double the repertoire, double the

concerts.” For its funding, the government expects the choir to “[elevate] the cultural level of the people. Because this is part of the national culture.” When asked if one of the goals of the choir is to be a cultural ambassador that represents Cuba internationally, Guerra responded that this is a responsibility of the choir “both inside and outside of Cuba,” but acknowledges that when they travel, they are representing their country. Of *Entrevores*, she says, “we are a choir, but we are a Cuban choir. And in that moment, we are representing all Cuban culture.”

**Coro Nacional Infantil**

In 1995, Guerra expanded the Coro Nacional by creating the *Coro Nacional Infantil* (National Children’s Choir). There was an open audition call in Havana and children from all over the city attended. This ensemble differs from the *cantorías* mentioned later in this chapter in that children were selected based on their ability. As *cantorías* were growing and developing, Guerra desired for this to be a specialized opportunity distinct from that project.

I said, “I don’t want this to be another *cantoria* [non-select community children’s choir], I want a selective choir where we can sing real music.” So we chose eighty children and sang music by classical composers. Because some old teachers would say “No, no, no: you have to start singing in unison,” and I would say “Yes, yes, ma’am, thanks for your kind input.” But we only did one work in unison, then we did “Veris leta facies” from *Carmina Burana*, we did things by Mendelssohn, Schubert…we sang all sorts of things with those kids. Polyphony from the renaissance, all sorts of things.

99. Ibid.
100. Ibid.
101. Ibid.
102. Ibid.
When asked if the children were capable of such challenging literature, Guerra responded emphatically regarding what is possible with discipline and high expectations:

Of course they are! It’s the teachers who are wrong. They think a child can’t do that. A child can, and they absorb everything you give them...We did the complete *Stabat Mater* with the kids and a string orchestra. It was amazing, it was performed at the *Amadeo Roldan* theater, which is now undergoing renovations. I always pursued good repertoire. In that sense, I don’t care if you just got off of a plane, you are coming here to learn. I am not going to do repertoire just to entertain. I need to inform you culturally through my repertoire. Therefore, don’t count on me to do any silly nonsense.\(^{103}\)

**Chamber Choirs *Entrevoces* and *D’Profundis***

The singers in *Entrevoces* are individually chosen by Guerra. Some singers must wait seven to eight years singing in the *Coro Nacional* before being placed in the ensemble, and there is no guarantee of eventual placement regardless of longevity.

Guerra shared an anecdote about this phenomenon:

There was a girl that joined the national choir a while ago. She came from another choir, she left that other choir, but her main goal was to join *Entrevoces*. Time would pass and she would keep asking me to try her out. I told her I had already tried her out and that’s how she made the cut for the national choir. In the end, she tells me one day, “No, I’m leaving, because all I wanted was to join *Entrevoces*.” And I told her, “Oh no, honey, it doesn’t work like that.”\(^{104}\)

*D’Profundis* was formed in 1998 with conductor Adriana Sanabria to meet the desire for a second chamber choir for the *Coro Nacional* singers that were not in *Entrevoces*. The repertoire is selected partially current conductor Ladys Sotomayor and partially by Digna Guerra. Guerra examines the repertoire Sotomayor has chosen and approves it, often suggesting suitable repertoire that she has comes across.

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104. Ibid.
The Coro Nacional had two significant experiences in 2016: a concert performance with The Rolling Stones (see fig. 11) and Barack Obama’s visit to the island. Guerra shares the experience of finding out about their invitation to sing with the Rolling Stones in concert:

The thing with the Rolling Stones was one of the most beautiful things. I was driving to the market and my phone rang. When I pick up someone says: “Is this Digna Guerra? This is Mark Gillespie, from the staff of the Rolling Stones and we want your choir, Entrevoces, to sing with the Rolling Stones at their concert in Havana…” and then he says, “are you still there?” I say, “Yes, let me just process all of this.” “Do you accept?” “But of course!” I was dumbstruck, I was not expecting this kind of news. So, he says, “I will send the music over tonight then, with all the information. We are heading over there tomorrow to film the choir in concert attire so that you can sing this and I can send it over to the Rolling Stones so they can listen.” I ran over to the choir, and told them, “Choir: I have just received a phone call asking for the following…” Everyone was thrilled.105

Figure 11. Rehearsing for the Rolling Stones concert. Source: Digna Guerra personal collection.

There was almost no time to prepare, with the music arriving that same day by email. Two days after sending the recording, the choir was approved. Immediately after

this, Guerra had a trip to New York for a United Nations women’s summit. Guerra continued:

We spent the whole day with them at the stadium. But it was so beautiful. It was truly impactful. Suddenly seeing this man, Mick Jagger, jumping around as if he were a 16-year-old kid, such energy! He didn’t stop for a minute in the whole concert. He was jumping and skipping here and there. When the choir came out, I remember we [sang You Can’t Always Get What You Want] for the final song. They did an encore afterwards, something really well known: Satisfaction…when the choir came out, people cheered. They were cheering so loudly that we just thought “Oh my God, how beautiful!” and well, we sang, everyone was very happy, and we finished singing and then they took us inside the ships they had over there, to wait for the last song to be over. And they played the last one, got in the car and left…this was a historic feat because when would we have dreamt of singing with the Rolling Stones? But this just fell from heaven.106

When then-U.S. President Barack Obama visited Cuba in 2016, it had been 88 years since a U.S. president had done so. During Obama’s visit, Guerra was in the United States, but left the choir prepared to sing the U.S. and Cuban national anthems and instructed them to begin on Sotomayor’s signal. Guerra shared her excitement as a spectator watching from abroad, saying “I saw them in Miami. I was visiting a relative in Miami and I said, ‘Look at my people!’” 107

Auditions and Singers

To audition for the children’s choir, prospective singers take a test or sing a song to determine their intonation and ability to remain in one key. Singers are expected to echo back auditory and rhythmic exercises. For the adult choir auditions, singers perform two prepared songs with the expectation that they perform them perfectly. Singers are

107. Ibid.
also asked to sing a Cuban song and sight-read. When Yamila Monje auditioned for the Coro Nacional, she described herself as inexperienced.

I didn’t graduate from any music school...When I arrived in Havana in the year 2000, I came in and auditioned, but I really wanted to get in at the Instituto Superior de Arte...when Digna saw me, and showed interest in my voice, and I told her I hadn’t graduated from anywhere...She told me she wasn’t interested in that. That she was really interested in my voice. But I could learn music with time and that I could do it right here in the choir and overcome that. That I would have many fellow singers who were going to help me learn the music. They would help me with my reading, my scores, and all those things. And well, I told her I was willing, and she told me I would be on trial for three months [as is the case with all incoming singers].”

Monje admitted that “there are very few [untrained musicians] like me. Because when it comes to rehearsing the repertoire, if you don’t know how to read music, it’s a bit harder. And we are a professional choir. We can’t lag every time she asks us to learn a work in a week… Because this is how demanding she can be.”

The demographics of the choir are “mixed,” including “black, white, mixed race, half-Asian” ethnicities. Guerra shared that “it is a representation of the ethnic composition of Cuba.” The ages of singers in Entrevoces range from 30-40+ years of age, older than the singers in D’Profundis, who are generally in their 20s.

…age and experience are correlated, but I always like to have mostly young people because they will stay longer in the choir. Permanence in the choir is paramount, because you can’t just come and sing for a year and then leave. Because there are choirs out there that sing this work and then they fall apart and come back together again to sing another work…To me, they have no identity. You have to look for an identity for your choir, and it lies in the sound. In Entrevoces, the majority have been with me for years, we have grown old together.

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109. Ibid.
111. Ibid.
Under Guerra’s direction, there have been numerous prominent singers in the Coro Nacional. Some that she listed included bass Santiago Herrera, baritone Jaime Ponzoda, tenor Bismarck Estupiñan who specialized in spirituals, and currently, light soprano Yamila Monje “with a wonderful sweetness to her voice.” Monje sang with the national choir for seven years before being selected for Entrevoces. Former Coro Nacional singer Miriam Ramos “has been an exquisite trovadora (a singer specializing in the Trova Cubana genre) for many years now.”112 Multiple singers have moved from the Coro Nacional to solo singing careers. Singers in the group come from a variety of backgrounds, including instrumentalists who play piano or woodwinds and music theorists. There are singers that have graduated from the ISA, but some have graduated from the ENA, or the intermediate level of training. Those who come as singers must be trained to adapt to the sound that Guerra requires. Monje shared that “still, sometimes, for your [required government] social service, they place you in different places, and sometimes they are placed here.” Singers can be placed without an audition and without the maestra’s consent, “but she also determines whether we need those voices…and if the voice is fit for the choir, because not everyone can sing in a choir.”113

Monje described the rehearsal expectations for singers and the mutual connection between singers and conductor in this work environment:

Every voice has a chair, a leader. Afterwards, when it’s time to join all the voices, she takes care of the music. The learning process is done by voice [part], but when it comes to piecing the work together and the interpretation, then it is up to her. The interpretation part with Digna is very hard because she can explain the work like this: “I want it like this, I want it like that.” But she doesn’t always follow a set of rules, or the sheet music (if it says to sing piano here and forte

there). This is part of her personality; however she feels it. This is why I say it’s hard, because she doesn’t feel the same way all the time.

Sometimes she says, “No, I don’t want it like this today, today I want…” so you have to read her mind …flexibility is one of the most important things you will need here in the choir. Like she says “I am not a machine; I am a human being. And as a human being I have feelings.”…when we have an enthusiastic audience, a supportive audience, you feel excited. So, it’s the same. Because music is transmitting positive energy. And when you see that the audience is positive and gives you their energy, well you also get filled with enthusiasm and you pass that energy to her and this is how she’s going to conduct.\(^1\)

Perception of Coro Nacional

In Guerra’s view, “it’s really not appropriate for me to say this, but Coro Nacional and Entrevoces are the best choirs out there. They are at the top. I have been told we are all over there on top, and then there’s a gap, and then come the rest of the choirs.”\(^2\) However, Guerra reserves her praise for when it is truly merited.

I feel very accomplished because I have achieved things, and when there are things that don’t work out, I am the first critic. I don’t conform, I can easily say “This was trash and you’ve made a mistake here,” but when things are well, nobody can question me because I am the choir’s first critic. I am not easily pleased. I am not the person who says “Congratulations! It was great!” if I know it was a load of garbage.\(^3\)

Leonor Suarez shared her impression of the Coro Nacional’s place in context within the history of Cuba’s choral system:

After Serafin passed away, Digna became the conductor [see fig. 12], and from that moment, Digna imprints her own vision and signature style, but as an institution, it’s historical. If you want a historical representation of the Cuban choral movement, that is Coro Nacional. And with this I’m not trying to say it’s the most or the least important. I just want to say that there’s history and significance.\(^4\)

115. Ibid.
116. Ibid.
From the perspective of a singer and conductor of the Coro Nacional, Sotomayor shared the following about Cuban’s perception of their national choir:

I think the general population in Cuba sees the Coro Nacional as something extraordinary. It’s like an icon of the choral culture in Cuba. I noticed this on the first national tour, when Coro Nacional traveled across the whole country. This was in November or December, 2015. Every time we arrived in a province in Cuba, when they said on the radio or TV that this was the national choir, people would react like, “Wow! It’s Coro Nacional!” Besides the reception, you would see this sense of joy in the faces of every Cuban. This is when you realize, outside of Havana, this is when you realize and how much Cuba loves Coro Nacional. How identified it feels with it, how much it respects and admires it. Of having their national choir conducted by Digna Guerra.  

Sotomayor shared that the *Coro Nacional* is “dressed to the nines”¹¹⁹ by virtue of their current conductor. She stressed that she did not mean to diminish the qualities of other choirs, rather, they offer different things. She wonders about the future under different direction.

I have thought of this many times: when the time comes, and the maestra is no longer with us (because this is the law of life), what will become of *Coro Nacional*? It’s still an unanswered question, because *Coro Nacional* is because of Digna Guerra…she used to tell me the stories of her life when she was a little girl…there was a piano where she was, and she would play the melody and would add the bass without even knowing anything about the piano. I used to tell her, “Profe, you are a 20th century Mozart!” To have a child doing that at two or three years old, that is quite impressive.¹²⁰

Delfina Acay asserted that the institution of the *Coro Nacional* is a “flagship” and a “pillar”, making it the example for other choirs in Cuba to follow.¹²¹ She believes recordings of the choir serve as models due to Guerra’s interpretation so that listening to them becomes a form of practical musical lesson. Another factor affecting the perception of the choir is the size. Most other professional choirs in Cuba are chamber choirs, which allows the Coro Nacional to perform different repertoire than others are capable of due to their performing forces. Acay described the sound of the ensemble as clean and with a wide range of dynamics and vocal colors.

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¹²⁰. Ibid.

Festivals

Guerra has been involved in the organization of numerous festivals open to national and international participants. One such event is the biennial festival CorHabana. This festival emerged as a result of a meeting with choral professionals from Cuba and the United States. It was facilitated via an agency in the United States called Music Contact, which facilitates choir travel around the world. The first CorHabana in 1999 garnered 13 choirs from the United States and numerous Cuban choirs as well. This initial festival was named *Encuentro Coral Cuba-Estados Unidos* (Cuba-United States Choral Encounter). The following year, there was an unfortunate reduction in attendance:

We did it in 2000 too, but then Bush became president and started kicking things around and forbidding travels. So this decreased choir circulation, we got fewer and fewer choirs, until they stopped coming altogether because they would get penalized so things were over. But then we decided we wouldn’t lose the venue, so we were going to carry on with the festival. So then, [my husband and our manager] Benjamín told me “Call it CorHabana.” It was Benjamín’s idea to call it CorHabana because it was no longer an encounter between choirs from Cuba and USA. It was a shame too, because it was so wonderful…We would have a final party where everyone would come together and mingle. It was precious, precious, but it’s a shame that this cultural exchange initiative was lost. Because our people have always loved each other, the rest of the battles are a different story.122

Guerra’s role is president of the festival, and the *Centro Nacional de Música de Concierto* (National Center for Concert Music) is in charge of all of the logistics for the event.

On its website, America Cantat is described as “the premier cultural music festival of the Americas, and…the only noncompetitive choir festival to unite singers, conductors, and festival choirs from North, Central, and South America in a ten-day

cultural and musical immersion program.”

Guerra served as President of America Cantat and hosted the festival in Cuba for its fifth iteration. Oscar Escalada describes the experience as follows in the *Choral Journal*:

America Cantat 5 was held in Havana, Cuba, during Easter 2007 and was produced by the Music Cuban Institute (Instituto Cubano de la Música) at the Palacio de Convenciones, a huge building where the People’s Assembly takes place. Cuban choirs such as Exaudi, conducted by María Felicia Perez; the National Choir of Cuba, conducted by Digna Guerra; Schola Cantorum Coralina, conducted by Alina Orraca; and the Chamber Choir of Matanzas, conducted by José Antonio Méndez, gave the welcome, singing works by Cuban composers Roberto Valera and Guido Lopez Gavilan. The closing gala was held at the Teatro Karl Marx, and the Swedish choir Amanda and the Cuban group Vocal Sampling gave outstanding performances. The 4,000 seat hall was completely full. Some of the outstanding conductors invited to lead the workshops were Electo Silva and Sonia McCormack from Cuba; Doreen Rao from Canada; Víctor Alarcón from Chile; André Pires from Brazil; Robert Sund from Sweden; and Nestor Zadoff, Ricardo Barrera, and Dante Andreo from Argentina. The Songbridge was also included, but unfortunately it was without Erkki, who passed away some time before. An outstanding concert was presented at the Amadeo Roldán Theatre featuring Chucho Valdés [see fig. 13] and Omara Portuondo [of Buena Vista Social Club fame], a famous Cuban pianist and singer.¹²⁴


Guerra will soon serve as Co-Artistic Director of a new choral festival in Cuba alongside American Choral Directors Association Executive Director Dr. Tim Sharp. The festival is named *Viva La Amistad Choral Festival* (Long Live Friendship Choral Festival) and will take place in Havana on July 2-7, 2018.\(^{125}\)

**Cantorias**

Guerra is involved in an initiative to bring community children’s choirs to hundreds of children in underprivileged areas with the assistance of former student and Coro Nacional singer Delfina Acay. The “social community project” of the *cantorias* is

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the brainchild of Digna Guerra (see fig. 14); Acay serves as the advisor. This project arose from a deep love of country and a desire to be of service. Guerra shared the initiation of this profoundly important project:

I spoke on behalf of the municipality that elected me and said it would be a good idea, since there are so many people facing hardship, to favor the children from those neighborhoods by organizing choirs, getting them interested in music, getting guitars and percussion instruments for their community centers. Because we went straight to them to ask them “What do you want to study? What do you want to do?” So we could get them out of the problems they have and get them interested in music.¹²⁶

Figure 14. Digna Guerra with the children of a cantoría. Source: Digna Guerra personal collection.

She gave an example of one of the neighborhoods served by the cantorías:

This neighborhood is called Los Sitios. They have a lot of problems. So, we went there with our own children choirs, we visited every elementary school of that popular council, and there are many. We held a concert at each school so that children could see what we were talking about. Then we said, “Let’s see: who wants to sing like us? Who wants to participate?” They would raise their hand and we would write down their name. So, we created a choir in every school. At least this helps them.

Their teachers have told us that many of the kids who had strange behaviors have made a substantial improvement, they are calmer. This means music has helped them in this sense. So this is a social endeavor, which I think is very important. Because oftentimes people tie being a deputy [a position Guerra holds in the Cuban government] with other things, but we don’t get paid here; it’s a service to our country. Because people in other countries get rich from this, but not here. I mean, I am satisfied with what I am doing in this capacity.  

Acay’s detailed narrative of her experience forming this program revealed a deep personal attachment to the work and the children and families with whom she works as well as a profound and sincere admiration and respect for Digna Guerra and her service to music education in Cuba’s underserved communities:

Maestra Digna…does not only dedicate herself to music. Her love to the land where she was born makes her want to help, even if it’s little by little; the government, the state, our children, whatever it is, but help…The maestra calls me to say “Fifi, please help: we’re going to do something in the municipality of Centro Habana. A neighborhood with many social issues, where kids need artistic projects to get them out of their house, so they can be in a cleaner environment, mentally healthy; to take away the hours when they would be on the streets.”

…we started having meetings to organize the project. But this was a project she created. They chose the neighborhood in Havana, it’s called Consejo Popular, it has many social difficulties. Many kids are sometimes abandoned, in the sense that the parents don’t dedicate enough time to them. We knocked on every door and managed to enroll three hundred children.

…We [based the project] in a zone where the parents have the biggest social issues. And this was done for the children. Because the parents are already being taken care of by social workers who take care of those problems that affect society. There is no art school in that community. There is the Conservatorio Amadeo Roldan, but it is for children who have been chosen and they have already been through elementary school, and so it doesn’t count. There is also the

Casa de la Cultura, where they offer workshops in different forms of art. They also have instructors, but they need stronger advisement.

…what we did in terms of management, with Digna’s proposal, was massive. Yes, that is one of the things that makes me proud. It’s one of the things that I’ve worked hard for, I got headaches, I suffered for it, but it’s my joy. Children come, honey, kiss me and say, “Here comes our teacher, Fifi!” and they come running for about half a block… There is nothing that compares.128

It was evident from the interviews with Acay and Guerra that the project of the cantorías was not simply a professional project focused on musical excellence, but a deeply personal endeavor grounded in patriotism, love of fellow Cubans, and a desire to be of service in an area that is needed. Acay was no longer able to sing with the Coro Nacional due to health issues and raising her daughter. However, when Guerra called upon her to co-lead the cantorías, Acay felt it was her duty. “When she told me ‘Fifi, help me,’ what was I supposed to do?”129 Similarly, Guerra elicited this response from many of her colleagues and students. The respect she garnered resulted in their trust and a sincere desire to follow her leadership.

The program has been built up to six choirs. Acay describes them generally as “not top quality,” but proudly assessed two of the choirs as sounding “really well.” Some of the goals of the cantorías are cultural enrichment, socialization, community-building, enjoyment of music-making, equity, and education, compared to the children’s choirs that are selected by audition and expressly given challenging repertoire. Acay describes the communities the cantorías serve as being in “greater need.” Acay described one of the meeting places for a cantoria: “One of the schools has a classroom which is half as big as this [small room], it doesn’t have a window, the fan that we borrow from the

129. Ibid.
headmistress is half-broken, and they rehearse like that.”¹³⁰ Some of the children that participate “had never ventured out of their neighborhood, even three blocks from their house…”¹³¹ Guerra was able to acquire ten guitars for the program through the government, and through persistence in continuing to make phone calls, she was also able to obtain drums and additional guitars. Digna’s involvement goes beyond material and administrative support. Her pride in the musical work with the children was visible in her smile and her affectionate expression as she discussed her work with the project.

Figure 15. Children’s choirs and cantorías performing at CorHabana 2016 in Havana. Source: Melissa Bumbach personal collection.

¹³⁰ Delfina Acay, July 5, 2016.
¹³¹ Ibid.
The 2016 CorHabana choral festival specifically featured children’s choirs (see fig. 15). The attendance of the relatively new cantorías was a significant success. Acay described the challenges the children faced in their everyday lives to contextualize what a feat it was for them to attend the event at all. At the CorHabana final concert, the cantorías and children’s choirs had different colorful uniforms on, some elaborate and some simple, some purchased and some made. In the past, some groups had acquired uniforms by organizing fundraisers to order the clothing from a workshop. In other cases, one parent or grandparent sews while another provides the fabric. During Acay’s time as conductor of the Coro Nacional Infantil, the Ministry of Culture would provide uniforms outright, however, this no longer occurs. The government does still assist in some way, providing fabric or the use of a workshop to produce the uniforms or providing a supplement for other expenses. In some smaller groups, parents make arrangements together to pay. In the neighborhoods the cantorías serve, “the majority are very poor, and we can’t ask them to buy anything. We asked them to come either with their school uniforms, or with a white shirt, jeans, a skirt, shorts, whatever they have.”

Acay expressed her pride in the children and admiration for Guerra’s efforts to facilitate this accomplishment. “What happened there, to have in CorHabana, an international event, choirs of children that come from such difficult backgrounds…That was Digna’s doing!” Even with all of the Maestra’s other responsibilities, Acay knows she can depend on Guerra should any needs arise. The day of the cantorías’ performance at CorHabana, there was a hitch in the plans that likely went unnoticed by the many attendees. “Before the closing act, I called to tell her, ‘The buses didn’t come to pick up

133. Ibid.
the children!’ and she immediately started making phone calls, she called the minister, and the buses showed up.” 134 While it would be enough to lead the National Choir, mentor younger conductors, travel to present and tour with her choirs, and facilitate international choral festivals, “Maestra Digna does not limit herself to her personal achievements with *Coro Nacional* and *Entrevoces*; she goes above and beyond to reach out to the children….she does not limit herself to doing just enough, or even more than enough than what’s expected for the choral conductor of such important works as the ones here. She needs to protect, she needs to help.” 135

**National Government Work**

Guerra also serves in the Cuban government. She began two and a half years ago and is currently serving a five-year term. She described the structure within which her position situated:

The parliament is comprised of deputies that are elected from the bottom. I was elected to represent the neighborhood where I was born, which is a poor neighborhood. Out of nowhere, I was chosen by the people, but I don’t know where any of that came from. One day someone from the national assembly knocked on my door, “Look, you have been nominated for this. Do you accept?” And I said yes. So, you are elected from the bottom of the pyramid. The base of this pyramid says “John, Paul and Jane.” Then elections come and people vote, and if you win, you go up. And you can keep on climbing. I went straight from the base to the national assembly. Otherwise, you are a base delegate and you have other duties. But I became a deputy of the national assembly right from the start. 136

Guerra is also the Vice-President of the *Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba* (Writers and Artists Union of Cuba, UNEAC), now in its 55th year of existence. The

135. Ibid.
136. Ibid.
association is comprised of the top artists in the fields of music, general performing arts, literature, visual arts, film, radio and television. Guerra is fiercely devoted to her country and to the revolution that she acknowledges for providing her with the opportunities to pursue her love of music and develop her skills. Of her position in the UNEAC, she says:

…in this union, I have many responsibilities. I am caught in this never-ending whirlwind. But I think that this vocation to serve my country is important. From my profession, because as a humble girl, my country gave me everything and gave me the chance to get an education. This is a topic that many people don’t understand: I am thankful for the revolution because it gave me the means to develop the talent I had. Because I once said this on an interview and someone in social media asked, “But what about your talent?” As if they don’t know that the world is filled with talented people living in the streets, without ever having an opportunity to develop, or a school they can attend to develop the talents that nature has given them. And I was lucky to have the Cuban revolution on my side, which allowed me to do so. I was able to do this, and even go to Germany on a scholarship. When would I have dreamt of studying in Germany? Never! I would have never been able to do this on my own means! Therefore, I am simply grateful, and I will do everything I can do for my country.  

When asked about her self-perception of her position within the Cuban choral community, Guerra responded simply, “I do my job.” She admitted that it is “not an easy industry. Especially in Havana. Not so much outside. I get along with every conductor, with everyone. But there are people here in Havana that…[sighs]”  

It is evident that Sotomayor views her mentor and fellow conductor with fervent esteem.

I think that Cuban musicians…see Digna like this: all the way on the top. I think we all need to get a little closer to her so we can feed ourselves of all the cultural legacy that she has. Whether it is because of all her years of experience, whether it is because of her natural talent, whether it is because of all she has been through. Whatever the reason. We should take more advantage of her from a musical standpoint. Yes, she has been influential, but we should enrich ourselves more with her knowledge. Because her work has been often framed within the realm of choral music, but she is much more than a choral music. She is a musician and she can give as much to a violinist or an oboist, or pianist (that goes


138. Ibid.
without saying). We should get more involved with her and stop classifying her in Choral Music.\footnote{139}

Acay asserts that Digna Guerra and Cuban choral music are inseparable:

…you can’t talk about Cuban choral music without talking about Maestra Digna. It’s because of the way she does it…She has been a teacher to everyone. Furthermore, I think she has taught every conductor in Cuba. Except for Maestra Carmen Collado, who is the same age as her, and when they both went to Europe; Maestra Carmen studied in Hungary and Maestra Digna was in Germany. But afterwards, here in Cuba, she was a teacher to almost every conductor that we currently have….When ISA was created (I was in that first generation)…almost everyone wanted to be her student. I’m telling you, the rest are very good teachers, but her way of treating people is very appealing. You can be both demanding and a good teacher. You can be a tough critic and tell the truth, even if it hurts, but only if you do it the right way. But not every teacher does this.\footnote{140}

**Additional International Work**

Guerra’s work with the UNEAC led to her involvement in a related organization named the *Asociación Cubana de Naciones Unidas* (Cuban Association of the United Nations, ACNU), a local group under the auspices of the United Nations. In 2016, the United Nations held a women’s empowerment summit that was attended by representatives from countries around the world. The UNEAC chose Guerra to attend, give a lecture, and participate in all of the activities at the event. Guerra was very passionate about the valued role women play in Cuban society and had the following to share about her experience:

Well, I spoke about the situation of women in Cuba, because we are privileged as compared to what happens to women and girls around the world. Things are very different for us here. So, I was in New York a couple of days –I thought the buildings were really tall! It was interesting; a new experience for me. Very interesting, and of course, I didn’t hold back, I had a lot to say.\footnote{141}

\footnote{139. Ladys Sotomayor, July 7, 2016.} \footnote{140. Delfina Acay, July 5, 2016.} \footnote{141. Digna Guerra, July 7, 2016.}
Regarding this Cuban female empowerment Guerra referenced at the United Nations women’s summit, there is a related phenomenon I discussed with Leonor Suarez. There is a notably large ratio of female choral conductors compared to male choral conductors in Cuba. Suarez believes this may be part of Cuban culture, although she does not have an explanation for the trend considering that there are fewer women than men serving in government positions, as is the case in many governments worldwide. In Cuba, singing is not considered a feminine activity. Whether that contributes to the trend is unclear. In the United States, there are fewer female choral conductors than male at every level except for children’s choruses. Suarez noticed this trend in the U.S. and in Europe as well.

…it in Cuba, which is a less developed country, and has a more sexist culture, where men prevail in leadership roles, that is not the case in the choral world. In school for example, at the Amadeo Roldan, where I worked for many years, I believe if there was a period of 10 years in which no men enrolled. Some men enrolled at ENA from other provinces. Therefore in the Cuban choral world, there’s only five men and more than fifteen women. I don’t know if it’s cultural, or that the idea that conducting a choir was a woman’s job got passed from generation to generation. Maybe because in Cuba there was a very important choral society in the beginning of the 20th century and it was led by a woman: Maria Muñoz de Quevedo. I am just speculating. This woman will be remembered for having created this choral society, and since this figure created a foundation for parents to think that choir was something to be led by women. But maybe not, because there have also been great male conductors like Ochoa, or the good conductors who taught in Digna’s generation. I don’t know, then, but it’s a reality. I don’t know what elements made this possible, but in Cuba, it is subconsciously conceived that women should be choral conductors.

It is important to clarify that male choral conductors do exist in Cuba. The city of Matanza’s professional choir is conducted by a man, as was the Orfeón Santiago, which

was conducted by long-time director Electo Silva but is now conducted by a young female conductor, Daria Abreu. The male choir of Villa Clara is conducted by a man as well as is the professional choir of Ciego de Avila. “But you see? I can count them with my hands. And in Havana it’s all women.”144

Among other international work, Guerra founded and conducted the Choir of the Canary Islands Philharmonic Orchestra in Spain for 2 years. An album of Holst’s *The Planets* was recorded under the orchestral direction of Adrian Leeper. She also worked with the Canary musical ensemble “Los Gofiones” and artists Silvio Rodríguez and Omara Portuondo, recording an album with the Spanish record company Manzana.145

Guerra’s perception of her position within the international choral community is “very positive,” she said, avoiding reference to herself and instead focusing on the reception of the repertoire. “I think it’s necessary to take a Cuban music wherever I can end in a choral setting…whenever we sing a Cuban piece the audience just loses it. Cuban music is well received. That has been one of the strongest things every time we go on tour.”146 Monje has traveled internationally with Guerra and Entrevoces and shared her observation of how Guerra’s technique differs from that of other conductors:

I’ve had the opportunity to travel and to hear many good choirs, but I can tell you this: I think she is unique because the way she conducts, the way she interprets with her hands, and the way she works voices and textures, it’s unique. I haven’t seen this in any other country (and I have seen many good choirs) and the way she conducts sets her apart. It’s something else and it doesn’t deviate from choral music, but it’s something else. There is nothing similar. When it comes to conducting, she is unique. There are many choirs that try to go in Digna’s line, using Entrevoces or Coro Nacional as an example. Trying to walk along those lines. But I have never seen anyone working the way she does.147

144. Leonor Suarez, July 7, 2016.
145. Digna Guerra, Curriculum vitae
Monje shared others’ reactions to Guerra’s work with Entrevoces abroad. “In the workshops where we have participated, in Colombia, in *America Cantat*, we were the pilot choir, but people who came out would say, ‘But…working with her is something else!’”

Suarez’ view of the international community’s perception of the Maestra’s work is that the results of the work and the legacy the Maestra has left abroad is extensive:

Maestra Digna is well known internationally. I’m not going to say she is known in every country, but she has recognition. In the same way you are here, there are Colombians, Mexicans, Argentineans, everything. They have been her students, or she has been there teaching workshops, conferences. She has been to so many places and has so much recognition, that it has been a way to add value to the Cuban choral movement. Of course, they, as pioneers, created and took the choral movement and have worked to raise the bar. They have had such a tremendous influence, but they have made the whole world recognize Digna’s work, and the work of several other conductors in important projects. But I am telling you that at the same level you have [Cuban choirs] *Coralina, Sine Nomine, Ex Audi, Vocal Leo*. They have traveled, shown their work and won awards. But something is true: you can’t not mention maestra Digna’s work, because she has taught all of us, or most of us. She goes ahead in her own path and we follow her closely behind. We work every day preparing new repertoire, and exceeding all the expectations that have been generated by this movement.

López-Gavilán succinctly referenced the recognition Guerra has received abroad as evidence of how she is perceived:

Well, the fact that she always comes back with awards when she goes to the most demanding competitions in the world, that is an influence. She is a regular at international juries, to organize events both in Cuba and abroad, she’s invited to give seminars, to work for some time with a specific choir. All of this is evidence that she is a well-respected personality with great prestige outside our country.

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Sotomayor was frank in that in her opinion,

…Digna is more influential outside of Cuba than in my own country. There are countries or she is admired, like, ‘Wow, Digna!’” [In] Mexico, the United States, Ecuador, Colombia, Germany…they seek Digna as a reference of choral music. As a starting point of what they should do, how to do it, and where. That is good, really good. But they also frame her in choral music (because that’s where she has developed more), but no one knows she also studied percussion… She could be of great help for a percussionist! She has also studied orchestral conducting, piano (the peak!) But from a musical standpoint, any musician could benefit from her. Not only theorists, but instrumentalists too.\textsuperscript{151}

**Selected Recognition and Notable Achievements**

Entrevoces was selected to represent Latin America at the World Symposium of Choirs in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2002 and Kyoto, Japan in 2005. Guerra and Entrevoces formed an brigade alongside the ensemble “Moneda Dura” for the anniversary festivities of the Frente Francisco Miranda, a political organization founded by former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro. Guerra toured with Entrevoces throughout Venezuela, including the cities of Caracas, Cojedes, and Carúpano. A gala concert was presented at the Teatro Teresa Carreño.\textsuperscript{152}

Guerra’s international guest clinician work includes master classes, workshops and choral conducting lectures in countries including Jamaica, Barbados, Nicaragua, Panamá, Perú, Curazao, Colombia, Argentina, Venezuela, México, Spain, Yugoslavia, Poland, Germany, Switzerland, Norway, Belgium, Canada, and the United States. She has also been involved in numerous film soundtracks for films including *El Siglo de las Luces, La Ultima Cena, Técnica de Duelo, Patakin*. She has served as a judge in competitions including *La Edad de Oro, 13 de Marzo, El Caimán Barbudo, UNEAC*

\textsuperscript{151} Ladys Sotomayor, July 7, 2016.
\textsuperscript{152} Digna Guerra, Curriculum vitae.
Composition Competition, *La Caja de Canarias* in Spain, **Adolfo Guzmán, Adolfo Kraus** in Spain, Children’s Choir Contest with the Alejandro García Caturla School of Music, *Concurso Caracol* of the Film, Radio, and Television Association of the UNEAC, Marktoberdorf International Choral Contest in Germany, and the Alba Cultural Prize in 2012.

Maestra Guerra conducted the choirs for the world premiere of the work *Salmo de las Américas* by José María Vitier for the *Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano* in 1999, as well as conducting the choirs in a performance of *Carmina Burana* by Carl Orff under the direction of Maestro Leo Brouwer as part of the celebrations for the 4th International Fair of *Cubadisco 2000*. Guerra gave a workshop at the IV *Festival Internacional de Coros “El Caribe y Centroamérica Cantan”* (International Festival of Choirs “The Caribbean and Central America Sing”) in the city of Panama in July of 2007, conducting the mass choir at the final concert. Guerra was one of five women honored at *Cubadisco 2005*, alongside Rosita Fornés, Tete Linares, Omara Portuondo and Celina González. She participated in a concert and later a recording entitled *Canto a Dios* by Maestro Chucho Valdés dedicated to the victims of Hurricane Katrina alongside the *Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional*. She was also a member of a cultural delegation along with *Coro Entrevoces* to the *Festival Internacional de Música* (International Festival of Music) in Morelia, México.

When asked which of the awards she has earned carries particular significance for her, Guerra responded: “I think everything has been important because it’s the result of my effort and hard work. Because I work like a meticulous little ant, and I don’t stop

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153. Digna Guerra, *Curriculum vitae*.

154. Ibid.
until I get what I have on my mind’s ear.” One of Guerra’s many accomplishments is the production of the first choral DVD in Cuba. It was the result of collaboration with the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa (Interamerican Society of the Press, SIP), which is involved in filmmaking. The DVD was filmed in Old Havana to feature the historical area in the movie. It was recorded in a single day. The “Making Of” section features a Havana historian and the president of the Instituto de Música.

Guerra was selected to participate in the ACDA International Conductors Exchange Program in 2012, but had her visa unfortunately denied, leaving her unable to travel and fully participate. Regardless, she retains a positive impression from the experience, remaining especially appreciative of the repertoire that was shared as a result of the exchange.

Seven conductors from ACDA visited, and then we sent seven… Well, six, because my visa was denied. I had to go to Texas, and in the end only six traveled because I wasn’t allowed. But it doesn’t matter because they went to Texas and they called me in the middle of the conference and I said hi to everyone over the phone and they were really nice. And it was interesting because they brought their music, which we appreciated greatly, because there are so many great composers in the United States. In fact, I do many works by American composers, which we love. Mostly contemporary ones. Really, you have a whole spectrum of composers. So, then they brought their music and we gave them ours, and it was a beautiful exchange with wonderful people, and we maintained that relationship.

Guerra was also invited to bring her choirs to the Oregon Bach Festival (see fig. 16) in Eugene, Oregon in 2015. This was an emotional experience for all involved, reminiscent of her experience in collaboration with the Minnesota Orchestra in Minneapolis, Minnesota in July of 2015. She described both with fondness and reinforced

156. Ibid.
the connection between music communities in the United States and Cuba, regardless of the political climate of the time:

Oh, yes, that was the funniest thing. We went to sing, both Coro Nacional and Entrevores, at the choir festival in Santiago the Cuba, which takes place every two years. And the president of the Oregon Festival came to hear us, but I didn’t know him or knew he was sitting in the audience. So we sang at the concert, and when it was over, he came over to tell us “I want to invite you to sing at our festival.” And I said “Okay.” It was something that came about really quickly and it was a huge success. I can’t tell you the name of the theater because I am forgetting the name. It had like four or five levels and it was completely filled with people. And just as we came out, without even opening our mouths, people got up on their feet cheering for us. I said a few words, I remember I took the microphone (I had an interpreter) I said, “I bring a message of friendship from Cuba.” Everyone fell silent. I couldn’t go on because I was so full of emotions. Everyone was moved.

Figure 16. Oregon Bach Festival advertisement for Entrevores. Source: Digna Guerra personal collection.
Music unites the people. Governments can mess things up, but not the people...we had a wonderful experience last year. We’ve been to ten states with Entrevoces singing and the reaction from the audience and the people has been wonderful...so much love and affection, that you wonder “Wow, and this?” For example, we had a moment in Minneapolis when we sang at the symphony’s concert hall. It’s a huge venue and it was also packed. When we came out to sing the first song, people yelled with excitement and waved Cuban flags. They did that with the second song too. And I said to the choir “What is this? I don’t know what to do.” Because I felt so full of love and affection. It was truly precious, beautiful indeed...we visited several states, and it was like that every time. The audience was full of people, full of applause. Every concert was full. We had a concert in Kentucky with five thousand people, and this one in Minneapolis had three thousand and something. And I say well, that’s beautiful. We were really touched by the warm reception they gave us.157

Entrevoces was the only foreign choir invited to sing along with the principal choir.

Together, they performed Beethoven’s 9th Symphony under the direction of Miguel Hart-Bedoya, Mendelssohn’s Elijah under the direction of Helmut Rilling, and concerts in the cities of Eugene, Florence, Springfield, Portland, Corvallis and Roseburg. Guerra gave a presentation on Cuban choral music while at the conference.158

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158. Digna Guerra, Curriculum vitae
Guerra has recorded the following albums with Coro Entrevoces (see fig. 17):

- *Date una Vueltecita*
- *Vos Omnes* (sacred music, received *Cubadisco* award 2000)
- *Aporreumbosis*
- *Tu Son Entero* (dedicated to Cuban poet Nicolás Guillen)
- ¡Qué Rico é!
- *Una Manera Mejor* (with works by Juan Almeida)
- *De Todo Corazón* (received *Cubadisco* award 2006) with the Coro Nacional de Cuba
- *Contemporáneos Entrevoces* (received *Cubadisco* award 2011)
• *Oh, Yes!* (first Cuban album of African American spirituals, Grand Prize *Cubadisco 2015*)\(^{159}\)

Additional recording projects include

*De lo sagro a lo profano,* [From the sacred to the profane] “a musical monument” with works by a group of authors, and *Veinte cantos patrióticos* [20 patriotic songs], along with the National Children's Choir, an album that will be accompanied by the printing of scores addressed to schools. In addition, the album *Cantico de Celebracion* [Canticle of Celebration], by Maestro Leo Brouwer…this includes a DVD with images of a concert offered at the *Basílica Menor del Convento de San Francisco de Asís*, and study versions of the songs.\(^{160}\)

For a list of awards Guerra and her ensembles have received, see Appendix 1 (see fig. 18).

\(^{159}\) Digna Guerra, Curriculum vitae

In November of 2010, Guerra and Entrevoces toured the United States including New Hampshire and Boston among other cities. They presented a concert at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. In March of 2013, Guerra and Entrevoces performed in America Cantat 7 in Bogotá, Colombia in March of 2013 where Guerra also presented a workshop on Cuban choral music. She was recognized with the Presidential Honor award.
at the Cubadisco 2015 awards ceremony. Guerra served as an international adjudicator at the Marktoberdorf 2015 Competition held in Germany from May 21-25. In May of 2015, Guerra and Entrevoces embarked on a successful concert tour in the United States including the cities of New York, Chicago, Minnesota, North Carolina, New Haven, and Baltimore, including a concert at the Lincoln Center and Grand Prize in the Serenade Choir Competition in the U.S. capital. Guerra conducted the choir in “Polovetsian Dances” from Borodin's opera *Prince Igor* for the opening of the Cubadisco 2015 award ceremony in the Avellaneda Room of the Teatro Nacional alongside the Orquesta Sinfónica of the Conservatorio Amadeo Roldan conducted by Maestro Guido López-Gavilán. Guerra led the Grand Choir amassed for Beethoven's Choral Fantasy together with the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra and pianist Frank Fernández under the direction of its Principal Director Osmo Vanskaen in the Avellaneda Hall of the Teatro Nacional during the Cubadisco 2015 awards ceremony.\(^\text{161}\)

Guerra is highly decorated in Cuba and has received the following notable distinctions over the course of her distinguished career:\(^\text{162}\)

- National Music Award 2006
- Félix Varela Order of the First Degree
- Doctor Honoris Causa of the University of the Arts of Cuba
- Distinction for the National Culture
- The Replica of the Machete of General Máximo Gómez (see fig. 19)
- Master of Youth Award awarded by the Hermano Saiz Association for her lifelong work dedicated to the formation of values in the new generations
- Artist of Merit granted by UNEAC (National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba)
- Order for Cuban Education
- Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) Seal August 23
- Raúl Gómez García Medal

\(^{161}\). Digna Guerra, Curriculum vitae

\(^{162}\). Ibid.
• Espiral Eterna (Eternal Spiral) Award 2012 given by the Leo Brouwer Office
• Commemorative Medal for the Centenary of the Birth of Cuban National Poet Nicolás Guillén
• 50th Anniversary Commemorative Medal of the National Symphony Orchestra
• Distinction of Merit of Mariana de Gonitch
• Giraldilla of Havana
• Seal of the Laureate
• Distinction Gitana Tropical (Tropical Gypsy) of the Provincial Union of Culture
• Shield of the City of Santiago de Cuba
• Distinguished Guest of the City of Bayamo
• Distinguished Guest of the City of Matanzas
• Distinction Angelote of the City of Holguin
• Distinguished Guest of the City of Las Tunas
• Distinguished Host of Ciego de Ávila
• Stamp Foundation of Havana
• Shield of the City of Pinar del Río
• Key to the City of Santa Clara
• Shield of the City of Matanzas

Figure 19. Digna Guerra being awarded the replica of Máximo Gómez’ machete. Source: Digna Guerra personal collection.
CHAPTER V
THE MAESTRA AT WORK: PHILOSOPHY, PRACTICE, AND COLLABORATION

Philosophy

Guerra’s practice is grounded in a clear vision of what content to teach and how to convey this knowledge. Guerra’s philosophy becomes differentiated in practice to meet the needs and subtleties of the genre, age, setting and the particular individuals with which she is working. Her confidence in her methods is grounded in her keen observations of culture and the lifelong learning process as well as her love and acknowledgement of the humanity and vulnerability that lies in each person under her direction.

Educational Philosophy

Guerra’s philosophy of music education involves maintaining high standards which she believes they can meet. Singing, in her opinion, is more than a musical endeavor, but also a transmitter of culture.

Therefore, you can’t have a group of children singing “Rock-a-by baby,” you know? I can’t have them entertained with little silly songs. Therefore, I have to respect the child in front of me right from the start, and tell them “Let’s talk about this, we’re going to sing a work by Schumann. Do you know who he was?” And I tell them the story, about his childhood, about his wife who was also a musician...I give them a scope, or I tell them “If there is a musician in your family, or if anyone knows, bring something the next class.” For example, we did a piece by an Argentinian in class, and the lyrics were written by Rafael Alberti. So, I said “Ok, the music was written by Dante Andreu and the lyrics by Rafael Alberti. For next class, I want you all to write about who Rafael Alberti was.”

According to her philosophy, a teacher must balance when to provide information and when to require students to seek the information on their own. Guerra believes that this is “the only way to encourage research.” Guerra asserted that “when a child sings in tune, his body is in tune, blood flows, organs interact, they work in harmony. You have to keep all of that in mind.” Guerra summed up her philosophy in this way: “…never underestimate children or youth. Teenagers are a bit more complicated.”\(^\text{164}\)

Guerra’s choral music education philosophy for university students differs from her philosophy for children and young people. Their previous education has covered the fundamentals such as the conducting pattern. The demands placed upon them must now be at the highest level: the analysis and application of music-making. She believes this general concept can be applied to all forms of music education at this level.

The student has already been through the basic and intermediate levels. Therefore it’s time for them to make music. You shouldn’t be telling them how to move their right or left hand. No, no, no: let’s make music. Let’s talk about music, and let’s see how things are, because technique is a resource; not the goal. You have to use technique, but by then you already know that “one, two, three, four” goes like this [demonstrates with her hands], but who can tell you that in this particular score one is up here where four is supposed to be? It is the time to analyze, to think, to use every technical knowledge that you have at the service of music.

But you can’t make music fit technique. It’s not that. I think that is something you can apply to choral conducting, piano, flute, or trumpet. The superior [university] level is meant for talking about music, how to make music. Let’s make music. Where does this phrase end, where does this note end? Sometimes people see a half note and go “Piin!” Forget it! It ends where the third begins. Purely musical questions, but with a heightened perspective of how music should be treated and made.\(^\text{165}\)

To Guerra, a rehearsal is no different from a class. Rather than simply learning notes, a rehearsal is a place where applied musical concepts that would be presented in

\(^\text{164}\) Digna Guerra, July 7, 2016.

\(^\text{165}\) Ibid.
the classroom are addressed in great detail. Guerra gave one example of how issues of intonation, sight-reading, vowel production and modification, vocal pedagogy and anatomy, and timbre can be addressed in a single moment of rehearsal:

We solve vocal problems, the vocal production of this passage, how to tune every interval, whether it’s ascending or descending. I’d tell them every day: intervals don’t exist, you have to be able to do this [sings an octave followed by a tritone] “Do, Do, Fa” one after the other. You sing them side by side and it becomes a bit more stable. Otherwise they will start going like [sings as if imitating a person trying to find the correct pitch] “Do-Do-Fa-Mi-Re,” and start searching from a visual point of view: “This is ascending, no it’s descending.” But for those intervals, from a vocal production point of view, there is only one spot in your mouth. And where you sing the first, you sing the rest, and start making substitutions. Because then people start taking a full tour of their mouth, which makes things impossible. Then you get a rainbow of colors in your tone production. There are so many, many things…

Relationship between Singers and Conductor and Community among Singers

Guerra’s philosophy regarding community in the choral setting is that it determines the work that is done. There must be positive relationships among the choir, and deficient communication is not tolerated. Rather than simply communicating, however, Guerra uses the term “communion” as a descriptor of the bond fostered between singers:

When you sit down to sing there must be a communion, a connection in every sense: human, musical…It’s a chain. A chain I cannot break. If there is a lose link, I must pick it up and fix it. Because otherwise, music doesn’t flow: music doesn’t flow when this person doesn’t talk to this person. There isn’t going to be any music there, forget it, there can’t be music like that.

Potential for relationship-building is the first trait she looks for in potential singers. After that is determined, then the singing follows. Guerra is confident that she

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167. Ibid.
will teach singers good vocal technique based on her work with the choir, but one’s personality and temperament is paramount to success in her choirs and much more difficult to adjust.

But before [musical talent], you have to be a human being; a good person. If not, I don’t want them in the choir. I don’t want them. And I have let people go, you can’t imagine. People that come here to harm, to talk about people behind their backs. But I don’t want any of that in my choir. Because then, where does the music go? That’s why you have to get along with this person and that person. With whoever you have right here. Let’s all go together, with a person right next to you. But if you were singing with a chip in your shoulder, there is never going to be music.¹⁶⁸

Suarez described the closeness in the Maestra’s relationship with her students as continuing beyond the classroom and accompanying her throughout her activities. Instruction is paired with feedback, and classroom experience is then applied to Guerra’s own ensembles for the sake of impactful learning on the part of the student:

Digna is a very approachable person. She is very open; in fact, she has students wherever she goes. She has brought students to train them and teach them classes. She is approachable, open, and tries to help anyone who is under her tutelage. And she’s like that with all of her students. She takes them to choir, to watch the rehearsals, because there’s no better school than watching a professional choir rehearse. I remember when I was a student, she would do this with me and she would invite me to conduct some rehearsals, because it’s not the same on the piano. That connection and feedback you get from a performer, teacher, and student is something habitual in her.¹⁶⁹

Suarez asserted that it is not necessarily universal to have very close relationships with students. “I think this is a trait of us here in Cuba, to be very familiar.”¹⁷⁰

Sotomayor has observed different versions of student-teacher relationships between the Maestra and her students. With conducting students, the relationship is more

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¹⁷⁰. Ibid.
conventional, in that “she will respect that space.”\textsuperscript{171} With singers in her choir, however, relational skills are much more important. She is aware of good musicians who were not “good people” that have left the choir, as Guerra confirmed in her interview. “Sometimes it’s not worth having good musicians if they are bad people. Sometimes you can do more with musicians who are good people. You do more with that, and that is her policy. And this doesn’t mean you don’t have to have a good musical level, a high level of professionalism in what you do…”\textsuperscript{172} Guerra’s influence among the singers is a unifying and spiritually elevating one.

She always advocates for a respectful environment and the choir. Not \textit{amiguismo} [coterie, or cliquish behavior], but friendship, which is not the same. To create an environment where music flows. She says that you can’t make music when there are attentions or conflicts, which can happen anywhere. Because we are human and we are complicated, and working with humans is complicated. But she always advocates for something else. To go beyond that physical level, to go one step further, to a spiritual plane, a sentimental one. That plane takes us to music, that plane where every musician has been at some point, floating… Because it’s like that, it’s ethereal. Where we can be intertwined, and music is the chain that links us all.\textsuperscript{173}

Furthermore, Guerra exudes mutual respect, for one another, and for the communal work. This respect involves elevating the task of music-making so that a singer is constantly aspiring to be worthy of his or her privilege to do so.

And the more you know her the more it you respect her, and your commitment is increased because you are in. She will tell you, “You are here, but you have to demonstrate that your chair is worthy of your name. You have to demonstrate this, or else, we won’t have a problem and you will be out.” It’s that simple. This is where all the results of the choir come from. That respect and discipline that we all need to learn.\textsuperscript{174}

\textsuperscript{171} Ladys Sotomayor, July 7, 2016.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
Monje also emphasized that communication is especially important both among a community of singers and with the conductor, calling attention to the difference between making music with instruments and making music with voices. Empathy is paired with Guerra’s humility in remaining open to and aware of the lives and concerns of her singers.

…this is not an orchestra where you just play your instrument; we have voices. Voices communicate feelings and communicate things. If you don’t get along with your conductor, that is what the audience is going to receive. The same goes if I have a fight with the person standing next to me: that can’t be. Because when you sing, even if you can’t see it, it’s like an invisible cloak that wraps us all together. And she, as a conductor, must have a good relationship with all of her singers. Besides being a good conductor, she is a magnificent human being. She may have defects like I do, because we all do, but she has many virtues. One of them being that she is empathetic. She understands the problems of those standing on this side. She is not isolated in her own world.¹⁷⁵

The sense of community among the singers of the Coro Nacional is healthy enough to withstand regular criticism from within the ranks of the choir as well as regular self-examination by each singer.

Some of us have more affinity with others, but generally, we get along well. We help each other, we also correct each other. Because it’s everyone’s problem that everything goes well, because we should tell each other the truth even if we don’t like it. Sometimes you have to find the way to say things so the other person doesn’t get hurt. We also have to be self-critical and this is one of the things she teaches us.¹⁷⁶

Monje agreed that potential for a good fit within the community of singers is one of the first things the Maestra looks for in new singers. This becomes especially vital when traveling abroad.

When you go out of the country, you are a family. You are representing Cuba, but you are a family. You are not going with your parents, with your

¹⁷⁶. Ibid.
brother; you are traveling with your coworkers who, in that moment, are your family.  

Acay’s experience under Guerra’s instruction has been unique, as they are of similar age. She shared the different teacher-student relationships she has observed and experienced, echoing the closeness mentioned by several of the participants. This does not, however, erase the respect that in Acay, manifests as the use of the formal title of professor.:

She doesn’t want a distance between her and the singers. She treats them like her children, or like siblings. For example, me and her, we are almost the same age and we have shared so many moments, good, sad, life’s moments. I treat her respectfully in front of everybody. Wherever we are, if there is anyone around, I will call her maestra, or I will call her profesor Digna. But when we are alone, we are like sisters! Because she’s a very approachable person, very sensitive, and she needs that kind of brotherly or sisterly love, honest love, sincere, without hypocrisy. She gets really hurt, she folds back, and that’s really sad when she sees any foul behavior from any of her siblings.  

By siblings, Acay is referring to the members of the choir. This recalls the familiarity Suarez attributed to Cuban culture. The singers have respect for one another in this unique community relationship and deference for their conductor, even accounting for human imperfections. Acay referred to the hardships inherent in everyday Cuban life, several of which I witnessed in my travel to Havana, including unreliable or insufficient public and private transportation, infrastructure, electricity, food, and water…

…there is a lot of respect, but there is a lot of caring. Because she will walk into a room…and unless she is carrying many things, or she is hosting a visitor, she will hug and kiss everybody. She doesn’t hesitate. She just asks, “What do you need?” I think this is a human condition you are born with and that you develop. Because we all make mistakes, that is true. She has quite a temper…Did you know we call her “genio” [temper]? When she gets mad, oh my god! Therefore, you should avoid making her mad! [Laughs] You should behave, sing well, compose yourself correctly and you’ll have no problem. But this is part of

her personality, otherwise, she wouldn’t survive so much work, so much hardship. We face hardship, because our country is beautiful and all of that, but there are many difficulties we have to overcome every day.\textsuperscript{179}

Acay described a close connection with Guerra that allows them to communicate as singer and conductor with a mere look of the eyes. This heightened sense of connection and ability to communicate has developed over the course of many years, confirmed by Guerra in her assertion that she and long-time members of her choir have “grown old together.” Many moments of the interviews I conducted in Havana such as this one felt intensely intimate in their revelation of such deep ties to one another.

There is a moment I am going to miss…imagine how it is when we sing one of these works that move you, and so many times I was rehearsing just like that and she would make a gesture [gestures with her hands], I mean, she would encourage me just with her eyes. Or maybe with just one look, she would tell me to keep an eye on the person behind me in case they were making a mistake. Just one glance, I mean, just eye contact. Or even with just a finger, she would go like this and I knew what she was telling me.\textsuperscript{180}

As for building community among singers, Acay acknowledged that this is an important principle for Guerra. “…like in any society, there are affinities. There is a group that will get along better with that group for whatever reason. But this is a principle to her: in here, we love each other. In choir, we love each other.”\textsuperscript{181}

Rehearsal and Conducting Philosophy

Guerra’s conducting philosophy requires the conductor to initiate the connection with the student. She acknowledged the emotional and human element of the choral conducting profession, which eliminates hierarchy and emphasizes humility. To Guerra,

\textsuperscript{179} Delfina Acay, July 5, 2016.
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid.
it is important to assure the students that their professor or conductor is “on their side” and attentive to their needs before attempting to simply convey information to them. She lamented her observation of what is reminiscent of the common trope of university faculty in an ivory tower or a conductor literally on a pedestal, far-removed from those they lead. Calling attention to the unique nature of the music field, Guerra minimized the effectiveness of expertise alone, saying that this paired with an inability to connect with students makes that expertise “worthless” and using the hyperbole of heaven and hell for emphasis. Monje says of Guerra, “When someone doesn’t understand, she finds the way.”182 The hierarchy of student and teacher is eliminated in favor of “weaving” oneself into the choir or class and Guerra instead leads by guiding those in her charge “under her arm” so they “go together”.

From a personal standpoint, you have to approach the student, or the choir singer if you conduct their choir. You have to try to interact with a certain closeness so that they know you are on their side, from a human vantage point, or if they need anything…because I have seen in my many travels that the teacher tends to be a stuck-up figure, isolated from the world, who feels he holds, like we say, Christ by the beard. And that’s a mistake. You can know everything, but try to pass on your knowledge with humility. Because you may not know everything, or maybe you are in fact an expert. But if you don’t know how to pass on this knowledge, your expertise is worthless. If you don’t know how to pass on your knowledge from your position…I believe that, without arrogance, and with all the humility in the world, you can pass on your knowledge with all the elements and all the tools you have at hand.

And after this, you can try to go deeper… Music is a delicate field. It’s emotions and you can’t put them in a box. You make music and the wind takes it away. It’s an act that slips through your fingers. So you have to make people enjoy it, make people go to heaven with you, and if you have to go to hell, take them with you. Do you understand? That’s my goal. Try to have everyone here: under my arm so we can go together wherever we have to go.

But not from my position, or because I am who I am. No: I am nothing. I am the musician who wants you to enjoy, and feel, and suffer with me through the music we are making. That is very important, because you don’t always have this dichotomy between student and teacher. I am the teacher and the student is right

over there. No, no, no: it’s not about distances or hierarchies, but about weaving yourself in the crowd. That same crowd in front of you. So that they can give themselves, so you can win them over, so they can give themselves sincerely through music. Because music brings us closer; it doesn’t divide us.\textsuperscript{183}

Part of Guerra’s rehearsal philosophy includes forging ahead with the expectation that the singers will adjust to the conductor, and not vice versa. This is the case even in earlier stages of learning music. Her expectation is that singers must be prepared to sing in four parts, on text, while making music from the beginning. However, Guerra avoids providing the singers with all of the information about musical interpretation, instead, requiring that they investigate the “why” in the musical decisions she makes. Sotomayor says, “Every rehearsal is a master class.”\textsuperscript{184}

In Sotomayor’s conducting lessons, Guerra de-emphasizes the traditional pattern in favor of conveying direction with her hands in a way that the choir can understand. As a student, Sotomayor once observed Guerra conduct and thought, “look at the conductor: her movements are so reduced, yet look and the result in the choir… I want to conduct like her. And years later I would end up having class with the Maestra. I wouldn’t have imagined!”\textsuperscript{185} Guerra demands precision in Sotomayor’s hands, expecting her to know what she is aiming for in order to be precise with the choir. “How to make a legato that stretches well, that’s not soft, but with tension.”\textsuperscript{186} Sotomayor intentionally observes Guerra’s rehearsal methods at the Coro Nacional’s rehearsals, noting what she says and how she says it. Sotomayor noted the importance of balance between demands and concessions made.

\begin{itemize}
\item[183.] Digna Guerra, July 7, 2016.
\item[184.] Ladys Sotomayor, July 7, 2016.
\item[185.] Ibid.
\item[186.] Ibid.
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[Sotomayor noticed] how she says things in a confident, demanding manner. Without hurting the person in front of her, because people have feelings, and their own personality. There are people who are more sensitive or more resistant, but she always gets to: “this has to be this way, you can do more, let’s go!” she will not be hurtful, but she will demand….there’s this hand that is demanding and the hand that is human, and that is one of the things I have still to learn: to know the balance of the two. If you are too human, you won’t get results, but if you are too demanding, you won’t either. Therefore, I must know when I should stop being human, and when I should stop being demanding. That is a unique formula and she has it…because I am too sensitive, and as someone is not feeling well, I will tell them, “Poor thing! Don’t sing today…” Not her. She will tell you “Are you not feeling well? That’s terrible…you feel bad.” And you see that she truly feels your pain, but after this, she will tell you “But we have to sing.” And since she tells you to sing, you walk right past that feeling, and you get over it.  

Guerra stressed the importance of expressive hands, even while maintaining precision. 

Look, to me, the hand is what conducts. The hand that draws everything you want. Everything. Not only from a melodic point of view. Harmonically, harmony has colors, ranges have colors. You must use your hand to draw what you want, whether it’s a high or a low sound. You must draw it with your hands, and that is a language that every conductor should learn.

Guerra also spoke of the necessity of subdividing with fingers or wrist, yet not a defined subdivision which marks each beat in a prescribed conducting pattern. “…those schemes (conducting patterns) that Ochoa taught, I don’t follow them. That goes against gravity, you learn that after you have accrued some experience. With the years spent doing this, and the more you can reduce your downward gestures…No way! I don’t do that. I simply don’t use those schemes, because I think they are obsolete.” Guerra expressed “you must condense the greatest amount of gestures. Because it’s more accurate than doing everything they taught you what school. After I graduated, I rejected

188. Digna Guerra, July 7, 2016.
189. Ibid.
all that. I don’t do it.”\textsuperscript{190} However, Guerra encourages her students not to simply follow her instruction, but to question, investigate, and “try to find the reason to everything…”\textsuperscript{191}

López-Gavilán spoke of Guerra’s unique temperament, in which she expertly balances musicality with persistent demands. He also celebrated her comfort equally within a variety of musical genres due to her innate ability to embody and then convey the essence of whatever music she may be conducting.

Digna has the strength of being extremely musical yet extremely persistent, hardworking, and demanding. She has the gift of being equally able to fight with you, yell at you for times, or kiss you. That is being able to manage your left and your right hand; the kiss and the shout. And that is how she accomplishes what she accomplishes, because I have been dress rehearsals of Coro Nacional: They start fighting, and she will shout, “Why aren’t you in tune?! Why don’t you do it this way? Etc. etc.” And later at night, they will make it work and make it sound the way she wants it. There are people who do that and get no results. And there are people who do that and get good results. It’s all in the personality and in what they are able to communicate. She communicates music. First of all, she feels it, she absorbs it, she owns it. That is one of her characteristics. A conductor has to own the work they are conducting, she owns it, she creates her own version and is then able to communicate it, through her hands, through her fingers, through her mouth, through her eyes, and you can feel that…She will equally sing a classical European piece, or sit at the piano to play a Cuban song, a Latin American song, or a north American song. She has an excellent musicality, very complete, and this is how she has achieved all her accomplishments, and everything that is left for her to do…\textsuperscript{192}

Monje explained that flexibility is key when singing under Guerra, because musical interpretation with her is not permanent. “You have to read her hands, because she can…change it completely in terms of expression and say, ‘I was doing it like this but I don’t feel it that way.’…When I started, there was a singer who said that in this choir

\textsuperscript{190} Digna Guerra, July 7, 2016.
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{192} Guido López-Gavilán, July 5, 2016.
you have to be a chameleon.”

While Monje acknowledges that the entire body and face is involved in conducting, the hands are the most important part. “…She always says that her hands are like the strings of her singers. Like marionettes. You have to know where she is taking you…sometimes she doesn’t explain anything. Sometimes we are at a concert and she will make new gestures, but since we are so focused on her that we know what she wants.”

Monje believes the connection between conductor and singers is the reason for success in reading conducting gesture because it is reading the person as well as the gesture.

It’s the relationship, and with the passing of time you get to know her: where she comes from, where she goes. She says, “You all have to guess where I am coming from,” and that is one of the things that you learn. Because to guess her, believe me, it is difficult. She’s not an easy person to guess. She is very complicated in that sense because she is very emotional, driven. And from time to time she knows how to be relaxed…We have a great connection with her. If not, the work wouldn’t flow the way you see it flows. She says that when the connection is broken, she doesn’t feel well with that person, and no. You stopped being there…she is a very spiritual person and she says that when it’s time to sing, your whole soul must be clean towards her. You can’t hold any grudge.

López-Gavilán spoke highly of Guerra’s ability to create an extensive spectrum of sound to suit the most subtle needs of the music. Monje confirmed this, saying, “She has great knowledge of how the vocal mechanism works. She has a book [she wrote] about that.”

López-Gavilán used the example of singing the same pitch in different styles to describe Guerra’s philosophy becoming audible sound.

In Digna’s case, what is most relevant are the nuances, the colors, the possibilities of one vowel. She can do the same note in very different ways depending on the context of the work in question. Let me explain: a middle C is a

194. Ibid.
195. Ibid.
196. Ibid.
middle C in Mozart, but a different middle C for Guido, but a different middle C in Palestrina. Regardless of the sound and, regardless of the note. What matters is the context that note is in; the role it has. The color she achieves, looks for and feels in that note, is not the same when she is singing and north American song, and you are spiritual, for example, or when she sings a contemporary choral piece from any country, or when she sings polyphony or when she sings a Cuban work. One same note, one same middle C, sounds differently in each of those works, because it follows a different concept. This is part of her philosophy turned into music, turned into sound.

I think one of the secrets, one of her characteristics, is that. Because sometimes you hear a magnificent choir but sings everything very evenly: everything is in two on, everything is in its place, but a baroque piece sounds the same as a renaissance peace, with the same callers, the same sonority, at the same intentions… Everything sounds alike. That same capacity of finding the spirit of every work, where it comes from, where to find it, and how to communicate it, is part of Digna’s philosophy, and part of what I propose. Sometimes you propose and it’s not accomplished, but in her case, it is always accomplished.  

**Practice**

Guerra has a wide variety of experience working with age levels from young children with no musical experience through adults at the professional level. Her areas of musical experience have included opera, individual conducting, piano, classical solo voice, choral, orchestra, percussion, solo instruments, and chamber ensembles. With this experience comes a diversified perspective and the capacity to make informed decisions in practice.

**Rehearsal Methods**

When asked about her rehearsal methods, Guerra responded that she does not employ warm-up exercises. She confirmed Sotomayor’s description of rehearsals in which the singers are working toward performance level immediately, primarily because

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they have sectional rehearsals that should have warmed up their voices and solidified their individual voice parts. While the choir has its own role for preparing the notes in sectional rehearsals, Guerra takes pride in being able to achieve great results as a conductor no matter who she is working with. “She says that she will even make stones sing.” The choir rehearses mostly a cappella. Guerra stressed the importance of unifying vowels and shared her personal goal to begin enjoying rehearsals from the beginning, appreciating individual passages and passing along that enthusiasm to the singers. Guerra contrasted quality compositions, each of which is “a world of its own” and expressed exasperation for pieces of music that are “useless” and beneath the level of what can be categorized as “music.”

First thing: I don’t vocalize. People should have read the work separately with their own voice. Oftentimes, if it’s something simple, we read it right there. And then they come to me and I start to build the score. First, I do a general reading. And then I play some fragments with them so they will know where things are. Because we usually rehearse a cappella, but I use the piano to take them where I want them to go. And, then I start to work on the piece. “Okay, sopranos, is there a segment where you have problems?” and I work that segment vocally. But I don’t vocalize previously. None of that. And then I work on a fragment for the altos, for the sopranos, for the tenors…How do they sound, what’s not working.

I try to even out all the vowels. This is very important: the emission of the vowels has to be even in every voice and then in the whole choir. There must be one emission, which can change with the literary discourse that the work has, or with the voice leading. All of that has to be analyzed.

There are many factors and details to be worked in a piece. There are people who just do a reading and that’s it…No way! Each work is a world of its own, and the simpler it is, the harder it gets. Because then you have to truly create the work. And there are works that are useless, they are garbage, and you have to elevate them to the category of music. There are works that are pointless, that you say “Okay, let’s see then…” That is hard. And difficult works too…Well. I like difficult works…I am always looking for things that are a challenge for me…and I try to start enjoying things from the rehearsal. Starting with the first bars, for the first time. “Look at this beautiful fragment, look at that.” I try to impress my

feelings about the music on them, and they let me guide them. And that is very important, because if people reject a work, it will never work out. 199

Guerra described the ideal choral sound in her head that she aims for in rehearsal, one that is pure, clear, and free of excessive vibrato. Monje described it this way: “She always says that the voice should come out naturally.” 200

Every conductor has a sound that lives in their inner ear, and this sound is materialized through the choir. And a mine is transparent; instrumental. Like the sound of woodwinds, with that purity, that clarity. I like clear sounds because from there I can do whatever I want. I can create a thicker sound, a more operatic sound, more lyric, or lighter...but I try above all, to have a clean sound with no vibrato. I try to stop people from doing those excessive vibratos. That natural vibrato that every sound has, has a certain kind of vibration. 201

Since the majority of the singers read music, Guerra distributes the music two to five days before the choir is to start rehearsing it with her. During this time, section leaders rehearse the music with their sections during their weekly sectional rehearsal time. No interpretative elements are addressed; musical expression is saved for combined rehearsal with Guerra. Guerra then begins rehearsing the music in large sections, then smaller fragments. She does not rehearse with solfege, rather on the text or on a vowel if the text needs to be coached. Since the sections have already rehearsed, it is most common to begin combined rehearsal by singing the text. Eventually, Guerra will provide the choir with a translation. For difficult passages, Guerra will create a vocalise to isolate it, changing the vowels, or having the singers eliminate the consonants or hum. At this point, “this is when the soul comes, this is when [Guerra] goes overboard.” 202 Once the singers have solidly learned the music as it is written, Guerra begins having them change

markings in their scores and beginning the phase of her musical interpretation of the work.

Sotomayor describes Guerra’s rehearsal methods as “precise and concise.” One of Guerra’s goals is to continually layer challenging elements, or “a new step to climb.” Another technique Guerra uses is a holistic performance of a work that is still in progress to aid in the absorption of all of the musical and interpretive elements before the singers even feel they are ready to do so. This method of challenging the singers works due to the aforementioned considerable trust between singers and conductor. Unless the choir is performing a premiere of a new work or singing a large masterwork, all music is performed by memory, even if scores are used in the concert. Sotomayor listed the steps of a typical rehearsal:

When she gives us a new score, we sometimes we split by parts. Everyone has a different classroom. And we will sometimes read everything, and most of the times that is the start of a new work. And if she thinks a work is not that complex, and we can read it together, we will read it, all four parts, and she will play the piano to give us an idea of the harmony, the notes, the tone. If there are any leaps or accidentals, she will show them with the piano. If we split by parts, when we get together, the text should be ready to start making music.

But she also uses another method: While you are learning, she introduces musical elements, and that, even if you don’t want to, forces you to learn the music faster and absorb all the things regarding interpretation. This is why I am telling you she always gives us a step to climb. Sometimes when we have read it with everyone else, she will say, “Did you read it? Now let’s add the text.” And then she forces you to, not only add music and lyrics, but to get the musical things. And afterwards, well, you have to let go of the score. You have to sing by heart, you have to learn it. If the concert is coming close and you don’t know it by heart yet, she will tell you, “I don’t want paper at the concert.”

Repertoire Selection, Interpretation, and Score Study

Guerra aspires to maintain the high performance level of her ensembles, and repertoire is an important part of this endeavor. “I always try to get works, as we call them, troncudas [hefty]. Strong works that are mighty both musically and vocally. And I then build the program with other kinds of music, some kind of cycle, Latin American music, negro spirituals, Cuban music. But I’ve always tried to raise the bar, especially with these complicated works because they make us grow.”204 One of the advantages of the Coro Nacional is that it is one of the only large choirs in the country, allowing for large works or works for double choir. Most of the other professional choral ensembles are chamber choirs.

Guerra, as almost certainly any conductor can attest to, is always on the lookout for new music. “I am always searching for music wherever I am. Whenever I travel, half of my luggage is filled with sheet music and the other half with my clothes, because I always like to rummage, to look for new things to premiere, things to bring, and I am on a constant search.”205 The two main elements Guerra searches for when choosing new repertoire is that the music be both interesting and also complicated. Sometimes the challenges can be that the work requires a rich tone quality or a simpler piece that is harmonically challenging or difficult to tune, “because that is a challenge, too. Because a choir that is not in tune, or a musician that is not in tune, is lost.”206 She chooses a large number of contemporary pieces, especially those by living composers. She did have one stipulation when deciding whether or not to select certain modern music. “Sometimes I

205. Ibid.
206. Ibid.
don’t like works with contemporary techniques, because that’s another thing. Because they don’t tell me anything. I need music to move me, to say something, but above all, to affect the audience. Because when you do one of these programs that have contemporary techniques, you end up asking yourself ‘Okay, so what?’.

When Guerra travels, she asks for copies of music she would like to peruse. If this is not possible, she requests help from fellow conductors by email. It is challenging to search for repertoire with often limited or unreliable access to internet in Cuba, where “many times I can’t even get YouTube to open.” It is said that professional choirs in Cuba do not share repertoire with one another to maintain their own individual repertoire and therefore reputation and following. Suarez explained:

We find all the period scores [for Sine Nomine, which specializes in early music] on the internet, or we get them as gifts because in Cuba but we don’t have music editorials and it’s very difficult for us to get them. When other choirs come here, since they know how hard it is, they leave whatever we are interested on, and that’s how we do it. Now, I have two arrangers in my choir: one is both composer and arranger, and the other is just an arranger… The three of us, the two of them and I, and I will tell them “I am interested in this song, make an arrangement.” And sometimes they come to me and say “I am thinking... Are you interested?” “yes, I’m interested, do it!” so then we agree on it. For example: there is a beautiful arrangement of Piazzola’s Los Pajaros, which is currently being written by one of them for tenors, basses (no countertenors), and him, who is an alto countertenor, as soloist. So we’re singing that. That makes our repertoire very exclusive...

We share scores which are common. “Hey, so and so, what you’re singing is beautiful. Can you give it to me?” but there is an implicit arrangement, with no words: that the works that were specifically written for a specific choir, are off-bounds... For example, I wouldn’t even think of asking maestra Digna for a work that is a signature to her choir because they sing it so well. I don’t ask for that! Because it’s hers, it’s a signature work. And in the case of the arrangements that Vocal Leo sings, the conductor’s daughter is an arranger, and also the son; they are marvelous. If they make an arrangement that was specially written for her mother’s choir, well, it is obvious that no one is going to tell her “can you please give me Mariale’s arrangement of Chanchullo to sing it with my choir?” No one

208. Ibid.
would ever think of that because it’s part of the choir’s identity. But that doesn’t mean that there is an agreement that says that we can’t share scores. It’s more that we respect the other choir’s repertoire. And in the case of these boys, who write arrangements for *Sine Nomine*, which are arrangements for a format that has very special characteristics, with a limited tessitura, this wouldn’t even work for other choirs. Because it’s thought for *Sine Nomine*.209

If Guerra likes a work by a particular composer, she will specifically ask her colleagues abroad to search for additional works by that composer. “Every time I go to a festival, I take things and I save whatever I can.”210

I think that people, when they listen to *Coro Nacional*, they are amazed. Because there are people who think that a choir is just for contemporary music, lyrical music. And we at *Coro Nacional* have a wide spectrum of works, where you can find pieces that can range from a Venezuelan song, to a popular song [see fig. 20]. There is everything…This is precisely the authenticity that we have. That we span many genres. We don’t box ourselves in solely with classical music.211

Sotomayor describes the active quantity of repertoire of the Coro Nacional as “gigantic.” As each year, the ensemble learns eight to ten new works, but all of the repertoire should be feasibly prepared should they be called upon to revisit it. New singers are required to learn all of the Coro Nacional’s repertoire.

There are more active works, and other works that are dormant. But at any point she can say, “Let’s sing this work which we haven’t sung in four years.” So then you have to learn all 50 works. And they go crazy and she follows up with them, “Have you learned it yet? You have to let go of the scores.” They go crazy but I tell them, “Don’t worry. We have all been through that.” Every time a new person comes, it’s the same. And you see them with all their scores asking, “What should I learn first? Everything is important!” yes, everything is important and you have to learn everything.

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213. Ibid.
Monje described a model concert, which is customarily in three blocks. The first block is frequently comprised of classical or contemporary music, which can come from any country. The middle block is usually Latin American music. Guerra often has the women and men sing a couple of pieces as individual ensembles to vary the program. The final section is most often Cuban music or African American spirituals, both specialties of Guerra. She and the choir both especially enjoy this block of music.

We sing Freddie Mercury and those things too. And from those things we have also sung classics such as Bohemian Rhapsody…That was great because we would imitate, that is one of the things she does: to make things sound instrumental, she likes to imitate the sounds of instruments. She makes suggestions and gives us the tools to sound, perhaps, like a little guitar.214

Throughout the rehearsal and concert process, Guerra is always thinking of which pieces would be suitable for recordings and how best to combine them. She often selects repertoire for an album based on a theme. In the past, she has recorded albums of spirituals, sacred works, contemporary music, Cuban music, and popular Cuban music.

Guerra makes it a point not to listen to works she plans to select for her choir. “I don’t want to have a point of reference. I want to know what my mind can do, so I assimilate everything on my own. I try to assimilate what’s on the paper and put it in practice.”215 It is important to Guerra that as she studies a score, her interpretation be her own and not an imitation. She advises her students to do the same. She tells her students:

Don’t listen; take home the score, and try to understand, try to take everything you can out of the score. Don’t look at it from up close, look at it from afar so you can see how things come out of the music, and you’ll see. But if you listen, you’re going to copy.216

216. Ibid.
Guerra does not even play the work on the piano, although she is an extremely talented pianist. Instead, she looks at the score and determines by its structure, voice leading, and ranges whether the piece is suitable for Coro Nacional or Entrevoces. This is one of the many ways in which Guerra chooses to challenge herself. Cuba’s influence on Guerra is substantial; when asked how Cuba has influenced her musical instincts, she responded as follows:

Because everything is music here too. As they say, “everything is music and reason.” Those are Jose Martí’s words. Everything is music here. Wherever you look, it’s music, music, music. But above all, my constant search for new things. Things that pose new challenges. Because I am restless. When it comes to music I am always looking, looking, looking. And looking for things that press me. That has made me develop all the time and I will keep on doing this until the end. Searching for new things, and besides, what I care about the most is the process of setting things up. When music is ready, it’s all the same to me. But the process of discovering what the score holds, that’s what I most passionate about in my life.\[217\]

Guerra does not need to work very hard to study a score. It comes naturally to her. As she looks at the score, things “jump out of the paper… it’s like I already know what I’m supposed to do only by looking at them.”\[218\] As she rehearses, ideas continue to jump out at her and she and the choir perform it as she sees it in real time.

**Working with Composers**

When commissioning a new work for her choir, Guerra is not often specific in her request. She will sometimes provide a title, but mostly she is asking for a new arrangement of a Cuban song. “Make me an arrangement of this song because am tired of singing the same thing. But do something that makes me work; not something

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218. Ibid.
silly.””219 Composer López-Gavilán has had most of his choral works premiered by Guerra and the Coro Nacional. They are frequent collaborators, working alongside one another at the UNEAC, at Cuban choral festivals, at the ISA, “and well, we practically spend our lives together.”220 Due to this close relationship, López-Gavilán actively participates in the rehearsal process with Guerra and even conducts the choir. They work as true partners, each of them contributing ideas that the other has not considered. López-Gavilán describes their efforts as “fruitful”221 and complementary. Much of the time, in fact, when López-Gavilán composes a work for choir, he is hearing Guerra’s choir in his head. So much so, that he even hears “the sonority the sopranos or tenors may have, and I think about it as an ideal, Digna’s interpretation. This means that when it sounds in real life, it is very close to what I was thinking. This is something that influences, without a doubt.”222 Guerra informally listed some of the most important Cuban choral composers of the 20th and 21st centuries, naming Roberto Valera, Guido López-Gavilán, Frank Fernandez, who “composed works for choir a while ago, but he’s a pianist,”223 Beatriz Corona, and Wilma Alba. Guerra has performed several of her works, specifically mentioning a suite she wrote titled El Canto Quiere Ser Luz. There are arrangers as well, many of which write specifically for one choir.

Composers in Cuba are not paid for their commissions. Suarez believes they should be paid, but “in Cuba, the financial aspect is complicated and it doesn’t work

221. Ibid.
222. Ibid.
Cuban composers work for the sole purpose of having their works performed. Even if they did get paid, Suarez insists “they wouldn’t get paid what they did deserve for said composition.” Suarez drew my attention to Beatriz Corona, in her words, a “prolific” composer. Unfortunately, she was not aware of her work until a student interviewing her for a dissertation brought her Corona’s catalog of works.

There are many young composers in Cuba who study at ISA. But I think these composers see the choral world as something minor. So, they do bigger works for orchestra, but for the choral movement, there isn’t a great amount of works. This is also the case with arrangements. They also think that about arranging 20th century Cuban songs, trova, and that’s why there aren’t so many. This is another speculation: that composers regard choral arranging as something minor. Obviously, the choral world has certain limitations, such as ranges, technical limitations…

Suarez believes that there is not enough collaboration between composers and conductors in Cuba. There is a composition program at the ISA. The choral conducting program has a choral arranging class, but even if the composers have a class, “the main focus of composition is orchestra, string quartet, woodwind quintet, but whatever they have in choral composition is very little. Therefore, we are lacking and we demand more choral compositions.” Suarez feels privileged to have two composers that sing in her choir Vocal Sine Nomine and also compose for the group. Their intimate knowledge of the ensemble’s voices and limitations makes it an ideal situation. Suarez laments the lack of Cuban choral compositions being written. “If you go to a festival, you will hear one choir after the other singing the same pieces, and probably think ‘with all the musical

225. Ibid.
226. Ibid.
227. Ibid.
228. Ibid.
richness in Cuba…” While there is a composition major at the ISA, there is no real promise of a paid career.

Generally speaking, the composers are the same conductors, school teachers… It’s not like you’re going to sit at home and get paid to compose. There are some composers like Guido, like Roberto Valera, who are Cuban icons. But all of them, besides composing, they either teach composition or other subjects, are orchestra conductors, or are instrumentalists with a composition degree. \(^{230}\)

**Rehearsing Different Styles**

When preparing repertoire of different styles, Guerra described her preparation and rehearsal perspective in this fashion: “I simply place myself in the time and place, age, country…within time and space I try to put things in their place.” \(^{231}\) Many Cubans I spoke to offered without prompting that Guerra’s two specialties are Cuban music and negro spirituals. Guerra agreed, adding that she performs all styles that “[have] worth.” \(^{232}\)

Guerra shared a remarkable anecdote of her interpretation of a Swedish choral piece as an illustration of the way she studies and interprets a score, without listening or playing, rather, gleaning the substance of a work.

Look, we were very close friends with the Swedish choir association. We had a relationship and they sent us many scores. I must say Swedish composers are some of the best in the world. The music that Swedish composers write is wonderful, I deeply admire them. I have a great relationship with Gunard Eriksen, who came to Havana with his choir. Charming person an extraordinary musician. So, they would bring me all that music if they came here. Stacks of music. I would do everything. I would start a reading this or that because this music is so well-made. So, one of the works that they gave me is a work by a composer called Gösta Nystroem and this man composed a work entitled Huru skön och huru ljuv. The text is written in Swedish but it’s like a series…a very good work. So, when I pick of the work, I say “God…the text bothers me.” I mean, the work had a whole

\(^{229}\) Leonor Suarez, July 7, 2016.
\(^{230}\) Digna Guerra, July 7, 2016.
\(^{231}\) Ibid.
\(^{232}\) Ibid.
musical progression, and voice leading, that made the text feel superfluous. I was recording an album at that time. So, I told the choir, “Let’s include this work in the recording, but we will remove the text,” and I did it just like that, vocalized. And I explained that this [hums an excerpt] gives me the feeling that it is…I think it’s a person, adrift on a boat. And then comes a section in the middle, and it’s like the person sank to the depths of the water, and you can hear the chant of a mermaid in the middle of all that. People should have written that down. So, I end up recording it like that, because there is a solo for a light soprano, which I interpreted as the mermaid on the bottom of the ocean, as if the boat had sunk, as if the man were down there listening to the mermaid’s song. But suddenly, towards the end of the work, it resurfaces progressively and comes out of the water, back to the surface.

I was invited to Sweden to conduct some workshops with Erik Eriksen, who was one of the most famous Swedish conductors. He invites me to sing with his chamber choir, the Stockholm chamber choir. And he tells them: “I want you to hear this.” I took the disk with me and he plays it to the choir, and everyone looks at him, and he turns to me and says: “I want you to tell the choir why you removed the text.” And I tell them this story I just told you. “Do you know Gösta Nystroem?” And I reply, “No… I just heard the music.” And he says, “Well, this man only composed on a boat at sea. She would sit by the water or he would go on his boat and start to compose.” Where did I get all that? The music was there. The essence is there, the sea is there. It’s on the surface, and then on the bottom, and then it resurfaces. And he says, “It’s amazing how you, who haven’t heard anything about this, just felt that.” And I say, “Because it’s on the paper, you have to see what is written.”

Sotomayor noted that Guerra does not need to rehearse Cuban music as much “because we have the syncopation and accentuated upbeats in our veins.” Yet, she stressed, there is always more to do, even if the choir has been singing the piece for 20 years. Guerra will take the time to ensure each singer understands the nuances of each piece. “Because if only one person doesn’t understand it, the work is ruined.” One strategy Guerra uses is to allow a piece to rest if too much time has been spent on it without sufficient success. Monje pointed to the need for different strategies when rehearsing “the particularities of Cuban or Latin American music, which has nothing to

235. Ibid.
do with classical music. But she adds a lot of *cubania* [Cubanism] to Cuban music.”

Beyond the addition of movement to Latin American music, Monje made a cultural comparison to describe the difference in preparing Cuban music:

> Cubans are very much like that. They take things lightly, things that may be serious for the European, they take it lightly, with laughter. A Cuban will make a funny remark of anything. We say we laugh, even at our own misery, and Cubans are like that. When it comes to making music, Cubans will do things easily, loosely.

Acay pointed to specific vocal timbres that were necessarily different when rehearsing Afro-Cuban music. She used the example of a Schumann piece to illustrate that certain music must be read differently than written. “In order to give a sense to the end of that phrasing, instead of doing it as it is written, she asks that we do a rubato while the piano keeps playing with the tempo.” Acay believes Guerra has similar “respect” for all classical musical styles and “acts with more freedom” with Cuban or Latin American music. Guerra merely rehearses what she sees. “When it asks for full sound, she makes it sound through the roof. But also, when there is a piano, she makes it small and clean. No hoarseness, no nothing.”

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237. Ibid.
239. Ibid.
240. Ibid.
Adding Movement

It is common for Cuban choirs to move their bodies when they sing, especially when performing Cuban music. While it would be logical to assume that this is a carefully choreographed occurrence, this is mostly not the case. Even when body movement by the choir is synchronized, it is not the conductor, but the singers who coordinate this effort.

Cubans themselves have their own movement. Besides, when you’re going to sing it Cuban music, almost all Cuban music is danceable. She says (discreetly) that you can’t sing Cuban music [stiff as a board]. You should sing with a relaxed body and make your movements to the beat of the music but without exaggerating; you should also keep that in mind because it’s a choir…imagine if everyone came out to dance…every human has their particularities, and there are people who will get more excited than others, but in the end, there must be some uniformity in your movements. Then, for example, the ones standing at each end are always the ones who start swinging from left to right. The ones at the end are usually guiding the movement…that way you don’t stand out and you get uniform movements.  

Guerra explained it this way: “Look, the choir moves by itself, because you can’t stand all stiff when you are singing Cuban music. Everyone on their own, start moving here and there…All on their own.”

Acay, normally a very expressive person, said simply, “Well, in Cuban music there isn’t a lot to say, because that is what we all have in our blood.” I delved deeper with Acay to ascertain how a foreign choir would learn to perform such music if was not “in their blood.” She responded with the most common starting point in learning Cuban music—determining the style/genre, and identifying the rhythmic patterns inherent to that

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243. Ibid.
particular type of Cuban music. She gave several examples complete with dancing to illustrate:

If we are talking about a son, it’s possible that the first part of this son, or the singers generally, as the sones have a narrative first part, if what they want is a subtle movement, they what do it like this: [swinging back and forth] every two beats...that would be the narrative part. When they start with what in Cuba is known as montuno, or refrain, it’s the more danceable part when the tempo accelerated, or you have the same tempo but the musical arrangement requires more movement. This is when the dancers would move with their whole body. So then, the choir can, if in the first part they were just doing this [demonstrates], maybe every two beats, for example, they can do this [demonstrates]. For example, Guantanamera, is the most basic example. In the first part, every two beats, simple, without movement. But then when the maracas, and the clave, and the güiro come, you can do it every beat.

[You naturally move the arms as well], but small movements. Or the shoulders a little bit. Whenever you want to do an impactful choral movement, then you do a bigger dance, which would be as if you were dancing on a dancing floor. You would throw a step backwards, but then you can’t do that during a song because that interferes with their breath. This is why the conductors only do this in a little segment. I think it Digna only did it at the concert for a little segment because singers lose their breath, so it’s better to ensure they sing well. I was telling you just now that what I like about Digna is that she doesn’t exaggerate corporal movements. She gives the choir the possibility to be at ease so that music can be more stable and can be heard. But what is the determining factor? Genre, if it’s a traditional bolero, [sings applauding the clave’s rhythm]…

It was surprising to me to learn that there are in fact “choir singers who do not dance well” in Cuba. In these cases, Acay suggested that the choir’s movements remain discreet, “or maybe someone who does it well goes to the front and the rest stay behind. Acay confirmed that the conductor does not choreograph, rather the singers themselves. Of course, the conductor may decide in the end if it satisfactory and make any necessary adjustments.

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244. Delfina Acay, July 5, 2016.
Interpreting Cuban Choral Music

When discussing the distinct characteristics of Cuban choral music, Guerra struggled to explain what distinguished it from other styles. Her intimate understanding of it meant that it was second nature to her and she had no need to articulate it. She explained it similarly to several others I asked: “This is something that is in us; it’s in our blood.”246 When Cuban choirs rehearse Cuban music, they need very little coaching. Guerra also agreed with Suarez that the amount of Cuban choral music is lacking. There are no books or articles on Cuban choral music that Guerra could recall; nonetheless, it is taught in schools. Suarez believes Cuban composers “should make a greater effort to make more choral music. Because with Cuba’s natural richness, you would expect a repertoire overflowing with music…We have music, I am not denying that, but in my opinion, the amount of choral arrangements is not proportional with the amount of traditional Cuban music.”247

As a composer, López-Gavilán had much to say on the subject. His first response to the query asking about traits of Cuban choral music was to say,

Well, it depends which Cuban choral music. Because you can have masses, requiems, but you can also have danceable music. With Cuban music, you get something similar to what happens with popular music around the world. Mostly, when it’s very folkloric, very national, you have to know it since you are little so you can learn and perform it. I am incapable of performing something from India, China, or Japan. However, they frequently approach western music and our music. Something similar could happen with music from Romania or Bulgaria. That is terribly intricate for us, but it comes so spontaneously for them. It’s the same with Cuban music.

We are permeated with the rhythmic influence from African percussion, of an explosive mixture that happened in Cuba centuries ago. Our way of singing is done very specifically. And only Cubans or people close to Cubans notice: Latinos, Venezuelan, Puerto Ricans…people who are closer are the ones who can

do it in a more genuine way. However, more and more countries are approaching Cuban music in a very transparent, genuine, and correct way.”

López-Gavilán admitted that the most difficult aspect of performing Cuban choral music may be that

…generally, in Cuba, you write one way and you perform in a different way. In Cuba there is a liberty, rubato; and improvisation is very present. This improvisational element developed in Cuba, practically in the same way that it did in the United States, with New Orleans jazz. Cuban musicians were very closely connected, even with New Orleans musicians, and it’s a tradition that has developed in a parallel way in both countries and other countries too. But the improvisational element has been crucial in our music.”

Improvisation is an ingrained characteristic of Cuban music-making that Cubans are surrounded by all their lives. López-Gavilán believes this may be the most challenging element of performing Cuban choral music: “being able to play with the rhythm, the rubato, feeling like you’re losing the beat, but not. You have the appearance of losing control, but you never lose it. That is very hard to achieve, but there are people who specialize and who study, and who study a lot of our music of the Caribbean Coast and achieves it perfectly.” Using his well-known work *El Guayaboso*, López-Gavilán pointed several elements that he says “give it the quintessential character of Cuban music. It’s a *rumba*; a *guaguancó*, but at the same time it has modal harmonic characteristics…obviously, the best interpretations I’ve heard have been in Cuba.”

While *El Guayaboso* is a concert work and not a folk song, it incorporates rhythmic elements from folk music, as is typical of this composer. López-Gavilán held a workshop in 2016 with the Chicago Children’s Choir at CorHabana working on precisely this piece.

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249. Ibid.
250. Ibid.
251. Ibid.
He deemed the performance excellent, and had a few suggestions to improve their interpretation. Namely, that the piece must remain light, that rubato must be present, and that there are specific rhythms and accents that are essential. This level of research is not beyond the ability of a foreign choir or conductor, suggesting that this style of music is not only worthy of study, but achievable for a capable choir. When determining whether to add percussion and which specific Latin percussion instruments to incorporate, one must also do research. Guerra explained that percussion instruments are added “because the music demands it. Sometimes you’re hearing and notice that it lacks a clave, or a güiro…”252 The method for determining which percussion instruments to add is to first determine the genre of Cuban music. “If you play a son, there must be a clave, and a güiro. Or perhaps you have a guaracha, then you need the bongos or a tumbadora.”253

In order to determine which style of Cuban music a specific piece is classified as, Acay had several suggestions. The first recourse is to examine the score; often the genre is written right under the title of the piece. Other times, one must examine it carefully to determine the genre.

 Sometimes they just write the word “canción”, but when you analyze the music and the internal rhythm goes [applauds a bolero rhythm], that is a bolero. The son is [applauds a 3-2 clave] and the rumba or the guaguancó go like this [applauds a 2-3 clave]. Therefore, if a non-Cuban choir wants to sing any of these things, they would have to know a little bit about how the Cuban is.254

 Acay described the general spirit of Cubans as fun, brilliant, radiant with joy, and extroverted.

 We are Caribbean, our country has a lot of light, a lot of warmth, a lot of beach. That is projected in our music. Therefore… You should try to know the contents of the song that you choose to sing. If it’s a love story or if it is a little

253. Ibid.
sad, but there are times when the choir sings something sad but it has a double meaning, and that is called guaracha. In that case you sing it with a little shoulder movement and a light voice.

It’s difficult to find a Cuban work that is sung like this [sings with a lyrical voice]. Just imagine this: it’s a guaracha that’s called Dame un traguito. It’s about a man that walks into a bar to have a drink, to ask the waitress for “everything good and big that I am feeling.” To sing that, and non-Cuban choir should add some lightness to their voice, it can’t be heavy, but very loose. Singing almost non-legato, but it’s because of the quality of a guaracha, and because what you’re saying is fun. Now, the sound should be light, no vibrato, a fairly white sound. But then if it was a song like [sings in Spanish] “Una rosa de Francia cuya suave fragancia...” that is called a criolla. I imagine you also have many genres. This is a criolla...[an example of peasant music would be a] “zapateado [claps a 6/8 and 3/4 rhythmic combination].”

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Digna Guerra has shared her valuable years worth of practical experience with singers and students who have then passed this knowledge on to their own students and the musicians under their care, thus influencing generations of musicians in Cuba and especially in Latin America. Therefore, it is fitting to conclude a study of her work and life’s impact by having her students reflect on her lasting effect on their lives and careers. In order to stay true to the tributes of her students, I leave the participants’ words intact wherever possible. When considering the many students she has impacted over her many active years in the profession, Guerra was modest.

I think I have taught many good people who have assimilated my teachings, because I don’t want to mention any specific names or set anyone aside. I think everyone has learned. Everyone who has come here has learned, because I wait for them to learn. And everyone with their specific details, because no one is like no one else. There are particularities and individualities and you have to help them bring out the best in themselves and their music potential.²⁵⁶

From the perspective of a lifelong colleague and friend, López-Gavilán summarizes her inevitable influence by saying “we have shared a life.”²⁵⁷ Monje joined the Coro Nacional with no experience and learned to sing under Guerra’s direction. “As for choral music, I owe it all to her. This is where I have been raised, where I have grown.”²⁵⁸ Sotomayor, as Guerra’s conducting student, remains amazed at her teacher’s innate musical skill.

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…with Digna you can mention any song of any genre or country, and she will go, and sing it and play it in the piano. We see that all the time within new members who come and audition. She will tell them, “sing the song and I will follow.” And she will add the chords that go with the melody, and it even add the ornaments. She doesn’t need a score, but if you give her a score it’s as though she were playing by heart. And with our works, the choral works, you know, they are four-part works and they have a staff each [open score], and you can even have 16 parts, and it doesn’t matter if it’s 16 or 21 parts, double choir, she doesn’t mind, she reads it all. And she can tell you “let’s raise it half a tone,” and she will do it without stopping: playing in a key while reading a score in another key. Furthermore, there it is a work that we sing, Prayer, I don’t remember the author. It’s in G major and she does it in B flat major, and she will read it in G major while she plays it in B flat major. And it’s not easy, because it’s not half a tone; it’s a third higher. I have never seen anyone else who is able to do that. If there is anyone else, that’s great! But up ‘till now, for me, she is the only one who can do it, and I haven’t seen it anywhere else. 259

Guerra has been a promoter for many students, offering them opportunities that have changed the course of their careers. For Sotomayor, that was the appointment as the conductor of D’Profundis. Had she attended the ISA, she would be studying music at the university level “from a more academic perspective: studying the works at the piano, giving out cues on the air with an imaginary choir. But I am studying at a practical level. With the works that I conduct in the choir.” 260 Should Sotomayor continue on to that level of education, she will have prepared with one of the highest level professors in choral music in the country. A common theme in Guerra’s life is that of giving. If she sees a need, she meets it by giving of her time, her energy, and her expertise, despite her extremely active schedule. “She doesn’t have time for anything, but always, in the middle of all those things she has to do…she makes some time.” 261 When Suarez auditioned to

260. Ibid.
261. Ibid.
study choral conducting at the ISA in 1977, that was her first time meeting Maestra Digna.

She was the same person she is right now, very nice, pleasant and approachable, with a smile that lights up her face and everyone else’s. I felt really comfortable in that exam. I felt everything but fearful. I remember that moment because it changed the course of my life…This was the first time Digna influenced my life. Then she did it again when she called me to take over as choral conductor of *Sine Nomine*. Because going from teaching music, which is what I was doing, to conduct in a choir professionally…it was a radical change.\(^{262}\)

While Guerra is a challenging and enriching teacher, Suarez emphasized that as her professor at the ISA, the maestra gave her a lot of freedom. “She is not the teacher who tells you something is the way it is just because.”\(^{263}\) Suarez also commented on the musicianship evident in Guerra’s choirs. “What can I say? Digna is music. Hearing a choir conducted by Digna is hearing a completely different choir.”\(^{264}\) Suarez shared an anecdote from her years at the ISA under Guerra’s instruction:

> When I was in my second year, Digna gave me a really hard work. Mostly, because it was hard to play it on the piano (because at the intermediate level, we all had to play the piano and it is still like that). I went home, tried to play it, but it was a work for six voices and I couldn’t play it. I went back to class the following week and I told her: I couldn’t play it because my fingers were not enough for that many voices. So, she looks at me and she tells me “what isn’t enough… is your brain!”

> Oh, my god! I felt so ashamed… So, I told myself, “this can’t be!” Then, I went back home with the work, I studied it, and took it apart, just from how I ashamed I felt. And the following week I went back to class and played the whole work. This is one of the works I kept playing throughout my life. That suite has a last part that was also very difficult, but I didn’t even think of saying no. I did the same thing, I studied it and brought it perfectly played to class, because of the shame I felt when Digna said that to me. But that was a lesson: when you can’t do something, it’s because your head isn’t enough. [Suarez shared this story at a birthday celebration for Digna years later, and] Guerra said “Oh, Leo! I don’t remember that.” And I said “I know, the one who has to remember, is me.”\(^{265}\)
At a certain point in time, the professional choir Sine Nomine was left without a conductor when he traveled abroad. Guerra was aware of Suarez’ ability from her work as a student at the Conservatorio Amadeo Roldán. Guerra had observed Suarez’ women’s choir at CorHabana the previous month, and had loved their performance, even encouraging her to “professionalize” the choir, although this was not possible with a student group. Guerra bypassed the formal juried decision process to place a request for Suarez to be appointed as the conductor. “I think it’s the biggest thing that has ever happened to me professionally, and of course I have to thank Maestra Digna for that.”

Suarez listed the many responsibilities Guerra has, and added: “above all, I know that Digna is an exceptional conductor who has influenced a whole generation who has grown watching her conduct, hearing her choirs, hearing her, and regarding her as the peak figure of the Cuban choral movement.”

Along with Suarez, Acay was one of only two students during her studies with Guerra at the ISA (see fig. 21). Acay “had the immense fortune to be placed under Digna’s tutelage…it was as if a whole new world was being opened.”

Guerra did not limit herself to teaching conducting.

She teaches that technique must be subject to whatever music does. It’s not about moving your arm and making a technically correct and clear gesture. It’s about making sure that the gesture that you make gives the singer the feeling that music conveys. It’s hard. We have excellent teachers and choir conductors and the result was evident in several excellent concerts at CorHabana. But I have never seen any other teacher who has this approach, which is a unique trait in Digna.

266. Leonor Suarez, July 7, 2016.
267. Ibid.
268. Ibid.
270. Ibid.
Acay came from an underprivileged family, “and couldn’t advance at a faster pace because I didn’t have the same resources or knowledge.” Guerra demonstrated great patience with Acay, raising her to the required level of success. “It wasn’t only the technical and historical [education]. She would make you feel what you were doing. With Maestra Digna, playing correctly, or singing correctly, isn’t enough. With the maestra, you must do things that come from your heart.” At that time, Guerra would have her conducting students complete their graduation exam by conducting the Coro Nacional. When a life event disrupted Acay’s educational requirement, Guerra accommodated her.

I thought I was only going to get a four out of five on that [final exam] because I had just had my baby. In ‘81 I had to postpone my graduation with the choir. And I had the maestra’s full support, because anyone else would have told me that it was my responsibility, but the maestra was very understanding and allowed me to do the exam at a later date.

Acay described the feeling of conducting the Coro Nacional at that final exam as channeling what Guerra had instilled in her about immersing herself in the experience.

...when I presented my exam with the choir...I was still missing some cues. But the singers told me afterwards “Fifi, you transformed, you were not the same person you were at the rehearsal.” I didn’t notice. I only noticed when they started applauding at the end. I was so immersed in the music and wasn’t aware of anything else. But I learned that. I could’ve already had the aptitude to feel and enjoy music, of making the choir sing as they are told, but that was learned, and I learned it with Digna.

At her thesis defense, Acay did not even realize how much knowledge she had gained until it allowed her to pull information she had simply absorbed under Guerra’s thorough instruction.

272. Ibid.
273. Ibid.
274. Ibid.
Her success was due to “the knowledge that Digna gives you, which she delivers with such humility… but you must… capture it and to transform it in yourself. That changed my life. There is a strong authoritative personality in every conductor, but there is an extreme level of sensibility. A spirituality in every rehearsal.”\textsuperscript{275} Acay’s connection with Guerra is deep and based on more than a bond between a student and teacher. They are united by their love of and service to their country.

We don’t just know each other as student and teacher, but we have an endearing love for our country. Even though we know about the social and economic difficulties that we have, however we are, we fight for our country. The maestra and I are bound because I was her student, because I have sung in her choir, but we are also bound by the love of our country. Therefore, in these past months, when I fell ill and asked for my retirement, and I was very limited and asked her for a temporary leave, in her great thoughtfulness she said “No. Help me whenever you can.”\textsuperscript{276}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Digna Guerra accepting the Doctor Honoris Causa from the ISA. \textit{Source:} Photo by Abel Padrón, Digna Guerra personal collection.}
\end{figure}

At the time of the writing of this paper, Maestra Digna Guerra is 72 years old. Her singers marvel at her work ethic and her stamina. Monje shared, “Sometimes at rehearsal,

\textsuperscript{275} Delfína Acay, July 5, 2016.
\textsuperscript{276} Ibid.
when she arrives (because she has her years of age), we will say, ‘what did you eat today, profe?’ because we, who are young, don’t have the stamina that she has to conduct and to tell us things.” Guerra was celebrated by colleagues and students on her 70th birthday while being recognized for her many contributions to Cuban choral music. At this event, the UNEAC bestowed upon Guerra the status of Member of Merit, the highest award the organization grants. Even more notable about this educator than this recognition was the name the organizers of the event gave the gathering: “Afternoon of Love.” Sotomayor shared:

It’s a privilege to be with her. Sometimes, since she is so close to us, we don’t think of how fortunate we are. We don’t think that because we see her every day…but if you stop and think about how much she does, and everything she’s been through, and everything she does at age 70, and how she is admired by everyone who comes here… It’s a privilege.  

Defining the Maestra’s Legacy

At the end of each interview, I asked each participant the same question:

Why should one study Digna Guerra? Several selected and edited responses follow below.

Leonor Suarez

Because Digna Guerra is…a specialty class. Because of her musical concepts, because of her talent, because of her drive, her vital force, and her relentless will power, she has always been a very important part of what has been accomplished in Cuba so far, an outside of it. In Digna you see the summary of many accomplishments of the Cuban choral movement. She is the maestra. With her age, she is still the steam engine of this train. She pulls us all with her example. And I think you have chosen the figure who embodies the musical choral movement in Cuba.280

Guido López-Gavilán

Because she is a vivid example of how with talent, perseverance, work, effort, you can become a world-renowned personality in her field thanks to her own work…Because of the way she influences and communicates with the people that she conducts, or the people are around her. Because of her integrity as a person, because of her character.281

Ladys Sotomayor

…the maestra is…a human being, and she is a woman who suffers, who has uncertainties, like any human being. She has doubts, she gets tired, she gets sick like any human being. And how she has been able to overcome herself and overcome everything she has been through. That is also worthy of admiration.

You see a confident Digna, a decisive Digna, a strong Digna, but behind that secure and decisive Digna, there is a Digna who has headaches, a Digna who once caught dengue fever, a Digna who feels all her years. Because it’s 70 well-lived years. There is a Digna who suffers the death of her relatives, like you or like me. And she also feels another person’s pain. Authentic pain, because there are people who fake to win her over or to be by her side. But when she sees a truthful heart without any agenda, she will feel their pain. And when you are sincere, she will go with you to the end of the world. She is worth studying.

because, first of all, she is the foremost figure in choral music in Cuba because of her results.282

Digna Guerra

When asked what her greatest challenges have been as a teacher, Guerra had few regrets. She mentioned a certain group of teachers who “have a very square conception about music and conducting and I just don’t fit in there.”283 She also shared her advice to students of hers who define themselves by a low score on an exam. “I tell them: ‘no… Life gives everyone what they deserve. Carry on. That three or that two have no meaning in music. Your worth is bigger than that number.’”284 When asked about her greatest achievements, despite a long and exhausting week producing an international choral festival, Guerra’s countenance became reanimated as she first listed the joy of sharing her musical life with her family (see fig. 22).

284. Ibid.
One of them is having my daughter singing with me in the choir… Having my husband Benjamín, because they are both linked to music with me. He is my support, my cane, my help, my everything. I wouldn’t be able to do half of what I do if I didn’t have him. I am truly thankful for my family in this sense. Everything else is solved by music, music is everything. I breathe music, I live for it, in and fascinated by choral music because the choir gives you the possibility to touch the human sensitivity. It’s not the orchestra, because there is a stand between the conductor and the musician, separating them. But the message of the choir is much more direct. That has given me the chance of knowing human beings from up close because I can touch them. I can touch them.\footnote{Digna Guerra, July 7, 2016.}
Conclusion

Guerra has many demands on her time, yet gives what she can to mentor conductors and organize national and international events for the benefit of the general choral community. She works with the highest-level singers and choirs in the country, yet has been instrumental in forming community hubs for music-making in underprivileged areas. Her great love of her country is evident not only when she speaks of Cuba, but also in her numerous responsibilities with the government and to the Cuban people. She demonstrates particular empathy for those of underprivileged backgrounds, as reflects her own childhood. She is strict and demanding, but also gives chances to singers of lesser experience but much potential, as in singer Yamila Monje’s acceptance into the Coro Nacional and conductor Ladys Sotomayor’s appointment with D’Profundis. Perhaps this mirrors the opportunities she herself was given, with the gift of her beloved piano as a young girl and Manuel Ochoa’s entrance exam waiver at the Amadeo Roldan choral school. Guerra’s high expectations on others are also placed on herself. She is continually seeking new repertoire and looking to challenge herself as well as her singers. Her personal strength and force of will is combined in complementary fashion with her humility as an educator. Guerra has shaped choral music in Cuba for all ages and levels of education, and her generations of students ensure her impact for years to come.


Appendix 1

Selected List of Awards Guerra and her Ensembles have Received

- 1990 – Award for the Best Interpretation of Cuban Music in the Concurso de Música de Cámara de la Habana (Chamber Music Festival of Havana)

- 1997 – 29th Concurso Internacional de Masas Corales (International Choral Mass Competition) in Tolosa, Spain. First Prize and Gold Trophy in the category of Profane Music, Second Prize and Silver Trophy in the category of Sacred Music, Public Prize

- 1999 – International Festival of Choirs “Harmonie 99” Lindenholzhausen, Limburg, Germany. First Prize with Gold Certification in the Vocal Jazz category, First Prize with Silver Certification in the category of Madrigals, Second Prize with Gold Certification in the Mixed Choir category. Special Prize awarded by the German government for being the choir with the highest awarding of points.

- 1999 – Concurso Internacional de Coros (International Choir Competition) in Marktoberdorf, Germany. Third Prize and First Level Category with Excellent Performance at the International Level

- 1999 – Concurso Internacional de Coros (International Festival of Choirs) in Maasmechelen, Belgium. First Prize in the category of Chamber Choirs

- 2000 – Prize in the 4th International Festival of Cuban Albums “Cubadisco 2000” in the category of Choral Music with CD “O vos Omnes”

- 2000 – First Prize and Grand Prize in the Children’s Choir Contest “Voices of the Morning” with the Coro Nacional Infantil (National Children's Choir)

- 2004 – Prize in the Festival de Habaneras (Festival of Habaneras) in Torrevieja, Spain in the category of Habaneras and Premia Publica (Audience Award)

- 2006 – Cubadisco 2006 award in the category of Choral Music for the CD De todo Corazón

- 2007 – Second Prize in the category of Vocal Ensemble and Third Prize in the Free category of the 36th International Choral Contest Florilège Vocal de Tours in Tours, France.

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286. Digna Guerra, Curriculum vitae
• 2011 – Marktoberdof Contest in 2011. Mixed Choir Category, First Prize and First Level category with Excellent Performance at the International Level, Audience Award

• 2011 – International Festival of Choirs “Harmonie 2011” in Lindenholzhausen, Limburg, Germany belonging to the City of Limburg (Hessen). Category of Mixed Chorus: Gold Certification (First Prize), Vocal Jazz Category: Gold Certification (Second Prize), Special Prize for the Best Performance in the Competition of a Romantic Work with work “Liebchens Bote” by Max Reger, Special Prize given by the Mayor of Limburg to Coro Entrevoces and Maestra Digna Guerra for being the Choir to receive the highest score from all competing categories (this high score is a record in this contest, as it is the highest in all of its history)

• 2011 – 9th Mainhausen International Choir Competition. Jazz Vocal Category: Gold Certificate (Second Prize), Mixed Choir Category: Gold Certificate (Third Prize)

• 2012 –Cubadisco 2012 award in the category of Choral Music for the CD Contemporáneos with Entrevoces

• 2012 –ECHO KLASSIK 2012 award in Germany for the best choral recording of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for the album El Canto Quiere Ser Luz in collaboration with the record companies MDG of Germany and Colibri of Cuba