



Composer Profile: Ariel Ramirez (1921 – 2010)
Programme Notes: Misa Criolla

Ariel Ramírez was an Argentine composer, pianist and music director. He was considered "a chief exponent of Argentine folk music" and noted for his "iconic" musical compositions.

Born in Santa Fé on the Rio Paraná north of Buenos Aires, Argentina. His father was a teacher and after studying piano, it had been thought Ramírez would also pursue this career path. He began teaching in a rural mountain post when he was 19, but the job lasted for just two days due to "discipline problems".

Instead, he spent his early twenties roaming the South American hinterland, playing piano and studying regional musical traditions, becoming fascinated with the music of the Indians, gauchos, and creoles in the mountains; which then became the inspiration for most of his music.

He continued his studies in Córdoba, where he met and became influenced by the great Argentinian folk singer and songwriter Atahualpa Yupanqui.

Following a suggestion from Yupanqui, he visited the North East of Argentina and deepened his research into the traditional rhythms of South America.

He spent time in Mendoza and continued his academic studies as a composer at the National Conservatory of Music, in Buenos Aires.

In 1946 he made his first recording, with RCA, and a further 20 other recordings followed through until 1956.

Ramírez went on to formally study classical music and folk traditions, at the Academy of Vienna, Austria and also at the Institute of Hispanic Culture in Madrid, from 1950 to 1954. And even spent time teaching music in a German Convent.

On his return to Argentina, Ramirez completed his musical training in Buenos Aires and collected over 400 Andean folk and country songs. He founded the *Compañía de Folklore Ariel Ramírez*, to subsequently record and publish them.

His politically engaged popular songs rapidly earned him renown as a leader of the *nuevo cancion* movement.

In 1963, after the Second Vatican Council lifted their ban and authorised vernacular mass settings, Ramirez created his widely popular *Misa Criolla* (Creole Mass/Mass in Native Style), which is a Spanish translation of the traditional liturgical text.

The success of this innovative work owes much to its timing. Set in Spanish rather than Latin, it was one of the first major masses, composed and celebrated in a modern language.

And profited from the period's burgeoning interest in folk music.

As a result, the work quickly captured the imagination of audiences worldwide and went on to receive thousands of performances.

The Mass's reception abroad, where its style was perceived as novel and exotic actually helped stimulate appreciation for native culture among more sceptical audiences back in Argentina.

The vocal writing is light and lively, distinguished by numerous call-and-response passages, such as the *carnavalito* sections of the Gloria.

With the Washington Post describing it as "a stunning artistic achievement, combining Spanish text with indigenous instruments and rhythms".

Misa Criolla is a synthesis of popular and liturgical styles.

It is based on Southern American folk music, particularly the rhythms and melodies of Argentina.

The opening *Kyrie* is in the rhythm of the *vidala-bagula*. This music, characteristic of northern Argentina, depicts the feeling of loneliness one has living on a deserted high plateau.

The *Gloria* rhythm, the *carnavalito*, it also from the same area, but evokes the sense of rejoicing implicit in this part of the mass.

The two sections of the *Gloria* are separated by a recitative (*Yaravi*) which makes the cadence of the *carnavalito* more brilliant when it returns with a full rhythmic accompaniment.

The *chacarera trunca*, a folk theme of central Argentina, is the basis of the *Credo*. Its obsessive rhythm accentuates the profession of faith and the section ends with the final words of prayer which reaffirms the triumph of everlasting life.

One of the most beautiful and unusual Bolivian folk rhythms, the *carnaval cochabambino*, is used for the *Sanctus*. It has a subdued but marked beat.

The *Agnus Dei* is written in a typical style of the pampas (*estilo pampeano*). As in the *Kyrie*, a feeling of solitude and distance is created.

A simple recitative expresses the universal longing for peace.

The work won the unprecedented admiration of the critics and public of Argentina and other South American countries, proving that indigenous musical forms can communicate the highest values of life, and that the religious act may be conveyed through a popular medium of expression.

Misa Criolla was recorded in 1964 by Philips Records, directed by Ramírez himself, with Los Fronterizos as featured performers. But was not publicly performed until 1967 - in Düsseldorf, Germany, during a European tour; which eventually brought Ariel Ramírez before Pope Paul VI.

Misa Criolla allowed Ramírez to travel around Europe and Latin America to build his reputation, and led to album sales numbering in the millions internationally.

Ramírez once told The Jerusalem Post how Misa Criolla was inspired by a visit to Germany after World War II. While there he had an encounter with a group of nuns, which led him to consider writing "a spiritual piece"; which would eventually become the Misa Criolla.

Although most renowned for Miss Criolla, it marked the beginning of a period of high musical productivity for the composer which also heralded the premieres of the following works, all produced in collaboration with writer Félix Luna: *Navidad Nuestra* (1964), *La Peregrinación* (1964); *Los caudillos* (1965); *Mujeres Argentinas* (1969) *which documented women fighting for their freedom*, and *Alfonsina y el Mar* (1969).

Albeit not sharing the same worldwide success as Misa Criolla, *Alfonsina y el Mar* also enjoyed great popularity in Latin America and Spain, being one of the most regarded songs in Argentinian folk music.

Equally famous are the recordings with the solo voices of George Dalaras (1989), José Carreras (1990), and Mercedes Sosa (1999). Plácido Domingo recorded the Kyrie (i.e., the first movement of the Misa) with Dominic Miller on guitar (2003).

Other major compositions by Ramírez include the *Cantata Sudamericana* (again with text by Félix Luna, 1972) and another mass: *Misa por la paz y la justicia* (Mass for peace and justice) (with liturgical texts by Félix Luna and Osvaldo Catena, 1980).

Additionally, along with the *Hamlet Lima Quintana*, Ramírez also composed the music for Spanish film director Carlos Saura's TV film *El Sur*, which is based on the short story *El Sur* by Argentine author Jose Luis Borges.

Ramírez was married to Inés Cuello de Ramirez, and together they had two sons.

By the time he died in 2010, Ramírez had composed over 400 songs in popular styles, his work was globally renowned, been recorded by notable artists (Plácido Domingo, José Carreras, José Cura and Mercedes Sosa) and had sold millions of albums.