

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Tracie Amend, PhD.

The Last Song / El último cuplé (1957)

Juan de Orduña (1900-1974)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Juan de Orduña was born and lived his entire life in Madrid. He was one of the most prominent film directors of Spain in the mid-twentieth century, although he also frequently wrote scripts and acted. Orduña specialized in historical melodramas during Franco's regime (1939-1976). Unlike other artists, Orduña remained in Spain throughout the dictatorship and refrained from writing any satirical or politically-charged scripts. As a result, his filmography is frequently equated with Francoist propaganda. Nonetheless, it is rumored that Orduña was a homosexual and hinted at his repressed sexuality in some of his later films. His adroitness at creating historical epics and musicals shaped the landscape of Spanish film in the 1940s and 50s.

Film *The Last Song* (1957) is one of the few Orduña films in color and one of his most successful openings. The plot involves María Luján, an older woman who looks back on her career as a vaudeville-style singer and remembers her many love affairs. Although María Luján was a fictional character, most critics see the film as a tribute to two big cupletistas of early twentieth-century Madrid: Raquel Meller and La Goya (Aurora Mañanós Jauffret). The musical stars Sara Montiel, who often portrayed sexy singers and seductresses (she was often called the Spanish-Mexican Marilyn Monroe).

Background As a musical melodrama, *The Last Song* (1957) is unique among Orduña's films of the 1940s and 1950s. Rather than retrace the glory of the Spanish Empire and key historical figures, Orduña made a popular technicolor film that became the biggest box-office smash in Spain until the 1970s. Ironically, the film almost shut down due to a lack of funds and the near-bankruptcy of CIFESA, Spain's national studio. Sara Montiel became a big star, and her contralto voice created a new style of singing that did not require a soprano range.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

<i>María Luján</i>	singer and performer
<i>Paca</i>	María's saucy aunt
<i>Luisa</i>	María's best friend from the chorus
<i>Cándido Chamorro</i>	young watchmaker and thief; María's first love
<i>Juan Contreras</i>	María's agent and theater empresario
<i>Russian Grand Duke</i>	older man who propositions María
<i>Pepe Molina</i>	young matador whom María seduces
<i>Trini</i>	Pepe's desperate girlfriend

SYNOPSIS

María Luján is a young, beautiful chorus girl who lives in Barcelona with her Aunt Paca around 1910. Although María is content staying in the chorus and marrying her boyfriend Cándido, Paca is determined to make her niece a famous cupletista—a type of cabaret-folk singer. When the rich theater impresario Juan Contreras notices María backstage, Paca convinces the agent to take on María as a client.

María resists initially, as she thinks she will have to sleep with Juan to get ahead in the business. Instead, she decides to marry Cándido and work in a factory. However, when Paca falls ill (even though she is just pretending), Cándido offers to rob his boss so that María can pay for medicine. Cándido is caught and arrested, but Juan agrees to bail him out. María finally agrees to sign a contract with Juan, who convinces Cándido that he should break up with María. Both young lovers mourn their lost relationship, but María slowly gets over her heartbreak.

With Juan's training, María becomes a better performer and tours Europe. By the time of the Armistice of 1919, María is the toast of Paris and has multiple admirers. When the Grand Duke of Russia makes repeated advances after a performance, Juan defends her honor and kills the duke in a duel.

Later, María, Paca and Juan tour the Americas and end with a triumphant performance in New York City. When they return to Madrid around 1925, María falls in love with a young, aspiring matador named Pepe. As his benefactress and lover, María agrees to move to Seville and fund Pepe's lifestyle and career, even though he has another fiancée on the side named Trini. In the climax of the film, Pepe is trampled in the ring, and María is left to mourn her second great love.

In the 1940s, María descends into a depression in which she drinks and gambles away her fortune. She ends up returning to Barcelona in 1950 and performing in a second-rate theater. Juan sees María perform and offers to use his clout to get her a well-publicized Spanish tour. On her opening night, María performs with such passion and emotion that she collapses in the wings. Juan, realizing that she has died suddenly, goes on stage and declares that María Luján has sung her "last song."

SCENES

Introducing the Singers of the El Molino Theater The credits roll in front of a standard red theater curtain. When the main curtain rises, we see a spotlight set against the back curtain but no one on stage. A male narrator explains that this film is an invented story that is a tribute to the "mosaic" of female singers who created magic on stage. We see a plaza with the letters "Barcelona 195..." indicating that the opening scene of the film takes place sometime in the 50s (contemporary Spain for the audience). The camera cuts to a street outside the theater with multiple advertisement posters. There is an interior shot of the stage and the balcony seats of the El Molino (The Miller) theater. A voluptuous red-head in a powder-blue leotard, skirt, and headdress is performing. A group of back-up dancers in take their positions around the red-head singer. The camera cuts back and forth between the show-girl performance and two couples watching from one of the balcony boxes. The women sit while the men stand, and all four are dressed in expensive furs and suits. One man explains to the women that they have come to the theater to hear María, and his wife asks if María is aware that they are in the audience. The other man comments that María has been performing in this theater for two months.



María Gets Ready Backstage In the wings, another performer waits to go onstage while a young girl walks in front of them, carrying a package. We see María's backside as she primps in front of a mirror backstage. She wears a tight, red dress. We also see the reflection of a young girl in the mirror, who introduces herself as the costumer's daughter. The girl reports that her mother is sick, so she has brought María her clothing. María tells her to put the package on the side table. When the girl hangs around, María goes over to chat with her. The girl tells María that she wants to be a cabaret singer, too, and that she listens to all of María's hits. María warns her that the cuplé lifestyle is not great for girls and that her mother should forbid her to enter show business.



María Gets to Know the Girl and Remembers an Old Lover The young girl starts to sing her favorite song, and María joins in, briefly. María asks her name, and the girl replies that she is also named María, but her surname is not the best for show business-Chamorro. María is startled when she hears that name, and she murmurs: "It can't be—you are too young... Candido Chamorro." The girl says her father has a different name and explains that he is a bricklayer. María laughs at the misunderstanding. We infer that María has an old lover named Cándido Chamorro. Suddenly, a stagehand enters the room and tells María that a big-wig businessman is in the audience. María guesses correctly that it is her old agent, Juan Contreras.

María Performs in the Red Dress The businessmen and their wives watch María's set. She sings a slow-tempo song about enjoying the attention of a man who stares at her with passionate eyes. The men in the balcony box enjoy the performance, but the wives are not as impressed. The young girl



and fellow performers watch María from the wings and declare that her voice is better than ever. The couples in the box decide to go back stage with a bottle of champagne.

María Regrets Her Life on the Stage Juan enters to find María crying. They embrace passionately, and the man's wife also hugs María, remarking that she hasn't changed. They introduce the other couple, the Pérez, to María. María wistfully remarks that their genre of performance used to be called cupletistas, then tonadilleras, and now animadora (or cheer-leader), but really the songs stay the same. Juan remarks that she is too good and too famous for this theater. María retorts that she was drunk on the wine of fame when she was younger, but she didn't realize how much she would have to sacrifice. She reminisces with Juan about the first time she met Don Práxedes, when he was a city official.



Flashback to María's Chorus Girl Days There is a sudden cut to a gentleman drinking champagne and flirting with an elegant woman. Their clothing suggests that it is the early twentieth century. The gentleman compliments the lady's beauty, and she replies that she can't sing like the other women. The lady sings a few bars off-key to prove her point, and the gentleman chuckles at her attempt. The camera pans to a row of chorus girls in white and blue sailor outfits. A young María is on the left. They are rehearsing a number with a pianist. Another chorus girl, not in the number, complains to a stagehand that she never gets a man's favor or champagne. The sailor chorus sings their song in a lackluster fashion, and the camera cuts back and forth between the rehearsal and an intimate dinner between the couple from before. Don Práxedes, the city official, proposes to the lady over dinner. He presents her with a ring and jokes that he could take the expense out of the city budget. When the scene cuts back to the rehearsal, we see María half-heartedly singing and not really knowing the lyrics. Out in the wings, the director Don Jerónimo yells at the girls to watch their choreography. A trio of stage moms also watch the rehearsal from the wings, and they bicker over which daughter / niece is most talented.



Drama After the Rehearsal The girls run off to the dressing room while the stage moms continue bickering. María and two other girls wonder if their boyfriends are waiting for them outside. One of the stage moms comments that the girls need to hook a man while they are young and beautiful—like she did with her husband. Práxedes continues courting his fiancée, and two of the moms get into a fight and start pulling each other's hair. The girls and Jerónimo run in and pull apart the fighting moms.



María's Aunt Paca Advises Her When one of the moms is kicked out of the costume room, we find out that the other woman in the fight was María's aunt, Paca. María chides her for getting in a fight, and Paca responds that the other woman is jealous because she (Paca) cozied up to Jerónimo in order to get María better parts. Paca exhorts María to get a sugar daddy, but María replies that she only has eyes for her boyfriend. Paca warns María that she needs to aim higher and not marry a pauper. María and her friend Luisa ignore Paca and run out to meet up with their boyfriends. Back inside, Paca tells her friend Gloria that she wished María would go after Juan, the rich businessman.

Paca Plays Matchmaker Don Juan pulls up in front of the theater in a fancy carriage. He gets out and passes the two boyfriends still waiting outside. He wears a three-piece suit, gloves, and a cape-like coat, and he is greeted by various stagehands as he passes. María runs down the staircase in a flamenco-style, polka dot dress and collides with Don Juan, who is taken aback by her beauty. Juan asks why he didn't notice her before, and she replies coolly that she is only in the chorus. Juan attempts to chat further but María runs away. Paca, observing the scene from atop the stairs, shouts out her niece's name. She tells Juan that María is her very talented niece and brags that she, too, used to be an artist when she was young. Juan praises her beauty, and Paca agrees, adding "Wait till you hear her sing!"



Pepe's Birthday María runs outside and tells Cándido to forgive her for making him wait. She presents him with a present for his birthday. Paca and Gloria file out and interrupt the reunion. María

protests, saying that it is Cándido's birthday, and Paca asks how old he is. When he replies 19, she scoffs and calls him a *mocoso* (snotty baby).

Dance and Beauty Contest The youths and the ladies go to a dance with a raised platform in front. A young couple sings a love song in a vaudeville-like style, and many couples slow dance—including Cándido and María. Alongside the stage area sit five older gentlemen at a decorated table. A banner behind them reads: "Judges for the Beauty Pageant." The judges survey the crowd of young couples and point at the ones they like. Paca and her friends sit at another table. Luisa asks her boyfriend if they should move closer to the judges' table, and her boyfriend responds that he will follow her anywhere. Cándido and María gaze at each other passionately and do not notice that the crowd is forming a circle around them—and the judges are eyeing them. Paca brags that María dances as well as she does. At the end of the song, the circle applauds, and Cándido and María realize that they are the last couple standing. The head judge stands up and announces that while there were many beautiful faces at the dance, the lady in the polka-dot dress is the winner. María is shocked and surprised, but Paca brags that it was a foregone conclusion. María receives a ring as her prize. Cándido looks on, disgruntled.



Juan Makes His Intentions Known Paca visits Juan in his luxurious living room. Juan proclaims that María will also be queen of the theater, and we assume from context that Paca has just described how she won the beauty contest. Juan offers Paca wine and describes the elaborate date that he has planned—not only wining and dining, but a meeting in which they discuss María's future career. Paca is ecstatic. The camera cuts to a theater box, where Paca, Juan, and a sour María sit. María declares that she is not a fan of low-brow theater, but Juan insists that cupletistas offer a good model for singing if they are of good quality.



La Bella Charrito Sings for Rowdy Male Patrons When the MC comes out on stage, he reports to the audience that their typical act, Bella Charito, will not perform her hit song due to new censorship laws. The audience full of male patrons starts yelling and heckling in protest. The MC explains that the government raised taxes and fines on the theater, and the crowd becomes so angry that they throw tomatoes at the MC. The camera cuts to the balcony box, where Juan comments that this is the typical crowd for the cabaret scene. The MC runs off the stage, and Bella Charito enters and starts singing a less controversial song. The men sing along and cheer. Juan tells María that she will have to learn how to manage rowdy crowds, and Paca asserts that she will be able to do it. The singer onstage touches herself suggestively as she sings, and the men yell out catcalls. María, still sour, says that she will sing those songs but "in a different way."



Juan Takes María and Paca Out to Dinner When the trio goes out for a fancy dinner after the show, Juan assures María that she can perform in her own style. María asks about all of the expenses and preparations, from sets to costumes, and she correctly guesses that Juan is prepared to pay for everything. María asks what Juan expects in return and declares that she is not willing to give up her virtue. Paca protests, but María asserts that she would rather stay in the chorus her whole life rather than give up her moral standards. She stands up and throws down the glass of champagne.

María Tells Cándido the Plan María and Cándido sit at an outdoor table, where María has just explained Juan's proposal. Cándido protests and argues that it is unseemly. María responds that she wants to try it and honor the sacrifices that Paca made for her—especially since it was Paca who raised her. Cándido thaws a bit and reasserts his love for María. He promises to marry her as soon as he has finished his military service. As they gaze into each other's eyes, a violinist plays nearby. Cándido says that he is playing their song. María also promises to stay true to Cándido, and they kiss passionately.



Paca Pretends to Have an Injury Paca lies in bed, moaning, with Gloria and María looking on. Paca makes a big fuss about being in pain, but María notes that Paca keeps changing which side hurts. Paca laments that she has been unable to work for a whole month and that they will be thrown out of the apartment. María



tells her to pipe down and promises to fetch her medicine. Paca argues that she will only make the money if she takes Juan's deal, but María vows to earn the money by working in the factory instead. As soon as María leaves, Paca flies out of bed and yells "Finally!" She and Gloria walk to the kitchen, and Gloria compliments Paca's acting skills. Paca quips that she does have joint pain from lying in bed too long. Paca brags that her plan is working.

María Asks Cándido For a Loan María runs over to Cándido's watch repair shop and past a group of peasants who are singing a folk song outside. She asks Cándido for 100 duros, and she tells him that she will have to go on stage if she can't get it quickly. Cándido laments that he does not have the money on him, but he makes a plan to get it. María says she will meet him at the shop at 7:00. Later that night, María greets Cándido's boss, Tomás. When she asks after Cándido, Tomás reports that he had Cándido arrested for attempted robbery. María explains that he only did it to help her and that they had every intention of returning the money. Tomás advises María to take the theater job so that she will not have to depend on a poor boyfriend. María asks Tomás to rescind the charges if she can return the money quickly. Tomás agrees to do so if he gets the money before Cándido's arraignment. María leaves hurriedly.



María Asks Juan for Help María sits in Juan's living room and explains the situation. Juan agrees to pay the *duros* that Cándido stole and remarks that he and María must really love each other. Juan tries to convince María to reconsider the stage, but María scoffs at playing in the sleazy theaters. Juan retorts that the venue doesn't matter if the artist is great. When they start to discuss her stage name, Juan suggests that she not use a nickname or descriptor, but her real name: María Luján. María agrees.

María Rehearses and Performs for Juan and Paca with a Small Band Inside a small restaurant, María sings a cuplé in a yellow mermaid-style dress with a puffy headdress. The male instrumentalists accompany her. Paca and Juan look on, satisfied with María's presentation. Cándido enters the restaurant and tries to barge in on the rehearsal. Juan comes out to talk to him and calm him down. Juan explains that he believes that María will be a big star. Cándido retorts that she is his fiancée, and Juan replies that María would probably give it all up for her love, but he warns Cándido not to make an ultimatum. Cándido laments that Juan and Paca have poisoned María. Juan convinces Cándido that María's true love will always be her art, so it is better that he find another wife. Cándido declares his love for María, but agrees to leave, dejected and crying. He watches a military parade pass.



María Mourns Her Lost Love The camera cuts to María reading Juan's breakup letter. The voiceover explains that he (Cándido) loves her dearly but realizes that she is meant to be a great artist. María cries as she reads Cándido's words. Paca enters and notices that María is upset, and María tells her about the breakup. Paca tells her it is for the best and reminds her that María is earning big money already. Juan enters to fetch María for her performance, and he asks Paca why she is still crying over Cándido. Paca replies that women are crazy and will accept poverty in exchange for love. She cites the title of a popular comic play from the early nineteenth century called "Contigo, pan y cebolla" (With you, bread and onion are enough). Juan reminds María that there is a crowd waiting for a performance, but María refuses to go out.



María is a Hit A distinguished tenor sings a ballad and ends on an impressive high note. Juan introduces María, and she saunters out in a sexy green dress with a slit. Paca watches nervously from the wings and reminds her to smile. María manages to sing well and flirts with the audience (but in a classy way). She receives a warm response with several curtain calls, and she ends up singing another song. Juan and Paca are very pleased with her performance.

María Goes on Tour After a successful first performance, María goes on tour—starting with Seville. We see train tracks with the names of all of the cities that María visits, ending with a special armistice performance in Paris in 1919. She sings a cuplé in front of a curtain with images of Spanish mantillas on it. There are also several bouquets of flowers. María wears a blue, floor-length mermaid dress with a fez and a blue mantilla. Military official watch admiringly from a balcony box. The elder gentleman whispers something



to his officer. María concludes her performance with a brief speech in broken French. When Juan enters the balcony box, the elder military man asks to visit María. Juan goes back to the dressing room and reports to María that she has admirers in the audience. The Grand Duke brags that he could make María his great love—for tonight. María returns to the stage in a French peasant dress and sings a patriotic march in French. The audience responds warmly. A male chorus in military uniforms join María on stage and they sing the last chorus in unison.

Backstage in Paris After the performance, Luisa thanks María for hiring her as a costumer. María responds that she needed a friend by her side. As María gets undressed, Paca notices that a French gentleman left bonbons for María in her dressing room. Paca tries to read the note but butchers the French. Juan translates that the bonbons are from the Viscount, and he reminds Paca that she should learn at least a little French. Paca retorts that she is too old to pick up new tricks. When Paca picks up a pearl necklace, María yells from the dressing room that the jewelry was a present from Juan. Paca jokes that there should be more than 20 pearls. The manager of the French theater enters the dressing room and declares that María's show was a triumph. He reports that the Grand Duke wants to spend the evening with her to admire her further, but María refuses. The manager gets flustered and leaves perturbed. Paca laments that virtue requires the loss of opportunity.

Can-Can Afterparty There are several women dancing the can-can with colored breeches and skirts. María, Paca, Juan and Luisa sit at a table and watch the performance. María notices that the duke who propositioned her sits at a nearby table with his officials. The duke's men ask him why he remains interested, and he replies it is because she rejected him. When the can-can ends, everyone gets up to dance in pairs. Juan leads María onto the floor and asks her if she is happy. The duke approaches and tries to cut in, but María refuses. When she goes back to the table, a woman tells her that the public recognized her and is clamoring for a song. Paca, Luisa and Juan all urge her to go up and sing with the house orchestra.



María is Forced to Perform The woman who asked María to perform announces her and tells the guests that she will sing a “truly Spanish” song. Everyone applauds enthusiastically. María reluctantly goes up and uses a white mantilla and fur coat as props. She turns playfully around the dance floor. The lyrics describe a fiery gypsy soul of a woman named Carmela. María sings to the duke but not does give him eye contact. The duke raises a glass as she sings. Juan looks on and studies her performance. Right at the end of the song, the duke gets up and kisses María's cleavage. Juan runs over and slaps the duke.



Duel at Dawn The camera cuts to a wide shot of an open field with the duke and Juan walking away from each other. We see two men for each man in the duel (most likely seconds or negotiators), as well as a judge standing between them and a doctor standing off to the side. All eight men wear black suits and hats. Juan and the duke aim at each other. The duke hits Juan first in the left shoulder, and he falls down.



María Stays with Juan in the Hospital The camera cuts to the hospital, where Juan is lying in the bed. In the hall, the doctor tells María that Juan will recover and is past the point of danger. María enters the hospital room and promises to stay by his side. Juan tells María that she should leave him and go on performing in America. She replies that she loves him, and he retorts that if she could leave her true love once, she could leave him now. María protests, saying that the two relationships are very different. She promises to continue touring with him, and she even kisses him. When Paca and Luisa enter, María declares that she will stay with Juan until they can stroll in the Parisian gardens together. Paca reminds her that she is scheduled to perform in New York, and María replies that she will move the American performances to the end of the tour.



Pastoral Number in New York City We see a steam liner sailing, then the churning waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Like before with the railroad tracks, we see the names of the cities that María visited. She performed in Buenos Aires first and made her way north through South America. She ends up in the Roxy Theater in New York. For this performance, the stage set is an elaborate pastoral scene in blue. There are two long



staircases, and a huge chorus of male and female singers descend the staircase with baskets and bouquets of flowers. María sings and holds a huge bouquet of roses. The lyrics of this song describe the beauty of Valencia (the city of flowers) in the spring. The chorus moves in formation in a semi-circle around María. Then, they climb back up the stairs.

A Carnival in Madrid circa 1920 Multiple visitors to the carnival surround a puppet stage at night. The title letter indicate that it is nineteen “twenty-something” in Madrid. We see Juan and María milling around the carnival, and María declares that it is good to be home. Juan assures her that they will stay in the homeland for a while. Suddenly, a boisterous singer appears onstage and starts belting out a song acapella. María recognizes the singer as “La Chulapona” and approaches to watch her performance. A young man bumps into her and makes a lewd comment. María stares at him, transfixed, but her gaze is intercepted when Juan returns with her “fortune.” He reads to her that she will have 30 years of fame and success. Meanwhile, the brazen man stands in front of the Museum of Bullfighting and ogles María from afar. A girl who knows him warns him that women like María “aim higher.” The young man replies that he will become a great matador someday, and we see a close-up of a bull’s head placed over the museum sign.



Bullfight We see a strong, huge bull entering the stadium at the beginning of a bullfight. As the bullfighter taunts the animal with his flourishes, the young man from the carnival (Pepe) watches from the stands. He complains that it should be him in the corral. Suddenly, Pepe grabs his own cape and jumps over the corral barrier. He steps in front of the professional matador and starts attracting the bull with his own flourishes. María (dressed in the traditional mantilla headdress) and Juan watch from the stands. Another matador pushes Pepe out of the way, and the audience applauds. María recognizes Pepe from the carnival. Juan predicts that Pepe will have to pay a big fine or spend some time in jail. María recommends that they pay his fine to get good publicity. Juan agrees reluctantly.



Pepe Visits María in her Madrid Apartment María rehearses a sexy number with a piano player. She holds a long cigarette and sings about her “smoky” romance. Meanwhile, the maid lets Pepe in the threshold. He asks to see María. Luisa approaches and tries to get him to leave. Pepe breaks into the music room and faces a line of questions from María and Paca, who is sitting in the corner. Pepe reveals that he is a bullfighter but is only 19. The women tease him about his age. María suggests that Pepe stay and listen to her rehearsal. Pepe stays but looks uncomfortable as she sings the flirtatious lyrics. We recognize the melody from one of María’s early songs. Paca rolls her eyes at Pepe’s fidgeting and eats a big bon-bon.



Pepe Reports Back to His Girlfriend Pepe meets his girlfriend, Trini, at an outdoor café. She expresses anger and jealousy when she hears about Pepe’s visit. Trini asks him if he has booked a bullfight, and he admits that he is still working on it. She accuses Pepe of becoming a gigolo. When Pepe pays the bill, Trini notices that he has cash in his wallet. She grabs the wallet and also discovers a pink carnation. She asks where he got it, and there is a sudden cut to María performing and throwing carnations at the crowd. When she spots Pepe in the audience, she throws a flower right at him. He catches it and sniffs it. After the performance, Pepe goes back stage. The manager tries to stop him from going upstairs to see María, but he pushes through. Two chorus girls make comments about Pepe being a gigolo, and Pepe turns around, furious.



Pepe Complains to María Back at María’s house, Pepe complains that he hates all the nasty gossip about their relationship. María urges him to ignore it and reminds him that she loves him the way he is. Pepe insists that he pursue his dreams of becoming a matador. María worries that he will die in the corral, but Pepe declares that he will come back to her if he does well. María, seeing his passion, gives him her blessing and agrees to go with him. They kiss passionately.



Juan Confronts María When María reports that she is accompanying Pepe to Seville, Juan becomes increasingly agitated. He reminds her that she promised to stay with him and perform. María retorts that Pepe will sink into a depression if he is not allowed to pursue his dreams. Juan tells María that he can

see she is in love with Pepe. María does not deny it, and she goes on to explain that while she loves Juan in a platonic way, she feels passion for Pepe. Juan scoffs at her passion for a boy and tells her that she may only be in love with his youth. María admits that as an artist, she longs to “re-light” her internal candle so that it doesn’t go out. Also, she worries that her fame is fading. Juan gives in to María’s will but remains bitter that he trusted her word back in the hospital. María kisses him, but Juan pushes her away.

Flamenco Passion We see the outside of a stadium and a poster announcing three toreros—Pepe Molina is the last one. There is a brief scene of a bullfight, then a sudden cut to a flamenco dance in front of an elaborate church altar. A soprano sings a flamenco song while young couples dance in unison with castanets. María appears on one side of the dance floor. Pepe enters in a black suit and stares passionately at María from the other side of the room.



Pepe Sees Trini Pepe spots Trini walking along a patio in a Sevillian neighborhood. Pepe approaches her, but Trini tells him that she knows he is María’s boyfriend. Trini breaks up with him and declares that he has gotten everything he wanted—money, name, and fame. Pepe retorts that he still loves Trini even if María is crazy for him. He promises to leave María and marry Trini, who cries in disbelief. He embraces her. Two older women, also on the patio, eavesdrop and remark that Pepe is a slick one. They decide to warn Paca of Pepe’s double-dealing. Paca thanks them for the warning.

María Sings a Confrontational Song María wears a more modest dress with a black mantilla (it looks almost like a nun’s habit). She sings directly at Pepe in the audience. The lyrics describe the singer’s annoyance at her lover’s poverty and insincerity. Pepe gets up and leaves. María exits the stage quickly, and a female tapper quickly replaces her as the next act. María meets up with Pepe in the car when he waits for her outside the theater. She confronts him about Trini, but he professes his love to her. Pepe even promises to marry María, and he caresses her seductively. María doubts his sincerity but gives in and kisses him passionately.



Trini Confronts María Before the Bullfight María gets dressed and tells Luisa that she is going to watch Pepe’s corrida. Luisa remarks that it is the first time. Just as María is about to leave, Trini appears and insists on seeing María. María guesses that Trini is asking her to leave Pepe, and Trini confirms it. The young lady argues that Pepe is under María’s spell but that he really loves her (Trini) and he wants to marry within his own class. When she asks if María has ever loved a poor boy, María tells the story of Cándido—and how they were too cowardly to stand up to their elders’ wishes. María declares that she will not make the same mistake with Pepe. Trini protests that Pepe is her great love, but María does not concede the point and insists that she loves Pepe more than Trini. Trini, seeing she will not convince María, runs away crying. Paca chides María for not doing the right thing.



The Big Bullfight Pepe joins the procession with his fellow bullfighters. María remains in her bedroom, sitting in front of her dresser mirror. She studies the wrinkles on her face, then lies on a chaise, depressed. The camera cuts to the last moments of a bullfight when the bull is on death’s door with multiple estocadas (sword wounds). In one pass, the bull manages to gore one of the other matadors. María senses that Pepe may be in danger, so she calls her aunt over and insists that they hurry over to the corral. It is Pepe’s turn, and he successfully completes a few rounds. María and Paca arrive in time to see the last moments of Pepe’s fight. He does well, but is suddenly trampled by the bleeding bull. The announcer yells out that he died.

Mourning Song María sings a bullfighting song all in black. Paca and Luisa watch from the wings, crying. Luisa asks why María would want to perform after such a tragedy, and Paca replies that above all, she is an artist. María sings the final verse half crying with her voice trembling. She walks off stage and collapses in her aunt’s arms.



Doctor’s Diagnosis and Years-Long Depression María lies in bed, and a doctor examines her. The doctor advises that she not perform, as the heartbreak and real



emotion are damaging her heart. María laughs weakly at the cliché of a broken heart. She agrees to leave the stage and try to survive off of her earnings. The camera cuts to María gambling at the card table and offering her jewels as collateral. Then, there is a montage of her playing cards in dives alongside drunks. María, as narrator, explains that she wasted years trying to forget herself. She drinks excessively and travels to Paris. Suddenly, she realizes the solution is to return to Spain and start her career again. The voiceover explains that no one wanted an old star, so she opted to perform in an old theater in Barcelona in order to survive.

Back to the Dressing Room of the Present After hearing María's story, Juan tries to console her by saying that she will always be the great María Luján. Juan and the others advise María to sing in the bigger theaters in Madrid and show young girls how to sing properly. There is a cut to a flurry of newspapers from all over Spain announcing María's performances.

María's Big Return On the night of her big comeback, a reporter interviews María before her performance. She wears a black velvet dress. The reporter asks for her advice about her art, and María replies that you have to leave your heart on stage and live and die for every performance. María enters the stage to thunderous applause. Crying, she thanks the audience for their support and vows to sing in gratitude. María sings a mournful song whose opening notes are the same melody of the first scene of the film. She becomes a bit unstable as the song proceeds, and Juan looks on from the wings, worried. The camera stays in a tight close-up of her emotional, beautiful face. At the end of the song, María can barely walk offstage. She collapses in Juan's arms, and he calls for a medic. María dies suddenly on a pink chaise. Juan walks on stage and reports that María will not return and that she has just sung them "her last song." The audience cries out in shock and horror. The last shot is that of the spotlight on a stage filled with flowers. The main curtain comes down.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

MARÍA LUJÁN

María is a young, beautiful, and talented singer, but she is also filled with sadness and regret. She is passionate when she falls in love, yet she also holds herself to high moral standards. This combination allows her to perform with deep emotion, but it also leads to her downfall later in life.

Attractive María's beauty makes her stand out among the other chorus girls and in public, which is why she is picked as the most beautiful woman at the dance. Whereas Juan fully supports María's talent later, he is first attracted to her beauty and charisma. Paca also realizes that María's good looks and general radiance will get her noticed and help jump-start her career.

Passionate While she loves Juan in a platonic way, María is desperately in love with Cándido at the beginning of her career and Pepe at the end. In both cases, she is willing to sacrifice her career for a relationship with both young men, and when both relationships end, María is devastated to the point of never fully recovering. This extreme passion and sensitivity inform the interpretations of the love songs she sings, which makes her an even more captivating performer.

Virtuous Although María refuses to break up with Pepe, she usually does the right thing and makes decisions based on her morals. She refuses to sleep with Juan or the Duke in order to get ahead, and she insists on classy choreography and songs when she is onstage (as opposed to the scandalous burlesque style of other singers). She remains loyal to her boyfriends.

PACA

Paca is María's middle-aged aunt who raised María and advises her. As her primary guardian, Paca pushes María in her career and does what is necessary to make her successful. Paca also has a sharp tongue and a witty sense of humor.

Ambitious From the very beginning, Paca is convinced that her niece will be a star. Despite María's resistance, Paca flirts with Jerónimo to get her better parts, then courts Juan as her agent. Paca

urges María to aim high in her career and in her love life. She also accompanies her niece on all of her tours.

Cheeky Paca is willing to use her wit to seduce the men in the theater and sway men of influence. She gets in a brawl with one of the other stage moms, and she is always talking up María's talent and beauty. Paca frequently uses jokes, insults, and aphorisms to comment on the situation at hand, and she loves to eat French bon-bons.

JUAN

Juan is the middle-age, sophisticated, theater empresario who acts as María's agent and mentor. Although he falls in love with María, he maintains a loyal professionalism. He is also very intuitive and kind to all of the characters.

Intuitive Because Juan is rich, the viewer knows immediately that he is a good agent and likely has a good eye for spotting talent. Juan knows early on that María has the talent and charisma to be a star. In addition, Juan has a high emotional IQ. He can sense María's motivations, and he intuitively knows that Cándido truly loves María, whereas Pepe is using her as a meal ticket.

Loyal Even though his love is unrequited, Juan stays loyal to María throughout her career. When she is down and out, he uses his clout to get her a return tour through Spain. Juan supports María and her family emotionally, as well, and often acts as their counsel. Finally, he risks his own life to defend María's honor.

Kind Juan mentors María in a kind way and never resorts to insults. He helps and advises all of her friends and family. Juan also agrees to bail out Cándido and let María out of her contract when she wants to follow Pepe.

CÁNDIDO

Cándido is a young, poor watch-maker who wants to marry the young María. Although they are truly and passionately in love, Cándido agrees to break up with María so that she can pursue her career.

Passionate Unlike Pepe, Cándido is passionate about María and his life with her. He resents Juan's propositions and wants to spend as much time with his love as possible. When they are at the dance, they are so locked into each other that they do not notice that María has won the beauty contest.

Sincere Cándido is a loyal boyfriend who sincerely proposes to María. Then, when she is desperate for money, Cándido is willing to rob his own boss to keep her out of the theater. He goes to Juan in order to plead his case. After Juan convinces him to break up with his love, he is visibly devastated.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Culture The concept of a cupletista or tonadillera, both forms of cabaret singers, is a long-standing tradition in Spain. As an art form similar to vaudeville, musical reviews, and burlesque, the female cupletista became an essential element of Spanish entertainment before film and TV. Juan would likely have had multiple clients who sang cuplé at various levels of the industry. The need to censure the sexier songs (as is indicated in the sleazier theaters in the first few scenes of the film) also indicates that cuplé was extremely popular and widespread in the early 20th century. For this reason, Juan de Orduña explores the culture of the stage during that period, from back stage squabbling, to rehearsal methods, to potential sexual indiscretions. There is the repeated assertion that a female performer cannot be a good wife or mother and can only dedicate herself to her art, which likely derives from Franco's insistence that women maintain "catholic virtue" and become "angels of the hearth." Outside of the genre of the cuplé, Orduña also references Spanish cultural stereotypes, including flamenco dancing and bullfighting. María frequently wears a mantilla either as a shawl or over her hat, which is a tradition for the ladies watching the corridas. Her costumes and dresses in general express a sense of Spanishness and national pride.

When she wins the beauty contest, for example, she is wearing a polka-dot mermaid style dress that evokes the typical garb of a flamenco dancer.

Illustrative Moment: María Shows the French Her Version of Spanish Culture

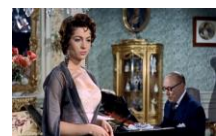
We see train tracks with the names of all of the cities that María visits, ending with a special armistice performance in Paris in 1919. She sings a cuplé in front of a curtain with images of Spanish mantillas on it. There are also several bouquets of flowers. María wears a blue, floor-length mermaid dress with a fez and a blue mantilla. Military official watch admiringly from a balcony box. The elder gentleman whispers something to his officer. María concludes her performance with a brief speech in broken French. María returns to the stage in a French peasant dress and sings a patriotic march in French. The audience responds warmly. A male chorus in military uniforms join María on stage and they sing the last chorus in unison. During this performance, María sings songs that juxtapose stereotypical Spanish and French culture. The image of Spanishness is represented by multiple mantillas projected onto the curtain, then María performs a French number for the troops. During the afterparty, there is a similar juxtaposition: we see the can-can first, followed by María's impromptu song about a fiery gypsy woman named Carmela.



Gender As many literary and film critics have noted, the gender roles in *The Last Song* are complex and contradictory. On one hand, the whole point of the film (as expressed in the opening narration) is to celebrate the female artists who brought the cuplé to life; moreover, the cuplé was a key element in Spanish culture. On the other hand, those women who engaged in this type of performance defied expectations of staying home and raising their children according to Catholic doctrine. Moreover, the nature of many cuplé songs is sensual and sometimes overly sexual, which also supports the dichotomy Ave/ Eva (or virgin / whore). María's character also exemplifies these gender contradictions. While she performs in tight dresses that show off her cleavage, she also strives to be less sexual in her movements and her choice of songs (and lyrics). María avoids the pitfalls of sugar daddies and womanizers to the point that she refuses to sign on with Juan for fear of losing her virtue. She remains loyal to Cándido initially. Later, however, María defies gender roles by seducing and financing Pepe. Concurrently, Pepe and Juan also embody contradictory models of masculinity. Juan acts as a father figure, mentor, and protector to María, but he also gives into her desires. Pepe exemplifies the virility of the most macho profession possible—bullfighting—yet, he agrees to be María's gigolo to get what he wants. In this sense, the film both supports and subverts the Francoist notion of "ideal" gender roles.

Illustrative Moment: Middle-Aged María Seduces Pepe with the Suggestive Smoking Song

María rehearses a sexy number with a piano player. She holds a long cigarette and sings about her "smoky" romance. Meanwhile, the maid lets Pepe in the threshold. He asks to see María. Pepe breaks into the music room and faces a line of questions from María and Paca, who is sitting in the corner. Pepe reveals that he is a bullfighter but is only 19. María suggests that Pepe stay and listen to her rehearsal. Pepe stays but looks uncomfortable as she sings the flirtatious lyrics. In this moment, María has transitioned from virtuous ingenue who sacrificed love for her art to a middle-aged cougar. She takes on the role of seducer and maintains the power over her target—a boy that is less than half her age. For the last third of the film, then, María openly defies societal expectations.



RELATIONSHIP

Love Orduña presents us with various iterations of love, passion, and desire. The characters even ask each other if their love is sincere and what their true motivations are. The cases of lost or unrequited love provide the tragic engine for the film, as María dies from a broken heart (and likely hard drinking). The first romantic relationship, that of María and Cándido, is the most pure and sincere. María would have likely been happy as a traditional wife, although the couple would have had to struggle financially. When the elders convince them to break up, the two mourn their lost love passionately, and María never fully recovers. Juan also loves María sincerely but knows that his passions will never be requited, which leads to more of a father-daughter dynamic between them. Paca represents maternal love, despite her own

motivations to live comfortably. As an object of the male gaze, María also exemplifies desire. The male characters are always looking at her and pursuing her, yet she managed to hold out for true love and not succumb to the temptations of riches and jewels. The last romantic triangle of the film (María, Trini, and Pepe) provides a bit more nuance to the nature of relationships in the theater. It is clear that Pepe only truly loves his career and probably does not intend to marry either of his girlfriends—even though he proposes to both. Conversely, María and Trini appear to be sincere in their love for Pepe and are willing to fight (and sacrifice) for him. Juan and Paca interpret María's interest in Pepe as lust combined with a mid-life crisis (see LIFE STAGES below), but María's passion for Pepe seems to go well beyond a May-December fling. It is Pepe's death that sends María into despair and addiction, which indicates that she probably did love him almost as much as Cándido. In either case, no one ends up with their love or even the object of their desire.

Illustrative Moment: "Older" María Remembers Cándido

The young girl starts to sing her favorite song, and María joins in, briefly. María asks her name, and the girl replies that she is also named María, but her surname is not the best for show business—Chamorro. María is startled when she hears that name, and she murmurs: "It can't be—you are too young... Cándido Chamorro." The girl says her father has a different name and explains that he is a bricklayer. María laughs at the misunderstanding. This early scene provides a "what could have been" moment for María, as she realizes that she could be a mother of a teenager and a wife of a bricklayer instead of a washed-up performer. In addition, María's face at hearing the name Chamorro prompts her to relive the most important relationship of her life, and the viewer infers that Cándido is the one who got away.



LIFE STAGES

Youth Versus Middle Age The beauty, confidence, passion, and vitality of youth become a refrain throughout the film, just as the fear of losing those qualities motivates many of the characters. María becomes a big star not only because she is talented, but also because she is exceptionally young, beautiful, and charismatic. In addition, she is able to use her own heartbreak and vibrancy to interpret the songs she sings in a very intimate way—so much so that the doctor tells her that her heart cannot bear the emotion of her performances. María's youth attracts multiple suitors and propositions as she remains the gilded object of desire who is literally on display. Juan even has to challenge the Grand Duke to a duel in order to defend María's honor. As she ages, María fears that her artistic "candle" will burn out and no one will come to see her perform. This fear turns into a mid-life crisis in which she gazes at and desires the object of youth and vitality: Pepe. Although it is likely that María really did love Pepe, Juan is also correct in asserting that she is really in love with his youth. María realizes that her best chance at true love occurred when she was Pepe's age, and that ship has sailed. Whereas Juan and Paca can enjoy the comforts of middle age, María ends up destitute and depressed. There is also the tragedy that Pepe is killed in the flower of his youth, which robs María and Trini of a possible life with him.

Illustrative Moment: Juan Confronts María About Her Feelings for Pepe

When María reports that she is accompanying Pepe to Seville, Juan becomes increasingly agitated. He reminds her that she promised to stay with him and perform. María retorts that Pepe will sink into a depression if he is not allowed to pursue his dreams. Juan tells María that he can see she is in love with Pepe. María does not deny it, and she goes on to explain that while she loves Juan in a platonic way, she feels passion for Pepe. Juan scoffs at her passion for a boy and tells her that she may only be in love with his youth. María admits that as an artist, she longs to "re-light" her internal candle so that it doesn't go out. Also, she worries that her fame is fading. In this argument, we see Juan's wisdom as the elder, María's mid-life crisis, and Pepe's vitality and confidence that he can become the best bullfighter in town. María also admits that she is chasing her own lost youth through her desire for Pepe.



Death The concept of death hangs over the entire film, even though it does not really manifest itself until the last half hour or so. The title "The Last Song" already suggests that either the musical theatrical genre of the cuplé or the singer herself will die. By the end of the film, both possibilities become true. The golden age of the cuplé was the first third of the twentieth century, which means that María's destiny

is to perform during that gilded period. By the time María is in her forties, the genre is dying out, and so is María's "artistic candle". Although Juan tries to revive María's career in the 1950s, the hope for a resurgence dies literally on stage with María's last note and last breath. María's body and spirit give out early due to the sudden death of Pepe in the bullring. Although María knows the danger, her heart gives out when he is trampled during the climactic corrida. This spiritual death worsens as María drinks and gambles away her fortune, then realizes that her career has also died during her period of mourning and depression. The shadow of death appears subtly in the first half of the film (such as when the characters wear yellow scarves or dresses—a bad omen in the theater), then explicitly in the form of María's multiple black dresses and mantillas. Although the audience mourns the death of both the singer and the genre, the country must move forward into the modern and urbanized twentieth century.

Illustrative Moment: María Faces Her Age, and Pepe Dies in the Ring

Pepe joins the procession with his fellow bullfighters. María remains in her bedroom, sitting in front of her dresser mirror. She studies the wrinkles on her face, then lies on a chaise, depressed. The camera cuts to the last moments of a bullfight when the bull is on death's door with multiple estocadas (sword wounds). In one pass, the bull manages to gore one of the other matadors. María senses that Pepe may be in danger, so she calls her aunt over and insists that they hurry over to the corral. It is Pepe's turn, and he successfully completes a few rounds. María and Paca arrive in time to see the last moments of Pepe's fight. He does well, but is suddenly trampled by the bleeding bull. The announcer yells out that he died. This cutting sequence that juxtaposes María in the mirror and Pepe in the ring helps to build the suspense as both characters are confronted with death. Even though María thinks she can revive her own spirit by staying with Pepe, she is faced with the reality that she cannot run out the clock or prevent Pepe's fate.



APPEARANCE

Performance (Including Spectacle and Beauty) Although *The Last Song* is a tragic melodrama, it is also a musical. We, the audience, watch at least fifteen songs and dances on stage or on a dance floor. Each number has its own costumes, sets, lighting and choreography, and a variety of cabaret songs are featured in the movie, from Andalusian coplas to songs from operettas. Sara Montiel's dresses cling to her voluptuous body, and the camera offers multiple close-ups on her beautiful face. Just as María tours Europe and the Americas, so too are we treated to a tour of various song genres in the film. The typical Spanish audience of the 1950s would likely recognize several of the songs, which partially explains why this particular film was such a blockbuster for CIFESA. In addition to the staged numbers, Orduña also explores the backstage world of the theater and the lifestyle of a cupletista in this period. We see multiple rehearsals and meetings in which the characters put together a number, plan a tour, or decide on a budget for costumes and sets. In addition, the film emphasizes the difficulties and joys of the singer's relationships to her manager, to her friends and family, to her suitors, and to her public. Paca and Juan bend over backwards to create a career and a name for María. Later, María becomes increasingly defined by her fame and her stage persona. María epitomizes both the glamor under the spotlight and the depression after the applause ends, and the film reminds us that art takes its toll on the artist. When the reporter asks María for advice about performance, she replies that the singer must live and die with every song. This adage becomes a pattern for the whole film, as María's troubles in her life are expressed perfectly by the song she sings that same night.

Illustrative Moment: Empty Stage with a Spotlight

The credits roll in front of a standard red theater curtain. When the main curtain rises, we see a spotlight set against the back curtain but no one on stage. A male narrator explains that this film is an invented story that is a tribute to the "mosaic" of female singers who created magic on stage. This opening (which is repeated in the very last scene) sets up the entire film as a love letter and cautionary tale about the theater. Although the performances may create moments of magic, these moments can only last so long. In other words, the curtain reveals the emptiness of a stage after the magic fades.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Orduña uses sudden cuts throughout the film, often when moving from an event to another scene where a character is explaining what just happened. What is the effect of this editing choice?
2. Does María die from alcoholism, heart disease, or a broken heart? Do you think that she really loved Pepe?
3. How is bullfighting presented in the film?
4. How is the culture of the theater represented in the film?
5. How do the sets, costumes, and choreography enhance the musical numbers?
6. What is the moral of the story? Are the screenwriters suggesting that women should not enter show business?