



## GARCIA LORCA'S POETIC JUERGA: SOUNDSCAPES OF THE DEEP SONG

гл. ас. д-р Пламен Гаптов  
СУ „Св. Климент Охридски“

**ABSTRACT:** Lorca's poetry is heavily indebted to the flamenco tradition. While this debt has been amply acknowledged, little has been said about the actual music in Lorca's poetry. This paper examines the specific rhythms and sounds of the flamenco act which the *Poema del Cante Jondo* incorporates to construct a peculiar soundscape. In this "flamencofied" (aflamencado) poetry, metrical variation takes on a whole new level as the flamenco groove becomes the order of the day.

*Key Words:* Flamenco, Lorca, rhythm, performance, sound.

Lorca has so firmly and unequivocally been co-opted as a folk poet (by the flamenco industry for instance) that to try to minimize his obvious debt to folklore (especially in the poetry up to and including *Romancero Gitano*) is to ignore what seems like the most crucial element in both the production and the reception of his works. Some critics find a way out either by pointing to all the *other* components in Lorca's *oeuvre* or by finding support in Lorca's self-proclaimed posture as more than just a flamenco poet; in both cases, flamenco (and gypsy culture as a whole) is seen as only a theme, as one influence among many.

The difficulty of coming to grips with Lorca's indebtedness to folklore for the construction of his aesthetic theory and poetry is further complicated by Lorca's conscious distancing of his work with traditional materials from contemporary literary appropriations. For instance, he denounced direct imitations of traditional flamenco poetry. In his lecture on *cante jondo*, Lorca distinguished between the "popular" poetry created by poets in imitation of the folk tradition and the poetry that the anonymous people themselves created. One was a paper – the other a natural rose.

Nothing but the very essence of this or that trill for its coloristic effect ought to be drawn straight from the people. We should never want to copy their ineffable modulations; we can do nothing but muddy them. Simply because of education.<sup>[1]</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Cited in *Federico García Lorca. Collected Poems. Revised Bilingual Edition*, Revised edition, with an introduction and notes by Christopher Maurer, Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2002, p. xlvii.



He reacted negatively to the charge that his *Romancero Gitano* was a gypsy book at the same time as he claimed a gypsy identity for himself. He complained about contemporary artistic appropriations of the folk – referring to what must have looked like a mass phenomenon as ‘costumbrismo’ – at the same time as his poetry is replete with symbols and tropes typical of museumized representations of traditional Andalusian culture. The decked-out gypsy dancer, the dagger-stricken lonely outcast, the airborne horseman, the hair smelling of the olive-tree, the beloved in her small balcony receiving verses at twilight, etc., are an integral part of Lorca’s poetic/folkloric paraphernalia. It is the systematic use of this elaborate symbolical apparatus which creates a magnetic attraction in Lorca’s folk-based poetry and makes it hard to avoid the conclusion that Lorca’s poetic project amounts to a construction of a decorative local landscape.

A good reason to insist on the hybridized nature of Lorca’s poetry (of which folklore is taken to be only one component) is to avoid the difficulty of resolving a paradox which is nonetheless central to his aesthetics. The paradox consists in Lorca’s positioning himself as peripheral to gypsy culture at the same time as he enthusiastically studied, collected and lectured on folkloric materials associated with that vernacular culture. It seems that Lorca, like Synge, had inherited the ambiguous position of the folklorist/ethnographer who both merged with and remained foreign to his/her object of study.

Yes, there is a sense in which Lorca is not a mere flamencofied poet (*aflamencado*). But there is also a very real sense in which his poetic performance follows the mode of the flamenco enactment. However sentimental the trappings of Lorca’s poetry might be, if one looks beyond what Lorca called the gypsy ‘theme’ (beyond landscapes and motifs), one finds the difficult attempt to register the surprise of the encounter with the folk in its own clearing. In his description of the gypsy *seguiriya*, Lorca emphasizes the physical voice, the modulations untranscribable by musical notation, the rise and fall of emotion. Curiously, in both his lectures and his poetry, Lorca seeks that moment of lull, of naïve surprise which makes the excessively sharp sound heard during a folkloric act all the more audible. It is not so much style that he intended to extract from his contact with folklore; the essence of the folkloric act was in the ineffably modulating voice, the unity of rhythm which makes one forget oneself, the cry of emotion abstracted to the point when it becomes pure sound – ‘[n]othing but the very essence of this or that trill’.

In many ways, Lorca’s poetry is a yearning to represent sound. This thesis may sit somewhat clumsily with the findings of most Lorca scholars who stress again and again that Lorca’s poetry is not imitative. Edward Stanton, for instance, labors hard to show that Lorca did not simply imitate (but echoed) traditional songs.<sup>[2]</sup> But the distinction in his erudite study, like similar distinctions made by other analysts, often seems specious. For one thing, it is very hard to establish a strict demarcation

---

<sup>2</sup> Stanton, Edward, *The Tragic Myth: Lorca and Cante Jondo*, The University Press of Kentucky, 1982.



between own and foreign, between borrowed material and authorial intervention, especially when a poet works in the popular vein. As Edward Honig points out, 'It [Spanish literature] is constantly hovering over the margin where the individual expression passes into the anonymous, where what seems the most anonymous is actually the work of the most individual of artists.'<sup>3</sup> For another, such distinctions usually ignore the acoustic dimension of poems. Stanton, like most scholars who examine the connection between flamenco and Lorca's poetry, studies 'certain basic motifs and themes' which 'are common to both Lorca's poetry and the world of flamenco.' And yet, anything that smacks of 'servile imitation of folk poetry' is eschewed in the analysis if only to prove that a high modernist's work must necessarily consist in distillation, filtering, echoing, or whatever the chosen terms is which designates not so much the poetry itself but the anti-mimetic prejudice of the analysis.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly enough, when the focus stops being themes and motifs, the acoustic dimensions is immediately invited back to the discussion. In this respect, Stanton's work is a good example. When he comes to the role of the symbol of the guitar in Lorca's poetry, he digresses into a long disquisition of the way in which Lorca's poetry represents the sound of the guitar. In a wonderfully insightful moment, Stanton compares a passage in the second part of the *Poema del cante jondo* to a characteristic technique of the flamenco guitar – the sudden damping of the strings by the palm whereby the sound is abruptly cut off and gives place to a complete silence in the twinkling of an eye. The 'No' of the following passage in *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* could be better heard in the light of this technique called *apagado*:

¡Oh blanco muro de España!  
¡Oh negro toro de pena!  
¡Oh sangre dura de Ignacio!  
¡Oh ruiseñor de sus venas!  
No.<sup>5</sup>

Well, here is an instance of imitation. In a sense, this is an imitative performativity and Lorca's poetry is rich in this quality. But it is more than just an imitation of this or that flamenco cry (*grito*), this or that instrumental technique, etc.

In what follows, I will examine the *Poema del cante jondo* as a yearning after the *composite sound* of the folkloric enactment. As Stanton is well aware, 'Lorca was inevitably drawn to *cante jondo*. The joining of singer, dancer, musician, and public approached the ideal of a composite art form for which he sought expression all his life.'<sup>6</sup> The space of Lorca's poetry is itself an acoustic clearing where the sound of the folkloric enactment is heard – if only one could hear it. The *Poema del cante jondo*, in particular, is a dreaming-back to the sonic space of the *juerga* or to the

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp 30-1.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 820.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. x. Lorca called this composite act 'common striving' (*aspiración común*).



sonorous cave or the silent desert space pierced by the individual cry of the *seguriya*. Sometimes this ideal sonorous space is the body of the guitar (but this is only one instance), sometimes, it is simply the memory of the voice of a celebrated singer (as is the case with Lorca's tribute to Silverio Franconetti).

\*\*\*

The rhythmic texture of the *Poema* often seems to borrow from the actual music – not merely in the rather general sense that the ‘changes in tempo and intensity in the poem recall the guitar’s variations in rhythm, tone color, and dynamics’<sup>[7]</sup>– but in the quite literal sense of actual flamenco steps, beats and rhythmic structures. That such an exact work in rhythm is perhaps to be expected from the *Poema* is evident from a comment Lorca made during the rehearsal of *The Shoemaker's Prodigious Wife* in 1933:

You have just seen me paying attention to the rhythm and the smallest of details and, in truth, one cannot proceed in any other way: songs are creatures, delicate creatures, that must be cared for so that their rhythms are not altered a bit. Each song is a marvel of equilibrium that can easily be broken: it's like a coin balanced on the point of a needle.<sup>[8]</sup>

In a letter to Jorge Guillén, Lorca wrote, ‘I wonder when I think that the musician’s emotion rests and is wrapped in a perfect mathematical order.’<sup>[9]</sup> And even though here Lorca is probably talking about harmonic intervals, one wonders if his poetry does not make use of the rhythmic algebra of folk song. ‘The nature that comes forth from the hand of God is not the nature that must live in poems .... We might say that nature and her tones receive the discipline of musical measure.’ The word for measure which Lorca uses is ‘compás’. Can we say that Lorca’s poetry is, to use flamenco terminology, ‘a compás’ (‘in time’) where even the silences are measured?<sup>[10]</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *The Tragic Myth*, p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Londré, Felicia Hardison, *Federico García Lorca*, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.: New York, 1984, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> Describing the measured control of the duende-inspired bullfighter, Lorca says, ‘in contrast, the *torero* bitten by *duende* gives a lesson in Pythagorean music’ (Cited in *op. cit.*, p. 54). We saw that the duende carries the improvisational quality of performance (it is like a raging storm never repeating itself). Here, it brings mathematical precision to the improvised performance.

<sup>10</sup> ‘La Imagen poética de Góngora’. All the passages in this paragraph are cited in *op. cit.*, pp 42-3. Describing the flamenco act, Lorca explains that even the silence after the initial cry (*grito*) is measured (‘medido’)



The segment ‘Danza’ from the ‘Graphic of the Petenera’<sup>[11]</sup> is a good example of syllabication based on flamenco steps. It can be marked according to an imaginary footwork where the stresses of the words coincide with emphatic footsteps. The footwork has to be fast enough to accommodate the speed of speech.

/ / ^ / / / ^ /

En la noche del huerto,

(So far we have two identical groups of four steps)

^ / ^ / . . . .

steps each. As a  
seis gitanas  
silence following

(Again two identical groups, this time of two  
whole, they make another group of four. The  
these four steps could be filled by this missing

group of four.

Alternatively, as I prefer, two steps may precede  
and another  
two may follow the phrase.<sup>[12]</sup> In both cases, it  
is ‘a measured  
silence.’)

/ ^ / / ^ / . . .

vestidas de blanco  
groups of three

(Here we have two identical triplets: i.e. two  
steps each. It is important not to render this  
four steps followed by an unfinished group of  
variation in rhythm between foursomes and  
staple in a lot folk styles. The triplets, when  
feeling of slowed down tempo even though the  
as before. Writing the line in triplets keeps this  
acoustic illusion  
– a signature of a lot of folk music – intact.)

line as a group of

four. The

threesomes is a

they come, create a

steps continue

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp 128-9. What Lorca has named ‘Graphic of the Petenera’ (Gráfico de la Petenera) is in many ways a graphic of sound.

<sup>12</sup> . . ^ / ^ / . .  
seis gitanas





The whole poem ‘Danza’ could be rendered in this way, and the effects are wonderful as the variations within what looks like a repetitive structure really begin to be heard.

*Danza*  
(*En el huerto de la Petenera*)

En la noche del huerto,  
seis gitanas  
vestidas de blanco  
bailan.

In the night of the garden,  
six gypsy women  
dressed in white  
dance.<sup>[14]</sup>

En la noche del huerto  
Coronadas  
con rosas del papel  
y biznagas.  
En la noches del huerto  
sus dientes de nácar  
escriben la sombra  
quemada.

In the night of the garden,  
crowned  
with paper roses  
and jasmine.  
In the night of the garden,  
their teeth – mother-of-pearl –  
inscribe the burnt  
darkness.

Y en la noche del huerto,  
sus sombras se alargan  
y llegan hasta el cielo  
moradas.

And in the night of the garden,  
their shadows grow long  
and purple  
as they reach the sky.<sup>[15]</sup>

Thus, if we collect all second lines together, we obtain – one after the other – a number of very different rhythmic groupings:

^ / ^ / . . . . (seis gitanas);

/ / ^ / . . . . (coronadas), which is a slight variation of ‘seis gitanas’;

/ / ^ / / ^ / . (sus dientes de nácar), which is very interesting in that the eight beats (counting the final silence) could be broken down into two segments, four and three beats respectively (not counting the silence), which yield the already familiar:

/ / ^ / and a / ^ /; this last rendition is substantiated by the second line of the next stanza which could be rendered as two identical triplets and two silent beats:

<sup>14</sup> In the bi-lingual edition referred to throughout this chapter, the stanza is rendered: ‘In the night of the garden,/ six gypsy women/ dance in white.’ Here I have deviated from this translation for obvious reasons.

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps something like ‘sky-reaching’ would be better here.



/ ^ / / ^ / · · (escriben la sombra), which is a repetition of the structure of line three in the first stanza with its two triplets;  
 / ^ / / / ^ / · (sus sombras se alargan), which – with its two segments of three and four beats (not counting the silence at the end) is a wonderful inversion of line two of the previous stanza (sus dientes de nácar) where the same segments occur in reverse order.

The analysis of the subtle rhythmic variations of what, at first glance, looks like a schematically repetitive poem could go on almost ad infinitum. I have only isolated the second lines of each stanza and played them off against each other, but the choice of second lines was not arbitrary: coming after the first line of each stanza, which is identical (with the exception of the added ‘and’ in the last stanza, which is itself worthy of note in terms of the break from the repetitive pattern which it provides) the second line is responsible for breaking the rut created by the repetitive first lines of each stanza. But what a great choice the first lines in themselves are. It is precisely their repetitiveness which gives the poem a feeling of overriding groove. Instead of absolute chaos, we have a carefully measured deviation from established patterns: a difference which needs sameness to announce its groovy presence. If one could explore all the connections and vectors between all lines of this little poem, the result would be a veritable maze of regulated variation. I have already pointed out that the second lines may, in some instances, be linked to the third lines of different stanzas, and this kind of analysis could go on. In addition, one could factor in the hard stops of every fourth line, the slight modifications in the grouping of segments, the various effects of pauses, and last but not least, the effects of individual lines<sup>[16]</sup> relative to the overall groove of the poem.

### Bibliography:

1. Higginbotham, Virginia, ‘Lorca’s Soundtrack: Music in the Structure of his Poetry and Plays’ in “*Cuando Yo Me Muera...*”. *Essays in Memory of Federico García Lorca*, ed. Brian Morris, University Press of America: Lanham, New York, 1988, pp 191 – 207.
2. Londré, Felicia Hardison, *Federico García Lorca*, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.: New York, 1984 Meir, Colin, *The Ballads and Songs of W. B. Yeats. The Anglo-Irish Heritage in Subject and Style*, Barnes & Noble: New York, 1974.
3. Lorca, Federico García, *Collected Poems. Revised Bilingual Edition*, Revised edition, with an introduction and notes by Christopher Maurer, Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2002.
4. Stanton, Edward, *The Tragic Myth: Lorca and Cante Jondo*, The University Press of Kentucky, 1982.

<sup>16</sup> Line three in stanza three is a good example; it has its own groove which stands out immediately with its three (not the usual one or two) stresses: ‘y llegan hasta el cielo.’