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Cantes Flamencos

The Deep Songs of Spain

Introduced & translated by

Michael Smith & Luis Ingelmo

Shearsman Books
Cantes Flamencos
Classification of *cantes flamencos*

In Federico García Lorca’s famous talk, *Cante jondo (Primitivo canto andaluz)*, given on February 19, 1922, the great Andalusian poet stated his belief, supported by his friend the composer Manuel de Falla, that the *cante jondo* had very deep roots in Spanish culture, that it drew on Eastern sources, that it was sung without musical accompaniment and that it is the purest form of folksong; the *flamenco*, on the other hand, he asserted, came into existence in the 18th century, was accompanied by guitar and dance and, despite its charm, could be said to constitute a dilution of the *cante jondo*, being primarily entertainment whereas the *cante jondo* was a deep cry from the soul.

Disagreeing with Lorca and Falla, Félix Grande, probably the most famous contemporary flamencoist, believes that there are two principal categories in what are generically called *cantes flamencos* and he summaries these as follows:

**Cante Grande**

*Tonás* (from which developed *martinetes, deblas, carceleras*): These usually have four lines of eight syllables rhyming assonantly a-b-c-b. Originally they were sung without musical accompaniment.

*Polo*: This is earlier than the *toná* and became popular after the *toná* emerged.

*Sigüiriya*: This has the packed emotion of the *toná*. It was originally sung without musical accompaniment and it has a different metrical structure from the *toná*. 
Soleá: This can have three or four lines of eight syllables. It is sung in different ways and is not derived from the *siguiriya* as Lorca believed.

*Saeta*: This is a solemn song for religious occasions.

**Cante Chico**

This category includes the *tango* (not the Argentine one), *bulería*, *fandango* and some others. They are usually happy songs with guitar accompaniment. They are most people’s notion of *flamenco*. They are primarily entertainment.

Grande finds support for this classification in the writings of Antonio Machado y Álvarez who used the pseudonym “Demófilo” and was the father of the great poet Antonio Machado and his brother Manuel. “Demófilo’s” two seminal collections are *Colección de cantes flamencos* (Seville, 1881) and *Cantes flamencos y cantares* (Madrid, 1887). In introducing his compilations “Demófilo” says that he believes that the categories insisted on by the *cantadores* from whom he collected his material had more to do with musical inflections than with anything else, but he nonetheless accommodated their insistence out of respect for them.

‘Demófilo’ noted the peculiarity of *flamenco* as a poetic-musical genre which was neither folkloric nor the property of all the people but the preserve of a limited group of *cantaores* and devotees of the cante:

*Cantes flamencos* constitute a poetic genre predominantly lyrical, which is, in our judgement, the least popular of all the so-called popular songs; it is a genre peculiar to the *cantadores* ... The people, with the exception of the *cantadores* and their followers whom we would called *diletantti* in the context of opera, are ignorant of these *coplas*, do not know how to sing them and many have not even heard them.
Los cantes flamencos constituyen un género predominantemente lírico, que es, a nuestro juicio, el menos popular de todos los llamados populares; es un género propio de cantadores […] El pueblo, a excepción de los cantadores y aficionados, a los que llamariamos dilettanti, si se tratara de óperas, desconoce estas coplas, no sabe cantarlas, y muchas de ellas ni aun las ha escuchado.

Comparing the non-folkloric character of the cantes flamencos with simply popular coplas, he noted of the cantes that

The words of these compositions are generally very sad and embrace at times very deep and subtle emotions and images that reveal extraordinary strength of imagination.

The subject matter of these coplas is almost invariably personal emotion and misfortune.

… for every thousand flamenco compositions … there are twenty thousand Andalusian.

“Demófilo” identified the flamenco with the gypsies. “The gypsies,” he wrote, “call the Andalusians gachós, and these call the gypsies flamencos.” His summing up of this relationship between the popular and the gypsy is worth quoting:

The gypsy cantes … Andalusianising themselves, so to speak, or becoming gachonales … will continue
gradually to lose their primitive character and originality and will become a mixed genre, which will continue to bear the name of \textit{flamenco} as a synonym for gypsy but which will be basically a confused mixture of heterogeneous elements.

Los cantes gitanos [...], andaluzándose, si cabe esta palabra, o haciéndoselo gachonales [...] irán perdiendo poco a poco su primitivo carácter y originalidad y se convertirán en un género mixto, al que se seguirá dando el nombre de flamenco, como sinónimo de gitano, pero que será en el fondo una mezcla confusa de elementos muy heterogéneos.

As regards the question of why the word \textit{flamenco} was used of the gypsies, a question still entrenched in scholarly debate, I may be permitted a personal note. Many years ago while living in a remote village in Ávila I heard the villagers speaking excitedly of a visit to the village of a small circus. Almost all the people of the circus were gypsies and yet the villagers always referred to them as \textit{húngaros} as if for them that word was a synonym for gypsies. Could it be that the gypsies who came with Spaniards returning from the Low Lands were called Flemings because of their identification with that region?

As it is the purpose of the present collection to convey to the reader without Spanish something of the \textit{literary} value of \textit{cantes flamencos} I have not bothered with any complex system of classification and have settled for leaving them all under the generic title of \textit{cantes flamencos} although almost all of them are what Lorca understood by \textit{cante jondo}. Readers who wish to know more about the technicalities of \textit{flamenco} can consult Félix Grande’s book, \textit{Memoria del flamenco} (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1999).
Words Without Music?

An important question to be confronted in putting these brief lyrics into English is whether they can survive, with any worthwhile value, their separation from the whole guitar and dance ambience in which they become truly what they are. My answer to that is I think something worthwhile does survive. I mean this in the sense that we can say that something worthwhile of a play can be appreciated apart from the play in its theatrical production. There is a literary quality in many of these cantes (not by any means in all) which can be carried over into English. That literary quality is produced by the demands of the total genre, by the compression the genre demands, by the need for the lyrics to carry the weight of the performance.

Let me take an example:

\begin{verbatim}
I am not who I was
nor what I used to be;
I'm a sad piece of furniture
put away at the wall.
\end{verbatim}

The first line hints that things were not always so. The speaker was once estimable, whether by lover or, more generally, socially. The imperfect tense of the second line subtly rejects any dogmatic assertiveness or self-righteousness. There is no sense of anger at the abandonment. Perhaps it is the speaker’s own fault that he was abandoned. The metaphor of the piece of furniture conveys a sense of obsolescence. The item of furniture has outlived its usefulness; it is not the pristine thing it once was. Yet it is not dumped out, disposed of. It still has a presence though discarded from use. There is a real poignancy in that lingering presence, as of a haunting ghost still present at the scene of its corporeal demise.
I do not think I am reading too much out of these four lines. Further narratives could be elicited. What matters, what is of literary value is the care with which the evocation has been constructed, the choice of language and the choice of metaphor. That said, it would be wrong to give the impression that what is offered here is an attempt to communicate the experience of listening to a good flamenco performance. The music and the singer are indispensable to that. Still, these lyrics in English have something to offer. And I have not attempted to dress them up in any way: that would have been a double betrayal. I have tried to be highly selective in my choices. Only some of them work in English, and there is a great deal of repetition in the corpus that had to be avoided.

Finally, despite the often quoted statement from Robert Frost that poetry is what is lost in translation, I take some comfort from the words of the great Chilean poet, Vicente Huidobro: “It is difficult and even impossible;” writes Huidobro in his poetic manifesto, El creacionismo, “to translate a poetry in which the importance of other elements dominates. You cannot translate the music of the words, the rhythms of the verses which vary from one language to another; but when the importance of the poem resides above all in the created object, that does not lose anything of essential value in translation.” Granted Huidobro’s sage caveat, I am convinced that many of these brief lyrics may be described as “created objects” in the special sense Huidobro meant. They are fascinating objects in themselves.

The Performance

Richard Ford, in his Gatherings from Spain, probably the greatest book about Spain ever written by a non-Spaniard, provides the following evocation of a flamenco session which
he experienced during his three-year sojourn (1830–1833) on
the Peninsula:

In Spain whenever and wherever the siren sounds are
heard, a party is forthwith got up of all ages and sexes,
who are attracted by the tinkling like swarming bees.
The guitar is part and parcel of the Spaniard and his
ballads; he slings it across his shoulder with a ribbon,
as was depicted on the tombs of Egypt four thousand
years ago. The performers are seldom very scientific
musicians; they content themselves with striking the
chords, sweeping the whole hand over the strings, or
flourishing, and tapping the board with the thumb, at
which they are very expert. Occasionally in the towns
there is someone who has attained over this ungrateful
instrument; but the attempt is a failure. The guitar
responds coldly to Italian words and elaborate melody,
which never come home to Spanish ears or hearts;
for, like the lyre of Anacreon, however often he might
change the strings, love, sweet love, is its only theme.
The multitude suit the tune to the song, both of which
are frequently extemporaneous. They lisp in numbers,
not to say verse; but their splendid idiom lends itself
to a prodigality of words, whether prose or poetry ...
the language comes in aid to the fertile mother-wit
of the natives; rhymes are dispensed with at pleasure,
or mixed according to caprice with assonants which
consist of the mere recurrence of the same vowels,
without reference to that of consonants … a change in
intonation, or a few thumps more or less on the board,
do the work, supersede all difficulties, and constitute
a rude prosody, and lead to music just as gestures do
to dancing and to ballads … the sad tunes of these
Oriental ditties are still effective in spite of their
antiquity; indeed certain sounds have a mysterious
aptitude to express certain moods of the mind, in
connexion with some unexplained sympathy been
the sentient and intellectual organs, and the simplest
are by far the most ancient … like the songs of birds,
[they] are not taught in orchestras, but by mothers to
their infant progeny in the cradling nest.
Ford knew little of the art of the *flamenco*, nothing of its technicalities, but his description is an interesting testimony of the abiding power of the *cantes flamencos*.

A more recent description of a *cante flamenco* performance is to be found (however over-written) in Laurie Lee’s *A Rose for Winter* (Penguin, 1955):

The rest of the night was devoted to that most fundamental, most mysterious of all encounters in Andalusian folk-music—the cante flamenco. Three people only take part and the stage itself is reduced to bareness. First comes the guitarist, a neutral, dark-suited figure, carrying his instrument in one hand and a kitchen chair in another. He places the chair in the shadows, sits himself comfortably, leans his cheek close to the guitar and spreads his white fingers over the strings. He strikes a few chords in the darkness, speculatively, warming his hands and his imagination together. Presently the music becomes more confident and free, the crisp strokes of the rhythms more challenging. At that moment the singer walks into the light, stands with closed eyes, and begins to moan in the back of his throat as though testing the muscles of his voice. The audience goes deathly quiet, for what is coming has never been heard before. Suddenly the singer takes a gasp of breath, throws back his head and hits a high barbaric note, a naked wail of sand and desert, serpentine, prehensile. Shuddering then, with contorted and screwed-up face, he moves into the first verse of his song. It is a lament of passion, an animal cry, thrown out, as it were, over burning rocks, a call half-lost in air, imperative and terrible. At first, in this wilderness, he remains alone, writhing in the toils of his words, whipped to more frenzied utterance by the invisible lash of the guitar.

At last, the awful solitude of his cry is answered by a dry shiver of castanets off-stage, the rustle of an awakened cicada, stirred by the man’s hot voice. Gradually the pulse grows more staccato, stronger,
louder, nearer. Then slow as a creeping fire, her huge eyes smoking, her red dress trailing like flames behind her, the girl appears from the wings. Her white arms are raised like snakes above her, her head is thrown back, her breasts and belly taut, while from her snapping, flickering fingers the black mouths of the castanets hiss and rattle, a tropic tongue, eloquent and savage. The man remains motionless, his arms outstretched, throwing forth loops of song around her and drawing her close to him. And slowly, on drumming feet, she advances, tossing her head and uttering little cries. Once caught within his orbit she begins to circle him, waving and writhing, stamping and turning; her castanets chatter, tremble, whisper; her limbs entangled in his song, coiled in it, reflecting each parched and tortured phrase by the voluptuous postures of her body. And so they act out together long tales of love: singing, dancing, joined but never touching.

Lorca and Cante Jondo

Lorca came early to cante jondo. When only twenty, he described himself as ‘taking down the splendid polyphony of Granadine folksongs.’ He would also say, ‘Cante jondo seems sometimes like sung prose, destroying all sense of metric rhythm.’ And again, ‘The finest degrees of Sorrow and Pain, in the service of the purest, most exact expression, pulse through these brief lyrics often just three or four lines long.’ He noted that the most striking characteristic of these lyrics is their emotiveness, their undistracted focus on feeling. ‘It is song without landscape, withdrawn into itself and terrible in the dark.’

Lorca’s early book, The Poem of the Deep Song, is a series of individual lyrics, organised around the traditional form of cante jondo, echoing and responding to those lyrics and to their passions.
Here is one of Lorca’s lyrics from that book:

He was dead there in the street  
with a dagger in his chest.  
No one knew who he was.  
How the lamppost shuddered!  
Mother.  
How the little lamppost of the street  
shuddered!  
It was early morning. No one  
could look into his eyes  
open to the harsh air.  
He was dead there in the street  
with a dagger in his chest  
and no one knew who he was.  

(‘Surprise’)

Lorca’s lyric elaborates the external world of the cante jondo, but only to draw attention, explicitly, to the fact that we have no knowledge of the story, the actors, so to speak. In fact, the only actors here are the unknown dead man, the lamppost, the mother who exists only as an isolated word, a wide-eyed ‘nobody’, and, perhaps, as substantial as any of the others, the harsh night air. Here Lorca stands astride that threshold which divides the true intensities of cante jondo from the routine versifying of his own time and ours.

There can be no doubt that Lorca learnt a great deal from cante jondo. Starting from fundamentals as spare and intense as those of cante jondo, Lorca learnt to orchestrate his words to bear a density of texture as taut as that of the full cante jondo performance in which words were drawn out across the inflection of the singer’s voice, the music of the guitar and the rhythms of the dance. This, of course, is not by any means the whole story of Lorca’s great achievement as a poet, but there can be no doubt that some knowledge of cante jondo adds significantly to the appreciation of his work. And that is beside their intrinsic beauty and the pleasure they offer.
This Selection

The selection of *cantes flamencos* included in this book is a fairly random one, but I hope it is all the more representative for being just that. As a specific, even formulaic genre is the rule, a good deal of repetition is unavoidable and, I hope, excused on the ground of presenting an over-all view of the vast corpus of the genre. That said, I believe that there are some very beautiful and unique things included in this selection that will encourage the reader to explore further.

Brief Bibliography


Antonio Machado y Álvarez: *Cantes flamencos, recogidos y anotados por Antonio Machado y Álvarez (‘Demófilo’)*) (Barcelona: DVD ediciones, 1998).


*Gypsy Cante, Deep Song of the Caves*: Selected and Translated by Will Kirkland (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1999)
1

The sighs that come from me
and those that come from you,
if they meet on their way
what things they will say!

Suspiros que de mí salgan
y otros que de ti saldrán,
si en el camino se encuentran
¡qué de cosas se dirán!

2

They say absence is
like death, but I say
that’s a lie: I adore you
without seeing you.

Dicen que la ausencia es
semejanza de la muerte,
y yo digo que es mentira,
porque te adoro sin verte.

3

How can memory be
the post in absences,
if it brings no messages
nor returns with replies?

¿Cómo ha de ser la memoria
el correo en las ausencias,
si no lleva los recados
ni vuelve con las respuestas?

4

If being fond costed money
you would owe me a lot;
but since it doesn’t,
you don’t owe me, I owe you not.

Si el querer bien se pagara,
mucho me estabas debiendo;
pero como no se paga,
ni me debes ni te debo.

5

I never ever implore
one that shuns me;
I’ve got into the habit
of forgetting the oblivious.

En mi vida solicito
al que de mí se retira,
que he tomado por costumbre
olvidar a quien me olvida.

6

With the dolour of not seeing you
I am living on earth:
if I am not dying,  
nobody will from heartbreak.

Con la pena de no verte  
estoy viviendo en la tierra:  
cuando no me muero yo,  
nadie se muere de pena.

7

Your mother is bruited  
something about my honour.  
Why cloud the water  
she will have to drink?

Anda diciendo tu madre  
de mi honra no sé qué:  
¿Para qué enturbiar el agua  
si la tiene que beber?

8

I must be buried  
sitting when I die  
so that you can say,  
‘He’s dead but waiting for me.’

He de mandar que me entierren  
sentado cuando me muera,  
para que puedas decir:  
—Se murió, pero me espera.
Your firm determination,
your praising love so much,
your dying if you couldn’t see me,
How quickly you forgot it all!

Aquella firmeza tanta,
y aquel ponderar amor,
y aquel no vivir sin verme,
¡qué pronto se te acabó!

I don’t know what it is
about the cemetery flowers,
but when the wind rustles them
they seem to be crying.

No sé qué tienen las flores
que están en el camposanto,
que cuando las mueve el viento
parece que están llorando.

If for loving another
you want me to die,
have your way:
let me die so another may live.

Si por querer a otro quieres
que yo la muerte reciba,
cúmplase tu voluntad;
muera yo por que otro viva.

12

Grief or no grief
all’s grief to me—
yesterday’s longing to see you,
today’s the sight of you.

La pena y la que no es pena,
todo es pena para mí;
ayer penaba por verte,
y hoy peno porque te vi.

13

You meant me to love you,
and I loved you not meaning to;
don’t mean me to loathe you
for I will loathe you indeed.

Quisiste que te quisiera,
y te quise sin querer;
no quieras que te oborrezca,
que te voy a aborrecer.

14

The more you caress me
the more confused I grow
because your caresses are
the prelude to your betrayals.
Mientras más caricias me haces,
más en confusión me pones,
porque tus caricias son
víperas de tus traiciones.

15

I must punish
the eyes of my face
for looking with affection
on someone who doesn’t care.

A los ojos de mi cara
los tengo de castigar,
porque miran con cariño
a quien mal pago les da.

16

I’ve learned you have someone else.
Don’t deny it or excuse yourself;
two lights is the least
that are lit on an altar.

Me han dicho que tienes otra,
no lo niegues ni te excuses,
que lo menos que se encienden
en un altar son dos luces.

17

If blood were sold
you’d be rich and I’d be poor—
you have in your veins
both yours and mine.

_Si la sangre se vendiera,_
_fueras tú rica y yo pobre,_
_porque tienes en tus venas_
_la que a mí me corresponde._

18

I wrote it to you crying,
I sent it to you crying.
The tears from my eyes
didn’t let me see it.

_Llorando te la escribí,_
_llorando te la mandé;_
_las lágrimas de mis ojos_
_no me la dejaron ver._

19

You said yesterday, Today …
today you’re saying, Tomorrow …
and tomorrow you’ll say …
you’re no longer in the mood.

_Ayer me dijiste que hoy,_
_hoy me dices que mañana,_
y mañana me dirás_
que se te quitó la gana._