

## **The *cantes muleros* and the traditional musical festivals of the Alpujarras**

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**ABSTRACT:** The Alpujarras is a rugged mountain region of Andalucía whose population is bound to a hard rural life that finds its most expressive voice in its music. This intersection of art and labor offers us an invaluable window onto the nature of the relationship of the people with their land and labor. This is especially evident in the *cantes muleros*, the songs of the muleteer, which express the relationship between man and beast that is essential for the very release of the bounty of the earth. For the outsider, however, virtually the only means of encountering this music of labor in the field is through the festival of traditional music, which exists largely as a forum for people to gather and reaffirm the cultural bond that is at the heart of their music. Thus, these songs are representative of an art that has transformed itself into a social phenomenon in which the individual performer is inspired to contribute his or her voice to create an extraordinarily eloquent communal expression of vocation.

### **Introduction**

The Spanish muleteer has an inexhaustible stock of songs and ballads, with which to beguile his incessant wayfaring. The airs are rude and simple, consisting of but few inflections. These he chants forth with a loud voice, and long, drawling cadence, seated sideways on his mule, who seems to listen with infinite gravity, and to keep time, with his paces, to the tune.... Often, the song of the muleteer is composed at the instant, and relates to some local scene, or some incident of the journey. This talent of singing and improvising is frequent in Spain, and is said to have been inherited from the Moors. There is something wildly pleasing in listening to these ditties among the rude and lonely scenes they illustrate; accompanied, as they are, by the occasional jingle of the mule-bell.

*Washington Irving*

In 2000, inspired by Gerald Brenan's autobiographical narrative *South from Granada*, I began a study of the folk music of the Alpujarras region of Andalucía. During the last five years I have researched and traveled to this rugged mountain region enough to realize that its population appears bound to its hard life in a way that is baffling to anyone raised in an urban environment. Even when faced with opportunities to escape to the cities, mines, and factories, *alpujarreños* have remained committed to the land, either migrating to the vast fruit plantations on the coast, or stubbornly staying put in their *pueblos* and *cortijos*.

The Alpujarras is a region that lies in the valley between the southern face of the Sierra Nevada and the string of coastal ranges, the Sierra de Lúgar, Sierra la Contraviesa, and the Sierra de Gádor, divided administratively between the provinces of Granada and Almería. At its western terminus stand the village of Órgiva and the small city of Lanjarón, whose springs supply a popular brand of bottled water; in its eastern reaches it spills out into the coastal apron to the west of the city of Almería. The terrain within the valley is steep and rough but yields a large spectrum of flora, from scrub brush to fruit and olive trees to pines in the upper reaches of the High Alpujarra. With a somewhat romantic flair, author Harold Lopez Mendoza describes the "rough, wild terrain...fertile valleys that open between rocky and craggy walls" that are cut by terraces and irrigation channels dating back to the Romans.<sup>1</sup> The produce from the trees, together with goat and sheep herding, form the heart of the agricultural base that serves as the main fulcrum for the region's economy.

Historically, the region has been populated by “Hispano-Romans, Mozarabs, Berbers”, and finally Castillian re-settlers.<sup>2</sup> All of these populations left some mark, especially the Moors, who brought with them the flat-roofed, whitewashed style of houses that still dominate Alpujarran architecture.<sup>3</sup> The Moors also introduced silkworm cultivation to the region to supply the thriving fabric industry in Almería<sup>4</sup>; later supplemented by wool production, the region became the home for the small scale manufacture of woven textiles, which are still in demand today by tourists to the region.

Following the fall of Granada in 1492, the region was granted as a fiefdom to Boabdil and his successors until the 1568 uprising, the brutal suppression of which ultimately resulted in expulsion of the Moors from the region and the country.<sup>5</sup> Following the re-settlement by Castillian farmers, the region began a period of slow economic decline that was accelerated at the end of the 19th century by the migration of workers to the mines in Cartagena and La Union<sup>6</sup> and later to the massive greenhouse-based agricultural projects on the coastal plain of Campo de Dalías.<sup>7</sup> Today, the region – despite a recent modest upsurge in tourism – remains arguably one of the economically poorest and most isolated in Spain.

It has proven, however, to be fertile ground for the cultivation of music. Against this backdrop of diverse ethnic heritage and economic hardship, we venture into a brief exploration of the music of the Alpujarras, specifically the *cantes muleros* or the songs of the muleteers, as well as the phenomenon of the annual festival of traditional music which serves both to celebrate and preserve this art.

### **Musical folklore: A dynamic social tradition**

Lacking the financial means or the time to obtain formal musical training, but possessing an intense emotional impulse to make music, Alpujarrans have drawn upon a natural musical sense which they have nurtured and evolved by their ears and their wits. The pioneering American ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax explains this impulse in terms of a communal need for emotional security that is fulfilled by music-making:

Thus from the point of view of its social function, the primary effect of music is to give the listener a feeling of security, for it symbolises the place where he was born, his earliest childhood satisfactions, his religious experience, his pleasure in community doings, his courtship and his work – any or all of these personality-shaping experiences.... The amount or kind of rhythmic, melodic, or harmonic material then offered him depends upon the musical inventiveness of his culture.... Apparently the character and the variety of the music matters less than its conformity to traditions, which produces a sensation of security.<sup>8</sup>

Miguel Carrascosa Salas, in his comprehensive study on the culture and history of the Alpujarras, turns to the words of Antonio Machado to draw a connection between the community and its “popular knowledge” which spawns a creative language. “The man who knows how to make something – a shoe, a hat, a guitar, a brick – is never an unconscious worker who adjusts his work to old formulas and recipes, but rather an artist who puts all of his soul into each moment of his work....”<sup>9</sup> Carrascosa continues:

In this context, the folklore acquires its more authentic and revealing dimension: that of being a live and dynamic culture of a population, from which we have much to learn... medicine, health, botanical, moral, agricultural, etc.; the proverbs, the songs, the puzzles, the tales, the legends...around these ancestral activities, so tied to the existence of the rural community of the Alpujarras, arise legends, romances, verses, songs...and in sum, all the constitutive elements of genius, knowledge, patriotic idioms, contained in the oral tradition and in the written monuments, as materials indispensable for the consciousness...Spanish history and culture.<sup>10</sup>

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In short, Francisco Checa Olmos of the University of Almería tells us, “popular verses are perhaps the best [manifestation] of the pure feeling of the village, from this it is to know their temper... of its conceptions of the world and the universe, and of life itself.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the generation of music by communities like those of the Alpujarras is an extension of a natural impulse to give voice to those familiar situations, relationships, and experiences that bind people within that community, and to express the story of their collective existence. It is most common for this music to be attached to their work, the dominating activity of their lives, and which we shall see provides a most propitious setting for its production.

#### **The music of the Alpujarras**

What, then, specifically characterises the music of the Alpujarras? This is an ongoing question that I continue to investigate, and for which I have only begun to approach a satisfactory answer. During my first visit to the region in 2001, I was introduced to María Aragón Saéz, past president of the *Asociación Cultural Abuxarra de las Alpujarras* and a renowned scholar of the region’s musical folklore. Professor Aragón explained that what truly distinguishes the music of the region is that it is dominated by two groups of genres. The first consists of the dance tunes of the string bands (bandurrías, laudas, and fiddles in the primary melody role, and guitars used mainly in a rhythmic role). The second is the *trovo*, a genre best summarised as the “art of improvising poetry in dialogue.”<sup>12</sup> Both of these genres bear further discussion that is beyond the scope of this current examination.

In a recent discussion, María-Angeles Subirats Bayego of the University of Barcelona made it clear to me that these genres are not restricted to the Alpujarras. She does not contradict Aragón, who never claimed that these genres were *exclusive* to the region. While *trovos* and string bands can be observed elsewhere in Spain, however, it is these specific styles in which the local musicians specialise and excel, thus giving the region its particular musical flavor. Furthermore, there *is* a distinct core repertoire of songs, poems, and tunes – separate from the dance tunes and *trovo* – that has sprung up within the region at large, and which scholars such as Subirats<sup>13</sup> and Germán Tejerizo Robles have set out to collect in anthologies or *cancioneros*.<sup>14</sup> This core is further supplemented by literally hundreds of melodies and lyrics picked up by individual musicians from outside sources, such as recordings and broadcasts of popular music, and adapted to the specific instrumentation and local color.

This repertoire points to two important attributes of the Alpujarran musician: skill in improvisation and oral training. As José Ruiz Fernandez and Juan Manuel Jerez claim, “spontaneity is proverbial in the Alpujarran musical folklore...Equally to be emphasised are the musicians, normally with a low degree of instruction, who are self taught,” and who are highly skilled in “the spontaneous creativity of its songs and the oral transmission of the lyrics that have been passed from fathers to sons, generation after generation.”<sup>15</sup> This idea was affirmed to me one evening in 2001 during an informal performance I observed in a *venta* in the village of Yegen by a brilliant guitarist and bandurría player named Tomás and two of his colleagues. When I asked him about the origins of their songs, Tomás replied with obvious pride that he and his colleagues had at least four hundred songs in their repertoire, and had learned them all by ear. Furthermore, he explained he had learned to play bandurría and guitar as a youth, a skill passed down from an earlier generation which he had spent his lifetime perfecting. This experience only serves to confirm Ruiz’s assertions.

Upon hearing the music in particular, one is immediately struck by two characteristics. The first is a rough, almost primal sonority, a coarseness and complexity of intonation that can be jarring to a listener who is not prepared for it. This tonal complexity relates directly to the second characteristic: the presence, to varying degrees, of non-European

musical attributes – remnants of influence from Andalucía’s Moorish past. These qualities are most obvious in the improvised songs like the *cantes muleros* and the *trovo*, but even permeate to some extent the melodies of the dances (See Figure 1). Specifically, these features include a) a tendency toward modality, often emphasizing ecclesiastical Phrygian mode, the most common in the Arabo-Andalucían tradition; b) a high degree of ornamentation, with frequent turns, grace notes, and “bent” pitches that fall outside of the Western tonal system; c) a vocal style that is tense-throated and covers a fairly high tessitura; d) vocal melismas or runs, often most notable in the long, florid, drawn-out final cadences. All of these features are characteristic of the most celebrated Andalusian musical genre, the *cante hondo*.<sup>16</sup>



**Fig. 1:** Dance tune showing ornamentation and Phrygian modality.  
(Transcripton: A Rosenfeld)

All of these elements bring to mind Lomax’s remarks about character vs. conformity to tradition, but also remind us that this is not music meant for the concert hall. Rather, its very nature and existence must be considered in its context as a creative activity tied to the life and labor of the farmer and the herder – bringing us at last to the *cantes muleros*.

### **The *cantes muleros* in the field and the festival**

As Francisco Checa states, “there are many tasks that require song more as an apparatus of labor,” including plowing, sowing, furrowing, mowing, threshing, transport, and herding.<sup>17</sup> For all of these labors, the donkey or mule is indispensable. According to Reynaldo Fernandez,

The specific conditions of the Alpujarran terrain, frequently steep and mountainous, oblige even today, the realization of agricultural labors with mules and arcane manual techniques. Together with these uses of the mule in the labors of the field, it is also employed as a means of transport. . . sorting and preparing of harvested crops for the market.<sup>18</sup>

As is typical throughout the world, the music associated with field labor serves many functions, from stimulating or coordinating action to providing a diversion from the monotony or difficulty of the task. The *cantes muleros*, or songs of the mule drivers, serve both of these functions, helping to pass the time during harvest, threshing, or transport, while stimulating the donkey or mule to action “with a free song, interspersed with words of animation toward the mule, and long silences.”<sup>19</sup>

The *cantes* derive much of their interest from the improvisatory nature of their melody. In Figure 2 we see transcription of one of the *coplas* performed by Juan and José Martín

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Martín at the 2004 Festival of Traditional Music of the Alpujarras in Padules. The transcription serves to illustrate that the *cantes muleros* of the Alpujarras share all of the traits of Andalusian music described above. If we observe more closely the melodic profile below, (as well as those of the *cantes muleros* in Tejerizo's *cancionero*), we see that the singer follows a basic formula in his improvisation. He begins each octasyllabic line of the verse with an ascent of a third to the principle pitch, which also reinforces the orientation on Phrygian mode. The next four or five syllables focus on this pitch in the fashion of a reciting tone, which can be ornamented by turns, grace-notes, or inflections at the whim of the singer; see the second, third, and fourth lines. The last syllable receives the most attention, being drawn out over a lavishly ornamented descending melisma to the final of the cadence. The formula repeats for each line, although in many *cantes* – like this one – the reciting tone of the final phrase (D) shifts one step lower, while retaining the same cadence as the other lines. This shift helps to establish a sense of conclusion to the *copla*.

**Cante Mulero**  
As performed by Juan Martín Martín, Padules 2004

The image shows a musical transcription of a Cante Mulero. It consists of five staves of music, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are written below the notes. The first line starts with a sharp sign (A) above the staff. The lyrics are: 'Que se ori-ñen Bar-ba-ra-na, ten-go el mo-jeo por de-ña-ña, Que se ori-ñen Bar-ba-ra-na, Ten-go la no-ñá mi-gu-sto, ten-go to-do que me da la ga-na'. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some lines having a reciting tone (a long note) followed by a descending melisma.

**Fig. 2:** Cante Mulero (Transcription: A. Rosenfeld)

Both of the *muleros* who performed for the Festival followed this phrase pattern quite closely. It is also present, albeit with minor variations, in the samples compiled by Tejerizo.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the illustrations in his *cancionero* – as well as other performances I have observed – demonstrate that this basic formula is characteristic of other improvised or quasi-improvised songs from the region, such as the *trovo*, or *coplas* sung to accompany *fandangos* and *robaos y mudanzas*.

This spirit of improvisation extends to the lyrics, as well. The *mulero* either adopts older verses or invents them anew according to a fairly consistent structure of anywhere between four to six octasyllabic lines that may or may not rhyme.<sup>21</sup> Tejerizo further demonstrates that there are four basic arrangements for the verses<sup>22</sup>:

- (a) Those with five different lines with one – usually the first – repeated immediately. Thus, AABCDE.
- (b) Those with five different lines, with the first repeated *after* the second. Thus, ABACDE
- (c) Those with four lines, in which the first is repeated at the end. Thus, ABCDA.
- (d) Those with four different lines, without repetition. Thus, ABCD.<sup>23</sup>

At the end of any given verse, the singer will pause and direct a shout to the animal, which is tinged with a typical blend of sternness and loving affection: “to *mu-lo!*” “Qui-e-to!” “Arriba!” “Como están mis mulillos!”<sup>23</sup>

Tejerizo would almost certainly agree that his list of formulas should not be viewed as absolute or comprehensive. As Carrascosa comments, “an artist that performs a muleteer song invents, over a musical structure and a given rhythm, a certain number of verses that he interprets with his personal style. This number is not obedient to any ruler. It depends solely upon the inspiration of the artist and the message contained within.”<sup>24</sup> Nor does it imply that verses cannot be altered at the whim of the singer. This spirit of inventiveness is beautifully illustrated by the lyrics of Figure 3, places the lyrics from Figure 2 side by side with those of the same *copla* which happens to appear in Tejerizo’s *cancionero*,<sup>25</sup> clearly pointing to a common source.

<u>As Transcribed by Robles</u>	<u>As Sung by Martín Martín</u>
A) Tengo el mayor par de mulas	A) Que se cría en Barbacana,
B) Que se cría en Barbacana.	B) Tengo el mayor par de mulas,
C) Tengo la novia a mi gusto	A) Que se cría en Barbacana.
D) Y tengo lo que da gana.	C) Tengo la novia a mi gusto.
	D) Tengo todo que me da la gana.

**Fig. 3:** Comparison of text treatments of as transcribed for anthology and as performed by Juan Martín Martín.

Note that the Sr. Martín Martín not only adopted the same text, but transformed the entire *copla* from a four-line to a five-line variety not specifically described by Tejerizo. Needless to say, it is also as unlikely as it is irrelevant to determine which form is the original.

What is significant about these two *coplas* is that they point to the existence of a communal repertory for the region, part of the collective literary consciousness of the population, transmitted and interpreted orally, and adapted according to the needs of worker/musicians. This idea is further supported by Checa, who divides the typical expressive themes of *coplas* into groups according to the following “broad strokes”:<sup>26</sup>

- Love themes – from declaration, celebration to disenchantment and disillusionment.
- Daily life – loneliness, sufferings, economic trial, deceptions
- Male pride – machismo
- Local pride
- Popular wisdom – basic difficulties of life, respect for motherhood, value of friends, etc.

Elements of these themes are reflected not only in Sr. Martín’s song, but also in the nearly two hundred *coplas* Tejerizo has compiled in his *cancionero*.<sup>27</sup> Thus, a *mulero* from Albondón is able to share the same text as one from Murtas, adapting both its outward and inward form to his unique style and purpose.

All of the disparate traditions, repertoires and musical genres of the region, including the *cantes muleros*, are brought together yearly in one massive forum, the *Festival de Música Tradicional de las Alpujarras*. The festival is held in a different town on the second

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Sunday of each August. It is a juried event which attracts delegations of strictly non-professional musicians and dancers from villages throughout the Alpujarras. The first festival was held in the village of Yegen in 1982 and has been held every year since then, blossoming into an enormous affair which features not only the performers, but merchants and exhibitors who showcase traditional arts, crafts, and food for the thousands of visitors who attend. The event has its roots in the movement of “progressive institutionalisation of Andalusian folklore” that emerged in the years following the end of the Franco regime in order to promote regional cultural awareness, as well as seeking new platforms for economic growth and political identity.<sup>28</sup>

The Festival, however, is far more than a phenomenon of political opportunism. It has become a major cultural institution for the region, which José Ruiz Fernández, one of the founding organisers, claims has been “transformed into a day of regional festivities that unites the distinct pueblos of the Alpujarras, independent of their political color... a ‘National Day of the Alpujarra’, that is, a day of obligatory pilgrimage of all the *alpujarreños*.... Anew begins to be heard the expression ‘we the *alpujarreños*.’”<sup>29</sup> As María Aragón states, it is a “nexus of union of Alpujarran existence” which is designed to counteract the tide of external cultural influences and “work for the recovery and ‘validation’ of indigenous culture.”<sup>30</sup>

The festival, therefore, is important not only for the sake of preservation of a musical tradition, but also as a means of publicly proclaiming the common goals, struggles, and destinies that unite the population of the region. What makes this event particularly effective is that, although the setting is contrived, the music is genuine – the *cantes muleros* especially reveal this in the most profound way. More than any other genre, they are a demonstration – albeit somewhat more self-consciously stylised for the setting of the Festival – by the workers themselves of a living, musical tradition that is still cultivated and performed as an integral part of the daily activities of their livelihood. The impact upon the cultural authenticity of the *cantes muleros* and other traditional genres by their conversion into a stage spectacle is beyond the scope of this discussion; nonetheless, it certainly bears further examination.



**Fig. 4:** Mulero and companion, Yegen, Spain (Photo: A. Rosenfeld)

It has not been my intention in this brief discussion to romanticise the music or the Festival with any nonsense about the *noble peasant*. At the same time, the Festival presents a paradox in that its very existence is intended to preserve and celebrate a way of life that is so inherently difficult as to threaten to drive more and more people from it. The attendance of approximately 15,000 people at the Festival in 2004 – most of them Alpujarrans – defies this paradox by suggesting that there is a powerful sense of identity, a calling to the land which is so spiritual and deeply seated that it defies the ability to understand it or to escape it. With artistic roots that reach deep into the history and culture of Andalucía, and with a repository of texts that mixes bitterness, joy, pride, and common sense with the sheer pleasure of invention, the musician has the means to use his or her voice to create an extraordinarily eloquent communal expression of this calling.

The *cantes muleros* form the heart of this expression.

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4. Brenan, 185.
5. Brenan, 187-190.
6. Francisco Checa Olmos, “El Trovo Alpujarreño. De lo Lírico a lo Satírico,” *Gazeta de Antropología* N° 12, 1996.  
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14. Germán Tejerizo Robles, *Canciones y Romances de la Contraviesa: Murtas*, Vol. 3 of *Cancionero Popular de la Provincia de Granada* (Granada: Método, 2003).
15. Ruiz and Jerez, “La Institucionalización”, 62.

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16. José Romero Jiménez, *La Otra Historia del Flamenco, La Tradición Semítico Musical Andaluza*, (Sevilla: Centro Andaluz de Flamenco 1996), 87 ff.
17. Checa, "El Saber," 48-49.
18. Tejerizo, *Canciones*, 169.
19. Tejerizo, *Canciones*, 169.
20. Tejerizo, 163-166.
21. Carrascosa, 584.
22. Tejerizo, 166.
23. It is worth noting here that the *canto de arriero* recorded by Alan Lomax in Galicia (and included on the recording *Spain*, Vol. IV of *World Library of Folk and Primitive Music*, Rounder compact disc 11661 1744-2) also adheres to this last formula.
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25. Carrascosa, 584.
26. Tejerizo, 166.
27. Checa, "El Saber," 55-56.
28. Germán Tejerizo Robles, *Canciones y Romances de la Contraviesa: Murtas*, Vol. 3 of *Cancionero popular de la provincial de Granada*, (Granada: Método, 2003), Appendix 1.
29. Ruiz and Jerez, 67.
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