

Mariana Velasco* and Gustavo Marcovich**

VOICES OF MEXICO TWO WOMEN IN ANCESTRAL SONG

Throughout the history of humanity, the memory of songs and melodies has been a powerful tool for sharing and preserving stories, indelible experiences, and much-needed expressions. While these sounds might be fleeting, their meanings are here to stay.

Mexican flutist and saxophonist **SIBILA DE VILLA AZARCOYA**¹

We first heard *cardanche* song in 2010, when working at a radio station. We'd never heard anything like it in traditional Mexican music: three male voices sing *a cappella*, heavy with sorrow, which is why the song is called *cardanche*, after the prickly cane cholla cactus that grows in northern Mexico. These capriccios are punctuated with long pauses, sometimes mid-word, as if breathing emotion. They would help people endure long days of working the land. The lone voices' only company was the song of crickets, the whistle of the wind, and the sound of embers crackling in the fire. These melodies have resisted writing: no piece of paper could possibly capture so many feelings. Thus, they are treasured in their interpreters' memories, without which they would no longer be shared. The melodies would die.

Some time ago, we realized that women *cardencheras* exist, too: Doña Mariana and Doña Otila García, two women of an older generation; and Ofelia Elizalde, the first woman to sing in Los Cardencheros de Sapioriz, who raises her voice alongside her brother Fidel Elizalde, Guadalupe Salazar, and a new-generation *cardenchera*, Higinio Chavarría. What a revelation!

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Photos courtesy of the authors and Sibila de Villa.



Cane cholla cactus.



Ofelia Elizalde, *Cardenchera*

I've been formally singing with Los Cardencheros for two-and-a-half years. I started at an event at the Sanctuary for *Cardenche* Song. A few people from Ciudad Lerdo's House of Culture attended, and our community was invited, too. My brother encouraged me to take a chance, and I said I would, at least for one song. That day, I sang "At the Foot of the Tree," better known as "The Dark Crane." I knew the song well, because my mother used to sing it often.

Here, in my community, people sing *cardenche* songs—songs of love and contempt, but also songs of praise at church; these are also "*acardenchadas*," or slow. People in my community sing. Sometimes my mother would sing with my Aunt Otila. They would sing their melodies together, softly. They'd sing all kinds of songs, like "At the Foot of the Tree" and "Going to Die in the Deserts," to name a few. And my brothers and I listened to them so much that they simply *had* to stick with us, too.

Women sing at church and at home. At church, they sing the novena and the rosary. Church is where those too shy to sing in front of anyone else will lift up their voices in praise of the Virgin Mary. When my mother and aunt were still alive, we'd sing songs at traditional Christmas parties known as *posadas*. And if any *cardenche* song is hard, the ones people sing at *posadas* are even harder. But we can sing it all.



Ofelia Elizalde.

Keeping *Cardenche* Alive: Another Reason to Sing

Our tastes are like our forebears'. Today, youths follow other trends; they sing things we don't like, but they're still singing. Before, you'd hear young people singing on every corner, but not anymore. The proof lies in the fact that they don't care to join the community's singing workshop. Very few young people participate in it. If this kind of song is from here, then the community should be involved.

My son used to sing, but he stopped because he had to go work in the United States. Then my grandson learned how at a workshop, but they gave it their own twist, fusing *cardenche* singing with the kinds of songs that they like. At least they considered our opinion: they asked their elders for permission before mixing everything up. But now there's nobody to sing *cardenche* properly. Of course, one can respect the fact that they want to add certain elements or take others out. If only *cardenche* wouldn't lose so much of its meaning . . . its essence. They learned *cardenche*, but they don't sing it the same way. Still, they're creating something along the same lines. It'll find its place.

Magical Singing

The way *cardenche* is sung can be strange: there's no musical guide, so one has to go about measuring the cadence, which is hard, of course. It's almost like a familiar song in which the voices come together. Each voice has its place, but they all sing together. We have to follow the main voice, which is usually my brother Fidel's. If, for instance, he starts singing on a note that's too high, then I'll struggle, because I'm a contralto, and if it's too low, then we'll have a hard time when it's time for the *glissando*. He has to know exactly where he's going to hit the note, and each of us has to be alert, in case the other cuts his part short, draws it out, or comes to a stop . . . and we have to sing parallel to the voice that's leading the song. The group has to be of one mind.

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Cardenche is very magical, the way I see it, or maybe it's just that I love this type of singing for family reasons. The singing is magical because it allows for certain things. For instance, if my brother goes too high in the song, he can stop, even if we've already started: the song allows for this. I would often hear my mother and aunt telling each other to take it higher or lower, to change the key. Sometimes the men would do that, too, because the song was theirs. They'd sing for themselves, any way they liked, and say, "Stop and let me roll a cigarette, and then we'll keep going" . . . things like that. I believe it's magical.

Having Song in Your Blood

Sometimes I can feel it, when I sing the song my mother remembered in her final days. A song that nobody knew, but that she started singing when she was already quite ill. My brother asked, "What's that song that I don't know? I'd never heard it." "It's the song of the round moon," she'd reply. When I talk about that song, or when I sing it, I'm overcome with emotion. I take great pride, and I'm happy to practice what my parents enjoyed doing, what they'd want us to learn. I wish I had more of a voice, and I wish I could sing louder so that they could hear me and know that I appreciate what they taught me. This feeling is in our blood, our minds, our hearts.

I like songs about nature or the stars, and I dare say that's why the songs were composed by the people who sang them, because of the things they experienced day in and day out. When they had a sad moment, or were kept up at night, when they'd harmonize at the dumpsters or at the ranch's edge, this is what I imagine: they'd look at the sky and feel inspired by their own needs, their poverty, their sadness, their loneliness. That's what I mean when I say the song comes up from my stomach, my heart, even my throat. Because I'm feeling it. What we sing, I feel.

Amalia Romero, Flamenco Singer

When I hear *cardenche* singing, I can feel lots of emotions stirring inside me. I see *cardenche* as related to flamenco. Historically, these songs started as ballads, then, as a traditional flamenco style known as *toná* (meaning "tune," but spelled the way the word *tonada* might sound in Andalusia). In the *toná*, voices come from the gut, from deep down, the *cante jondo* (or "deep song" in Andalusian), a *palo seco* (an unadorned kind of song), as they say in flamenco to refer to a *cappella* songs that require no accom-



Amalia Romero.

panying instrument. *Tonás* are sung without measures, which is why I think they're close to *cardenche*.

Cardenche and Toná

My hope and aim are to put on a performance called *Cardenche and toná*. This show of voices would bring together the two kinds of songs in the realm of emotion, with the voice taking the lead. The voice is the main instrument of feeling, of the pain that *cardenche* expresses, which is something I perceive in *cante jondo*, too.

I arrived in Sinaloa, Mexico as a young child, and that's where I became familiar with these songs, through dance. All of my experiences with *cardenche* have created a special place in my heart for the part of the state of Durango that borders with Sinaloa, which brings back memories of my childhood, of my youth, and of those emotions that I later found in flamenco.

I think that, in a way, you always end up finding why it is that you do what you do. First, without even realizing it, certain things crop up and become part of your life. I started practicing a traditional Mexican folk dance at the Sinaloa School of the Arts. I'd perform mestizo dances, but what I was most attracted to were pagan, ritualistic dances called *danzas*. We'd perform dances by Mexican indigenous groups, including the Huichol and Rarámuri dances, as well as *pascola* ones danced by the Yaqui indigenous people. Then, I joined a folk dance company at the UNAM, and, in 1990, the university invited a true flamenco icon: Mario Maya. Thanks to my teachers, I became his assistant throughout the course he taught, and, a month later, Patricia Linares, one

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of Mexico's greatest flamenco dancers, or *bailaoras*, became my flamenco teacher and guide. I grew alongside her as I learned the song and dance. Mario Maya would say that, to teach flamenco dance, you have to know how to dance for the voice that sings, and all of us who know the world of flamenco can understand the communion between the strumming of the guitar, the movements in the dance, and the voice of the singer, who embodies the backbone of flamenco. I was happiest when I sang and could relate to it the most. In 2004, I went to Spain to study with the renowned singers Rafael Jiménez Falo and Talegón de Córdoba. This was, without a doubt, a fundamental experience, and I came back home with an even more profound love for my own soil.

Women in Flamenco

As women—not only in flamenco, but in many other aspects of life—I believe we have to continue on the path toward equality in every sense of the word. There has been some progress, but there's still a long road ahead for women to be seen as equals. That's why, as a *cantaora* singer, flamenco has been one of my life's greatest gifts. It has put me in the privileged position of being able to raise my voice, speak, and sense my power. And especially to feel that I am there with many other women, my mother and many others who undoubtedly share this position with me . . . We are the *cantaoras*: we have to be at the front. And we have to be brave and strong.

Flamenco singing opens plenty of possibilities: going back to my roots as a Mexican and understanding how these songs interlace in time. They share many elements, and we have to decipher them. I don't see it as an ending, but as a return to our origins, so that we might build something new. **MM**

Notes

¹ Sibila de Villa, "Entre la fotografía y la música. Una pausa en el constante fluir del tiempo," <https://issuu.com/edilar/docs/cdm-232/s/12052891>.