GARCÍA LORCA AND THE GUITAR

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IT WOULD BE SURPRISING if Federico García Lorca had not shown a predilection for the guitar in his life and work: the instrument plays an essential role in the world of Andalusian music and folklore, in which the poet was immersed from an early age. His enchantment with the guitar might be said to have obeyed a racial and family inclination. One of his father’s ancestors, a certain Frasquito García, was a professional guitarist who emigrated to Paris, married and died there.1 Lorca’s father had the custom of organizing flamenco sessions at his son’s natal house in Fuentevaqueros, near Granada. The poet himself inevitably found a guitar in his lap when he was very young. He even took some lessons from an aunt.2 They did not last long, since he turned to a serious study of the piano. But as late as his stay in New York, he apparently still “played the guitar with great verve and spontaneity.”3

As we might expect, the guitar is a recurrent motif in Lorca’s work. He reveals a perfect understanding of the guitarist’s function in his lecture, “Cante jondo (Primitivo canto andaluz)”: the player should limit himself to providing a rhythmic and harmonic background, he says, following the singer rather than trying to display his own virtuosity.4 Music for the guitar forms part of the background of Lorca’s youthful prose descriptions and dramas; in one of his books of verse, the Poema del cante jondo, the instrument constitutes a luminous symbol. In his later works it tends to appear less frequently, like all the typical and somewhat picturesque elements of his native Andalusia. Yet, as I will try to show, it left an undying echo in his ear.

Two mentions of the guitar in Lorca’s first published works may give us a key to the instrument’s function in his lyrical world. Both relate to the Albaicín, the gypsy quarter of Granada. Lorca depicts the city in a poetic evocation of color and sound, with distant music of “guitarras dolientes” suggesting “gritos de amor y pasión.”5 These two aspects of the instrument—its association with love and sorrow—flow like a pair of rivulets from a common stream throughout Lorca’s writings. The negative aspect prevails in his first book of verse, Libro de poemas. In “Elegía,” he invokes the Andalusian girl who is the poem’s subject: “Venus del mantón de Manila que sabe / del vino de Málaga y de la guitarra.” The Malagan wine could be a kind of muscatel. It probably relates to the sweetness of desire, though its saccharine taste leaves a slightly bitter or medicinal residue on the palate—like everything in Málaga for Lorca.6 The guitar may stand for the wholly unfruitful side of love and desire, which are naturally frustrated in this unlucky sister of Doña Rosita la Soltera and other Lorcan women. I favor such an interpretation because this part of the poem consists of verses built on contrasts (“¿Oh mujer potente de ébano y nardo! . . . ¡Oh cisne moreno! . . .”). But the two images, Malagan wine and guitar, are characteristically ambiguous and rich in their possible connotations; Lorca’s imagery rarely fits into a tidy scheme. In two other poems of this volume, the lyre takes the place of the guitar (all the stringed instruments seem to have approximately the same meaning for Lorca). The lyre appears alongside of pain in the tenderly Franciscan “Canto a la miel,” where it suggests the poet’s office and the sorrow of past suffering: “Para el que lleva la pena y la lira, / eres sol que ilumina el camino.” Finally, in “Invocación al laurel,” the lyre and the traditional rose of romantic love point to death: “Las rosas estaban soñando en la lira / . . . Conozco la lira
que presentes, rosa; / formé su cordaje con mi vida muerta."  

Three separate lyrics treat the guitar more extensively in the Poema del cante jondo. The first appears toward the beginning of the "Poema de la siguiriya gitana," immediately after the presentation of the scenery for the drama to follow.

**La guitarra**

Empieza el llanto
de la guitarra.
Se rompen las copas
de la madrugada.
Empieza el llanto
de la guitarra.
Es inútil callarla.
Es imposible
callarla.
Llora monótona
como llora el agua,
como llora el viento
sobre la nevada.
Es imposible
callarla.
Llora por cosas lejanas.
Aren del Sur caliente
que pide camelias blancas.
Llora flecha sin blanco,
la tarde sin mañana,
y el primer pájaro muerto
sobre la rama.
¡Oh guitarra!
Corazón malherido
por cinco espadas.

The position of this poem at the beginning of the book is very proper, since the first timid strumming of the guitar usually create the atmosphere for the performance of cante jondo, enticing and drawing the initial notes from the singer. Moreover, the typically Lorcan hour of dawn is highly appropriate, time of the classic fiesta flamenca. The opening lines, with their weeping or lament, remind us of the siguiriya being evoked in this section of the book. This genre is the most funereal in all cante jondo. The language of the poem approaches the vagueness and the ephemeral quality of music, especially of music for the guitar. The strong pattern of assonance, the refrain-like repetitions, and the parallel constructions imitate a monotonous drone. The cups that held the dawn have broken, spilling a wan light and recalling the libations that accompany the flamenco ritual. The guitar's lament can no sooner be silenced than the crying of suffering mankind, of which it forms the burden. It wails like running water or the wind that blows across snow-capped mountains, perhaps awakening memories of the Granadine Sierra Nevada. The motive for this wailing lies in a futile yearning for what cannot be—the yearning of hot southern sand for flowers and fertility, of an aimless existence for a purpose and a new life; of a dead ideal for the innocence of a pristine illusion. The poem ends with an image of the guitar as a heart being wounded by the five "swords" of the player's fingers. I believe this image refers to the guitarist's right hand in the execution of the rasgueado, the characteristic technique of this music. But it also suggests the hearts of Spanish Mater Dolorosas, pierced with knives or swords.

In a brief fragment of the "Gráfico de la Petenera," the focus changes from the musician's fingers to the six strings of the guitar.

**Las seis cuerdas**

La guitarra,
hace llorar a los sueños.
El sollozo de las almas
perdidas,
se escapa por su boca
redonda.
Y como la tarántula
teje una gran estrella
para cazar suspiros,
que flotan en su negro
aljibe de madera.

The first two lines describe the melancholy beauty of the guitar. The instrument has a special power of awakening the intimate chords that sleep in the memory and unconscious. To fully understand this little piece, we have to place it within the framework of the larger composition to which it pertains. The "lost souls" whose sobs escape through the guitar's sound-hole belong to the hundred black horsemen,
victims of their love for La Petenera. Like a spider, the guitar weaves a web “in order to trap sighs,” expressing human sorrow through music. These sighs “float” inside the instrument’s body as if it were a wooden cistern; the Poema del cante jondo is full of foreboding wells and cisterns. In a later poem of the same work, we encounter a related image:

\begin{quote}
Pasen caballos negros
y gente siniestra
por los hondos caminos
de la guitarra.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

The black horses look back to the dark riders of the poem on the petenera, and the “deep roads of the guitar” to the cistern—two indications of the profundity of the instrument’s sound. In these and other places of the work, Lorca seems to be portraying the climate of vice that formed a real part of the Andalusian demimonde at the turn of the century, with its seedy taverns and the café cantante. Indeed, the whole “Gráfico de la Petenera” depicts this kind of milieu. It is Lorca’s most “anti-flamenco” poem.

The final lyric on the guitar in this book is one of the “Seis Caprichos” toward the end of the volume. These fragmentary sketches, with their concision and subtle metaphors, occasionally resemble Oriental verse. Lorca dedicated the entire series to the guitarist Regino Sainz de la Maza.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Adivinanza de la guitarra}

\begin{quote}
En la redonda
encrucijada,
seis doncellas
bailan.
Tres de carne
y tres de plata.
Los sueños de ayer las buscan,
pero las tiene abrazadas
un Polifemo de oro.
¡La guitarra!\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

The poet has caught the mysterious appeal of the guitar in a few brief lines. The sound-hole represents a crossroads where six maidens dance, three of flesh—the treble strings of catgut—and three of silver—the basses. In a poem above we saw how the guitar “makes dreams cry”; here the “dreams of yesterday” search for the dancing maidens. But a “golden Polyphemus” holds them in captivity—the wooden body of the guitar with its single round eye. The imagery is very accurate: the color of most flamenco guitars in fact approaches a golden hue, owing to the polished cypress used in their construction. Moreover, the dancing maidens, crossroads, dreams and frustration are echoes of earlier themes in the Poema del cante jondo. The Cyclops vaguely evokes the Sicilian cave from the episode in the Odyssey, which would be consistent with the deep hollow of the guitar’s body. The music of the instrument seems to have opened secret chambers of the spirit for Lorca. Its sound is intrinsically sad; stirring the turbid waters of the unconscious, it brings to light hidden dreams, memories and illusions.

In addition to the above poems, the guitar appears incidentally in a few other lyrics of this work. It is an instrument of mourning in “Barrio de Córdoba,” where a young girl has apparently died of love.\textsuperscript{15} Once more in the “Gráfico de la Petenera,” Lorca personifies death in a white vihuela—an ancestor of the Spanish guitar:

\begin{quote}
Por un camino va
la muerte, coronada,
de azahares marchitos.
Canta y canta
una canción
en su vihuela blanca,
y canta y canta y canta.
\end{quote}

Why the vihuela instead of a guitar? Perhaps because of the petenera’s archaic flavor, and its association with the medieval Spain of Christians, Arabs and Jews.\textsuperscript{16} With her withered crown of orange-blossoms and her sterile, white instrument, the figure of death evokes grotesque visions similar to those in the late Goya.\textsuperscript{17} The guitar is also connected with death in another poem, “Memento.” The lyric speaker, probably a gypsy, asks to be buried with his guitar:

\begin{quote}
Cuando yo me muera,
enterráme con mi guitarra
bajo la arena.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}
This last will and testament reflects the gypsies’ veneration for music as well as a racial custom. Jean-Paul Clébert says that this people used to place stringed instruments in the arms of their dead.29

In the Romancero gitano, Lorca attempted to purge his work of the picturesque Andalusian objects that fill his earlier poetry. The guitar suffers the same fate as oil lamps, weather vanes, wayside crosses and street lanterns. It would never again be as important in Lorca’s work. Yet strangely enough, he resurrected his favorite instrument in the Poeta en Nueva York and in his mature drama. In the volume of verse, the guitar, vihuela, lyre and mandolin provide a melancholy refrain to mortality and suffering. As in the poem on the petenera, death plays a vihuela, this time wearing a huge African mask. The mandolin is associated with a dissected frog, the lyre appears in a poem about a Jewish cemetery, and the guitar in a climate of radical loneliness, anguish and despair.20

In most of Lorca’s plays, the music of these instruments forms a kind of counterpoint to the usually tragic action. As in the poetry, their presence may prelude love, death or suffering. In the dramas of Lorca’s last years, the guitar acquires a new modality. The sinuous shape of its wooden body suggested a woman’s figure to the poet, as it had to many other artists before. In the rather experimental Así que pasen cinco años, the guitar is a symbol of the passionate Novia: “Creo que me vas a quebrar entre tus brazos, porque soy débil, porque soy pequeña, porque soy como la escarcha, porque soy como una diminuta guitarra quemada por el sol.” Background music on the instrument has the effect of an aphrodisiac on the feminine protagonist of Amor de Don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín. In Yerma, a similar music accompanies the fertility dance of the devil and his wife. And in Doña Rosita la soltera o El lenguaje de las flores, a new member of Lorca’s family of stringed instruments, the lute, is a correlative of the heroine’s body. Rosita says to her boyfriend in the first act: “¡rompes con tu cruel ausencia / les cuerdas de mi laúd!”21

Though Lorca’s plays and poems are full of direct allusions to the guitar, these do not exhaust its importance in his work. The instrument may function as an image or symbol with a definite meaning, but it exercises a more pervasive and subtle influence in the rhythms, tones and dynamics of Lorca’s verse. The Poema del cante jondo, in particular, has been interpreted by some critics as a lyrical fusion of poetry and music for the guitar. The verse incarnates the land from which traditional Andalusian songs derive, the human feelings they express, and their musical essence—of which the guitar is a fundamental element. Ángel del Río has noted that music and poetry at times merge so completely that the resulting sensation can only be translated by “imagining the deep plucking of a guitar’s bass strings.”22:

\[
\text{Tierra seca, tierra quieta de noches inmensas}.
\]

\[
\text{Tierra vieja del candil y la pena.}
\]

\[
\text{Tierra de las hondas cisternas.}
\]

Christoph Eich has gone even further in his comparison between this volume and the sound of the guitar. He believes the poems represent a pure transformation of the instrument’s music into words, manifested in variations in dynamics from piano to forte, the delicate shadings of tone color, the richness of rhythms and pauses.24 According to Gustavo Correa, the rhythmic feeling of the Poema del cante jondo could be interpreted as the modulation of a human cry accompanied by the vibration of the guitar. A kind of lyrical tension would be the primary structural principle of the work. This tension reveals itself in the human voice, in the pulsations of the guitar’s
strings, and in images of trembling, wavering and undulation.\textsuperscript{25}

The intimate tone of the Poema del cante jondo penetrates our ear with the subtlety and intimacy of music for the guitar; in the Romancero gitano, music condenses into color and form, the tone becomes more objective. In the “Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías,” Lorca also goes beyond the small, private world of flamenco and the guitar; yet the title and form of the poem may have been inspired by the gypsy funeral lament.\textsuperscript{26} Its scope and structure are closer to a symphonic or choral composition than to music for a solo instrument, but the guitar is not entirely absent. Its music forms the burden to the death and tragedy of the work, much as in Lorca’s plays. After the bullfighter’s going, “Comenzaron los sones del bordon / a las cinco de la tarde.” The changes in tempo and intensity in the poem recall the guitar’s variations in rhythm, tone color and dynamics. In the second part for example, the movement of the verse becomes more and more urgent until it is cut by a sharp “No” of the refrain, in the manner of a guitar whose strings are suddenly dampened by the player’s right hand:\textsuperscript{27}

1 Oh, blanco muro de España!
2 Oh negro toro de pena!
3 Oh sangre dura de Ignacio!
4 Oh ruisenor de sus venas!
5 No.
6 Que no quiero verla!\textsuperscript{28}

\section*{It is not easy to summarize the meaning of the guitar in Lorca’s poetic world.}

A son of the last years of the nineteenth century, he inherited the tradition of what Marcel Raymond has called the “guitars of elegiac romanticism.”\textsuperscript{29} The instrument’s music forms a plaintive and superfluous background to some of his youthful prose and drama. But Lorca soon transformed this stale tradition into a completely personal and modern myth. The guitar remained in association with love, but not with the nostalgic romance of the past. Perhaps due to its shape, he began to relate it to woman’s body and sexual desire. Desire is rarely fulfilled in Lorca’s work; the guitar came to suggest the frustration of love, and a consequent suffering and pain. In the hard wood of its sinuous form, he seemed to glimpse the limits of human yearning: “Sueño concreto y sin norte / de madera de guitarra.” In his brief article on Regino Sainz de la Maza, Lorca characterized this guitarist as being essentially melancholy. “Melancholy, like the man who wants to fly and realizes he is wearing iron shoes; melancholy, like the man who goes hopefully to a witch’s grotto and finds it decorated with English furniture; melancholy, like all of us who cannot display the splendid wings that God has placed on our shoulders . . .”\textsuperscript{31} This was also the quality Lorca divined in the guitar, and the one he incorporated in his own work.

Just as the lyre was the emblem of ancient poetry, the guitar might have been Lorca’s. In some of his verse the instrument seems to incarnate the lot of the poet, who sheds more tears than ordinary men: he bears the weight of all human suffering in order to purify and sublimate it through art. Few instruments can express “black sounds” of anguish and despair as well as the guitar. In his only composition for the instrument, Manuel de Falla interprets the dark spirit of cante jondo through the sonorities and dissonances of the impressionist composers.\textsuperscript{32} In Lorca’s poetry, the black sounds of Andalusian music have their equivalent in recurrent omens and somber presences: the moon, wind, sand, horsemen, unlucky colors.

The guitar could also be compared to the poet’s muse in so far as it represents a fusion of popular and artistic traditions. For several hundred years, it has been the instrument of the people in Spain.\textsuperscript{33} But as early as the sixteenth century, one of its ancestors—the vihuela—had become well-known in aristocratic circles. Composers be-
gan to write variations on popular songs in an elegant style. “The melodies forged by the people, unpolished and full of passion, are carried by the vihuelistas to the Court, where they acquire the delicate amatory accent that characterizes them.”

Lorca would do something similar in his adaptations of folk songs, though he considered himself to be a mere collector. In our century the guitar has enjoyed another renaissance; composers such as Tuíña, Villa-Lobos and Rodrigo have written pieces for it in a contemporary idiom without abandoning a popular inspiration. Lorca’s own poetry represents a marvelous union of traditional forms and motifs with the most modern technical resources, and a unique sensibility.

How could we fail to sense a profound correspondence between the poet’s art—receptacle of a live tradition—and the guitar—in which the essential values of former instruments have concentrated without a loss of its own character? This character it owes to the people. The guitar’s intimacy naturally attracted Lorca’s poetic ear, as perhaps another expression of the miniatuрист’s art so typical of Granada. Another Granadine, a friend and contemporary of Lorca, has been almost wholly responsible for the instrument’s modern revival. I am of course referring to Andrés Segovia. The grace and depth of his musicianship have much in common with the poet’s muse. Yet the flamenco guitar probably offers a closer parallel with Lorca’s poetry. Here the player does not seek precision or sweetness of tone. Everything—technique, rhythm, melody, harmony—is subordinated to a superior force, which might be called intensity, or in the language of the Andalusian, duende. As in Lorca’s work, the power of feeling seems to overflow the boundaries of form. The flamenco guitarist strains at the limits of consonance, Lorca goes beyond the verge of meaning, each creating an atmosphere of strange beauty.

NOTES
1José Mora Guarnido, Federico García Lorca y su mundo (Buenos Aires, 1958), p. 75.
3John A. Crow, Federico García Lorca (Los Angeles, 1945), p. 3.
6See the two poems “Juan Breva” and “Malagueña” in Poema del cante jondo (O.C., pp. 320, 323-24), with their imagery of sea-salt, lemon groves and a squeezed orange.
7O.C., pp. 199, 202, 281-82.
8Pp. 297-98.
9The siguiriya is often associated with the playera (planífera), perhaps a song of mourning as indicated by its name. See Ricardo Molina and Antonio Mairena, Mundo y formas del cante flamenco (Madrid, 1963), pp. 170-72.
10Sand often signifies death and sterility in Lorca’s poetry. See Carlos Ramos-Gil, Claves liricas de García Lorca: Ensayos sobre la expresión y los climas poéticos lorquianos (Madrid, 1967), pp. 139-140.
11O.C., pp. 313-14.
12“Malagueña,” p. 323.
13He also wrote a review of a concert given by this musician in Granada in May of 1920, discussed below (O.C., pp. 160-61).
14P. 325.
15P. 324. The general atmosphere and the presence of nightingales suggest a violent death.
16As in this example, cited by Hipolito Rossy, Teoría del cante jondo (Barcelona, 1966), pp. 259-60:
—¿Dónde vas, bella judía
 tan compuesta y a deshata?
—Voy en busca de Rebeco
 que espera en la sinagoga.
18“Clamor,” O.C., p. 317; p. 323. In the last poem, sand is once again a correlative of death.
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