



Review

Enrique Encabo, and Inmaculada Maitia Polo, eds. *Copla, Ideología y Poder*. Madrid: Dykinson, 2020.

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When I first laid eyes on the cover of my copy of *Copla, Ideología y Poder*, I was transfixed for a minute. For one who has lived in Spain long enough to remember the elusive, rather indefinable musical genre known among Spaniards as *copla* (and the even more vague metaphors associated to it) as an integral part of one's upbringing, I became flooded with nostalgia at the sight of the picture—a used postage stamp, issued in 1965, of a value of 80 céntimos de peseta, featuring the haunting portrait of what was once regarded as the quintessential Andalusian (read: Spanish) woman: olive skin, black hair collected in a chignon, her arms resting on a Spanish guitar (which hides her nakedness), looking both serene and melancholic with her big, dark eyes. The work, by Julio Romero de Torres (Cordova 1875–1935), conjures like no other the essence of a type of Spanish narrative song, closely connected to Flamenco, which, performed in a very idiosyncratic style and combined with dance, is oddly known as *copla*. That cover made me anticipate great things in the pages of the book, and I was not disappointed.

Until recently, historiographical studies in Spanish music scholarship had routinely neglected what the academic circles perceived and regarded as “low culture.” This was particularly noticeable in the study of two types of stage music that thrived around the time *zarzuela* (unquestionably the most important genre of stage music in Spain) began its inexorable demise, in the first couple of decades of the 20th century—namely, the *revista* and the *copla*. The current onset of cultural studies in Spain (influenced by scholarship of the United States, where the distinction between “high” and “low” forms of art has traditionally seemed less apparent and is therefore less problematic), and a more positive and friendly reception of forms hitherto disregarded by musicologists, has benefited the study of *copla* and hence the publication of this book, in which a variety of specialists of different areas have combined forces and contributed to offer analyses that are both multiangled.

Copla reigned supreme on the Spanish stage for at least 30 years, from around 1930 to 1960. Starting in the 1970s, the genre experienced a backlash, due to its chronological association with the Franco regime (1939–1975) and its perceived aesthetic and ideological adherence to it. Because of that, the presence of *copla* on the stage, as well as film, radio, and television, ubiquitous until then, faded rapidly. *Copla* began to be regarded as antiquated, obsolete, and even downright campy and over the top, especially by listeners whose musical tastes and interests had shifted to other, more

cosmopolitan sounds that came from Britain and America. Similarly, many performers shied away from *copla* and what it represented.

Meanwhile, music scholars paid no attention to it. As Julio Arce, one of the contributors to the book, explains, “[T]he study of *copla* has been largely neglected by the academic world” (p. 51). Remarkably, some Spanish artists (mostly writers, including Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, Carmen Martín Gaité and Terenci Moix, among others) not only did not ignore it, but in fact celebrated it in their novels and essays. Similarly, some filmmakers, notably Pedro Almodóvar, Jaime Chávarri, and Fernando Trueba, have embraced the colorfulness, theatricality, and campiness of *copla* and incorporated them in the soundtracks of their films. For these intuitive and unprejudiced artists, the antics of *copla* redeemed it from its association to the obscure, repressive years of the Franco dictatorship. Moreover, the sparkle of *copla*, the brilliancy of the shows, the lush arrangements of the songs, and the exaggerated melodramatic style of the singers’ performances compensated for the tragic tone that impregnated the stories that the songs told.

In the early years of the transition from the Franco regime to the democracy, *copla* was further devalued by the phenomenon of the “New Flamenco” (the school that renovated the genre in the 1970s, and that was represented by singers like Camarón de la Isla). *Copla* was viewed as a cheap substitute. Nonetheless, it was still defended by some Flamenco artists, often at the expense of reinforcing, deliberately, the kitsch elements that most disparaged: the performer “Martirio” (stage name of the singer Maribel Quiñones) is an example of this. Likewise, some consecrated divas of the *canción española*, like Rocío Jurado and Isabel Pantoja, always maintained *copla* in their repertoires. That was taken without question: their magnetism, legendary status, and widespread recognition helped to keep the genre alive in spite of its detractors. It was in part because of these artists that *copla* was saved it from oblivion.

Besides the politically motivated painful memories that many associated with *copla* and its perceivably dubious aesthetic value, another factor that may explain its stigmatization is the elusiveness of the genre itself. The term *copla* is a slippery one. In fact, it is something of a dumpster of a term. It is buried in many layers of meaning, most of which revolve around the ways listeners have perceived it, both during its heyday and after. In other words, *copla* has become a construct built, almost exclusively, by the ways it has been historically received. On the one hand, *copla* is a hybrid, a crossbreed of styles of different traditions of Spanish song and dance (especially Flamenco), for the most part identifiable if taken individually. On the other, *copla* as a whole is immediately identified (at least by most Spaniards) as a phenomenon that contains the whole gamut of sonic, visual, and performative components that, at some point in recent history, represented the essence of Spanishness. For many, the image of Spain that *copla* projected was to be celebrated. For many others, on the contrary, it represented precisely the one they wished to eradicate. Writing about *copla* requires from the writer some emotional involvement and an aesthetic affinity to compensate for its alleged shortcomings. Only a scholar who has a favorable opinion of the genre can render the time and energy devoted to it worth the effort. For scholars who have little interest in *copla* (or who downright despise it), that empathy can be a little disconcerting. During Francisco Franco’s regime, no matter how oppressive it was, the extravagant world of *copla*, with all its kitsch ingredients, served the purpose of canalizing the harsh historical situation with the mythical, racial, classic Spain, always proud and, at the same time, disturbed by its particularity and its chimeric inability to reach the more progressive lifestyle of its European neighbors beyond the Pyrenees—not unlike what the

Regeneracionistas of the *Generación del 98* (for example, Miguel de Unamuno) had lamented and denounced as the culprit of the nation's cultural backwardness.

Copla, Ideología y Poder aims at dispelling prejudices and misunderstandings, embracing the good, the bad, and the questionable elements that surround the reception of *copla*—including the unavoidable connection with the Franco years. The best asset of the book is its frank discussion of the ugly stereotypes that revolve around *copla* and the positioning of the genre into the category it belongs, one in which the standards “high” or “low” with which it has been typically measured are no longer valid. *Copla* was indeed the voice of the regime, its most visible musical manifestation, an amiable, benevolent soundtrack to the darkness of those years. But it was also the opposite: *copla* became the catalyst of the voices of the oppressed: the political exile, the working class, and the marginalized—among these, women and homosexual men in particular. Hence its enormous popularity and, consequently, the economic impact it had in the recording industry at a time when Spain was deeply impoverished. Fortunately, time has passed and *copla* can be examined with a fresh new attitude that eschews narrow assumptions. The authors' approach is more detached and less biased than it would have been had the book been written a decade or two ago. What are the repercussions of *copla* in the making of a music historiography of Spain in the 20th century? Does *copla* still resonate? How much? To whom? These are the questions that the book addresses, and, with various degrees of success, manages to answer.

The search for a definition of the genre occupies a considerable part of the book. The editors offer a compelling and legitimate definition of “that ‘thing’ called *copla*” (p. 14): *Copla* is a type of narrative song (not unlike a ballad) characterized musically by what in the early 20th century was universally understood and sanctioned as “Andalusian.” In its most recognizable form, *copla* is a type of music associated with (pseudo)Flamenco. Alejandro Coello Hernández rightfully asserts that, in addition to Andalusian song and Flamenco, Spanish dance, *cuplé*, *varietés*, *revista* and even vaudeville, contributed to the establishment of what was later known as *copla* (p. 127).

The fifteen chapters of the book are divided into three sections, each one containing about five chapters. The chapters of the first section are grouped under the generic topic of “*Copla* and Ideology,” for these two are inseparable and any historiographical account must discuss them side by side. Each author assesses the various degrees with which a specific ideology (Franco's) and an aesthetic (*Andalucismo*) were associated to *copla*. This includes the personal relationships that were forged, by necessity or by choice, between the political power and some the performers—and the implications they had in their careers, both during the Franco era and afterwards. The section aims at finding an answer to these two questions: How was *copla* appropriated by an ideology? And, whose power did it reinforce—or, in some cases, challenge?

In the chapter “Del ‘No pasarán’ al ‘Ya hemos pasado’: la humillación del vencido a través del chotis” (“From ‘They shall not Pass’ to ‘We Have already Passed: The Humiliation of the Defeated through the [homonymous] chotis”), Elena Torres Clemente does an excellent job reassessing (and thus, challenging) the reception of the phenomenon of the artist Celia Gámez (an extraordinarily famous Argentinian singer who settled in Spain in the late 1920s, where she made a career as a singer of variety *cuplés*). Torres explains how Gámez, who died in Spain in 1992, went from being acclaimed to reviled due to her perceived adherence to the Franco regime. In “Recepción en La Granja” (“Reception at La Granja”), Julio Arce gives an enticing, sometimes amusing, chronicle of the

extravaganzas held at the Palace of La Granja, near Madrid (one of Franco's residences) every year on Saint Francis Day, the dictator's name day. In "Copla en Radio Pirenaica," an anti-Franco radio station located in France (thus, beyond the Pyrenees, hence the name) that transmitted subversive material to Spain. Atenea Fernández Higuero exposes Franco as the most unmusical of all European dictators of his generation (Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini had, or at least pretended to have, a genuine interest in music; it could even be argued that they had good musical taste). Franco, who did not care about music, did however like *copla*. The chapter reproduces some of the hauntingly melancholic letters sent by Spanish listeners scattered throughout Western Europe, émigrés who had left Spain for political reasons or, starting in the 1950s, for economic necessity, who requested *copla* songs to the radio station.

The second section of the book, titled "A un lado y otro del océano" ("On Both Sides of the Ocean") focuses on the spread of *copla* in the Americas after the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and its impact on the thousands of exiled Spaniards who ended up settling in Latin America. The chapters in this section are probably more tangential to the core of the book's focus—a fact that confirms the elusiveness of *copla* and the permeability of its boundaries. In general, this section is the weakest, notwithstanding the excellent quality of some chapters. It somehow lacks homogeneity, as if the editors had felt impelled to include all, or most, of the conference papers, even the ones that perhaps would not have met the standards for publication, had the editors been more discriminating in their selection process. Of the six essays that make this section, three stand out. "Imaginarios de lo español en El Quite..." ("Imaginaries of Spanishness in El Quite..."), by Alejandro Coello Hernández, examines a ballet composed by Tomás Borrás (a Falangist) in 1931 and its role in the establishment of *copla* as a genuinely hybrid genre: it was the first show of *copla* to successfully combine songs and dances. "Copla en Chile" ("Copla in Chile") by Juan Lorenzo Jorquera, documents the establishment of the genre in South America in the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, "Copla in México" ("Copla in Mexico") by Teresa Fraile, illustrates the impact of *copla*, and, by extension, *andalucismo*, in the vibrant film industry of Mexico in the 1940s and 50s. Fraile rightfully points out that there is much to unearth and study regarding the aesthetic connections between Spanish and Mexican musical films of those decades.

The third section, "Repensando copla" ("Rethinking *copla*") revolves around the problems caused by the multiplicity of meanings around the term *copla* and focuses on the metonym Andalusia/Spain and its implications, especially regarding its reception. In "La mística de lo exótico" ("The Mystic of the Exotic"), Ibis Albizu discusses the origins of that metonym and explores the identifiers of Spain and Spanishness in the songs and dances that make the corpus of *copla* songs, often blatantly and unapologetically stereotyped, engaging the reader in a reassessment of the connotations elicited by those clichés and their impact in the (negative) ways it has been received. In this regard, Albizu points out the role of the male gay community (including transexuals and crossdressers, as well as their heterosexual admirers) in the appreciation of *copla* and its survival after it had ceased to be relevant. In a similar vein, Inmaculada Maitía Polo writes in "Las salas de fiesta en la España franquista: El Molino Rojo" ("The Nightclubs in Francoist Spain: El Molino Rojo") a delightful account of the history of a mythical nightclub in Madrid in the last decade of the dictatorship, where *copla* thrived until it closed in the 1980s. "Recepción de la copla en la industria discográfica" ("Reception of *Copla* in the Recording Industry"), by Marco Antonio Juan de Dios Cuartas discusses the role of the recording industry in the dissemination of *copla* and the making of some performers (and producers) into rutilant stars. In "La copla de Rafael de León desde una

perspectiva queer” (“The *Copla* of Rafael de León from a Queer Perspective”) further examines the connections between male homosexuality and *copla* through the application of queer theory, arguing that the undeniable homoerotic tones that some songs contained helped further engage the male homosexual community. The author shows that some composers of *copla* songs like Rafael de León (1908–1982), as well as performers like Miguel de Molina (1908–1993), embraced their homosexuality unapologetically—regardless the obvious risks. The case of Molina is eloquent; he did not (or could not) hide his homosexuality on the stage and was forced to flee Spain in haste shortly after the onset of the dictatorship, after receiving a vicious beating by a group of *falangistas*.

Copla, Ideología y Poder assesses many issues with neither prejudice nor condescendence, and does a good job eschewing the purely anecdotal (it is always tempting to linger a bit too much around the colorful lives of the *copla* performers). The authors know that it is unlikely that *copla* will return in the future, but that is not the purpose of the book. Their aim is not to revindicate the genre or even to exonerate it from its patent musical weaknesses, but to demonstrate that *copla* can be experienced, in retrospect, as a testimony of the history of Spain in the 20th century and of its people—especially, the marginalized. Paraphrasing the late, always insightful Vázquez Montalbán, a genuine expert on the genre (who, perhaps not surprisingly, was a writer and not a musicologist), this book confirms that *copla* is the real *Historia Sonora de España*.

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