

“Solamente la mano de Dios podrá separarnos”: Preliminary Notes for the Untold History of Mexican *ranchera*’s Hold on Colombian Popular Culture

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While working on this text, I recalled a joke that circulated some fifteen years ago in Bogotá, a short story displaying upper-middle-class Bogotanos’ sardonic and quite snobbish sense of humor. It stated that Colombians didn’t exist, because the local aristocracy thought of themselves as Europeans, the whole middle class aspired to immigrate to Miami, and the lower classes had always been convinced they were Mexicans. Beyond the irony in it, this silly story ultimately acknowledges the enormous impact of Mexican popular culture in shaping Colombian culture, in addition to recognizing that local identity takes different shapes according to different viewpoints. The joke, however, gives no clue about why or how Mexican popular culture became so important for Colombians. In fact, when I began to work on the reception of Latin American popular music in Colombia during the mid-twentieth century (Santamaría 2006), I was quite surprised to see that no systematic study exists of the musical connections between Mexico and Colombia, while there are several studies on the influence of Cuban or Argentinean repertoires in the country. Therefore, rather than pretending to trace back the whole process of contact and musical assimilation, I’ll piece together some fragments of the story and offer some clues. My article will raise more questions than provide clear answers about those musical interconnections. I will focus my attention on the reception of one particularly successful product of the Mexican cultural industry, *ranchera* music, taking as point of departure my work on popular music, social conflict, and identity in Medellín (Colombia’s second city) between the 1930s and 1950s. Therefore, most of my historical data pertains to that city and other urban areas in the country’s central Andean region.

Because of its privileged geographical setting, the Colombian territory has always been a crossroad of routes connecting populations living on different natural regions, the Caribbean and the South-American continent, the Andes and the Amazonian jungle. The advent of mass media at the beginning of the twentieth century just accelerated the economic and cultural exchanges between peoples, and generated an influx of new cultural products coming into the country. As in every other corner of the world, the commercialization of sound recording technology stimulated new ways of music circulation and production in Colombia. Local society gained greater access to different kinds of music, mostly recorded in the United States, although some of those early US recordings reproduced folk music styles from neighboring Spanish-speaking countries like Cuba and Mexico. In the 1930s, however, the local market began to transform due to the impact of Argentinean and Mexican cultural industries on the development of the local media business. During that period, Colombian audiences increased their interest in popular media originally produced and created in Spanish: tango music and tango movies coming from Argentina, *cuplés* and *zarzuelas* from Spain, as well as *rancheras*, *boleros*, and feature films produced by the Mexican cultural industry.

There were three different media channeling the flow of Spanish-language cultural products into the Colombian market between the late 1920s and early 1950s: sound recordings, feature films and radio broadcasting. I will briefly describe how Mexican music in general entered these channels, in order to illustrate how and why ranchera marked its foothold on local culture. In the mid-1920s the market of recorded music grew exponentially in Colombian urban centers, fuelled by the nation's economic expansion during those years. As mentioned before, most records commercialized locally came from the United States, but most Spanish-language music was actually recorded by Mexican singers. During this early period, singers such as Tito Guízar, Margarita Cueto, Alfonso Ortiz Tirado, and Juan Arvizu became local idols, opening the way for the Mexican megastars from the 1940s and 1950s such as Trío Los Panchos and tenor Pedro Vargas. But it would be impossible to understand the growing fondness for Mexican music among Colombian audiences in the 1930s without considering the significant influence of Mexican movies.

During the archival research I conducted in Medellín for my dissertation, I came across a wealth of advertising for screenings in local movie theaters during the 1930s and 1940s. Not surprisingly, most ads during the 1930s were of North American movies, but toward the end of the decade we can see Mexican movies like *María Elena* (Dir. Rafael Sevilla, 1935) premiered at the finest local theaters, Teatro Junín and Teatro Granada. The newspaper ad promoting the movie's premiere in June 1937 focused its attention on composer Lorenzo Barcelata's soundtrack, which included the songs *María Elena*, *Flor de fuego*, *El chinchorro*, and *La bamba* (Barcelata also composed the music for the famous film *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, in 1936). The newspapers also contained scattered references and notes about movies featuring ranchero singers and ensembles, such as Jorge Negrete's *Perjura* (1938) and Trío Calaveras' *Tierra Brava* (1938). It is important to take note of these dates, because they tell us that Mexican movies arrived in the local market before the craze for Argentinean tango films, which became very popular in the city during the early 1940s (certainly when talking about Argentinean tango films, I'm not considering Carlos Gardel's movies, because they were shot in the US in the early 1930s). In other words, Mexican movies had already become part of the local urban culture when the exotic Argentinean tango films began to arrive in 1942. This is interesting because Medellín's popular culture has construed an image of its own past as a tango stronghold, when in fact most of the working-class elder tango aficionados with whom I talked grew up watching Jorge Negrete's ranchero movies at the big screen. This simple observation makes evident that cultural consumption cannot simply be understood as a supply and demand issue.

The point I want to make here is that local audiences were divided in different segments following their own agendas when receiving and adopting the newly arrived genres of Spanish-language popular music. This becomes clearer when we consider the most influential channel for the dissemination of foreign popular music genres in Colombia during the 1940s: radio broadcasting. Commercial radio arrived relatively late in Colombia; although the country's first amateur radio station was founded in 1929, it was not until the mid-1930s that radio broadcast became a serious business. With almost

no experience in programming and radio-show formats, Colombian entrepreneurs looked for models to follow in Cuban, Mexican, and Argentinean radio stations. Both in Bogotá and Medellín the chosen paradigm was the Mexican commercial radio, namely Mexico City's XEW, *La voz de América Latina*. Upper-middle-class radio station owners and anchors liked the Mexican radio presenters' sober and elegant demeanor, as well as the whole programming's cosmopolitan atmosphere. Agustín Lara's show was one of the most emulated programs in local radio stations; at Medellín's wealthiest radio station, *La voz de Antioquia*, Lara's music was usually transcribed from the original Mexican broadcast and re-orchestrated in order to be premiered at a radio show called "Novedad" (Novelty). By the 1940s, Medellín's radio stations had become huge and powerful media industries and the core of the country's show business.

In spite of their success imitating foreign models, local singers and musicians were in serious disadvantage when facing the popularity of the recognized long-established Mexican performers and movie stars. During the 1940s, advertising strategies began to take advantage of that circumstance, and rival radio stations competed by hiring renowned foreign musicians to perform at their radio shows. Cadena Kresto, in 1941, was the first large-scale advertising campaign of that sort, requesting numerous Mexican performers to act in radio shows in Medellín and Bogotá. Among those touring musicians were a few ranchera ensembles, some well known through their performance at the big screen such as the Trío Janitzio (1941), and the Trío Calaveras (1947), and other less important groups such as the Duo Los Huastecos (1946), the Duo Típico Mariachis de Monterrey (1945), and Trío Hermanos Lara (1946). Nevertheless, looking at the statistics of Mexican singers acting at the local radio, ranchera performers apparently were not as popular as the romantic-song and bolero performers. The fact is that ranchera and other Mexican folk-derived genres were perceived as traditional, old-fashioned, and rural expressions, music for *campesinos* and the unrefined working-class audiences. Meanwhile, bolero and romantic song epitomized upper-middle-classes' cosmopolitanism, elegance, and sophistication. For radio audiences in Andean urban centers, Agustín Lara's boleros were paradigmatic examples of modernity's new sounds set to conventional Hispanic romantic poetry, while ranchera embodied a rough and unfashionable rural life that most listeners associated with the past. Something similar happened with local folk genres with rural topics, such as the Andean bambuco, which nevertheless enjoyed some good esteem due to a timid revival of nationalist agendas during the mid-1940s. Even though neither bambuco nor ranchera were part of the mainstream by then, none of them disappeared from local music consumption; rather, they were relegated to a small fraction of it, the market's rural section.

By the end of the 1940s, local family-run businesses that for twenty years had dominated the trade of records and phonographs brought in the necessary recording equipment and presses to found their own record labels. Medellín-based small record labels such as Zeida (later Codiscos), Victoria, Silver, and Ondina came into the market in the 1950s selling records to supply the growing market of rural canteens' jukeboxes. *Música de carrilera* (railroad music, also known as *guasca* o *guascarrilera*) is a term used to refer to the production of these and other similar record labels, apparently because the railway was the traders' main entry point into the mountainous countryside

(Santamaría 2002). Musically, *carrilera* is not a genre but an umbrella term that covers diverse forms, styles, rhythmic patterns, and genres, including Mexican ranchera, Argentinean tango, Cuban bolero, and Ecuadorian pasillo. More than musical elements, *carrilera* songs have in common their topics—unrequited love, mourn, deception, as well as expressions of love and gratitude to the mother—and their function—they are drinking songs. In spite of its habitual usage, *carrilera* is not a trade name; in fact, it is more common to find it referenced as *música para tomar aguardiente*, *música cantinera* or *música de despecho*.

Since the 1950s, records including ranchera and *música norteña* have been circulating through the Colombian Andean region following *carrilera* and similar mass media circuits (the region is very heterogeneous; the peculiar distribution of *carrilera* records has been mostly localized on the coffee-growing region in central Colombia, including the provinces of Antioquia, Caldas, Risaralda, and Quindío; at the eastern provinces of Cundinamarca, Boyacá, and Santander, the dynamics of distribution and reception of recorded music have followed some different patterns, especially due to the influence of educational radio stations (i.e. *Radio Sutatenza*). Although no systematic study has analyzed in depth the dynamics and the rationale behind ranchera's successful appropriation in rural Andean Colombia, I have my own hypothesis to explain it. The cultures of rural Mexico and rural Colombia share many characteristics, which might appear perfectly familiar to Colombian audiences when they watched them on films. In the first place, both share a similar concept of their own mestizo racial identity. According to Mexican media and cultural products, Mexico is the output of the racial and cultural mixture of Spaniards and the Pre-Columbian indigenous peoples. The same racialized image of the mestizo local culture is true for Andean Colombia, particularly in the countryside. In the second place, both Mexican and Colombian traditional societies have a very similar patriarchal structure and share a strong religiosity. And finally, the well-known archetype of the Mexican *charro* has its local counterpart in the *arriero antioqueño*. For rural Colombian audiences, Mexican ranchero films portrayed a reality much closer to their own than that portrayed by the also Mexican *cabaretera* films, or the Europeanized Argentinean films.

But Mexican culture not only went through the Colombian spectators' eyes, but also through their ears. There are many musical similarities between folk traditions in Mexico and Colombia that might explain why the music was so easily absorbed. Because of the common colonial past, aspects like the harmonic language and the poetical structure used in both musical cultures are almost identical. The same rhythmic patterns can be found in both countries: for example the *sesquialtera* is used in both Colombian bambuco and Mexican son huasteco, and the European waltz's $\frac{3}{4}$ meter has been adapted in both the Andean pasillo and the vals ranchero. The instrumentation is a different matter, because instruments commonly used in either traditional Mexican sones or in mariachi, like the violin and the trumpet, are almost never used in Andean folk ensembles in Colombia, though they were not unknown to the listeners.

The large and uninterrupted immigration of rural populations into the Colombian urban centers since the 1950s brought *carrilera* and ranchera to the city. There, ranchera

was mostly kept in working-class neighborhoods, but between the late 1950s and the 1980s it progressively became slightly more visible. Although during the 1950s most rancheras transmitted through Colombian media had been originally recorded and published in Mexico, toward the end of the decade local musicians began to put together their own mariachi ensembles to perform that music. According to the IDCT, Bogotá's metropolitan institute of culture, the first mariachi active in the city was organized in 1957 by Alfonso Regla, a Mexican citizen. Comprised of three violins, a trumpet, and a couple of guitars, this pioneer mariachi performed at a venue called "El Rafael", a restaurant set up according to Mexican models, and located in the heart of Chapinero, a middle-class commercial neighborhood. Though it disappeared many years ago, today there are at least four similar places in Bogotá. Another example of ranchera's rising popularity during the late 1960s is the development of Helenita Vargas' career. Helenita is a Cali-born upper-middle-class singer who for more than 35 years has made a very successful career as ranchera singer, usually performing at popular venues in small towns (she is very popular among politicians, who love her because of her ability to gather crowds around her; Helenita's concerts are very often part of political rallies). Vargas' first recording was released in 1975 by Discos Preludio, a Medellín-based record label that since the 1960s has specialized in Latin American popular music oldies. Most of her songs, such as *Señora*, a bolero ranchero by Mexican songwriter Homero Aguilar, are authored by Mexican songwriters.

An example of ranchera's assimilation within *carrilera* is Gali Galiano's hit *Y me bebí tu recuerdo*, a vals ranchero composed by herself. Galiano is a working-class singer who rarely appears on the mainstream media, but whose CDs are extremely popular in Colombia, Ecuador, and several countries in Central America. A typical *carrilera* jukebox decorates the background of Galiano's last CD cover. Finally, *La Jarretona*, by Hermanitas Calle, is a very good example of norteña influence in *carrilera*. It displays a blue-collar, quite rude but hilarious poetry that is very common at the Antioquia province, and is the kind of song that everybody considers proper *carrilera*. However, perhaps the best illustration of ranchera's enormous influence on Colombian culture is its inclusion in one of the country's most important and successful mass media products, Colombian *telenovelas* (Santamaría 2002). In fact, one of the first hits in the genre was the *telenovela Pero sigo siendo el Rey* (1984), based on a local novel that reinterpreted Mexican culture as seen by Colombians. All characters were taken from famous rancheras and corridos—El Rey, Juan Charrasqueado, Chabela, Rosita Alvirez, etc.—and every single day the show staged some sections of the songs. The sensation of the 1990s was *Café con aroma de mujer* (1994-1995), a *telenovela* in which a love story was the perfect excuse to portray the coffee growing region's life and culture. Music was a central part of the story because the girl was an amateur *carrilera* singer, and during the show she appeared performing or listening to *despecho* songs in a bar. The latest example, *La hija del mariachi* (2006-2007) tells the story of a Mexican upper-class man who has been falsely accused in his country and flees to Bogotá, where he takes cover as a mariachi singer and falls in love with the group's beautiful female singer. The show stages everyday mariachi performances at an imaginary downtown show bar, similar to the four local real venues mentioned above.

I would like to suggest some final conclusions. Shortly after their arrival in the late 1930s, *ranchero* images and sounds were assimilated into local culture because they appeared very familiar to local audiences. Perhaps that is the very reason behind the apparent invisibility of Mexican culture's impact in Colombia: it seems too familiar to be seen as exotic or foreign. In spite of its popularity, *ranchera*'s massive consumption has been concealed by its assimilation into unobserved working-class media circuits. However, there are signs that make me think this phenomenon is changing rapidly. Mariachis and *ranchera* music are currently gaining more space in Bogotá's cultural scene due to governmental programs aimed at diversifying cultural manifestations in the city. In 2002, IDCT organized the first Festival of Mariachi and *norteña* music, which in 2003 became the annual "Festival de Mariachi al Parque" (IDCT has a wonderful Festival series that stage different music repertoires at Bogotá's public parks, including Rock al Parque, Salsa al Parque, Ópera al Parque, Jazz al Parque). In 2002 IDCT and ASOMACOL (Bogotá's biggest mariachi association, with around 200 groups affiliated) will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the city's first mariachi group's foundation. Finally, there is another interesting change in upper-classes approval of working-class aesthetics due to the popularity of Colombian rock star Juanes, whose musical roots are in working-class *parranda paisa*, a danceable variant of the most wittily rude, blue-collar *carrilera*. Maybe in an indirect way Juanes' music will help to generate more interest for uncovering the untold stories that remain behind Colombian popular culture's development, including of course the unbreakable musical ties connecting Mexico and Colombia.

References

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