

El Camarón and the Cádiz Tradition

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1. Introduction

El Camarón de la Isla has been one of the most influential and innovative singers of the twentieth century. His *cante* is inextricably linked with the *flamenco nuevo* movement, although his career precedes this movement, spanning a period from the 1960s through the early 1990s. Apart from his enormous influence on the *cante* of today, Camarón has been something of a cult figure, both among younger Gypsies and Spanish intellectuals. Camarón has probably expanded the popularity of flamenco beyond its traditional subculture more than any other singer in almost three hundred years of *cante flamenco*.

Given the innovation and wide-spread appeal of Camarón's *cante*, it is inevitable that he should be a controversial figure in a field where elitism and tradition play such an important role. Flamenco aficionados are extremely elitist in that the world is divided into *los que saben* 'those who know' and the rest. Furthermore, ever since the *café cantante* period of the mid-19th century, there has been something of an ongoing battle between non-commercial and commercial flamenco. Camarón's *cante* has run afoul of both this traditional elitism and non-commercialism. However, Camarón is clearly not merely a popularizer of commercial flamenco; had he been he wouldn't have been nearly as controversial. Manolo Escobar and Rafael Farina have been commercial successes, but essentially have been written off and ignored by most aficionados.¹ Rather, Camarón is a *cantaor por derecho*, and capable of profound traditional *cante*. In this respect his position is similar to that of Manolo Caracol, a singer whom Camarón idolized. Like Camarón, Caracol sang some of the best *cante gitano* of his time, but also produced many very popular commercial *zambras*, *cuplés*, and *fandangos*.

This article discusses the traditional roots of Camarón's *cante*, and, to a lesser degree, the controversy surrounding his innovations. Camarón, associated with *flamenco nuevo*, has often been cited as a force behind the homogenization of flamenco and the demise of regional variation. The question I will try to address is: to what extent is Camarón an exponent of the Cádiz tradition in *cante flamenco*? In the next section I will attempt a characterization of Cádiz' *cante*; following this I will discuss Camarón's background and then go on to ask how faithfully Camarón follows in the Cádiz tradition. I conclude with a general remarks regarding Camarón's role in the demise of regional variation.

¹ Camarón mentions Farina in a 1989 interview: "We [Gypsies] are one race. If Rafael Farina had been born down here [Andalucía] instead of in Salamanca, God knows what he would have been." (Cited in Montiel 1994:269).

2. *Cantes de Cádiz*

Cádiz is one of the cradles of *cante flamenco*. Pohren (1988:334) notes that during the dawn of *cante flamenco* nearly all interpreters of *cante gitano* were from the province of Cádiz. However, the *cante gaditano*, as it is known today, can be traced to Enrique del Mellizo (1848-1906), his contemporaries, his sons, and his student, Aurelio Sellé (1887-1974). Pohren (p. 49) notes that the school of *cante* associated with Cádiz and its surroundings are largely due to the creativity of Mellizo. Examples of *cante gaditano* are preserved on a number of recordings, roughly beginning with Sellé, but also including Pericón de Cádiz, Manolo Vargas, Manuel El Flecha, Antonio el Chaqueta, La Perla de Cádiz, Chano Lobato, El Chato de la Isla, El Beni de Cádiz, and Juan Villar. Among the younger generation are Flecha's sons El Flecha and Chaquetón (I am only aware of recordings by Chaquetón), and Rancapino.

One often hears the *cante* from Cádiz described as somewhat lighter than that of Jerez. Perhaps this is due to the *cante chico* forms that have been so well-developed in Cádiz (e.g. *cantiñas*, *tangos*, *bulerías*, and *tanguillos*). However, listening to Sellé and his contemporaries, even *jondo* forms such as *soleares*, *siguiriyas*, and *malagueñas* are delivered with a certain restraint. Whereas *cante* from Jerez is intense, almost from the *temple*, *cante gaditano* seems to create tension by understating the first few *letras*, and then opening up with the *tercio valiente*. In this respect, there is a good deal of uniformity in the *cantes* of singers such as Sellé, Pericón, Manolo Vargas, El Flecha, and Rancapino. In fact, some of these singers (particularly Vargas, Flecha, and Rancapino) duplicate many vocal features of Sellé's *cante*. Given that Sellé was a disciple of Mellizo, it is possible that these were features of Mellizo's *cante*. Other singers, such as La Perla, seem to employ a more even *festero* delivery; while the vocal features and delivery are different from those of Sellé, the *cante* is no less *gaditano*. Hence, the 'Cádiz' sound associated with Sellé may be a common, but not necessary, characteristic of *cante gaditano*. Crucial to the Cádiz aire, however, is a keen sense of timing, and a *gracia* for *cantes* such as *cantiñas*, *bulerías*, and *tangos*.

Mellizo, his sons, Antonio el Mellizo and Enrique el Morcilla, as well as other contemporaries (e.g., Paquirri el Guante) left a canon of *cante* that essentially defines *cante gaditano*. These include styles of *soleá*, *siguiriyas*, *malagueñas del Mellizo*², as well as various *cantiñas*, *bulerías*, *tangos*, and *tanguillos*. One finds these labeled *de Cádiz*, *de los Puertos*, *del Mellizo*, *de Paquirri*, etc.³

² Aurelio Sellé claims to have innovated the practice of warming up for the *malagueña del Mellizo* by singing a *granadina* (Blas Vega 1978:80; cf. D1, *Que te olvidara* for an example).

³ There is a certain amount of confusion in the labeling of these *cantes* on various recordings. For example, the *Soleá de Cádiz* sung by Pericón on the Archivo anthology (D21) is identified as a *Soleá de Enrique el Morcilla* on another recording of Pericón (D24). A *soleá* with an identical melody is sung by Chaquetón and labeled *Soleá de los Puertos* (D20). This is cleared up by comments by Sellé and Pericón. In Blas Vega (1978:33), Sellé points out that

To summarize, there are two fundamental aspects to the *cante gaditano*: a certain *aire* that has different manifestations (i.e., the restrained delivery of Sellé, or the *festero* aspect of La Perla), and a large canon of traditional *cante gaditano*. Furthermore, Cádiz has a tradition of innovation, particularly in *cantiñas*, *bulerías*, and *tangos*.

3. El Camarón de la Isla: Background

El Camarón de la Isla was born in 1950 on the Isla de San Fernando, a suburb of Cádiz. He grew up in San Fernando in a *casa de vecinos* (i.e., a slum tenement) in the Barrio del Carmen. Both of his parents were singers. Montiel (1994: 36) describes Camarón's mother, Juana Cruz Castro, as being from a family that was "canastera y cantaora"; According to Montiel, Juana grew up in San Fernando in gypsy *barrios* where flamenco was a way of life. He mentions a video of her singing at a fiesta, in which he characterizes her *cante* as reminiscent of Pastora Pavón. A family legend has it that Juana sang *por bulerías* while giving birth to Camarón. Camarón's father, Juan Luis Monje, was from a town near Barbate. He was a blacksmith and a non-professional singer. He spent nights in his *fragua* drinking and singing with local flamencos, among them the legendary Macandé (cf. Pohren 1988:310-311).

Camarón was one of eight children; the family was apparently financially secure as long as Luis was alive; however, Luis died of asthma when Camarón was very young. After that, his mother went to work cleaning offices. Camarón remembers this as a time when he was "as hungry as a snail on a mirror" (interview cited in Montiel: 257).

Aspects of Camarón's early life are reflected in the following *letras*:

*En la Isla yo nací
me crié al pie de una fragua
mi madre se llama Juana
y mi padre era Luis
y hacía alcayatitas gitanas
(Fandangos de Niño Gloria, D3)*

I was born in La Isla
I was raised at the foot of a forge
my mother's name is Juana
and my father was Luis
and he made gypsy hooks

"... the flamencos used to give more importance to the verses than to the *cante*". That is, a *soleá* of el Morcilla must be a *soleá* with the verses of el Morcilla (and perhaps subtle changes in delivery and melody). El Morcilla himself may have adopted his own verses to the melody of the *soleá de los Puertos*, as well as other styles. Pericón (de Cádiz 1975:245) notes with respect to el Morcilla that "... other times he would sing other *letras*, all within the *cantes de Cádiz* and the *cantes de los Puertos*". The point is that the canon has two parts: a stock of traditional *letras* and a stock of traditional melodies. To avoid confusion I will use *in the style of Mellizo*, etc. to refer to *cantes* that maintain the melody, but not necessarily the *letras*.

*A la iglesia mayor fui
a pedirle al Nazareno
que me salvara a mi padre
y me contestó que no
que me dejaba a mi madre
(Siguiriyas, D14)*

I went to the main church
to ask the Nazarene
to save my father
and He said 'no'
but He would leave me my mother

*Cuando los niños en la escuela
estudiaban por la mañana
mi niñez era fragua
yunque, clavo, y alcañata
(Solea, D15)*

When the children at school
studied in the morning
my youth was forge
anvil, nail, and hook

Camarón's artistic career started as a boy in San Fernando. He and Rancapino, his best friend, would go into Cádiz to the Plaza San Juan de Dios to sing for tips. He later frequented the Venta de Vargas in San Fernando, where he listened to all of the great singers of the area and performed in fiestas with local flamencos such as La Perla and the notorious guitarist Campinetti.⁴ The owners of the Venta introduced Camarón to Manolo Caracol. Unfortunately, Caracol appeared unimpressed with his singing, an event that haunted Camarón for the rest of his life.⁵

In 1966 Camarón left San Fernando to begin his professional life, singing in the Malaga tablao *La Taberna Gitana*. Three years later, he went to Madrid to work in the tablao *Torres Bermejas*. Around the same time he toured Europe with Paco Cepero, Paco de Lucía, and others. In 1969 he recorded his first *colaboración especial* with Paco de Lucía (D2). There were eight more such collaborations with Paco (D3-10) between 1970 and 1977.

⁴ See de Cádiz (1975:147-140) for amusing stories about Campinetti. It is likely that Campinetti is the inspiration for the character Efrén in Howson (1964/1993).

⁵ Camarón idolized Caracol, and was deeply hurt by the snub. Later in Madrid, Caracol tried again and again to convince Camarón to sing in his tablao (*Los Canasteros*), but Camarón never agreed to. This ambivalence towards Caracol is summed up in the chorus from the *tanguillo* in *Potro de rabia y miel* (D17):

*Que pena y dolor
que eco mas puro
tenía Caracol
que buen cantaor
dejaste una herida
en mi corazón*

What pain and sorrow
what a pure sound
had Caracol
what a great singer
you left a wound
in my heart

Camarón's recordings divide roughly into two periods. The period between 1969 and 1977 involved fairly traditional flamenco sung with just Paco de Lucía or Paco and his brother Ramón. However, in 1979, he recorded *La leyenda del tiempo* (D11), which departed radically from previous work. This record introduced the guitar of Tomatito, as well as a number of non-traditional instrumental accompaniments. After this, Camarón's studio recordings would all break with tradition in a similar manner (D11-D17).

During the 1980s, Camarón performed in festivales, accompanied by Tomatito. These live performances presented a much more traditional style of *cante*, involving only single guitar accompaniment. Furthermore, Tomatito, although capable of virtuosity, played in a very simple and direct manner. Two recordings of these festivals have been released, one posthumously (D18 and D19).

4. Camarón as a *cantaor gaditano*

Given Camarón's background in San Fernando, it is clear that his initial *cante* must have been in the style of Cádiz and nearby areas. Rancapino, who he grew up with, clearly sings in this manner, being one of the Cádiz singers to approximate Aurelio Sellé. Camarón, however, does not have this sound. Two possible explanations come to mind. One is that Camarón, having left San Fernando when he was fifteen, found other influences, and lost his Cádiz sound. The other is that Camarón's model was not Aurelio, but rather other Cádiz singers, such as La Perla. I believe that both of these positions are correct.

It is clear that Camarón came under new influences after he left Andalucía. Sevilla (1995:28) points out that Camarón's first record with Paco (D2) was very much in the Cádiz traditions, with the exception of innovative *tangos*, *bulerías*, and *fandangos*. Sevilla cites an interview with Camarón where he says "I left my homeland singing *bulerías*, *tangos*, *soleá*, and *siguiriyas* ... But one comes to Madrid and begins to hear other things. If you have *afición* and like what you hear, you try to learn it." According to Montiel (1994) Camarón would seek out older singers wherever he went; he would accompany them with his guitar, and learn their *cante*. Given his *afición*, he developed an extensive knowledge of *cante*, beyond the *bulerías*, *tangos*, *soleares*, and *siguiriyas* he brought from San Fernando. In his first nine records, he sang a wide variety of *cantes*. In addition to the *bulerías* and *tangos* for which he was famous, he recorded several varieties of *soleares*, *siguiriyas*, *fandangos*, as well as a number of *granadinas*, *tarantos*, *tientos*, and *cantiñas*. In addition, he recorded less common *cantes* such as *cartegeneras*, *polo*, *peteneras*, *bamberas*, *fandangos de Lucena*, and *tangos del Titi*. Although not often thought of as such, Camarón, was one of flamenco's more complete *cantaores*.

It is equally clear, however, that Camarón was greatly influenced by La Perla and Antonio el Chaqueta. La Perla, hearing Camarón singing in Madrid commented "That blonde! He's learned all of my *cantes*, and now he sings them better than me!" (cited in Montiel 1994:273). Camarón also credits El Chaqueta as an important influence. Sevilla (1995:133) cites Camarón as

attributing his tongue-twister *bulerías* to El Chaqueta. The *romeras* on Camarón's second record (*Jardín de belleza*, D3) was also sung by El Chaqueta. Both La Perla and El Chaqueta are honored in *Te lo dice Camarón* (D15). On this record, Camarón sings an innovative *alegrías* dedicated to La Perla (*Tu mare Rosa*, after Perla's mother Rosa la Papera), and an *Homanaje a Chaqueta*. In this latter, he reprimands orthodox flamencos for their lack of recognition of these singers in the following verse:

<p><i>Que penita mas grande que en esas peñas flamencas no tengan un cacho foto ni tuyo ni de La Perla</i></p>	<p>What a shame that in those flamenco peñas they don't have a scrap of a photo neither yours [El Chaqueta], nor La Perla's</p>
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(Solea, D15)

Thus, Camarón's *cante* was clearly formed with a foundation of *cante gaditano*, particularly as interpreted by La Perla and El Chaqueta. It is also clear that he branched out into new areas after leaving San Fernando. The question is: to what extent did he keep his Cádiz roots, particularly after his move into less traditional flamenco.

On the first nine records (the *colaboraciones especiales*) there are a number of *cantes* that are in the style of Cádiz. Among them are a *soleá* in the style of *los Puertos* (D2), a *tientos* that is very similar to one sung by Aurelio (D2), an *alegrías de Cádiz* (D2), a *romeras* from El Chaqueta (D3), a *siguiriyas* in the style of Mellizo (D4), a *malagueña del Mellizo* (D4), and a *soleá* in the style of Paquirri (D10). Throughout these nine records there are Cádiz-inspired *bulerías*, innovative *tangos* (although not necessarily always in a Cádiz style), and various *cantiñas*, some innovative. In sum, these records provide a good case for the claim that Camarón was basically a *cantaor gaditano* who branched out to other *cantes*, and added innovations of his own.

The seven studio recordings from *La leyenda del tiempo* on (D11-17) are probably Camarón's best known, but most controversial work. These records all involve some non-standard instrumentation. Four of them feature the combined guitar virtuosity of Paco de Lucía and Tomatito. In fact, the accompaniment on these records form something of a canon for the *flamenco nuevo* sound. Another change from earlier recordings is the emphasis on *cuplé*-inspired *bulerías*, *tangos*, and *rumbas*. These records do not always contain *soleares*, *siguiriyas*, and *fandangos* (although some do). Like earlier work, most of these recordings feature *cantiñas*, often very innovative: the two *cantiñas* on *Leyenda* have become standards, others include *Pueblos de la tierra mía* (D12), *Mar amargo* (D14), *Tu mare Rosa* (D15), and *Casida de las palomas oscuras* (D16). While one might argue that the innovations *por bulerías* and *tangos* are in the Cádiz tradition, this does not distinguish Camarón from other modern singers. His innovations *por cantiñas* are more convincing in this respect.

Nevertheless, there are two features of Camarón's later work that suggest adherence to the Cádiz tradition: one has to do with several *bulerías* that are clearly in the style of El Chaqueta and La Perla; the other with the nature of the *cante* that he favored during live performances with Tomatito. With respect to the former, *Bulerías de la Perla* (D13) is nearly identical to a *bulerías* sung by La Perla on a *Chant du Monde* recording (D22). Similarly, the final *bulería* on the *Viviré* record (*Tres luceros*) shows clear influence from La Perla and El Chaqueta. His *soleá*, *Homenaje a Chaqueta* (D15), is sung in the style of *los Puertos*. During live performances, recorded on D18 and D19, we see more Cádiz influence than on the studio recordings from the same period. This is perhaps more telling, as it represents the *cante* that Camarón would be most comfortable with. On both of these recordings we hear *alegrías* that are pure Cádiz.⁶ Also, on both recordings we hear *bulerías* similar to those by La Perla (D23). Finally, on the posthumous *Camarón nuestro*, he sings a *soleá* that is very similar to one recorded by La Perla (D23).

Thus, we can conclude that despite innovations and other influences, Camarón remained committed to the Cádiz school of *cante* throughout his career.

5. Conclusion

To conclude I would like to briefly discuss some of the controversy surrounding Camarón's influence on modern flamenco. Given the above description of Camarón's traditional *cante*, it is surprising that he should be such a controversial figure. It appears that this controversy stems from a number of sources. First, Camarón's *cante* has been innovative in a number of ways. He is associated with a new genre of *tangos* and *bulerías*. In addition, his *cante* has a *propio sello* that some aficionados may find unflamenco. He often glides between tones in manner that is almost Middle Eastern. He does this effortlessly, due to his superior voice control. This has become one of the most imitated aspects of his *cante*. Secondly, he has sung his share of *cuplés*, particularly on his later records. Some of these have become modern flamenco standards (e.g. *Volando voy*, *Como el agua*, *Caminando*, ...). Many of these *cuplés* come across as quite flamenco, but perhaps only because of Camarón's flamenco delivery, as suggested by Pohren. Finally, Camarón's influence on modern *cante flamenco* has been nearly unprecedented. He, along with Paco de Lucía and Tomatito, have put down the foundations of the *flamenco nuevo*. There are many younger singers who imitate Camarón's vocal style. To the extent that singers all over Spain are taking Camarón as a model, this popularity contributes to the homogenization of *cante flamenco*. Regional variation is giving way to a single, *flamenco nuevo* sound.

⁶ It is interesting to compare the *alegrías* on these live performances with the *alegrías* recorded on D2. They are sung in the same style, but the later ones sound more 'Cádiz', perhaps because of a more mature voice.

While I believe that the above is true, it is less clear that Camarón is to blame. Rather, he may merely be a symbol of trends that were inevitable. During the 1950s many Andalusian flamencos (as well as many Andalusians in general) migrated to Madrid for economic reasons. As a result, Madrid became a flamenco melting pot where various regional *cantes* came together. While first generation immigrants (e.g., Pericón, Manolo Vargas, El Sordera, ...) retained their regional *cantes*, the second generation grew up with a distinct flamenco culture, and sang a different *cante*. Camarón came to Madrid during this period, and adopted new *cantes*, while retaining old ones. Thus, many of Camarón's 'innovations' were merely adaptations of other regional traditions. For example, Sevilla (1995:28) notes that the impetus for Camarón's trademark *tangos* came from the *cantes* of Extremadura.⁷ Nor is it clear that Camarón should be faulted for singing *cuplés* any more than Caracol, La Macanita, La Bernarda, etc. Sean O'Brien, in a post to the Internet flamenco discussion list, notes that in many instances singers may record *cuplés* due to pressure from recording companies for new material. He also points out that Spanish aficionados are often much more receptive of such hybrid *cantes* than foreign aficionados (perhaps because *cuplés* represent an active tradition in Spanish music).

Now consider the issue that Camarón's *propio sello* has been widely imitated. Generally, it is considered important to develop a *propio sello*. Thus, Camarón cannot be faulted for having one. Whether or not it sounds particularly flamenco is difficult to address objectively. Certainly Camarón's *rajo* voice is very flamenco. It is also odd to bemoan the fact that Camarón seems to have founded a school of *cante*. Other great singers of the past have done just this, and are held in reverence for exactly this reason. We saw above that many singers from Cádiz imitate the *cante* of Aurelio Sellé, who in turn may have imitated Enrique el Mellizo. Consider what might have happened if the migration to Madrid never took place. Imagine if Camarón and Paco de Lucía had stayed in the Cádiz area, and had gone on to innovate in exactly the ways they did in Madrid (perhaps with less jazz on Paco's part, and perhaps with fewer non-Cádiz *cantes* on Camarón's part). Then imagine a new generation of *gaditanos* imitating Camarón. What we would have would be a second Cádiz school of *cante*. In effect, Camarón would have been a second Mellizo. However, Camarón didn't stay in Cádiz, and his *cante* is imitated over a wider area. This does not make it intrinsically less pure; just more wide-spread.

Finally, there is the issue that because Camarón has so many followers, his *cante* has diluted the ranks of aficionados with those who are interested only in only *festero cantes* and *cuplés*. Despite the elitist aspect of this attitude one does worry that a generation raised on Paco and Camarón will have no interest in the likes of Diego del Gastor and La Fernanda. Nevertheless, one should take some solace in the fact that in Camarón we find a model with a great deal of traditional depth, as well as a wonderful understanding of pure *cante*. In fact, one

⁷ Madrid has a rather large community of *extremeño* flamencos, including the late Poriñas de Badajoz, his guitarist son, the late Juan Salazar, nephews Ramón el Portugués and Guadiana, and other family member that include Los Chunguitos and Azúcar Moreno. These last two have been instrumental in the popular *rumba* genre. Many of these artists have been active in the Madrid *tablaó* circuit.

might argue that Camarón and Paco are models for today's flamenco precisely because they are intrinsically so flamenco.

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