

Uncovering Transatlantic *Décimas* at the Díaz-Ayala Music Collection

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My interest in the *décima* as a song form came organically. As a *cuatro* player myself, the *décima* in its oral nature provided an extensive and distinctive musical language that is intrinsic to *cuatro* repertoire. One of the roles and main responsibilities of a *cuatro* player in the Puerto Rican tradition is to know how to accompany a *trovador*, a *décima* singer, by learning all of the *seises* that provide the melodic materials for *décima* singing and improvisation.

Improvised *décimas* often follow the form of *espinela*, a type of poetry named after the Spanish poet Vicente Espinel (1550–1624). The *décima* is a poetic form that adheres to a precise poetic and syntactic structure. The form of the *décima espinela* consists of ten lines in octosyllabic meter with the consonant rhyme *abbaaccddc*.

Décimas can be sung or recited, but in Puerto Rico as well as in the Canary Islands, Cuba, and many Latin American countries, the *décima* tradition is also practiced as an improvised form. In Cuba, a singer of improvised *décimas* is known as a *repentista*. In Puerto Rico there is not a distinctive title; a *décima* singer is known as *trovador* regardless of how he or she is singing the *décimas* (improvised or pre-composed).

While I was conducting research for my dissertation, specifically on the topic of *cuatro* performance in Puerto Rico and in the U.S., the *décima* came to be part of the research process as its practice is one of the principal outlets for *cuatro* players. The connections between the *cuatro* and the *décima* seemed natural but, as I researched, I came to discover intersections

between *cuatro* performance practice and *décima* singing away from Puerto Rico. At that point I became interested not only in exploring the *décimas* and the *cuatro* as national expressions but rather in examining the connections that were suggested through *décima* singing. Although the genre traditionally carries a strong national sentiment, I was interested in exploring other discourses established in *décimas*, texts that make reference to Caribbean connections, a sense of *hermandad* (fraternity) with other countries, historical events outside of Puerto Rico, migration, and movement.

Décima singing in Puerto Rico and the art of *décima* improvisation are considered part of our national folklore. National discourse engaged by Puerto Rican artists often stresses ideas about nationhood and identity, and emphasizes the island's distinctiveness in order to perpetuate and celebrate our own cultural heritage. The discography of Puerto Rican folk music tends to legitimize ideas of nationalism and cultural authenticity. Albums are filled with *décimas* that celebrate the nation, the *jíbaro* (Puerto Rican peasant), *la vida en el campo* (life in the countryside), religious beliefs, marriage, and other customs.

I grew up close to this music, with heavy national connotations, and I was truly amazed when I experienced the increased interest and positive reception of Puerto Rican folk music, away from the island, for example in the Canary Islands or *en la otra orilla*. In the summer of 2014 I was able to visit the Canary Islands along with the musicians of Grupo Mapeyé from Puerto Rico (also known as *la orquesta criolla nacional*, the national Creole orchestra). During this visit I documented performances by Grupo Mapeyé along with renowned folk musicians from the Canary Islands, and learned about the musical connections and active collaborations between Puerto Ricans and Canarians.

During that trip, I was able to document the musical connections between Puerto Rico, Canarias, and Cuba as an ongoing phenomenon, as evidenced in the recordings that involve

boricuas, *canarios*, and *cubanos*. I became particularly interested in learning more about the musical correspondence between these three island territories. Specifically, I wanted to examine how *décimas* as a folk genre serve a similar role in different geographical places—how the songs of the peasant, *el jíbaro* or *el guajiro*, are indistinctively charged with humor, national ideas, political opinions, and religious beliefs in the three island regions.

The popularity of *décimas* in Canarias, and the notable connections with Cuba and Puerto Rico, remains an active and ongoing musical phenomenon. These are current musical expressions that speak to the linkages between the three islands.

****Musical example: Cuban lute player—Fernando Murga Murguita—is currently based in the Canary Islands. In this song Murguita pays tribute to Celina González in the style of a Puerto Rican *seis mapeyé*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dc-SHDva8Gs>**

This recent musical example suggests that tradition is constructed in the present. In those *décimas*, Murguita celebrates and confirms the movements and transformations of musical forms across time and space.

I came to the Díaz-Ayala Collection with the idea of further exploring the roots of current collaborations, like the one we just heard, and to learn about the musical common ground that *décimas* have forged for Cubans, Canarians, and Puerto Ricans. The active musical correspondence is a product of historical and cultural relations and the materials at the Díaz-Ayala Collection are assisting me in identifying those cross-national musical connections.

What did I discover at the collection? Even though this is a work in progress and this presentation was given after two days looking for albums at the collection, several examples speak to the fluidity of *décimas*, how they can address local issues, and how they can also express global awareness.

One of the albums that I found at the collection is one featuring Puerto Rican *cuatro* player Maso Rivera and Cuban singers Neida Revuelta and Isidro Cárdenas. Maso Rivera is an iconic player, who skillfully balanced tradition and innovation. In this album he joined Neida and Isidro, the first Cuban poet-improvisers to arrive in Miami. Here, the traditional lute that accompanies *puntos cubanos* is replaced with Maso's *cuatro*.

The album liner notes indicate that the purpose of the production is to document the mutual sympathy between these countries. "The trio is able to express the sentiment binding these sister countries." Although the album highlights the rhythms of *la música de la campiña cubana* (the music of the Cuban countryside), one track is dedicated to Puerto Rico.

Another track, titled *Danzas latinoamericanas*, features the use of the *décima* form to address popular topics that go beyond national borders.

*Me gusta bailar el son
por ser alegre muchacha
y bailar una guaracha
una rumba o un danzón.*

*Un cha cha cha sabrosón
un mambo con su meneo.
Y no resisto el deseo
me ponga como me ponga
de arrolar en una conga
o meterle a un zapateo.*

*No solo el ritmo cubano
hace que yo me derriengue
pues también bailo el merengue
típico dominicano.*

*El galerón colombiano,
el fandango y la guavina
el bambuco que fascina
como el torito hondureño
del salvador el barreño
y la milonga argentina.*

*Bailo samba brasileña
y wapango mexicano
corrido venezolano
y plena puertorriqueña*

*De Nicaragua risueña
el suelto y el san hatillo
De Costa Rica el pasillo
y el punto guanacasteco
son chapín guatemalteco
y otro cualquier bailecío.*

Décimas and the Cuban-Canarian Connection

On the other side of the Atlantic, the poetic structure of the *décima* is musicalized and arranged with the characteristic style that is practiced in Cuba. In Canarias, *décimas* are performed in the form of *punto cubano*. The *repentista* is accompanied by an ensemble of chordophones that may include instruments from the lute family such as the guitar, Spanish lute, *laudino* and *bandurria*, and *timple canario*. These plucked lutes have a primary role since they are used to perform the base melodic motive characteristic of *punto*. Cuban *punto* arrived in Canarias in the 18th century, but acquired more relevance during the 20th century, a period of significant migration of Canarians to Cuba. Some historians argue that *punto cubano*, as practiced in the Canaries, is a circular phenomenon, moving back and forth from the Canaries to Cuba. This trend is generally defined as *de ida y vuelta*.

There are two conflicting theories about the specific origin of the *punto cubano*, one that defines it as a Canarian invention taken to Cuba, and a second theory that proposes a Cuban creation introduced to the Canary Islands. Maximiano Trapero, a scholar who has investigated the tradition of the *décimas* in Canarias and across Latin America, does not accept or reject either of these theories. According to Trapero, if the *punto* is a Canarian invention, “the first Canarian emigrants brought to Cuba the form of singing *décimas*, where it was established as a Cuban genre and was named *punto guajiro*.”¹

¹ Maximiano Trapero, “La *décima* entre Canarias y Cuba, una poesía de ida y vuelta,” in *Islas de la isla: Poetas canarios emigrados a Cuba / Poetas canarios de ascendencia cubana*, ed. Javier Cabrera (Gobierno de Canarias: Viceconsejería de Cultura y Deportes, 2003), 392.

Although the influence of the Canary Islands is present in the performance of verses and other popular song forms, the example that best reflects the cultural root of Canarias in Latin America are the initial verses of a popular *isa canaria*: *El palmero*. The following example is an unexpected find at the Díaz-Ayala Collection, and an evidence of the diverse materials that are housed here, musical resources that are not necessarily specific to the Cuban or Puerto Rican popular music experience.

**Musical example: It is an LP from the Radio Nacional Española series, dedicated to folklore in the Canary Islands.

El palmero

Palmero sube a la palma

Y dile a la palmerita

que se asome a la ventana

que mi amor la solicita.

El palmero is known in Chile, where it is performed as a *cueca*. There are other versions of *el palmero* from Perú, where it is performed as a *marinera limeña*. And the Canarian group Los Sabandeños recorded a *marinera* version followed by the original *isa* version. This example illustrates the impact of Canarian folklore on Latin American folklore.

***Décimas* and their Canarian Influence**

The Cuban poet of Canarian descent, José Orta Ruiz “El Indio Naborí” (1922–2005), proposes a Canarian origin of the *punto cubano* by arguing that in Cuba the *punto* is cultivated in areas that have been related to Canarian settlement such as Pinar del Río, Matanzas, and Las Villas. Samuel Feijoó explored the concept of the return of the *décima*, from Cuba to Canarias. Canarian emigrants who returned to the Canaries between the second half of the 18th century and the first half of the 20th century were carriers of the cultural customs learned and practiced in Cuba, among them the *décima*, already developed as a popular song for improvisation or for the transmission of traditional poetry. Trapero summarizes his position by stating: “All things considered, the Canarian-Cuban *décima* or Cuban-Canarian *décima* should be understood as a circular genre, and not just one that departs or returns.” Canarian singer Yeray Rodríguez agrees with this perspective, stating that:

Two traditions that are one. It has been an ongoing debate, did the *punto cubano* leave, arrive or was it already here... I think it is unworthy to spend energy in that controversy, but let be a part of a battle for persistency of something that we should feel as ours and that constantly reminds us that we all come from everywhere. In the specific case of the close ties between the Canaries and Cuba, the music genre that flourishes is a testimony of the similarities that bind us.²

² Pedro Grimón, Marcos Hormiga, and Yeray Rodríguez, *Propuesta: La décima en Canarias* (Silboarte, 2006), accessed April 25, 2016, <http://www3.gobiernodecanarias.org/medusa/ecoblog/fmesagu/files/2014/10/Propuesta-educativa.pdf>

One indisputable fact is that *décimas* in Cuba were cultivated in the 20th century by Cubans of Canarian descent. Either sons or grandsons of *canarios* were Pedro Guerra, José Marichal, José Othón, Ángel Valiente, El Indio Naborí, Patricio Lastra, Gustavo Tacoronte, Alejandro Aguilar “el Sinsonte Matancero,” and Chanito Isidrón.

The circularity of the *punto cubano*, as a song form of departure and return (*de ida y vuelta*) is a quality that cannot be minimized as it illustrates the mobility of the population and the dissemination of musical practices as they persist and become new musical forms. The musical collaborations between Canarians and Puerto Ricans can also be considered a circular phenomenon and can be examined from that premise.

****Examples of Cuban singers of Canarian descent:**

Chanito Isidrón (1903–1987), *Décimas jocosas*: El gago Mamerto Triana

El Indio Naborí (1922–2005), *Controversia del casado y del soltero*

Historical Context

The historical relationship between the Canary Islands and Puerto Rico began during the early years of Spanish colonization. The first contact can be traced back to the year 1511, but it was in the year 1569 when Canarians were officially authorized to travel to Puerto Rico. During the 16th and 17th centuries, there was a migratory movement from the Canarian archipelago to Puerto Rico as the islands were an important link for the commercial exchanges of Spain with the Americas. From the year 1663 onward, vessels en route to Cuba were required to embark five or six families in Puerto Rico. Any Canarian vessel engaged in commercial activity was required to transport five families of five or more

members for every 100 tons of commercial products.³ On the other hand and according to Maximiano Trapero, the position of the *décima* in Canarias is related to the migration of the 19th and 20th centuries. Oral traditions in the Canary Islands are filled with Cuban references, that are part of the local collective memory. The music makes reference to Camagüey, Matanzas, Cienfuegos, Santiago, Havana, Pinar del Río, and Las Villas as if they were located in Canarias.

An initial screening of the materials related to *décimas* at the Díaz-Ayala Collection, confirms that what historically have been considered local musics also serve as commonplace across nations. *Décimas* provide a song form that has been interspersed with, between and onto other types of music.

Décimas have paved the way to the reinterpretation of the common and shared aspects between different localities, such as migration, heritage, and island living, all of which drive the development of the cultural intertwining, evidenced in these examples. These musical collaborations could be analyzed in light of Kay Kaufman Shelemay's concept of "communities of affinity." Shelemay states that affinity emerges first and foremost from individual preferences, quickly followed by a desire for social proximity or association with others equally enamored.⁴ Music proves to be a particularly powerful mechanism for catalyzing affinity communities, in which straightforward aesthetic and personal preferences may, but do not necessarily, intersect with other powerful diacritics such as ethnic identity. Affinity generally joins an individual to others engaged with a musical style or tradition, so that the individual becomes part of "charmed circles of like-

³ Juan Manuel Santana Pérez, "Relaciones entre Canarias y Puerto Rico desde el siglo XVIII hasta mediados del siglo XIX," *Anuario Americanista Europeo* 4-5 (2006-2007): 216.

⁴ Kay Kaufman Shelemay, "Musical Communities: Rethinking the Collective in Music," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no.2 (Summer 2011): 374.

minded music makers drawn magnetically to a certain genre that creates strong expressive bonding.”⁵

Clearly, the *décima* song form is the driving force behind these circles of music making. With their lyrical or narrative function, *décimas* respond to the realities of the regions where they are practiced. However, other configurations are possible, and one can identify other cultural formations within the realm of *décima* making, where global and local motivations coexist, or where musical instruments and playing techniques can be exchanged. Although the traditional themes of *décimas* recount local historical events, disagreement between two subjects or contraries, or convey a religious message, the examples that I have been discovering at the Díaz-Ayala Collection unveil other subject matters, like the voice of Cuban exiles, the position of female singers, the nuances of Puerto Rican U.S. citizenship, and Puerto Rican settlement in the U.S.

** Musical Example: Germán Rosario, *Deportación boricua*

These examples and current musical practices confirm the circularity of the *décima* and other musical genres, and also manifest that their continuity is generating new musical forms being practiced from one end of the Atlantic to the other.

⁵ Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West*, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993), 98.

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Discography

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Isidró, Chanito. *Décimas jocosas*. Areito. LP-3801.

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