

Let Me Sing You a Story: Teaching the Musics of México and India in the LOTE Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching Culture in LOTE

The teaching of foreign languages conventionally includes a segment called “Culture,” “Cultural Background” or something similar, which talks about the cultural aspects unique to the country where that language is spoken. In that language course, then, one receives an introduction to the living styles unique to the speakers of that language, which includes, among other things, particular musical forms. Learners of Spanish get to experience the sounds and movements of Spanish *flamenco* and *sevillana* styles, the Argentine *tango*, the Mexican *ranchera* and so on. Students of German learn about the *Laendler* of the South and the sea shanties of the North. Many, if not most, teachers of foreign languages (currently and officially referred to as “LOTE teachers,” or teachers of Languages Other Than English) already teach language through song and dance in the classroom, from kindergarten through university levels. A number of teaching packets for German include a whole unit on the Rhenish folk song *Die Lorelei*, while Spanish teachers teach *Las Mananitas* and the *Jarabe tapatio*. (It is an open secret that German teachers at the university level also teach drinking songs.)

Now, the pedagogical logic for reinforcing language-learning skills through music, poetry dance and other artistic forms of expression is obvious. Besides assimilating structural patterns through rhythm and repetition, one acquires a liking and fondness for this unique type of music, a bent overly referred to in the literature as “appreciation.” Appreciation for cultures other than one’s own is a required objective in LOTE teaching, and rightly so. No study of another language can be complete without acquiring some insights into the cultural life which sustains that language.

But the assumption is that the culture being taught is the one associated with the particular language being taught, whereas “outside” cultures are ignored. In other words, in a French course, the student learns about French foods, French music and French history; Spanish-language students learn about Spanish-language artists, the regional foods and so on. I would like to add another dimension to the teaching of culture in the foreign languages I teach, and for two reasons. In the first place, when one travels to any of these countries, he will encounter “foreign”-food restaurants, have the opportunity to attend “foreign”-language concerts and recitals, see “foreign”-language movies and meet people who enjoy all kinds of cultural experiences not native to that particular country. I have attended flamenco recitals and a Senegalese ballet performance and French- and Polish-language movies in Germany, a performance by the Ballet Folklorico de Mexico in Paris, and discussed American plays with friends from different parts of Europe.

Houston itself is a prime example of a community capable of enjoying all kinds cultural expression. Houstonians go to nightspots where the food and entertainment are different from their own and in many ways support the efforts of its many ethnic groups to show off their culture. In the very moment of this writing, April 2002, the city has been hosting its annual International Festival, the theme this year being the culture of France.

Where this kind of vicarious enjoyment has not been taking place is in the LOTE classroom. For example, students of German are not exposed to the music of, say, the Middle East or of West Africa, and students of Spanish do not learn of the music of Korea or Pakistan. In the Social Studies segment of a LOTE program, very little is taught of countries outside that language's country beyond the names of those countries. Thus, one would not expect a sentence such as "In the Chinese calendar, this is the Year of the Dragon" to be taught in the regular curriculum of German or Spanish. Yet an exchange student just might find him- or herself in a conversation involving such a topic, simply because people talk about similar things all over the world. Think about the positive diplomacy created when students of German can understand their Bavarian hosts, or American students in Spain can maintain a conversation with their friends, when the subject involves a concert of Indian music they may have attended. Among other skills I try to teach my students, I would like for them to be able to respond at even the most elementary level to a statement such as "Japanese *kabuki* theatre has no similarities with Szechuan opera"—yes, I'm saying that learning how to express such a sentiment has a legitimate place in acquiring conversational skills. Even a naive expression such as "Wasn't that *raga* concert just great," spoken in the acquired language, constitutes a gain in more than one dimension. Adjectives of nationality, names of cultural institutions and musical styles do not restrict themselves to any one given linguistic context, nor is it realistic to limit the learning of these to a country-specific language, especially when one takes into account the demographic makeup of our current classrooms. One can well imagine the emotions generated in the household of the Vietnamese student who goes home and shows her parents a menu of their homeland's cuisine in Spanish or German. And since I mention "Vietnamese," this brings me to the second part of my rationale.

I begin by stating the obvious: We teachers work with real children. These living persons come with several years of acquired attitudes, thanks or no thanks to their current parental background, their entertainment sources and the whole rest of their previous environmental experiences. These attitudes include some very ugly ones which manifest themselves daily in our multi-racial, multi-background school populations, attitudes which we teachers as teachers are obligated to correct. For the sake of convenience, I'll group these attitudes under the generally-accepted and understood rubric of "racism" and related aspects of racism. One such aspect with which I have dealt over the years is the attitude many of these children exhibit towards Asians, whether other classmates or adults. You hear it in the insulting way they try to mimic their language, in the way they playfully enact stupid facial gestures to "portray" Asians, and simply—and annoyingly—in the way they label the entire region and its contributions as "Chinese," and sincerely proclaiming, "But it's all the same." For the past fourteen years, I have inserted an

excursionary lesson to demonstrate the different aspects of East Asian culture and heritage; I am not aware of similar efforts being implemented elsewhere.¹

Some of the worst examples of how these attitudes are acquired by young Hispanic students can be found in Spanish-language TV programs, produced of course by very successful Hispanic adults, *viz.* “Sabado gigante.” This is a variety show, containing amateur singing contests, panel questions, arbitration of all kinds of disputes, documentary shows, and comedy skits; in short, old-time variety. The form went out of style in the U.S. sometime before the mid-1970s, yet remains a popular form of viewer entertainment among Hispanic populations as of the beginning twenty-first century. A recurrent and blatantly racist comedy routine involves poking fun at Chinese people. An analogy is in order, one which will not resound with younger readers who haven’t lived through the experience. I refer, of course, to “minstrel” and “blackface” comedy, huge staples of the U.S. entertainment repertoire up through the 1960s. Think of how much fun white Americans used to have with blackface comedy—the masks, the false language imitations, the “funny” mispronunciations—all that still takes place nowadays in the incipient twenty-first century in Spanish-language routines which utilize Asians as their particular foil.

Accordingly, when teachers state as their goal or objective to help their young charges to appreciate other cultures, I would remind them that here, as in other aspects of their out-of-school lives, children bring along their own, pre-set agenda. Teaching “appreciation of other cultures” means nothing less than replacing attitudes of ridicule with convictions of respect, and *that* will entail much proactive planning. But this is not much of a leap for the teacher who already appreciates those foods, literatures, customs, musical styles and other cultural forms of expression commonly referred to by the middle class as “exotic.” Such a teacher already possesses the inner conviction that those different cultural forms are fun and enjoyable and worthy to be shared.

BACKGROUND

My idea is to have my students (currently, of high school level) present “culture projects” which celebrate the musical styles of two specific regions: that area extending from central and northern Mexico into the U.S. Southwest, and the region of South India defined broadly by the state of Andhra Pradesh. Originally I had planned to write a plan for the musics of Mexico, India and China. But each time I opened a door to one of these, I came face-to-face with an ocean of data, even for the type of music I am most familiar with, the Mexican. It took that tentative step to realize that whenever one wishes to discuss seriously the “music of Country X,” he or she is in no way prepared to include the

¹ Speaking of excursions: Try, for the fun of it, to keep track of the number of times an American newspaper, such as our fair *Houston Chronicle*, publishes an article on how Americans lag in the areas of geography and other branches of Social Studies.

whole of the vast variety of styles, genres, regionalisms and differing modes of expression comprising that music. Hence, the need to focus on a specific type of music for fewer countries became obvious, then, so did the need to limit even that discussion to regions within the regions. Given the context of teaching a unit for LOTE students in the grade levels I teach, even limiting my discussion to a specific kind of style characteristic for one musical region would have more than sufficed. Frankly, it was simply too difficult to let go of it all, so I contented myself with sharing with my students the joy of experiencing at least one other musical style besides the one which I am most proficient in describing, and so I opted for the classical music of India.

My focus is fine-tuned to deal eventually with the way in which music narrates a story. In Mexican story-music, the style is simple narrative, using words accompanied by music. In Indian story-music, the style is complex abstraction, rendered visually and aurally through dance. In Mexican narrative song, melodies are easily discerned and the audience can repeat the songs quite easily. In Indian dance, a Western audience finds it impossible to discern a melody or to imitate the sounds. Mexican narrative song is secular to the point of being profane. Indian narrative dance is basically religious in outlook, even though its current applications are to entertain.

Narrative Song

The Mexican variety of narrative music is the *corrido*, “ballad.” It is one form of the modern culmination of a long strain of narrative poetry forming a significant part of Western musical literature. Its antecedents include English and Scottish balladry, German *Balladen* (recited, not necessarily sung) and more immediately, the Spanish *romances* of the medieval period (Mendoza). In the U.S. the *corrido* compares very closely with narrative songs familiar to many, if not most, American listeners of popular music. Just think of early America’s “epic” “John Henry,” a ballad of a man doing battle against a machine, and the later “Frankie and Johnny,” which sings the story of a wronged woman who kills her two-timing lover. Recall Johnny Horton’s “Battle of New Orleans” (based on a Scottish folk tune), a humorous recounting of the historical battle (1812) by that name. Tex Ritter’s “High Noon,” where a man about to confront his enemies alone tells of his inner turmoil, is a masterful example of song-drama, as is Marty Robbins’ “Song of El Paso,” in which an errant cowboy dies in the arms of his beloved after being shot by lawmen. Then there were the narratives popularized in “big-city” idiom by the Kingston Trio in the 1960s such as “The Man Who Never Returned,” the song of a man who gets on a modern subway train and cannot get off, doomed to ride the MTA forever.

Mexican *corrido*

Without going into detail about American narrative songs, I only stress here that this type of singing, as popular as it may be from time to time, occupies no particular class, genre or status in the manner it does in Mexican music. The *corrido* of the twentieth century represents a body of musical literature in and unto itself. Its repertoire is huge and

continues to grow even in modern times which have seen a proliferation of ever-new musical fads and styles. When one mentions the word *corrido* in any casual conversation, immediate patterns of association are conjured in the audience's collective consciousness, a phenomenon not found in American ballad singing.

Mexican story-telling songs are generally uncomplicated and straightforward: a person from the countryside² sings a story, sometimes announcing the intent ("Here, I want to sing to you about..."), and events are sung in a chronological order. "First, this happened; then that happened, and finally, this other thing happened." Often, the singer announces a farewell, a *despedida*: "With this, I bid farewell," literally. Sometimes, the *despedida* contains a moral. Consider this one:

*Que bonito es
cuando se mueren dos hombres
con pistola en mano
defendiendo su honor.*
(Traditional)

How wonderful it is
when two men die
with pistols in hand
defending their honor.
(Transl. L. Rétiz)

Such a sentiment summarizes those features which characterize much of the traditional *corrido*: a bravado sense of honor, the obligatory duel, occasional treachery, and inevitable death. In many another such ballad, two men eye each other in a bar to their mutual displeasure, so they shoot it out to their mutual demise. In others, a girl (or a boy) disobeys a mother and goes to a dance anyway and is killed by a jealous lover. A drug smuggler is betrayed by his own kind and dies fighting American law officers.

Notwithstanding the inherent tragedy portrayed in these songs, the musical tone always sounds very upbeat; unless one knows Spanish, one would think that the performers are singing about some happy event. The key is always major; I know of no *ranchera* or *corrido* sung in a minor key. The rhythm is either a fast two-quarter or three-quarter time, a tempo which invites listeners to dance—and so they do. Besides singing a story that is perhaps already familiar to most listeners, the Mexican ballad has another purpose which Mexicans expect to find: they should want to dance to the sounds. Story and dance rhythm make for a real *corrido*. If no story is present, you have a polka or a waltz; no dance rhythm (2/4 or 3/4) but a story sung in another meter, then you have entered another ethnic dimension. No such animal exists in the Mexican repertoire.

Historically, the Mexican *corrido* is the musical descendant of the Spanish *romance*, which, like so many of its European counterparts of the late Medieval period, glorifies the antisocial behavior of an individual who defies a despotic authority in order to alleviate the sufferings of the downtrodden, cf. Robin Hood in England and Til Eulenspiegel in

² Traditionally, the setting is rural, hence the general designation of *ranchera*, "country" or "ranch."

Holland. Spanish adventurers and settlers brought the form into the New World in the wake of the *conquista* (Mendoza). Almost four hundred years later, this germ of an idea literally exploded into a powerfully influential musical style which continues to expand not only in Mexico proper but in large parts of the U.S., even as of this writing in the spring and summer of 2002. This Big Bang of the Mexican *corrido* occurred rapidly and wildly in the Mexico of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when its people, having suffered more than forty years of Biblical-style oppression under the government of the president Porfirio Díaz, decided “no more” and revolted. In the ensuing turbulence of the Revolution, tragic, valiant, and cowardly deeds were committed and many of them were committed to song.

One of the earliest ballads, which heroicized an upstart who challenges unjust authority and which is still sung today in the beginning millennium, tells of a certain malcontent who managed to drive out Díaz’s Federal troops from the city of Mazatlán, in Sinaloa: Heraclio Bernal. It was there where he was eventually defeated by the Federals under the command of Crispin García:

*Salió el Escuadrón del Norte
del Colegio Militar
a remontarse en la sierra
para aprehender a Bernal.*

The Northern Squadron left from
the military academy
to regroup in the range
to apprehend Bernal.

*Decía Heraclio Bernal
en la Hacienda de los Pericos
que no robaba a los pobres,
nomás a los puros ricos.*

Said Heraclio Bernal
in the Hacienda Los Pericos
that he didn’t steal from the poor,
only from the very rich.

*Una familia en la sierra
se hallaba muy retrasada
setecientos pesos les dio
para que se remediaban.*

A family living on the range
was in deep money trouble
to them he gave 700 pesos
so they could get back on their feet.

*Y en Mazatlán lo mataron
por traición y por detrás,
porque ese don Crispin García
era bueno para entregar.*

And in Mazatlán they killed him
by betrayal, and in the back,
because that Don Crispin García
was good for turning someone in.
(McNeil)

Of all the Mexican “Robin Hoods” glorified in these ballads, none is better-known throughout the world than Pancho Villa (1878-1923). Baptized Doroteo Arango, he lived in poverty in his youth and turned to banditry and became through circumstances a soldier of the Revolution. Before long he took control of the leadership of the forces calling themselves the Constitutionalists and eventually made himself supreme commander of the entire northern region

of Mexico. His capture of the city of Torreón, Tamaulalipas established his predominance in that area, a battle memorialized in “Pancho Villa en Torreón”:

*Año de mil novecientos
treinta y ocho es la ocasión
para hacerles mis recuerdos
de la toma de Torreón.*

The year 1938
is the occasion
for sharing with you my memories
of the taking of Torreón.

*Dice el General Francisco Villa,
A mí no me importa nada,
vámonos, muchachos, a tomar Torreón
recuerdas en Ojinaga.*

Said General Francisco Villa,
“What do I care, boys,
let’s go take Torreón,
remember how we did it at Ojinaga.”

Thirteen strophes later, which vividly describe the battle scenes, the city is taken:

*¡Viva Villa eternamente
en los pechos mexicanos!
porque tu nombre es valiente
y venciste a los tiranos.*

Long live Villa forever
in the hearts of Mexicans!
For your name is valiant
and you vanquished the tyrants.

*Ya con esta me despido
¡Viva la Revolución!
aquí termina el corrido
de la toma de Torreón.*

Now with this I take my leave,
Long live the Revolution
Here ends the ballad
of the taking of Torreón.
(McNeil)

The Revolution forced thousands of Mexicans to flee northward in the 1910s. Predictably, the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s witnessed profound societal changes in the U.S., especially the Southwest, such that one may really speak of the “Mexicanization” of much of the country. Migrant labor, poverty-ridden neighborhoods, identity crisis in a hostile, new society, racial tensions—these and many other themes unique to this period of history are mirrored in the music of the times. Moving beyond those earlier retellings of heroic exploits against tyrants, the *corrido* in the U.S. began to shape its own character. In one such transmogrification, the oppressor was transformed from the Mexican oligarchy to the dominant Anglo American authority figures: Texas rangers, Los Angeles police, and U.S. immigration officials. In recent years, beginning in the 1990s, there emerged a strain of balladry which glorified the escapades of narcotics smugglers, the *narcocorrido*. The repertoire here is quite extensive and enjoys quite a large following and is characterized in much the same way as the predecessors; here, the drug-runners are the heroes. This trend can only be characterized as degenerative and pitiful. Speaking as a common teacher with progressive ideas and liberal tendencies, I won’t discuss it in my classroom.

To visualize the performance of the *corrido*, some knowledge of the physical accoutrements would be helpful: dress, costume, instruments, body gestures and so forth. In *corridos rancheros*,

the singer is a *charro*, a kind of horseman or rancher. The usual translation of “Mexican cowboy” simply doesn’t cut it; it is inaccurate. He wears a suit of tight-fitting trousers, white shirt, big bow tie, a short jacket and a wide hat. The suit comes in different colors and is bespangled with shiny buttons and buckles, the usual basic color being black. The *charro* almost always has a mustache, the bigger and thicker the more manly. In *corridos*, which do not deal with a country setting, the performers wear different kinds of costumes, ranging from city-cosmopolitan to American “Western” style. Women also sing *corridos* and usually wear a feminine version of the *charro* suit: a long, wide skirt, long-sleeve shirt and short jacket, bow tie, and the wide hat. Then again, they may wear the much more feminine *china poblana*: a long, wide-fitting and multi-colored skirt, short-sleeved blouse and multiple layers of slips.

The singing is accompanied by guitars and anything else: horns, violins, drums, harp, electronic devices, piano etc. But the guitar, traditional or modern, always forms the indispensably basic instrument. When the ensemble consists of men and/or women wearing the *charro* garb, singing *corridos rancheros*, one has a *mariachi*. The *mariachi* may consist of as few as three persons, necessarily playing a guitar, a horn, and a violin; improving a step, add the huge *guitarrón*, then a contrabass, and so on.

Equally as important, the *corrido* and the *ranchera* may be performed by another kind of band, this one made up of at least three instruments: guitar, contrabass and most importantly—vying with the guitar—an accordion. Now we have the *conjunto*. The *conjunto* had its beginnings in the northern regions of Mexico and entered the U.S. with refugees trying to get away from the troubles besetting them following the fall of the Mexican president who had governed for thirty years, Porfirio Díaz. This era of the early twentieth century, bowdlerized in this country through corny references to “Pancho Villa” and “tequila” and “bandidos” took a toll of more than a million dead and thousands of simple folk fleeing into the U.S. These immigrants brought their stories and their musical styles with them, somewhere along the way adopting the German sounds of polka, waltz and schottische as well as the German accordion and produced an entirely new sound (some scholars place this original contact in the state of Nuevo Leon, [Burr]). Try to imagine a German polka with an ingénue Mexican “accent.” The resulting Mexican *polka* replaced the German three-step pattern of HOP-two-three, HOP-two-three, HOP-two-three with a much faster, more energetic one-TWO, one-TWO, one-TWO, twirl, swing, hop, one-TWO, one-TWO and so on. In like manner, Mexican immigrants transformed the waltz and Schottische, as performed by German- and Slavic- Americans already settled in the U.S. Southwest, especially Texas, into completely new sounds never heard before. This new, Mexican *American waltz (vals)* retains the three-quarter beat and is easily recognizable; on the other hand, the emergent *chotis* sounds entirely Mexican and un-German, yet sounds exactly how a Schottische should sound and is danced using the same steps.

As Mexicans began to orient themselves in this country and tried to settle down and rebuild their lives, they developed a form of entertainment adequate to their situation, *el baile*. “The dance” is a literal translation, which fails to convey the associations inherent in this word. The *baile* invariably took place on Saturday nights in somebody’s barn; the musicians were the three-man *conjunto*, “amateur” players who played music to dance to (i.e. polka, waltz and

Schottische). Every family in the Mexican American community went to the *baile*, which is to say, everybody in the community went: grandparents, mom and dad, children, grandchildren and anybody else who was family (such as godparents, the *compadres*). They danced to all these rhythms and when there was singing, it was almost always a *corrido*. It was during this era of the 1940s that a select group of talented performers distinguished themselves and imprinted forever into this repertoire a set of classics which continue to be performed: the accordionist Santiago Jiménez, the singer/guitarist Lydia Mendoza, the acrobatic-virtuoso guitarist Lorenzo Caballero, and others.

The period of the 1940s witnessed a parallel cultural development. Every Sunday afternoon, some American theater “allowed” Mexican movies to be shown. These were movies produced in Mexico, with Mexican actors who would become legends in time. Among such greats must be mentioned the comedians “Cantinflas” (legally, Mario Moreno), “Tin-Tan,” and the actress-heartthrob Maria Felix. Of all these actors, one person managed—unwittingly, it was learned later—to convey not only to resident and “diaspora” Mexicans, but to outside audiences as well, the essence of *charro* and *corrido*: Jorge Negrete (1911-1953). A gifted singer, he aspired to a career in opera, but business and other circumstances forced him “back into” an emerging kind of Mexican pop culture which glorified the rough, tough, romantic and entirely mythical *charro*. At his death he left behind a treasury of luscious songs, one of which expresses many an expatriate’s dream:

*México lindo y querido,
si muero lejos de ti,
que digan que estoy dormido
y que me traigan aquí.*

Beautiful, beloved Mexico,
if I die far away from you,
tell them that I’m only asleep
and tell them to bring me back here.

But his signature piece was a *corrido*, as could be expected, given the cultural atmosphere of the times described. This piece defined for all times what a *corrido* should be like and the measure for other practitioners to go by:

Juan Charrasqueado

Voy a cantarles un corrido muy mentado,
Lo que ha pasado alla en la Hacienda de la Flor,
La triste historia de un rancho enamorado
Que fue borracho, parrandero y jugador.

Juan se llamaba y lo apodaban “Charrasqueado”
Era valiente y arriesgado en el amor,
A las mujeres mas bonitas se llevaba,
De aquellos campos no quedaba ni una flor.

Un dia domingo que se andaba emborrachando
A la cantina le corrieron a avisar:
“Cuidate, Juan, que ya por ahi te andan buscando;
son muchos hombres, no te vayan a matar.”

No tuvo tiempo de montar en su caballo,
Pistola en mano se le echaron de a montón;
“Ando borracho,” les gritaba, “y soy buen gallo,”
cuando una bala atravesó su corazón.
(Victor Cordero)

“Juan ‘Scarred-Face’”

I’m going to sing y’all a story very well-known
About what happened once at the Hacienda of the Flower,
The sad story about a cowboy in love,
Who was a drinker, playboy and gambler.

Juan was his name and they called him “Scarred Face,”
He was brave, and risky in love:
He would take up with the most beautiful women;
In those fields there remained not one flower.

One day, Sunday, when he was drinking hard,
To the *cantina* they came running to warn him:
“Watch out, Juan, they’re looking around for you,
They’re a lot of men, don’t let them kill you.”

He didn’t have time to mount his horse,
With pistols drawn, they all rushed in on him;
“I’m drunk,” he shouted at them, “and I’m a baaaaad stud!”
When a bullet pierced his hear.

(Musical interlude)

The cornfield has grown with the rains in the land parcels,
And the pigeons go flying to the rock outcrops.
Beautiful bulls they’re taking today to the slaughterer,
What a fine horse the foreman is riding.
Already the bells of the sanctuary are ringing,
All the faithful prepare themselves to pray;
And down the ridge come a-lowering the farmers
A dead man that they’re going to bury.

In a very humble hut a child cries,
And the women whisper counsel, and they leave.
His mother only comforts him with tenderness,
Looking up to heaven, she weeps and prays for her Juan.

And now I finish singing this story,
Of Juan, a cowboy, scarred-face and a teaser,
Who naively put his trust in women,
And was a drinker, playboy and gambler.
(Transl. L. Rétiz)

Taking in the whole experience of this song, that is: hearing it with the visual accompaniment of the drama enacted in the movie, or even only hearing it at a *baile* and dancing to its music provides a rich and typical taste of what Mexican *corrido* is all about. Granted, the lyrics here invite all sort of moral condemnation, in this song as well as in most of other *corridos*. Nor would I want to teach a unit which incorporates only bloody, machista attitudes. To counterbalance this dominant trend in corridos, persisting even unto the present day, listeners are directed to those ballads which narrate women assertiveness. By way of tantalizing into further research, I suggest the following as a woman's response to male chauvinism, "La entallada" ("The Girl in the Tight Skirt"):

Roberto Murcino le dijo a Teodora
"Respeto el cariño, que cargo pistola,
la traigo con ocho tiros,
y van con dedicatoria."

Roberto Murcino said to Theodora,
"Respect my love, for I have a gun,
I have eight rounds in it,
each with your name on it."

Tu estas pedida y me arde la cara
que salgas vestida con ropa entallada,
toda rebotenada
y a mí no me cuadra nada."

You've been spoken for and it burns my
face
to see you go out in such a tight skirt
all buttoned up
and I don't like it one bit."

"Yo no te quería, mis padres me han
dado;
estar de pedida, mas no me he casado:
No voy a pasar la vida
con un celoso amargado."

"I never loved you, my parents gave me
away
to be engaged, but I haven't married yet:
I'll not spend my life away
with a bitter, jealous person."

"No seas tan coqueta, se mas decentita."
Ella le contesta, con una sonrisa:
"Pues yo no tengo la culpa
de haber nacido bonita."

"Don' be such a flirt, be more decent."
She answers him with a smile:
"Well, it's not my fault
that I was born pretty."

Saco la pistola para amenazarla

He took out his pistol to threaten her,

*pero la Teodeora le arrebató el arma
con ella le dio ocho tiros,
se los sepultó en el alma.*

but Theodora grabs away his weapon,
with it she shot him eight times,
she buried each round into his soul.

*Luego la aprehendieron
pero a Teodorita los jueces la vieron
tan entallidita, que la libertad le dieron
no más porque era bonita.*

Then they arrested her,
but the [male] judges saw her
in her skirt so little and tight, so they set her free,
just because she was pretty.

*Roberto se ha ido, ella se ha quedado,
robando a sus tiros, pues no se ha
casado,
para darle gusto a la vida
con su vestido entallado.
(Pepe Albarrán)*

Roberto has gone away, she has stayed,
robbing him of his shots, she still hasn't
married,
so she can enjoy life to her fullest
in her little tight skirt.
(Transl. L. Rétiz)

I can think of no better response to the tired and frequently voiced statements about *machismo* dominating Mexican social life. Of course there exists too much abuse of women by men, and this fact also finds expression in the music, such as in “La Martina” by Consuelo Castro. A young woman is caught philandering by her husband, and with the acquiescence of her father, she must pay the consequences and is shot six times by the *wronged husband*. One will encounter many other *corridos* that treat of women’s alleged two-timing and their ultimate end recurs as a fatalistic given. I mention only one more example of this theme, “Los dos hermanos” (“The Two Brothers”). Here, the two brothers realize at a dance that the girl accompanying one of them has also been dating the other. So the first lover shoots her dead, the afflicted brother vows revenge and the two kill each other outside the dance hall. “Naturally,” it was the woman’s fault.

And yet, the popular notion of widespread acceptance of male domination in Mexican society has been challenged, if not disproved, in the critical study by Maria Herrera-Sobek (1990), who points to similar findings by other eminent scholars such as Americo Paredes. In her very thorough monograph on the many roles assumed universally by women in world literature and particularly by Mexican women in *corridos*, Herrera-Sobek includes an extensive section on females in combat situations, especially during the revolution of 1910. These were the *soldaderas*, literally, “she-soldiers,” the best-known *corridos* of this type being “La Adelita” and “La Valentina” (both are common Spanish feminine names). The *soldadera* has long been a familiar figure in the Mexican imagination, and the term was applied frequently to young Chicana activists during the 1960s and early 1970s. Everyone of Mexican extraction knew the allusion.

As one listens to other *corridos* sung by Mexican women, the theme coursing through these stories revolves around women who feel free to choose their men and will always opt for the man who knows how to manage his money, control his drinking, respect his wife and his children, and is clean. Typical is the duet “El descalzo,” by Juan Gaytan. While the title literally

translates as “The Barefoot One,” a more suitable translation would be “The Barefoot Suitor,” even better, “The Suitor Who Complains about His Dream Girl’s High Airs Because She Prefers a Boy with a Steady Job and Rejects Him Just Because He’s Drunk Most of the Time,” and hence, presumably, can’t even afford shoes. And that is exactly what the verses sing. (In this type of story-singing, the singers do not narrate of past events but express their feelings about a present situation. It is a common technique, especially in the more recent *corridos* that tell of those men and women trying to cross the border, leaving behind them their beloved Mexico.)

There are many stories sung in Mexican ballads, but that’s another story which deserves a fuller forum than the present enterprise, which I have limited to introducing a musical form to my LOTE students in such a way that they might later want to pursue their investigations into this type of music. At the very least, they might perk up the next time they hear the tune of one of these songs, which are played so often in all the places Americans like to frequent and never receive the appreciation they merit.

Indian Music: Classical Dance

To reiterate my vision of implementing in some way the teaching the sounds of other cultures, cultural appreciation in the LOTE classroom means universal enjoyment of universal themes and does not restrict itself to some compartmentalized “subject.”

So, I next plan to draw my students of Spanish (I will extend the activity to my German students at a later juncture, after I have gathered logistical experience in the one language class) into that already-extant wide audience of persons who love and have come to understand some of the basics of South Asian music, here specifically, the Indian variety. That such an audience really is all that wide may be difficult to demonstrate in scientific terms, so one has to depend on actual observation, such as that afforded during the aforementioned Houston 2002 International Festival (this particular year, the theme was “France”). For the Indian dance programs, one saw literally hundreds of Houstonians sitting or standing transfixed before the spectacle of performances by groups of children ranging in age from six to eighteen on different stages. The two groups performing this year were the Anjali Center for Performing Arts and the Nritya School of Dance.

And what made these performances so attractive to these Houstonians, non-Western Americans? I submit it was the very different-ness of the sounds, both of the singing, none of it understandable, and of the instruments, none of them common to Western experience. In addition, the bright, flashing costumes worn by the dancers, the gestures, which involved agile, surprising and yet logical twists and turns of the head, the eyes, the fingers, the feet—in short, when one speaks of movement in Indian dance, anything less than total body movement of all body parts appears downright placid.

By way of introducing my students of LOTE to Indian music, I will specify that they are learning about *classical* Indian music, which represents only one, specifically-delineated segment of “Indian” music. Just as *corrido* is a particularly unique form of narrative song, and

must be explained to the uninitiated, so, too must Indian music in general and Indian dance in particular require initiation into an entirely different mode of viewing reality and the universe. To begin with, while *corrido* and country/western ballads may share certain commonalities, classical Indian dance, even those pieces meant to narrate stories, finds no such comparable reference points in other Western musical traditions. Next, I would remind my students that classical Indian dance is what they see in presentations such as those performed in festivals and other stage attractions, as opposed to modern styles of Indian music which enjoy a wider listenership. Finally, I would acquaint them with the fact that Indian classical dance comprises many differing styles. Scholars have identified and categorized these into seven major styles, each associated with a different state: *bharata natyam* (Tamil Nadu); *kuchipudi* (Andhra Pradesh); *kathakali* (Kerala); *manipuri* (Manipur); *kathak* (Uttar Pradesh); *mohini attam* (Kerala) and *odissi* (Orissa). The styles most performed in the West and which my students will learn about are the first two, *bharata natyam* and *kuchipudi*.

Bharata natyam

Bharata natyam is native to and is chiefly practiced in the southern part of India, mainly in the area of Tanjavur. The main languages spoken here are Tamil and Telegu. The movements exercised in this style follow certain protocols which make for fascinating reading and discussion. At about the dawn of the first millennium A.D., a philosopher and teacher named Bharata Muni wrote down guidelines which developed into treatises on how this initially religious type of dance should be performed. Women who dedicated themselves to religious duties performed these dances in temples and were called “*devadisis*.” Today, women and men perform *bharata natyam* on public stages and no longer in temples. Yet the defining characteristic of strict adherence to the guidelines defined within the theoretical writings remains, which means that the graceful dancer performing those fluid, rapid, agile moves before an enthralled audience is following strict, prescribed rules.

Moreover, the liquid movements and gestures undulating on the stage conform to yet another very established convention; they imitate those poses captured and frozen in time in the stone statues adorning the many temples in the country. These moving poses are nothing less than exquisite, visual effects that are accomplished partly by the dancer’s body movements and partly by the costumes. The female dancer typically wears billowy, silken pants tucked in at the ankles, a beaded or otherwise adorned brocade blouse, a distinctive sash at her midriff, and sometimes a vest. She further adorns herself with several necklaces; ear-, nose-, lip- and or other kinds of rings for the face; bracelets, and little bells around her ankle or feet. She rounds out her adornment with abstract, geometric designs painted in red on the palms of her hands and the soles of her feet. Her male counterpart wears bright, flowing pantaloons and dances barefoot and bare-chested, jewelry adornments of choice are worn around his arms, chest, feet and other parts of his body. His facial makeup creates an image of demonry, perhaps of divinity. The lines and curves and colors on his face, combined with his powerfully masculine movements, set him apart from his very human, very feminine partner with her delicate and distinctly earthly persona.

Now, what about the sound, the instruments, any singing? This is all a rich subject when dealing with Indian classical music. I restrict myself to the following instruments which I have observed to form the basic components of musical accompaniment in India, especially northern India (south Indian instruments usually accompany *bharata natyam*).

- **Sitar.** This stringed instrument declares and develops and sustains the “tune” or main, melodic idea.
- **Tabla.** This set of two “little drums” literally talks with, and talks back to the sitar and the dancer. There is no technical description of the *tabla* sound more accurate than “talking,” or “speaking,” and that is exactly what one witnesses in the interplay between the tabla and the sitar, or tabla and dancer.
- **Tambura.** This long, slowly-plucked instrument produces a dark, sustained droning sound, to provide a continuous background.

Understanding an Indian Classical Recital

To begin the Western student’s orientation into the sights and sounds encountered in a performance of Indian classical music and dance, it is helpful and useful to become accustomed to some terminology conventions. Basically, these include the underlying meaning of *bharata natyam* and *kuchipudi*; the sounds to be expected, and the parts of a *bharata natyam* performance.

There are several explanations given for the original meaning of *bharata natyam*. In the first, we recall that the Hindi name for “India” is *Bharat Varsha* or *Bharatavarsha*, literally, “The Land of Bharat,” who was a legendary monarch and sage. “Natyā” means the art of drama, which invariably involves dancing, hence, *bharata natyam* would mean the “dance drama of India.” Others disagree, claiming that the term derives as an acronym, from: *bhava*, meaning “expression,” *raga*, meaning “melody,” and *tala*, meaning “rhythm,” thus yielding the art form:

expressiveness + melody + rhythm + dramatic dance—i.e.
bha *ra* *ta* *natyam*

(Garland)

While the issue remains unresolved among scholars, it poses no problem. More important is the issue of the sounds. Generally, the musical sounds fascinate and captivate the Western ear, but in ways which nonetheless leave one mystified. They sound impossible to imitate. A “melody,” as we understand it, is difficult to discern, nor can one detect a clear tempo or beat. Now, it is not necessary to talk about differing musical scale conventions and the like; rather, it is necessary to begin to understand the one concept of sound which forms the mainstay of all Indian classical music. At the beginning of a recital, the main stringed instrument (sitar, *sarod*, or any other) strums a series of chords which seem to have no direction or definite metrical “place.” We learn that the player is exploring an idea, a musical theme. Once he or she has a “fix” on this theme, the player strums his instrument more assertively and a clear direction becomes discernible to the audience, and at this point, the tabla enters, having caught the intention of the

melody that has been evolving—and this thematic development of a musical theme is called *raga*. This *raga* proceeds through a lengthy progression of tempos and melodies. It is establishing the thematic mood, the melody, all the while adhering to a strict code of improvisations which, in the canon, number in the hundreds. “Improvisation” here does not compare with jazz improvising, for the rules even dictate which *ragas* should be played at which time of the day. Needless to say, such subtleties will be lost on most Western ears. No such confusion impedes the enjoyment in listening to a performance of *raga*, however. Sustained by the virtuosic strumming of the sitar, the agile, accompanying interplay of the tabla and the ever-present background drone of the tambura, the *raga* becomes drama in its own right, often ending in a crashing finale and at other times in a pensive mood equally as spectacular.

The next important consideration involves what to expect as the essential parts of a recital of *bharata natyam*. For a moment, think of Western *sonata* form: “fast—slow—fast,” and then forget about it. The parts of *bharata natyam* do not compare in quite those terms; however, there are prescribed parts to the performance. These occur in the following basic sequence:

1. ***alarippu***: The introductory dance, purely abstract and expressive in nature, yet offered expressly as in invocation for the blessing of the deities on the dance to come. It is accompanied by the tabla and a singer (called a *nattuvanar*) who vocalizes not with words but sounded syllables.
2. ***jatisvaram***: The next dance sequence, also abstract, accompanied only by the rhythm of the instruments.
3. ***sabdam***: The next dance, also purely abstract, accompanied by the dancer’s mimed gestures which interpret verses rendered by the *nattuvanar*.
4. ***varnam***: This is a long, complex dance sequence which may last from 30 minutes to an hour and can be considered the core of the performance.
5. ***abhinaya padam***: An interpretive dance sequence, one which tells of well-known love songs.
6. ***tillana***: Pure, abstract dance, a vigorous sequence which forms the rousing finale of the recital.

The dance may conclude with a religious chant of thanksgiving, the *shloka*.
(Garland)

Kuchipudi

Historians date the origins for this dance form as far back as 300 B.C., though it began to assume its modern contours sometime after the 1200s. The dates cited for the incipience of this later development into its modern forms differ wildly: thirteenth century (1200s), fifteenth century (1400s), and as late as 300 years ago (at the time of that writing, then, around 1695) according to various sources. There is general agreement, however, on the story that the dance form began after a Brahmin priest, Siddhendra Yogi, promised the god Krishna to devote his life to teaching ritual dance in his honor in return for having miraculously saved his life during a terrible storm. And thus it transpired, such that the dance began with a religious function and character.

The name itself has its origins in the name of the South Indian village where it all began, in the province of Anathra Pradesh, Kuchelapuram. According to one convention, this name evolved into the form *kuchipudi*, loosely translated as “village of the poor. But another tradition holds that the name of the village was actually a Sanskrit word, *kuseelavapuri*, which meant the “dwelling place of the *kuseelavas*,” (i.e. those bands of actors who, following the teachings of Siddhendra Yogi, wandered with their religious acting and dancing from village to village in accordance with their devotion to Krishna). In both versions, these devotees of Krishna form the common element. The performers were all male, who also enacted female roles. (Garland; Grove)

But the characteristics of *kuchipudi* have evolved considerably. The performers today are overwhelmingly female, and the religious element has been replaced by secular motifs which, while retaining many of the references to Krishna and related subjects, are by no means any longer devotional in character. The historical dramas which originally formed the *raison d’etre* for this type of performance continue to provide the thematic premises for modern recitals. Chiefly cited among these dance dramas are the following: *Bhama Kalapam* enacts the love-trials of the queen Satyalhama, who is eventually reunited with the object of her desires, her lord Krishna; *Krishna Shabdham*, in which a milkmaid attempts to seduce Lord Krishna; *Krishna Leela Tarnngini*, also called *Balagopala Tarangam*, is a dance that portrays various events in the life of Krishna. For many, this is perhaps the most popular of *kuchipudi* dances. The dancer dances poised on the edges of a brass plate and executes up to 35 different rhythmic variations, all the while balancing on her head a pail of water, trying not to spill a drop.

And there are others, but the preceding descriptions serve to bear out the observation pointed out by others, i.e. that the dance has become in modern times an art form designed to please the senses. Moreover, the outsider is reminded that *kuchipudi* is readily perceived as much more ornate, artistic, and *fun* than *bharata natyam*. However, this constitutes a requirement of Indian classical music: one must first master *bharata natyam* before being allowed to even begin studying *kuchipudi*.

Summary: At the Dance

Having discussed the fundamental characteristics of this other-worldly, yet compelling art form, I now attempt to restate the discussion in purely lay terms, wherein the observations of the sight-and-sound events on the stage invariably evoke pure sensual delight, regardless of one’s formal instruction on the subject. What the observer will see and hear in a performance of either *bharata natyam* or *kuchipudi* may be summarized in the following sequence of events:

- The sitar opens the presentation. One hears slow strumming; no, one *feels* a cloud of chords floating in the air, moving with apparently no aim in mind. These ethereal sounds appear to meander in space for some ten minutes, sometimes much longer, until one becomes aware of a different presence. The tabla has entered, very non-obtrusively, with a series of barely-audible and yet very assertive *clickety-clicks*. All the while, an indefinable buzzing/humming/droning sound permeates the ever-more energetic sounds.

The rhythm is still slow but palpably picking up speed. Now, the dancer makes her entrance and performs several introductory gestures and statements. She is dancing not only with her feet and legs, her head moves laterally and horizontally, as do her eyes. Her eyes shift through varying emotions, from horror to delight. Her fingers move as well, coordinating with her head, eyes, feet and legs. Her torso moves and shifts and gyrates such that one feels that she is communicating a message.

- The instrumentalists have begun to chant early on. The chant evolves into ever-quickening tempos, which display, ever so vaguely, sustained and repeated and distinct melody lines. At the same time, this singing exhibits sounds and voice modulations not familiar to Western ears: throat trills, clucking of vowels, of syllables, of kinds of ululating. In a “middle” section—Western conventions want to be accommodated—one feels a repetition of a thematic melody line and a dance sequence. There follows an energetic phase of increased tempo, of volume and dance movements.
- By degrees, the music diminishes in pace. Dancer, song, instrumentation and dance loosen in tempo and one feels a resolution coming on. This slowing-down conveys a sense of the spirit coming to terms with itself, of the harmony of all things, all of this felt through the sounds of the sitar, tabla and tambura, and of the dancer painting a feeling of resolution. Finally, there is quiet. The universe has come to terms with itself and may rest.

Lesson Plan: The Mexican *corrido*

Students Targeted

Middle school through high school levels, beginning to advanced students of Spanish. (I will extend this activity to my German students in another year.)

Objective

Student teams will present visual and aural representations of different *corridos* to an audience of peers and adults.

Materials (for final presentation)

Posterboards. Recordings. Photographs. Video clips. Handouts. Costumes. Instruments, instrumentalists.

Assignments

Students will be assigned the following research topics (among others):

1. Brainstorm: What kinds of *corridos* are there out there? How can we classify them? List as many categories as you can. Some starters: “love,” “migrant worker,” “mother/child,” “The Mexican Revolution.”
2. Brainstorm: Who are the exponents of *corridos*? Find as many as you can; then, list according to importance or recognition. At the same time, list according to gender. Bring mounted photographs of individual artists, with a short description of what they have accomplished.
3. Visuals: Find and present pictures of instruments, *mariachis* and *conjuntos*. Mount them, label them and write a short description of their work.
4. Visual-audio resources: Find and present videos and audio recordings of *corrido* performances. Be prepared to describe orally, briefly, what is on the recording.
5. *Mexicanismos* (advanced, probably to be restricted to native speakers): Mexican *corridos* employ distinctive vocabulary and syntax peculiarities, a couple of examples being *de volada* and *nomás*. Find more, there are plenty. Model:

<i>mexicanismo</i>	Standard Spanish	English
<i>de volada</i>	de prisa	quickly

6. Performance (advanced): Recite a *corrido* in any preferred format. (e.g. A student or a group could recite a *corrido* in the manner of readers’ theatre.) At a more advanced level, the students could actually sing a *corrido*, utilizing a live band or a recording as accompaniment.

Presentation

In this phase, my students of Spanish present to a general public their projects on Mexican *corrido*. With the aid of handouts, visual and audio samples, they will demonstrate the origins, *development* and recognizable elements of the style, using Spanish as their medium. They will talk about the instruments used, the general form and content of the *corrido*, using the props they have integrated into the project; further, they will talk about the best practitioners of the art, again referring to their visual and audio aids. The more advanced students will be able to perform a *corrido* in any of the formats I have outlined above.

The presentation phase will take two, maximally three days. On the day preceding the first presentation, students will decorate the room with *ranchera* motifs (pottery, musical instruments, posters and the like). Parents and family friends are to be invited, and typical regional foods will be brought to the classroom. On each presentation day, the teams will present their projects, orally and in Spanish, employing their visual and audio aids. With the consent and cooperation of students, parents and administrators, a venue other than the regular classroom during regular class times may be arranged. This is a delicate issue, involving property damage to an outside party's room; security, custodial and safety concerns; and any other unforeseeable issues, so the teacher should approach this possibility with deliberate caution.

Lesson Plan: Indian Classical Dance

Students Targeted

Middle school through high school levels, beginning to advanced. LOTE: Beginning to intermediate Spanish; possibly native speakers of Spanish.

Objective

In Spanish, student teams will present visual and aural representations of two forms of Indian dance: *bharata natyam* and *kuchipudi*.

Materials (for final presentation)

Posterboards, photographs, recordings, video clips, jewelry, costumes, actual instruments where available.

Assignments

At the beginning of the six-week study, I will assign my students the following activities and research topics:

1. Instruments: Bring pictures of Indian musical instruments and if possible, real instruments. Label them and write a short description of each.

2. Performers: Who some of the best-known exponents of *bharata natyam* and of *kuchipudi*? Bring pictures of them, with attractive lettering and a write-up of their careers, places they have performed, awards, and reviews. (Here, I will model the kind of display they can create.)
3. Maps: Create and bring color-coded maps of India, showing the regions associated with the seven major classical dances. (Reminder to the teacher: geography is regarded as a weak skill for American students.)
4. Visual-audio resources: Bring video- and audio-cassettes which demonstrate these dances.
5. Vocabulary list: Create a trilingual list of the specialized musical terms employed in Indian classical dance. Model:

<i>Indian term</i>	<i>Spanish term</i>	<i>English term</i>
kuchipudi	baile clásica india del estado de Andhra Pradesh	classical Indian dance from the state of Andhra Pradesh
raga	modo melódico hindu	(Indian) melodic treatment
tabla	tambor (indio)	(Indian) drum
sitar	instrumento musical de cuerdas (indio)	(Indian) stringed instrument

6. Languages: Discuss the languages employed in the sung parts of these dances.

Performance

Arrange a live performance. Ask friends and acquaintances if they would be willing to perform sample portions of Indian dance, not necessarily restricted to *bharata natyam* or *kuchipudi*. Make this a fair, complete with background music, foods, costumes and other decorations. Invite family members. Finally, and most importantly, be prepared to discuss your project in Spanish, working in turns with your partners in your team.

Presentation

As with the *corrido*, the Indian project presentations should extend over a period of several days, assuming the event will be staged in the regular classroom. With the cooperation of students, parents and administrators, however, it might be desirable to use another venue (keeping in mind that administrators have to pay security and other personnel for the use of school facilities after regular school hours; see again my observations above on these considerations, after the lesson plan on the *corrido*).

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These two reference works are the obvious departure points of choice, especially in the exhaustive bibliographic sources listed for each entry. For *kuchipudi*, look in *Grove* pp. 264-65; in *Garland*, pp. 104, 270, 358, 515-18, 521 and 908. But by far the reference work which is much more accessible to teacher and student alike is the following.

Ellingham, Mark, et al., eds. *The Rough Guide to World Music, Vol. 2: Latin and North America, Caribbean, India, Asia and Pacific*. London: Rough Guides, 2000.

Very comprehensible introduction to the unfamiliar conventions of other musics, using friendly, informal lay language. Begin with the section on Indian Classical Music, pp. 63-69.