

Flamenco, *maqamat*, and pop: Arabo-Andalusian influences in the music of Rosalía

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Introduction

Arabo-Andalusian music emerged around the 8th century, during the rule of the Umayyad caliphate on the Iberian Peninsula. The interaction between Arab music and that of the Iberian Peninsula has led to many interesting musical genres: Arabo-Andalusian music entails classical Andalusian music, as well as Andalusian nuba, and Andalusian-Maghrebi music, among others. Popular music genres have also been influenced by the rich Arabo-Andalusian history and its music.

In this essay, I will outline the relationship between Arab music and flamenco, and use a case study of contemporary Spanish music in order to assess the influence of Arab music and flamenco on contemporary pop music. The musician I have selected for this case study is Rosalía, a Spanish pop artist whose music has been heavily influenced by flamenco and other musical styles such as hip hop, reggaeton, and generic pop music. In recent years, Rosalía has gained international recognition, collaborating with artists such as Travis Scott, Pharrell Williams, and J Balvin, and performing in different countries across the world.

Arab music and flamenco

Arab music has had a longstanding influence on Spanish flamenco music. From the Muslim invasion of 711 until the defeat of Granada in 1492, most of the Iberian Peninsula was under Muslim rule.¹ The Muslim invasion introduced many instruments previously unknown to the region, like the *duff*, *qanun*, and *'ud*, into the musical culture of what would come to be known as al-Andalus.² The introduction of new instruments caused Seville, a major Andalusian city, to become the epicentre of instrument making.³ In the Arab world and the Middle East, al-Andalus still proves to be of cultural importance. Jonathan H. Shannon recalls the opening of the Andalusian Music Museum in Fez, stating that there is still a great interest in understanding and preserving Arabo-Andalusian culture and music in countries such as Morocco and Syria.⁴

Arabo-Andalusian music mainly developed in the urban areas of Andalusia. Seville, Córdoba, and Granada were hotspots during this time. Córdoba was home to the court of 'Abd al-Rahman II where the musician Ziryab, to whom the "foundation of the Andalusian school of music is generally attributed", had great influence.⁵ At the court, musicians of

¹ Robert Stevenson et al., "Spain (Sp. Reino de España)," *Grove Music Online* (2001). <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40115>.

² Idem.

³ Idem.

⁴ Jonathan H. Shannon, "Performing al-Andalus, Remembering al-Andalus: Mediterranean Soundings from Mashriq to Maghrib," *The Journal of American Folklore* 120, no. 447 (Summer 2007).

⁵ Philip Schuyler, "Morocco, Kingdom of (Arab. Mamlaka al-Maghrebia)," *Grove Music Online* (2001). <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.19156>.

different backgrounds interacted; Ziryab was for example a freed Persian slave. Other musicians could be employed by the court, be secular musicians, or could include amateur musicians from higher social classes. Due to its unique role as functional capital of the Umayyad caliphate, Córdoba became the centre of Arabic learning.⁶

Isabel J. Katz defines flamenco as “a particular body of *cante* (song), *baile* (dance) and *toque* (solo guitar music), mostly emanating from Andalusia in southern Spain.”⁷ Although there is no clear origin known of flamenco, Roma and *gitano* people have played a vital role in its development and its diffusion.^{8,9} Flamenco’s roots are thought to lie in Spanish, Flemish, and Arab music, the latter specifically influencing the way of singing.¹⁰ In flamenco, the singing is characterized by melismatic singing, a technique of singing that is defined as the singing of many notes for one single syllable. Flamenco songs can also feature multiple singers, with some of them functioning as a chorus, or performing ad lib as a response or addition to the lead singer’s singing.

Many musical characteristics of Arab music have been adapted into Andalusian music, specifically flamenco. In Arab music, *maqamat* are the different melodic modes used.¹¹ In opposition to Western modes and scales, *maqamat* make use of microtonal steps, also referred to as quarter tones. *Maqamat* have had a great influence on Arabo-Andalusian music, causing “[m]odes within the octave, regarded as heptatonic, [to] form the basis of the repertory of Arabo-Andalusian music”.¹² Different *maqamat* are believed to induce different feelings and emotions, in both the performer and the listener.¹³ Just as the different rhythmic cycles of Arab Music, called *iqa’*, flamenco possesses different rhythmic patterns. Rhythm plays an important role in distinguishing different styles of flamenco. The great variety of rhythms is “one of the most distinctive characteristics of flamenco music.”¹⁴

In flamenco, different melodic modes are used, and they are related to the different *maqamat*. Miguel Ángel Berlanga notes that the musical mode of flamenco is closest to *maqam Bayati* or *Hijaz*.¹⁵ According to A.J. Racy, *maqam Bayati* as a particular possesses great emotional potential due to the microtonal steps of the mode, and is thought to have great ecstatic influence because of it being a “popular” *maqam*.¹⁶ *Maqam Hijaz* is said to “produce an extraordinary level of *saltanah*, or modal-ecstatic domination over the performer and the listener.”¹⁷ According to Peter Manuel, in flamenco “the amatory lyrics tend to

⁶ Stevenson et al., “Spain (Sp. Reino de España).”

⁷ Isabel J. Katz, “Flamenco,” *Grove Music Online* (2001).
<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.09780>.

⁸ Katz, “Flamenco.”

⁹ I choose to use the terms Roma and *gitano*, since this is a more accurate and less offensive description than the word “gypsy”.

¹⁰ Katz, “Flamenco.”

¹¹ A.J. Racy, “Culture,” in *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and History of Tarab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 26.

¹² Owen Wright, Christian Poché, and Amnon Shiloah, “Arab Music,” *Grove Music Online* (2001).
<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.01139>.

¹³ A.J. Racy, “Music,” in *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and History of Tarab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 97.

¹⁴ Catherine Guastavino et al., “Measuring Similarity between Flamenco Rhythmic Patterns,” *Journal of New Music Research* 38, no. 2 (2009): 130.

¹⁵ Miguel Ángel Berlanga, “La universalización del flamenco. De Música Mediterránea a Música Transnacional,” *Cuadernos de Etnomusicología* 2 (April 2012): 83.

¹⁶ A.J. Racy, “Music,” 98-99.

¹⁷ Idem.

display the values of machismo, fatalism, pride, and male self-pity”.¹⁸ The musical modes used in flamenco, resembling maqam Bayati and Hijaz, aid in the conveying of emotions through music.



Figure 1: Maqam Bayati and Hijaz

Although traditional Arab instruments are not typically present within flamenco, the influence of Arabo-Andalusian history is evident in instrumentation. The duf, a frame drum, strongly resembles the Spanish tambourine: the *pandereta*. In flamenco, panderetas can be used to indicate rhythm or create an added cross-rhythm. And despite the difference in build and tuning, the flamenco guitar resembles the ‘ud and qanun in how all are regularly used as accompaniment. In addition, the ‘ud is used both as rhythmic and melodic accompaniment, just like the guitar is used in flamenco.¹⁹

Rosalía

Rosalía, often stylized in all-caps as ROSALÍA, is a Spanish pop artist born in Barcelona. She received international attention after collaborating with artists like Travis Scott and Pharrell Williams. For this paper, I will discuss some songs from Rosalía’s album *El Mal Querer*, released in 2018 through Sony Music. *El Mal Querer* tells a story inspired by an anonymous book from 1420 titled *Flamenca*.²⁰ The story is about a woman named Flamenca, who is forced to marry the son of a count and becomes trapped in an abusive marriage.²¹ Violence, liberation and romance are central themes to the story, and ultimately to Rosalía’s album.

In “MALAMENTE (Cap.1: Augurio)”, we hear handclapping, in flamenco referred to as *palmas sordas*, in order to add an additional cross-rhythm to the beat of the song.²² In “DI MI NOMBRE (Cap.8: Éxtasis)” *palmas* also play a central role. This is a clear influence of the more complex rhythms and patterns pertaining to flamenco music. Polyrhythmic patterns, sometimes achieved with cross-rhythms, have also been used in Arab music since the 1960s.²³ In Rosalía’s lyrics, there are also some influences of the Andalusian dialect. In the chorus she repeats the phrase “mu’mal” a few times. This is a shortening of “muy mal”, meaning “very bad”. The case is the same with a lyric in the second verse: “han salí’o luna y estrellas”, in which “salido” is shortened and pronounced as “salí’o”.

“QUE NO SALGA LA LUNA (Cap. 2: Boda)” demonstrates the incorporation of traditional flamenco guitar in Rosalía’s music. We also hear the *palmas sordas* denoting the rhythm again. In this case it is a *bulería* rhythm in 12 beats, with the following emphasis: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12.²⁴ In this track, Rosalía also sings melismatically, something that is often done by flamenco singers. The song also features other singers, functioning as a chorus, a technique that is frequently used in flamenco as well. The other singers join in with *ad libs*

¹⁸ Peter Manuel, “Andalusian, Gypsy, and Class Identity in the Contemporary Flamenco Complex,” *Ethnomusicology* 33, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 52. <https://doi.org/10.2307/852169>.

¹⁹ Wright et al., “Arab Music.”

²⁰ María Lucía Sánchez, “Rosalía Vila: la creación de lenguajes y de contenidos,” *Letras* 8 (2019): 2.

²¹ *Idem*.

²² Katz, “Flamenco.”

²³ Wright et al., “Arab Music.”

²⁴ Carlos Morales Gálvez, “El mal querer (2018) de Rosalía: semiótica del videoclip «Di mi nombre (Cap. VIII: Éxtasis)»,” *Popular Music Research Today* 2 (2020): 8. <https://doi.org/10.14201/pmrt.20824>.

too sometimes, almost creating a call-and-response effect. These characteristics stemming from flamenco and Arab music create an interesting contrast with the use of modern effects like autotune and electronic beats.



Figure 2: Screen capture of Rosalía's videoclip for "MALAMENTE (Cap.1: Augurio)"²⁵

Rosalía not only takes musical inspiration from flamenco, she also shows dance moves typical of flamenco during live performances and in video clips. In "MALAMENTE (Cap.1: Augurio)" she dances like a flamenco dancer, in a very expressive manner, and moving her hands slowly above her head. The videoclip for "PIENSO EN TU MIRÁ (Cap.3: Celos)" also uses flamenco imagery.²⁶ It opens with a view from the front seat of a bus, showing a little *gítana* doll with a guitar, hanging from the rear-view mirror. The video also features shots of a male flamenco dancer, dancing on burning coals. Besides these elements typical of flamenco, she also presents some symbols of Spain and its history and religion, like references to bullfighting, the Virgin Mary, and crosses.²⁷

The influence and elements of flamenco that Rosalía uses in her music are so clear that she has even been criticized of appropriating flamenco and gitano culture.²⁸ Cultural appropriation in music can "be defined as the adoption [...] of musical traits, genres, styles or elements of genres and styles coming from musical works or musical universes other than those of the borrower."²⁹ Rosalía was born and raised in Catalonia, and is condemned for capitalizing off Andalusia's flamenco music. She has studied flamenco for many years, raising the question if the musical universe of flamenco and Andalusia is very different and

²⁵ Retrieved from:

ROSALÍA, "MALAMENTE (Cap.1: Augurio)," YouTube video, accessed October 20, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rht7rBHUXW8>.

²⁶ ROSALÍA, "PIENSO EN TU MIRÁ (Cap.3: Celos)," YouTube video, accessed October 21, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_4coiRG_BI.

²⁷ Sánchez, "Rosalía Vila: la creación de lenguajes y de contenidos," 4.

²⁸ Rodrigo Terrasa, "La polémica de la apropiación cultural: ¿Es el éxito de Rosalía un robo a los gitanos?," *El Mundo*, September 18, 2018, <https://www.elmundo.es/papel/cultura/2018/09/17/5b9e799be2704ea8af8b465b.html>.

²⁹ Armelle Gaulier and Denis-Constant Martin, "Music behind the music: Appropriation as the engine of creation," in *Cape Town Harmonies: Memory, Humor and Resilience* (Cape Town: African Minds, 2017), 41.

“other” than her own.³⁰ Another question is whether flamenco can really be attributed to the Andalusian musical universe. Flamenco has been influenced by different cultures and different peoples: it has never been a homogeneous culture. So, is cultural appropriation even possible in this case? These questions make Rosalía and her music an interesting subject for further research.



Figure 3: Rosalía performing live, demonstrating typical flamenco dance moves

Conclusion

Flamenco has been thoroughly influenced by Arab music, due to the history of both Spain and the Arab World. The Muslim invasion of the 8th century marked the beginning of a century-long rule on the Iberian Peninsula. This Arab rule influenced Spanish music, and vice versa. Even after the fall of the caliphate in the 15th century, interactions between Spain and the Arab World were present. The connection between musical modes in flamenco and Arab maqamat is clear, just as the similarity between the concept of iqa' and different flamenco rhythms. There are also resemblances in terms of instrumentation, like that between the duf drum and Spanish panderetas.

Rosalía displays some influences of flamenco in her music. Although her music is distinctly pop, flamenco elements are very clearly incorporated. One of these elements is the rhythmical patterns typical of flamenco, sometimes demonstrated by palmas sordas. Traditional flamenco guitar playing is also present in Rosalía's music. Her use of melismatic singing and the featuring of multiple other singers and the performance of other singers, is also related to flamenco and Arab music. Furthermore, her use of Andalusian dialect and words also points towards an influence of flamenco. In her videoclips and during live performances, Rosalía makes use of Spanish and flamenco imagery as well: crosses, bullfighting, dancing, and traditionally dressed gitanas among other things. Due to the prominent flamenco elements that Rosalía uses, she has been accused of cultural appropriation, a fact that raises different questions about cultural appropriation, flamenco, and Rosalía, which calls for further research on this topic.

³⁰ Rosalía, “Rosalía: “El flamenco no es propiedad de los gitanos”,” interview by Iñako Díaz-Guerra, *El Mundo*, July 5, 2018, <https://www.elmundo.es/papel/cultura/2018/07/05/5b3cf5b6268e3ed7098b463c.html>.

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