

CANTO A LO POETA.  
GUITARRONEROS  
AND POET-SINGERS  
OF CENTRAL CHILE  
STEFANO GAVAGNIN



ISTITUTO INTERCULTURALE  
DI STUDI MUSICALI  
COMPARATI

*fondazione* ONLUS  
GIORGIO CINI

WORLD MUSIC  
LISTENING GUIDES

INTERCULTURAL MUSIC  
EDUCATION COURSES

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**World Music Listening Guides.  
Intercultural Music Education Courses**

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**Cover image**

The poet-singer Roberto Carreño plays the Chilean *guitarrón*. Screenshot from Zoom in on Masters 2021.

# CANTO A LO POETA. GUITARRONEROS AND POET-SINGERS OF CENTRAL CHILE

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**The World Music Listening Guides. Intercultural Music Education Courses** aim to provide critical tools for understanding musical diversity. By analysing the dance and music characteristics of pieces belonging to different world music traditions, the guides explore the close relationship between music, culture and society, integrating textual descriptions, images, and multimedia animations created from audiovisual materials held in the IISMC archive. The multimedia animations form the core of the guides and represent their most innovative feature. Designed to function independently of the text, they aim to make the distinctive elements of the musical traditions under study immediately accessible. Each guide concludes with a set of simple exercises intended to assess the knowledge acquired through the texts and animations, which can easily be used as teaching resources by educators.

Starting from significant pieces of a given musical tradition, the guides explore the general aspects of the performance, such as the cultural context, performance practices, instrumental ensemble, song texts, and symbolic elements. The guides also offer the analytical elements needed to understand the formal and syntactic procedures peculiar to each music tradition: metric-rhythmic structures, processes of melodic variation in instrumental and vocal parts, the relationship between music and sung verse, tuning systems, methods of combining parts, and the interaction between music and dance movements. Organised according to progressive levels of complexity, the educational materials presented in the various guides are intended to provide students and teachers with a support for intercultural music education, and address a wide audience, including those with no prior expertise.

The listening guide *Canto a lo poeta. Guitarroneros and Singers from Central Chile*, by Stefano Gavagnin, is dedicated to the vocal and instrumental repertoires of Chilean *canto a lo poeta*. The materials it comprises were collected during the recording for the fourth edition of *Zoom in on Masters* (IISMC), published online in 2021 and devoted to the *guitarroneros* and singers of Central Chile.<sup>1</sup> Its realisation was made possible thanks to the valuable contribution and generous collaboration of the singers Erick Gil and Roberto Carreño, as well as the ethnomusicologist

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1 The episode is available on the IISMC YouTube playlist:  
<https://youtu.be/S50QhnWA1tU?si=LGgxlzQ2t7bVEbX6>

Claudio Mercado of the Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino.

The materials presented in this guide are organised so as to provide first a broad contextualisation of the practice of *canto a lo poeta*, before progressively focusing on aspects concerning the performance practice of music and sung verse. An initial distinction between the two different types of repertoire – *canto a lo divino*, of a religious nature, and *canto a lo humano*, secular and profane – is introduced through a video in which the two poet-singers, Roberto Carreño and Erick Gil Cornejo, perform a short example accompanying themselves on the characteristic Chilean *guitarrón* and on a guitar with specific ‘transposed’ tunings. Particular attention is given to the description of the organological features and cultural meanings associated with these instruments: in a brief video interview, Roberto Carreño discusses the roles and functions of the guitar in rural Chile, while a video animation, created from a live performance by the two musicians, illustrates the main performance techniques of instrumental accompaniment with the *guitarrón* and the *guitarra traspuesta*. As is often the case, the practice of *canto a lo poeta* has not remained static over time. A significant section of the guide compares traditional performance contexts with contemporary transformations. A video animation, based on an interview with ethnomusicologist Claudio Mercado, illustrates the original contexts of this sung poetry practice and the processes that define it. Current transformations are instead addressed in an interview featuring Mercado together with the two *cantores*, in which they discuss the changes taking place in the cultural sphere of *canto a lo poeta*. Finally, the main analytical aspects of this practice are presented through the opening verse of the piece ‘Por Adán y Eva’, performed by Roberto Carreño. The accompanying graphic animation focuses on the interdependence between metrical, poetic and musical structures, showing how the rhyme scheme organises the different parts of the stanza. The musical structure is in turn highlighted through detailed transcriptions of the sung verse.

The guide concludes with a set of four multiple-choice quizzes related to the various chapters and multimedia animations. Beyond supporting comprehension of the contents, these tools are also intended to provide practical suggestions for integrating the materials into educational settings and teaching activities.

Lorenzo Chiarofonte



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## 1. *Canto a lo poeta*: origins and diffusion

*Canto a lo poeta* (singing in the manner of the poet) is an oral and sung poetry practice, accompanied by stringed instruments, performed by folk poets and singers in the rural areas of central Chile. From a historical point of view, this tradition is the result of the cultural syncretism that followed the conquest and colonisation of the Americas by the Spanish between the 16th and 18th centuries and, as such, it has remarkable similarities with other popular sung poetry widespread in Spanish-speaking America, from Mexico to Argentina. Several regional poetic traditions of this vast area are in fact characterised by the use of the same metrical forms common to the Iberian literary tradition. An obvious example is the *décima espinela* (see §5 *Formal analysis: metrical and musical structure*). At the same time, however, they can be distinguished from each other by various local specificities, the result of independent developments that include the cultural contributions of the indigenous and mestizo populations, made in several ways: the construction of the poetic repertoire, the aesthetics of the musical components, and the modes and contexts of performances.

The Chilean *canto a lo poeta* has been documented in forms similar to the present form since the 19th century. Its gestation, however, is thought to have lasted over the previous three centuries, during the long, conflictual process of the colonisation of the southern regions of the Spanish-ruled Viceroyalty of Peru, to which the territory of present-day Chile belonged. The characteristically religious *canto a lo divino* is believed to have been the earliest form: the clergy (particularly the Jesuits) used to adapt religious texts to profane music, already spread by Spanish soldiers and colonists, in order to inculcate Catholic doctrine and knowledge of the Bible in the indigenous and mestizo populations. According to another theory, *canto a lo poeta* was said to have derived from a repertoire of liturgical psalmodic singing, gradually converted to private use. *Canto a lo divino* then gave rise to *canto a lo humano*, when folk cantores began to use the same poetic forms and melodies for secular and profane themes.

Between the late 19th and early 20th century, *canto a lo poeta* flourished and circulated widely within a broader popular literary system, also in

written form, as witnessed by the lively production of the broadsheets of the *Lira popular* (Fig. 1.1). During the first half of the 20th century, however, following the urban and industrial growth of the country, the genre was gradually confined to the countryside and barely survived. Today, thanks to the efforts of pioneering researchers and a generation of local enthusiasts, *canto a lo poeta* and the *guitarrón* are enjoying a new lease of life, both in the preservation and transmission of traditional practices and in the creation of new forms, or in crossovers with other genres. A national survey recorded several thousand active *cantores* and *payadores* (poet-singers who take part in poetic improvisation contests), often in groups and associations. The area of diffusion of traditional forms of *canto a lo poeta* is now rural central Chile, the regions of Coquimbo in the north and Bio Bio (Concepción), almost 1,000 kilometres further south. Within the area of diffusion, several zones can be distinguished in terms of differences in musical styles and performing technique (Fig. 1.2).



Fig. 1.1. Folio of the *Lira popular* with representation of *guitarroneros*. Source: Archivo de Literatura oral y Tradiciones Populares. Biblioteca Nacional Digital de Chile: <https://www.bibliotecanacionaldigital.gob.cl/bnd/627/w3-article-616212.html>.

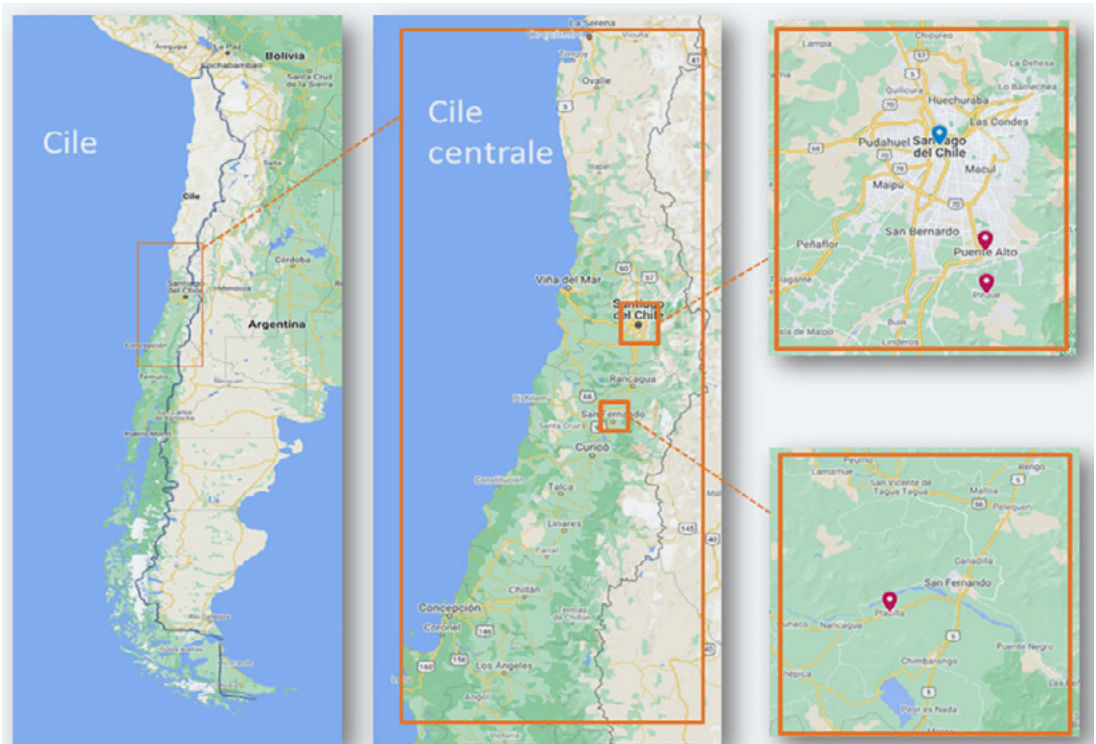


Fig. 1.2. Distribution area of the *Canto a lo poeta*. In the boxes, the towns of Pirque and Puente Alto (Santiago) and Placilla (Colchagua) are highlighted. A detailed map of the presence of individual devotees and associations of the *Canto a lo poeta* can be consulted on the website: <http://www.sigpa.cl/ficha-elemento/canto-a-lo-poeta>.

### The poet-singer

The performer is primarily a singer. In some cases, he is also the author of the texts (and thus a poet), while at times he may simply set to music other poets' poems, which, at least in the past, had been transmitted orally. Today, the singer is almost always also an instrumentalist, capable of accompanying his own singing or that of other singers and poets during collective performances, called *ruedas*. The instruments commonly used are the Chilean *guitarrón* and the *guitarra traspuesta* and, more rarely, the *rabel*, a threestringed instrument in the family of Mediaeval rebecs. Despite a few documented exceptions, in the past the *cantor* and the *guitarrón* player were only men: women performed other repertoires of dances and songs, which they accompanied on guitar or harp. Today, this division is no longer a hard and fast rule, and *cantoras a lo poeta* and *guitarroneras* (female poet-singers and *guitarrón* players) are now commonly found. The *cantor* is not a paid professional but enjoys the recognition and respect of the community for his or her gifts, skills and role as a living memory of events, forms of knowledge and shared

values. Belonging to a largely oral-based culture, until a few years ago, the oldest singers were almost always illiterate peasants or animal rearers, yet capable not only of memorising many thousands of lines of verse concerning biblical stories and the most diverse topics, but also of creating their own versified narratives or philosophical reflections on the same topics, or improvising for hours during contests with other poets. Official culture has long had an ambiguous attitude towards these art forms. For example, *canto a lo divino* has only recently been accepted into the liturgical world of the Catholic Church, having previously been viewed with suspicion as an expression of a non-sanctioned popular religiosity. In turn, the official secular (Eurocentric) culture has extolled the *canto a lo poeta* for its deep Hispanic roots while overlooking its non-European characteristics. More recent studies, however, have highlighted the importance of Amerindian and mestizo components, such as the musical aesthetics.

### Repertoire and contexts

The repertoire of *canto a lo poeta* comprises *canto a lo divino* and *canto a lo humano*. Both use the same poetic structures (*versos*) and musical structures (*entonaciones*), while they differ significantly in the topics covered (*fundados* or *fundamentos*) and in the contexts and occasions when they are performed. The *canto a lo divino* is performed on religious holidays, during *novenas* in honour of the Virgin and the saints, or at funeral wakes and vigils (Fig. 1.3). The *velorio del angelito*, i.e. a wake for a dead child is one of the most important and intense duties for a *cantor a lo divino*. The *canto a lo divino* draws its *fundados* from episodes in the Old and New Testaments (the Creation, Cain and Abel, the Birth of Christ, the Apocalypse, etc.) or from paraliturgical themes (the lives of the saints, the story of the wandering Jew, etc.). The *canto lo humano*, on the other hand, was originally associated with everyday rural life, in particular resting and recreation during community work, such as harvesting or threshing. The songs have various themes, ranging from events in ancient history to local stories and social and political current affairs; from knowledge of past centuries (such as astronomy, geography or arithmetic) to everyday sentimental and social life: love songs, serenades (*esquinazos*) and good wishes to newlyweds (*parabienes*). Another part of *canto a lo humano* is the *paya*, i.e. contests of poetic improvisa-

tion between singers (*payadores*), according to highly codified, complex schemes, in which the poets demonstrate their compositional virtuosity. In both cases, *a lo humano* and *a lo divino*, the original usual setting was the private, extended family world, with the participation of a small local community. In recent times, however, *canto a lo poeta* has also entered public settings, such as those of religious liturgy, in the case of *canto a lo divino*, or the stage, in the case of *canto a lo humano* and especially of *paya*, with numerous festivals and meetings of *payadores* (see §4 *Contexts and performances*).



Fig. 1.3. Pedro Tapia and Ana Monardes, *cantores a lo divino*, during the vigil for the feast of the Virgen del Carmen at El Tebal (Valparaíso). Source: Manuel Morales, Daniel González, Danilo Petrovich Mundana, *Alta esfera*, Ediciones MUCAM.



Fig. 1.4. Erick Gil and Roberto Carreño are both poets and *guitarroneros*.

### ***Guitarroneros* and poet-singers**

Video 1.1 shows excerpts from the performances of two singers: Roberto Carreño, originally from Placilla (about 150 km south of Santiago), and Erick Gil, originally from Pirque (in the metropolitan area of Santiago) (Fig. 1.4). The recording was made in October 2020 at the home of ethnomusicologist Claudio Mercado in Pirque. The video is not of a complete performance, but only a few stanzas quoted from their respective compositions. In the first fragment, Roberto Carreño sings a *décima* (ten-line stanza) *a lo divino*, on the theme of the story of Adam and Eve:

*In the garden of earthly paradise  
God placed Adam and Eve to test them,  
to see if they were naturally good.  
He said to them: ‘You shall not eat  
from the tree of good and evil.’  
But the woman, tempted  
by a cunning snake,  
picked the first fruit  
out of sheer curiosity.*

In the second fragment, sung by Erick Gil, the subject is ‘Por el agua’ (About water) and belongs to the *a lo humano* category:

*On the puna [high plateau] the sun breaks through  
bringing its warmth  
steam rises from ice  
and upwards gathers towards the sky.  
One by one drops of rain  
fall on the steep rocks  
and run clean down the crags on natural paths  
forming rivers and streams  
from snowy peaks.*

In the first two sequences, the singers accompanied themselves on the *guitarrón*. In the third, however, Roberto Carreño employs the *guitarra traspuesta*, that is, with a different tuning from the standard version (see §2 *Instruments*). The subject of the text is the *cantor a lo divino*, his ethics and the responsibility that comes with possessing an artistic gift:

*The cantor ‘a lo divino’  
has a noble mission:  
to sing from the heart  
to each of his fellow humans.  
He can’t be mean  
with the gift that God has given him  
he can’t be insincere  
with his fellow cantores  
or expect flowers  
if he doesn’t deserve them.*

The original Spanish lyrics are included in the subtitles of the video.

1.1 GUITARRONEROS AND POET-SINGERS

<https://youtu.be/QCdOk0JrxiY?si=Uq8i4RqIPCpsbSYP>



## 2. The instruments: the *guitarrón* and the *guitarra traspuesta*

In *canto a lo poeta*, music and instrumental practice are placed at the service of the poem with its tempos, rhythms and metrical forms. At the same time, the instruments make a key contribution to creating special musical atmospheres and moods during the performance, both for the singers and the audience. Although *canto a lo poeta* has a collective dimension, as several performers intervene within the same performance, each singer is a soloist and is accompanied by only one instrument at a time. The instrumentation, as well as the performance styles and techniques, are the same for *canto a lo divino* and *canto a lo humano*. In [Video 1.1](#), Roberto Carreño and Erick Gil play the *guitarrón* and the *guitarra traspuesta*.

### The Chilean *guitarrón*

The Chilean *guitarrón* belongs to a large family of American chordophones clearly related to the guitar with four or five courses (cori or multiple string groups) that the Spanish introduced to the Americas. The American instruments are not rough copies of the 19th- and 20th-century guitar, but original local interpretations of older European models. At the same time, however, the Chilean *guitarrón* is unlike any other chordophone in Latin America in terms of the overall number of strings, as well as their atypical distribution in the courses, and the presence of *diablitos* (little devils), secondary strings outside the fingerboard. The Chilean *guitarrón* derives from the Spanish guitars of the colonial era, but the lack of documentation until the end of the 19th century, when the instrument had already assumed its current configuration, prevents us from reconstructing the intermediate steps of its development, for which there are various theories. According to some scholars, local makers and musicians may have multiplied unisons and octaves in the tuning to recreate on the European chordophone a sound with the dense timbre, rich in harmonics and percussive playing, that characterises the Amerindian aesthetics of the indigenous aerophone bands throughout the southern Andean area. But according to others, they were meant to reproduce the sounds of the organ and harpsichord on the guitar, since these instruments were not

always readily available in the Chilean churches at the time. Throughout the 19th century, the *guitarrón* was also found in urban contexts but then gradually fell out of favour and barely survived in the surrounding countryside. Relegated to the outskirts of the city, the *guitarrón* was mostly used to accompany *canto a lo poeta*, and especially *canto a lo divino*, felt to be the quintessence of that rural world with its archaic traits. By the mid-20th century, very few *guitarrones* could still be found in the Pirque and Puente Alto area. Thanks to the efforts of local enthusiasts, such as the Santos brothers and Alfonso Rubio, and a few researchers, including the multi-faceted musician Violeta Parra, the instrument gradually reacquired its popularity in Chile extending out from this circumscribed area. Today, the *guitarrón* is a resurgent, prestigious instrument, endowed with a strong identity and is now also used outside the traditional sphere in contexts and genres far removed from folk music.

### Description of the instrument

Despite its name, the *guitarrón* or *guitarra grande* (literally ‘large guitar’ Fig. 2.1) has slightly smaller overall dimensions than the modern guitar, except for the depth of the body, which tends to be greater. The *guitarrón* illustrated here has a figure of 8 shape and a flat bottom, reminiscent of the elongated forms of the early guitars but with more pronounced curves. The round sound hole on the soundboard is positioned at the end of the fingerboard. The bridge has two symmetrical side extensions (*puñales* – daggers) on the soundboard to make it more stable and able to withstand the considerable tension produced by the twenty-five strings. The neck is relatively short and the fingerboard has seven or more frets, originally movable and made from tied-on braided gut strings, now usually replaced by the same number of fixed metal bars. The characteristic large headstock houses twenty-one pegs or small keys, divided into three parallel series of seven each. Again, metal tuning pegs have now replaced the wooden pegs, which are more laborious to use and hold the tuning for less time. Another recent innovation is the use of imported wood to replace wood from no longer available indigenous trees. The instruments often feature ornamental elements (mother-of-pearl decorations, mirrors inserted in the fingerboard and wood inlays), with symbolic motifs, such as crosses, stars, doves, hearts and church naves. The two *puñales* also often have decorative elements.

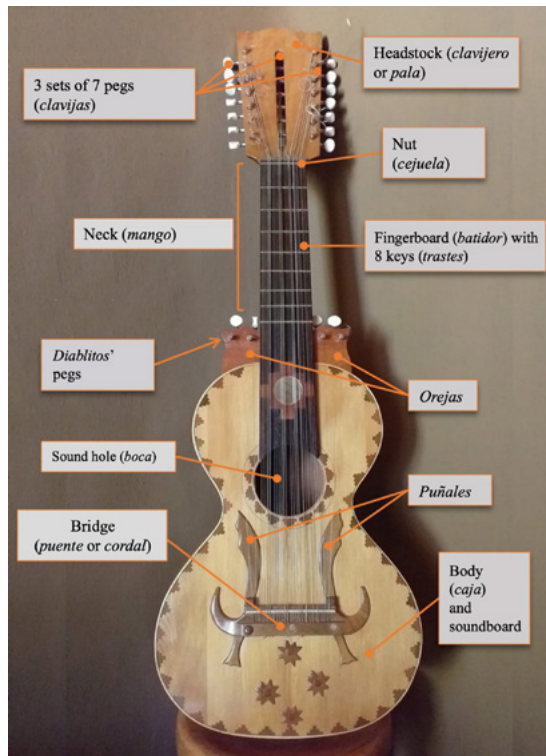


Fig. 2.1. The Chilean *guitarrón* and its parts. Instrument owned by Erick Gil Cornejo, made by Manuel Basoalto Maturana from Pirque (courtesy of Erick Gil Cornejo).

The stringing is the most original aspect of the instrument (Fig. 2.2 and 2.3). Unlike the *guitarra traspuesta*, the *guitarrón* has a well-established fixed tuning. This means that each performer can only make a few subtle individual variations, mainly in the choice of string materials and gauges, or in the absolute tuning, which can generally vary by two semitones (with the fourth course, considered the tonal centre of gravity of the instrument, tuned to G, G# or A). In recent years, instruments have been tuned in higher keys to suit the vocal register of female performers.

The twenty-one main strings are distributed in five groups or courses (*órdenes* or *ordenanzas*), tuned in intervals of fourths, except for the interval of a major third between the second and third course. Each course has from three to six strings, tuned in unison, octaves or double octaves. The lowest note and some of the highest pitches are in the middle, in the third course, thus giving rise to a form of non-progressive tuning (i.e. the string sequence is not ordered from the lowest to highest).



Four shorter single strings called *diablitos* (little devils) or *tiples* (trebles or ‘little singers’) are in the high register. They are positioned on the same horizontal plane as the other strings, but outside the fingerboard, two on each side, and are tightened by pegs attached to two extensions (*orejas* – ‘ears’) of the soundboard near the neck joint. The *diablitos* are struck as open strings and are used to complete the harmony, emphasising certain cadences with their clear high ringing sound, depending on the style of the performer.

At the end of the 19th century, there were three types of strings: braided silk (*entorchados*), gut (*cuerdas*) and steel (*alambres*). Today, various gauges of standard guitar strings are used, either metal or nylon, or in mixed combinations. The diversity of materials and the uneven distribution of unisons and octaves in the five courses, together with the associated micro-variations in intonation, mean that the *guitarrón* has an extraordinary variety of timbre, producing the effect of an ensemble of several instruments playing simultaneously. Together with the wide tessitura (range) but with a predominance of the middle register, this makes the instrument particularly suitable for its main function of accompanying singing.

### **The *guitarra traspuesta***

The guitars used in Chilean rural folk music do not have any major morphological differences from the modern six-string model, except for the various tunings, which are unlike the standard tuning, here called *por música* or *universal*. The different tunings are called *finares* or *afinares* (from the verb *afinar*, to tune), and the guitar tuned in this way is called the *guitarra traspuesta*. More than fifty different tunings used by Chilean *guitarra campesina* enthusiasts have been recorded, some closely associated with the *canto a lo poeta*. The tunings vary according to geographical area and each cantor only masters a few of them. Such transposed tunings often transfer the four- or five-string pattern of early guitars to the six strings of the modern instrument, simply by doubling one or more notes (Fig. 2.4). In general, the tunings obtained in this way are aimed at simplifying the positions of the left hand, so as to obtain chords with the maximum number of open strings, which are both very resonant and easy to play. The simplicity in the use of the left hand that this solution offers, however, entails the need to change tuning ac-

ording to the different keys and *entonaciones* (melodies) by modifying the intervals between the strings as required. Consequently, the *cantor* will have to learn and memorise a large number of positions, since the same chord requires different fingering depending on the tuning adopted each time. This means that performing *canto a lo poeta* requires having a good memory not only for the texts but also for these technical musical aspects.

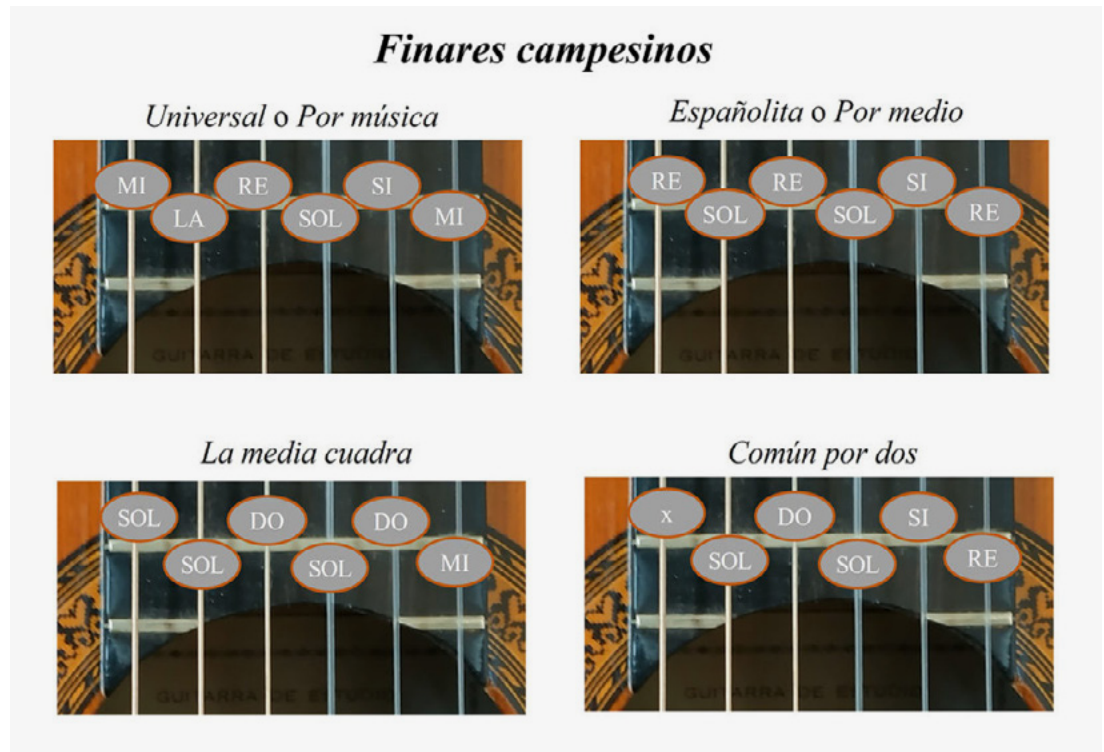


Fig. 2.4. Some examples of the tuning of the Chilean *guitarra traspuesta*. The second (*españolita* or *por medio*) is the tuning used by Roberto Carreño in the Video 2.1. The *media cuadra* has two strings in unison, whereas in the *común por dos* the tuning of the sixth string can be freely chosen.

In Video 2.1, Roberto Carreño describes how the features of the instrument can make playing less arduous for the performers, who in the past were often called upon to accompany dozens of poets and *cantores* for hours on end.

2.1 GUITARRA TRASPUESTA

<https://youtu.be/4yJ4NHfKug4?si=vH2K3DC52ZnFJA0i>



### 3. Performance techniques

#### *The toquío*

The *toquío* (from *tocar*, to touch or play) is the instrumental component associated with the *entonación* (melody), and is performed on the *guitarrón* or guitar. The combination of *toquío* and *entonación* constitutes the musical form accompanying the *verso* (the literary form of the composition). While the association between *verso* and *entonación* is essentially free, i.e. at the discretion of the individual *cantor*, each *entonación* is complemented by a specific corresponding *toquío*.

#### *Toquíos of the guitarrón*

The *guitarrón* is not easy to tune and play because of the large number of strings, arranged in a proportionally rather cramped space, given that the fingerboard is only slightly wider than that of a standard six-string guitar. The performer sits holding the instrument horizontally, like a normal guitar (Fig. 3.1), or more vertically, resting the bottom of the body on his or her legs. In the first position, the left hand acquires greater agility, while in the second, the right hand is freer. The greatest difficulty for the left hand is having to forcefully press down courses of five or six strings accurately. As a result, simpler fingerings, i.e. with many open strings, are preferred. The right hand, resting on the soundboard near the bridge, plucks the strings by alternating thumb, index and middle finger (Fig. 3.2) without using the technique of *rasgueo* – i.e. simultaneous hammering or strumming several strings with the thumb or the other fingers of the right hand, either from the top downwards or vice-versa.



Fig. 3.1. Posture of the singer-*guitarronero*.

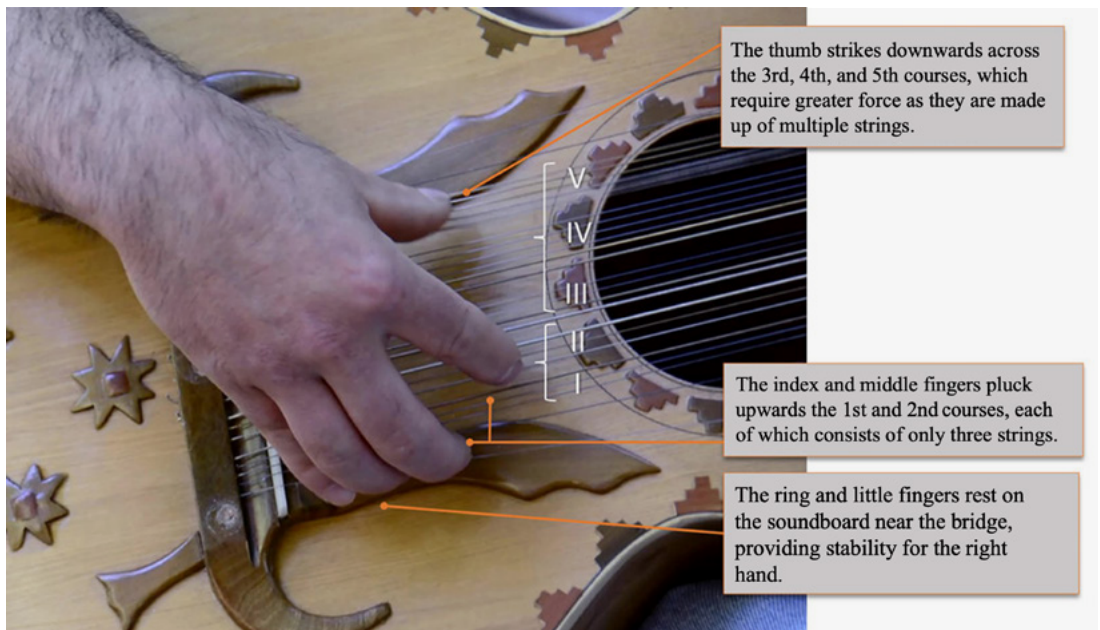


Fig. 3.2. Performance techniques: the position of the right hand.

The *toquío* of the *guitararrón* consists of a continuous melodic-harmonic sequence, which includes parts with melodic *punteo* (pizzicato) of single or double notes, and other figures, such as the *trinado* (trill), i.e., a rhythmically faster sequence on the notes of the chord. These figures are

combined in recurring patterns that characterise clausulae at the end of phrases and cadences. To emphasise certain passages, the performer may occasionally also strike the side strings, the *diablitos*, which complement and emphasise the harmony of the tonic and dominant chords in the high register. Thanks to the high frequency of plucked notes on the open string, with their prolonged resonance intensified by unisons and octaves of each course, the *toquío* of the *guitarrón* produces a continuous, flowing legato overall, called the *campanilleo* (bell-ringing effect), a quality appreciated by performers. The choice of playing technique – such as the simple chordal positions and the continuous alternation of thumb, forefinger and middle finger in the pizzicato – reflect the need not to tire out the instrumentalist, who traditionally had to accompany numerous *cantores* continuously, even for several hours.

### **Toquíos of the guitar**

In *canto a lo poeta* the guitar is mainly used with traspuesta tuning (see §2 *Instruments*). The *toquíos* of the guitar may also employ *punteo* and *trinado* techniques, probably due to the influence of the greatly respected model of the *guitarrón* and *canto a lo poeta*: in the video on the *guitarra traspuesta*, the *cantor* Roberto Carreño also defines the *punteada* technique as *a lo poeta*. Most guitar *toquíos*, however, are based on the techniques of *rasgueo*, i.e. the rhythmic striking of chords with the fingers of the right hand. The highly varied ways of striking the strings also include the characteristic *golpe apagado*, in which the hand stops the strings at the same time as it strikes them. The use of open tunings (i.e. producing a concordant harmony on the open strings) allows the right hand's *rasgueo* to be used to produce a melody in the high register on the first strings, while the open strings in the middle and low register provide continuous harmonic support in the form of a drone.

**Video 3.1**, illustrating the techniques, shows examples of how *punteo* and *trinado* are played on the *guitarrón*, and *rasgueo* on the *guitarra traspuesta*.

#### 3.1 PLAYING TECHNIQUES

<https://youtu.be/G5wDKqOyEuY?si=FBn2MIDVEtHnbaKN>



## Singing

The vocal style of *canto a lo poeta* is characterised by a tense, powerful emission, in a register that, given the peculiarities of each singer, generally tends towards the high-pitched, or at any rate the highest range of the singer's register. The expressiveness of the singing is due to its simplicity, tension and clarity, even in the diction of the text, the pivot of the poet's performance. There are no affective colourings, such as vibrato or embellishments. One procedure that contributes to enhancing the expressiveness and aesthetic individuality of the singing is what Santos Rubio, a *cantor* from Pirque, calls 'cantar arrogante': a style in which the voice tends to stretch the phrasing, to avoid coinciding with the rhythmic and regular accentuation of the instrument's *toquío*. The *verso* for Adam and Eve performed by Roberto Carreño provides an example of this deliberate independence between the metre of the instrument and the freer, more dilated metre of the song.

## 4. Contexts and performances

### Contexts

As an intrinsic expression of the rural world, *canto a lo poeta* reflects its rhythms, calendar and rituals. The poet-singers traditionally perform in the private spaces of homes, at the invitation of the hosts, who offer the guests hospitality, food and drink. The *canto a lo humano* is sung at wedding celebrations, baptisms and birthdays, or in moments of rest and recreation, at the end of a day of communal farm work, or even on the fringes of a religious festival. On the same occasions, the *paya*, a contest of poetic improvisation, is also held. *Canto lo divino*, on the other hand, is performed during funeral wakes, novenas, or religious festivities, such as the Cruz de Mayo or festivities dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Special consideration is given to the wake of a dead child (*velorio de angelito*), one of the most important and demanding artistic duties for *cantores* of *canto a lo divino*. During these wakes, once very frequent due to the high infant mortality rate in rural areas, but nowadays fortunately much rarer, the role of the singers is to help the family elaborate their mourning and

by expressing the community's spiritual values achieve a return to life, apparently negated by a tragic event that is difficult to accept. The wake follows a precise ritual, ending with the *cantor* interpreting the role of an angel addressing the child's parents to console them for their loss, as he or she ascends directly into heaven (Fig. 4.1).



Fig. 4.1. *Velorio de angelito*. Painting by Antonio Caro (1835-1903).

In recent times, *canto a lo poeta* has spread to new contexts, including urban situations, acquiring the dimension of public shows. On one hand, *canto a lo divino* has been accommodated in liturgical spaces, thus serving the Catholic Church through its considerable potential to attract congregations. And on the other hand, *canto a lo humano*, and especially *paya*, now features in public events, such as concerts, festivals and dedicated meetings of enthusiasts at local, national or international level.

In the two videos on this page, ethnomusicologist Claudio Mercado and singers Roberto Carreño and Erick Gil illustrate some aspects of performing and discuss new practices emerging alongside more conservative and traditional ones. The resulting picture is of an evolving cultural complex, whose vitality is closely linked to its capacity to incorporate and elaborate even radical changes to the codes of the genre.

In *canto a lo poeta*, even when the singing and the accompaniment are performed by different persons, the cantor is always a soloist. When several singers are present, they perform in turns, one at a time. This practice, however, can also take on a collective character, evident in the case of the *rueda de cantores*.

In [Video 4.1](#), Claudio Mercado outlines the context of the traditional use of *canto a lo divino* and then describes the performative mechanism of the *rueda*. In the development of the *rueda* (literally ‘wheel’ or ‘circle’), the singers take turns following a cyclical rotation, until they create a kind of extended ‘meta-poem’, which focuses on a single topic (*fundado*, or *fundamento*) but is actually the result of the interweaving of their respective, different compositions (*versos*). A *rueda* may last all night long, from dusk to dawn, passing from one *fundado* to the next, and alternating the singing of *canto a lo poeta* with other songs and dances.

This procedure is still followed today, albeit with significant changes compared to the customs of the past. Previously, the *rueda* was normally accompanied by a single instrumentalist, repeating the same *entonación* (melody), to which each singer had to adapt, thus generating an iterative, hypnotic effect. Nowadays, however, in the Pirque area, the individual *cantores* accompany themselves, with their own *entonación* and corresponding *toquío* (style of accompaniment), creating a discontinuity in the music that considerably reduces the possibility of generating a hypnotic state. There is no doubt, however, that the effort of staying awake all night while remembering a huge number of lines of verse and adapting to the *fundados* proposed from time to time without repeating stanzas already sung by colleagues, involves a profound, intense psycho-physical experience in a demanding situation pushing the performers to their limits.

#### 4.1 PERFORMANCE CONTEXTS: LA RUEDA DE CANTORES

[https://youtu.be/yIsOo7-3\\_DE?si=b9vdIahGcHpL9t0J](https://youtu.be/yIsOo7-3_DE?si=b9vdIahGcHpL9t0J)



In [Video 4.2](#), the ethnomusicologist and the singers discuss the different uses of *canto a lo divino* and *canto a lo humano*. While the former is still conditioned by the performer’s religious sentiment, the latter appears to be developing in the direction of larger public performances, especially the art of *paya* (improvisation). In this field, exchanges with other Latin

American currents of *repentismo* (poetic improvisation) has been crucial and has raised the poetic, musical and performing standards, especially of younger performers. The change can be seen in the emergence of a new generation of singers who have had a very good grounding and are willing to experiment with non-canonical forms, both in the use of instruments and in going beyond traditional codes, as for example, with the growing presence of female performers of *canto a lo poeta*.

4.2 CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

<https://youtu.be/U8nZC72Mctw?si=nAxR6S6fHCc4SBQ4>



## 5. Formal analysis: metrical and musical structure

From a formal point of view, *canto a lo poeta* is based on specific poetic metrical forms (the *cuarteta*, the *décima espinela* and the *verso*), melodies (*entonaciones*) and instrumental accompaniments (*toquíos*).

### The *décima espinela*

The main metrical form employed by the singers is the *décima espinela*, a stanza form created at the end of the 16th century and attributed to the Spanish poet and musician Vicente Espinel. Today, the *espinela* is one of the most widespread, lively poetic forms in the popular literatures of Latin America, particularly as regards oral tradition and improvisation. The *espinela* consists of ten octosyllabic lines (which the singers call *vocablos*) linked by rhymes according to the obligatory **abbaaccddc** scheme. In the *canto a lo poeta* tradition, unlike the canonical scheme, non-consonant rhymes are also allowed. Three sub-parts can be distinguished within the *espinela*: two envelope quatrains (lines 1-4, with **abba** rhyme, and 7-10, with **cdcc**), called *redondillas* in Hispanic metrics and *cuartetos cuadradas* or *cuartetos redondas* in the Chilean context; and a *puente* (bridge) connecting them by their external rhymes (lines 5-6, with an **ac** rhyme).



### An example of a *verso*: ‘Décimas a lo humano por el agua’

‘Décimas a lo humano por el agua’ is an original composition by Erick Gil Cornejo. In [Video 1.1](#) there is a clip of the first *décima*, interpreted by Erick Gil himself. The subject or *fundado* of the text – ‘Por el agua’ – falls within the category of the *canto a lo humano* and in this case the poet uses it to address an issue by making an environmental and political critique, expressing his dissent over the privatisation of water resources, introduced by the neo-liberal policies of Chilean governments.

### The *entonación*

The melodies to which the singers set their *versos* are called *entonaciones*. In general, each *entonación* can be associated with any *verso* or *fundamento*, at the singer’s discretion, and therefore becomes interchangeable with the texts. The instrumental accompaniment of the *entonación* is called the *toquió* (from the verb *tocar*, ‘to touch’ or ‘to play’) and is usually performed on the *guitarrón* or *guitar*. The development of the *entonación* coincides in its overall duration with one *décima*, but its internal structure is articulated differently (Fig. 5.1): whereas the main syntactic pause divides the literary *décima* into two unequal parts (4+6 lines), the musical structure has two symmetrical periods of three phrases each (3+3). For the pause between the two musical periods to coincide with the pause in the text, the mismatch between the two structures must be compensated for. In the example analysed in the video ‘Por Adán y Eva’ ([Video 5.1](#)), we see how the compensation is achieved in the first *cuarteta* in two different ways: by lengthening the duration of the singing of the first line of verse until it coincides with a complete musical phrase and by repeating the third line.

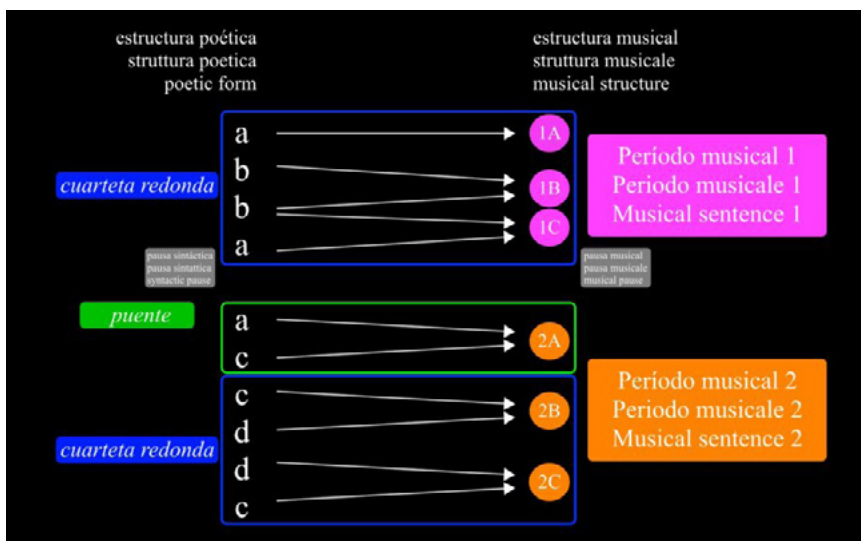


Fig. 5.1. Diagram of the relationship between metrical structure (*décima espinela*) and musical structure in a stanza of the *verso* 'Por Adán y Eva', as performed by Roberto Carreño in Video 5.1.

The melodies have a certain variety, oscillating between the tonal arrangement and the memory of historic European modes. They generally move within a reduced range (the distance between the lowest and the highest note), between a minimum interval of a fifth and a maximum interval of an octave; they are mostly syllabic (each syllable corresponds to a single note) and psalmodic (the intervals between the notes are predominantly conjunct, by a tone or a semitone). The relationship between metrical and musical structure can also vary. In some melodies, such as the one sung here by Erick Gil, a short melodic and textural aside is introduced with the words *Ay sí*, added but not counted in the metric of the *décima*. A further element of rhythmic variation is provided by the diversity of accompaniments (*toquiños*) associated with the *entonaciones*. On the other hand, a fixed element is the presence of descending melodic curves (*caídas*) at the fourth and tenth lines of the *décima*, i.e. the conclusion of each of the two musical periods making up the *entonación*. Video 5.1 shows the metric and musical structures of the first *décima* of 'Por Adán y Eva', sung by Roberto Carreño. In his interpretation, the phrasing of the song tends to be stretched to avoid coinciding with the more regular accentuation of the *toquiño*.

5.1 POR ADÁN Y EVA. METRIC AND MUSICAL STRUCTURE

[https://youtu.be/\\_sOr-6qP5OU?si=9oFdR9\\_ZJuQ1Zs0f](https://youtu.be/_sOr-6qP5OU?si=9oFdR9_ZJuQ1Zs0f)



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Test your skills → in this part you can test what you have learned in the listening guide:

## CANTO A LO POETA. GUITARRONEROS AND POET-SINGERS OF CENTRAL CHILE

The following sets of quizzes present 10 multiple-choice questions each. The sets refer to the corresponding chapters:

1. INTRODUCTION  
<https://forms.gle/eKkeZLcMdRBJh5e76>

> VAI AL QUIZ

2.-3. INSTRUMENTS AND PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUES  
<https://forms.gle/FSis8fsonN1BQULq9>

> VAI AL QUIZ

4. CONTEXTS AND PERFORMANCE  
<https://forms.gle/57DEiiTtEPp9iQ7A7>

> VAI AL QUIZ

5. FORMAL ANALYSIS  
<https://forms.gle/7kd4dhv5u7tjLcT6>

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ANSWER THE QUESTIONS, COMPLETE THE SERIES BY SUBMITTING YOUR ANSWERS, AND YOU WILL RECEIVE FEEDBACK FOR EACH ANSWER!

In some rural localities of central Chile, at times even just a few kilometres from the metropolis of Santiago, a tradition of sung folk poetry, rooted in the deep layers of Spanish colonial culture, has survived, albeit with syncretically absorbed native elements.

In their texts (*versos*) – partly learnt through oral transmission and partly newly created or improvised – the singers of *canto a lo poeta* deal with biblical and parabiblical themes (or *canto a lo divino*) and profane themes (*canto a lo humano*). The profane themes include poems reflecting ancient forms of knowledge of Mediaeval origin, while other songs are embedded in social life. The *cantores* (poet-singers) accompany themselves on guitars with specific transposed tunings and especially the Chilean *guitarrón*, an unusual local derivation from the Spanish baroque guitar. The modal settings along with the metric verse forms and the tradition of poetic counterpoint have evolved from a Hispanic colonial substratum, shared by various other regions of Latin America.

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Stefano Gavagnin earned a PhD in ethnomusicology from ‘La Sapienza’ University of Rome (2020) and previously a degree in History of Music from Ca’ Foscari University (Venice). He teaches literature at the Liceo Artistico e Musicale in Venice. His research focuses on the Latin American folk revival, with a particular interest in the transnational dynamics of Latin American Nueva Canción and Andean music. He also explored this perspective as a musician. He has published essays in collective volumes and in European and Latin American journals, such as *Rivista italiana di Musicologia*, *XXth Century Music*, *Journal of Music Criticism*, *Anclajes*, and *Revista Argentina de Musicología*. With Laura Jordán and Javier Rodríguez, he edited the dossier ‘Territorios y trayectorias de la Nueva Canción Latinoamericana’ (2022) for *Cuadernos de música iberoamericana*. He is the author of the monograph *Suonando il Cile e le Ande. L’esperienza di una generazione di italiani tra musica dell’altro e memoria di sé (1973-2023)*, Rome, Neoclassica, 2024.