

“Gregorio Cortez”--Trovadores Regionales (1929)

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Essay by Ilan Stavans and Ella C. Rose (guest post)*



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“Gregorio Cortez” is a *corrido* originating from the Mexican-American borderlands that details a confrontation between a vaquero and a police officer. Corridos are best defined as Mexican folk ballads from this region, particularly around the border between Texas and Mexico. They tell stories of heroics and tragedies, and have been used to spread both news and political messages. Although they are an important tradition in the telling of history, corridos are known for their exaggeration and larger-than-life characters. It can be difficult for listeners to distinguish between reality and fantasy. As such, corridos, in their narrative, alter real people and events into heroes and myths, and hold unique power as story-telling mechanisms. “Gregorio Cortez” is arguably the best-known corrido from the turn of the twentieth century, and has enjoyed several resurgences in popularity. To this day, it remains well-known, and its legacy has provided a template for many additional ballads that have followed.

The corrido tells the story of a vaquero, or cowboy, who is working on a ranch with his brother. This base story, as far as we know, is essentially true--Gregorio Cortez and his brother were real people who did suffer a run-in with the law in 1901, although, keeping with tradition, parts of the story are certainly embellished within the corrido. The story goes that a sheriff and a couple of other law enforcement officials were on the hunt for a horse thief and were enquiring around at the ranch where Cortez and his brother were working. The sheriff did not speak Spanish, so he had an interpreter with him. Supposedly, the interpreter misunderstood some of the things that Cortez said to the sheriff, although it is unclear whether he actually misunderstood them or if he was trying to cause trouble. Either way, the sheriff became convinced that Cortez was being disingenuous as a result of this misinterpretation. As the situation escalated, so did the consequences of the language barrier. Ultimately, Cortez’s brother was shot and wounded by one of the deputies. In what he perceived to be self-defense, Cortez drew a pistol, shot the sheriff, and fled. A manhunt involving hundreds of people ensued, and about a week later, Cortez was discovered and arrested in Texas.

“Gregorio Cortez” was supposedly written during the manhunt. At the time, it was journalistic-- a way of spreading news. In the years that have followed, it has become a symbol of the ongoing conflict at the border between the United States and Mexico, both the visible, violent conflict that frequently results in loss of life, and the cultural conflict and language barriers between Mexican Americans and Anglo Americans in the borderlands region. As the Cortez event was unfolding, there was a lot of public concern that he would not receive a fair trial because of the injustice intrinsic to the United States legal system. These concerns further associate the song and its legacy with tension and distrust between the groups on opposite sides of the border. Because the manhunt was so dramatic and public, Cortez gained a lot of supporters and fans who began to idolize him and view him as a larger-than-life character. He was sentenced to life in prison, but won early release, which many of his supporters saw as a triumph over a legal system biased against Mexican Americans.

Although it is thought that the ballad was written as the events that it describes were taking place, no one is quite sure who to attribute the corrido to. Today, it is performed by many different artists, and has many variations. During the Mexican Revolution, “Gregorio Cortez,” along with other corridos, served as a symbol of hope. It has enjoyed significant media attention and continues to be popular to this day. A film called “The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez,” made originally by PBS in 1983, with Edward James Olmos as the lead and directed by Robert M. Young from a screenplay by Victor Villaseñor, retells the Cortez story from the interpreter’s perspective.

Like most corridos, “Gregorio Cortez” is upbeat. The performance by Trovadores Regionales features two voices accompanied by an acoustic guitar plucking a simple harmony. Throughout the majority of the piece, the two vocal parts are separated by a third, a musical interval used frequently in the creation of harmony. Thirds can be either major, slightly further apart and evocative of positive emotions, or minor, slightly closer together, and evocative of sadness and mourning. The harmonies in “Gregorio Cortez” feature both major and minor thirds, and frequently change from one variety to the other in quick succession. The effect is that of epic tragedy, a song about injustice and heroics told in glorious tradition, and music rapidly swimming out of happiness and sadness. Major and minor chords work together to inspire and describe glory, without diminishing the tragedy and bitterness experienced by Cortez. The song likely owes some of its power and legacy to this harmonious juxtaposition. The corrido does this all without deviating outside of its key signature, creating a cohesive feeling with no notes that sound as though they are not meant to be there. The guitar part is simple, and exists to compliment the vocals without distracting from them.

“Gregorio Cortez” is written in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, meaning that there are three beats in every measure and that the quarter note gets the beat, which is common for corridos and characteristic of waltzes. The tempo is fast, and the key signature features three sharps, making this piece in A major and F sharp minor. As it ends on a major chord with a feeling of hope, it is best described as being in A major. Long, sustained notes followed by dramatic pauses allow the singers to catch their breath, and leave listeners on the edge of their seats, waiting for the next part of the story.

In “Gregorio Cortez,” music and storytelling work together to create a beautiful, multi-faceted piece with lasting purpose and legacy. Major and minor come together to describe injustice and

heroics with equal conviction. It is easy to understand why this piece has endured far beyond the event that inspired it.

Ilan Stavans is the Lewis-Sebring Professor of Humanities and Latin American and Latino Culture at Amherst College and the publisher of Restless Books. He is the general editor of "The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature."

Ella C. Rose is a student at Amherst College.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author(s) and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

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