Tarantas versus Tarantos
John Moore

It is well known that the difference between tarantas and tarantos, is that the former is libre while the latter has a slow 4/4 compás (Pohren characterizes it as ‘zamba-like’).

For this reason the danced version is called taranto - it usually a slow 4/4 dance, speeding up at the end into either tango or rumba.

One thing that has puzzled me, however, is that when taranto is sung without dance, it is often libre. At first I thought this was just mis-labeling, but I am not so sure anymore.

I listened to all the things labeled ‘taranto’ that I could find, and while 14 cuts were recorded with a 4/4 compás, 14 cuts were libre - 50% out of a sample of 28 recordings.

Of those labeled ‘tarantas’, all 38 recordings that I listened to were libre.

As mentioned above, Paco de Lucía accompanies his brother with compás. He also plays a compás for Fosforito, and for Camarón on their first colaboración especial record. However, after that, Camarón records seven more things labeled ‘taranto’, and Paco play for all of them; and they are all libre.

Aside from Mairena, Chocolate, and Camarón, libre tarantos are recorded by Jose Sorroche, Caracol, Chaquetón, Menese and Sordera (he actually has two recordings - one with and one without compás).

So what is going on? Clearly tarantas is libre, but what about tarantos? The following three explanations come to mind:

---

1 Los Chiquillos de Algeciras were Paco de Lucía and his singer brother Pepe, when in their teens. On some versions of the Tarantas y Tarantos record there is an error, where instead of including their taranto, they include a siguíyiras.
A. The singers in question don’t know what they’re doing.

- unlikely - we’re talking about Mairena, Chocolate, Camarón, Menese, ... These are pretty heavy hitters, and in particular, include singers who make a point of knowing what they are doing.

B. The records are mis-labeled.

- It is common folklore that flamenco records are often mis-labeled. I’m not sure how wide-spread this really is. Anyway, if this is the explanation, it would suggest that record companies perform at about chance with respect to the distinction between tarantas and tarantos. However, this mis-labeling hypothesis would predict that things labeled ‘tarantas’ should also be wrong - clearly this is not the case, as evidenced by the 38 libre cantes labeled ‘tarantas’.

C. Tarantos, as a cante with compás, is a rather artificial cante, created mainly to make it danceable.

- This is what I think may be going on. I suspect that the terms ‘tarantas’ and ‘tarantos’ are used more or less interchangably, except that there is some awareness that when it is in compás it must be tarantos. Some singers seem to feel the need to sing tarantos in compás, others don’t (and others, like Camarón and Sordera, sing them both ways).

Further evidence that tarantos is not created as a cante a compás comes from its rather awkward fit into the baile. My wife, who has danced it on a number of occasions describes the cante as ‘round peg in a square hole’. The basically libre nature of the cante is kept in compás only through the guitarist’s compas. This, in fact causes problems with the baile:

Usually, the dancer does a remate between tercios of the cante - there is a traditional riff the guitarist does for this:

“da-da-da-dum-dum-dum-da-dumpy-dumpy-dum” (ending on D)

The problem is where does this riff come in. If the guitarist stays in compás, then it has to come in on the tail of the tercio - however, it is somewhat tricky for all parties involved to anticipate when this will be, due to the prolongation of the tercio by the singer. To get around this problem, some guitarists remata the end of the tercio with a rasgueado, and then do the run. This helps signal to the dancer when to do his or her remate. However, the rasgueado also breaks the 4/4 compás, and technically, causes everyone to go out of compás.

I once played for a dance class where Manolete was mounting a taranto. Towards the end of the classes, he brought in a singer and also the guitarist Felipe Maya. Soon the issue of whether to rematar the tercio with the rasgueado or not came up, and Manolete, the singer, and Felipe started arguing about it. After the class was over, the argument continued in the Moka bar (the bar where everyone went from Amor de Dios). Each person would sing
‘Ay mi muchacho - brump - da-da ..’

- ‘¡Que no! - ay mi muchacho - da-da ...’

- ‘¡Que no! - ....’

This went on, so I left, had lunch, took a nap, and came back - they were still at it, and David Serva had joined the argument:

‘Ay mi muchacho - brump - da-da ..’

- ‘¡Que no! - ay mi muchacho - da-da ...’

- ‘¡Que no! - ....’

Years later, I was back in Madrid watching a video of a rehearsal where a taranto was being put together for a concert. Exactly the same argument started, and the dancer stormed out of the room in frustration.

A round peg in a square hole ...