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## Totó la Momposina: Chambacú

MARCH 19, 2018 | [DOROTHY POTTER SNYDER \(HTTP://BLOG.NYFOS.ORG/AUTHOR/DOROTHYPOTTER-SNYDER\)](http://blog.nyfos.org/author/dorothypotter-snyder)

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After hearing from *mi querido guapo* Steven Blier (<http://nyfos.org/about/>) last week about his plan to create an entire NYFOS program around García Lorca, I decided to devote my week as NYFOS guest blogger to five of my favorite Hispanic women vocalists so that I might demonstrate *duende* by example.

What is *duende*? In *Theory and Play of the Duende*, García Lorca writes:

“ All through Andalusia, from the rock of Jaén to the snail’s-shell of Cadiz, people constantly talk about the *duende* and recognize it wherever it appears with a fine instinct. That wonderful singer El Lebrijano, creator of the *Debla*, said: ‘On days when I sing with *duende* no one can touch me.’ The old Gypsy dancer La Malena once heard Brailowsky play a fragment of Bach, and exclaimed: ‘*Olé!* That has *duende!*’ but was bored by Gluck, Brahms and Milhaud. And Manuel Torre, a man who had more culture in his veins than anyone I’ve known, on hearing Falla play his own *Nocturno del Generalife* spoke this splendid sentence: ‘All that has dark sounds has *duende.*’ And there’s no deeper truth than that. (Translation: A.S. Kline (<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/Admin/Bio.php>))

But lest you should think *duende* exists only in Spain, let me assure you that it is here in the Americas and the Caribbean, too, though here it sometimes goes by other names. The women I am going to write about this week are an eclectic group, singing in a variety of different styles from several countries and two continents; all have magnificent instruments and sing in traditions deeply-rooted in the lands from which they arise; and they all have that extra element that sensitive artists everywhere in the world recognize, though they call it by different names. Simply put, these gals got *duende*.

They are not necessarily the Latin vocalists who are better-known by North Americans, though they should be, and there are definitely some missing. I choose these five, selfishly, because I love them best; they demonstrate vocal courage, artistic invention, and tonal genius as well as possessing powerful instruments. I choose them because *ellas me ponen los pelitos en punta*—they make my small hairs stand on end.

At 70, Totó La Momposina (<http://www.totolamomposina.com/>) is still the premiere exponent and voice of Afro-Colombian music. She is an elegant stylist and dancer from the colonial village of Mompox, a World Heritage Site on an island in the middle of the great Magdalena river which acts as a cultural vein connecting the musical tradition of the Andes to the Afro-Colombian coastline. I had the pleasure of singing some of Totó’s repertoire in the 90s as part of the voice and percussion

ensemble Fiesta de Tambores directed by Colombian singer Lucía Pulido (<http://www.luciapulido.com/>) in New York, an experience that still stands as some of the most physically-taxing, sweaty and insanely fun singing I have ever done.

Totó has almost single-handedly kept alive the roots tradition of Colombian *cumbia* and *bullerengue*, and she is the matriarch of a large clan of young musicians who are learning this tradition at her feet. Totó's blend of indigenous, African and Hispanic elements, her (super)natural vocal power that emerges from the Earth itself, the rawness and breath of her tone, and her no-fault rhythmic sensibility win her the number one spot on my list of gals with *duende*.

I choose Totó's rendition of the cumbia, "Chambacú (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADnc1mWSsBE>)" because of the long, water-clear notes and the way she floats on top of the rhythm as if she were improvising (she isn't). It is a *cumbia herida* (a wounded cumbia), a call to action, and an artifact of generational suffering and persistence of joy amongst Afro-Colombian people.

### Chambacú - Totó la Momposina



Dorothy Potter Snyder (<http://www.dorothypotter.com/>) is a writer, literary translator and consultant on Latin American music and culture. She has the honor of being NYFOS Artistic Director and co-founder Steven Blier's Spanish language coach (<http://dorothypotterspanish.com/>), and has contributed to his program notes for NYFOS concerts involving *el cancionero hispano*. A former New Yorker, she now lives in Hillsborough, North Carolina.

*Read other posts by Dorothy Potter Snyder* (<http://blog.nyfos.org/author/dorothypottersnyder>).

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