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Voices on the River Rhine: Multimusicality and The Unknown Spanish Levant series in Cologne

*The Unknown Spanish Levant series covers the compilation of nine albums recorded in Spain, Germany, Brazil, Mexico, Turkey, and Egypt from 2021 to 2024. The album series entails the author's compositions inspired by the revitalization of the Cancionero Popular Villenense (Soler 2006) – awarded by the Institute of Musicology of Spain in 1949 as one of the most extensive musicological documentations of southeastern Spanish popular music – and its intercultural coexistence with musical cultures across the world. The purpose of The Unknown Spanish Levant series not only contributes to the revival of local musical styles (Malagueña, romances, etc.) but it also brings awareness of the historical circulation of *musica villenense* within and beyond the Iberian Peninsula – historically and at present. Specifically, this article focuses on the making of Voices on the River Rhine as part of The Unknown Spanish Levant series in Germany in 2024. In this album, there are musical collaborations with Germany and migrant communities from Cuba, Iran, Spain, and Greece residing in Cologne, as well as with two musicians residing in Alicante. This article addresses such intercultural music practices as multimusicality from two main perspectives: historical circulation of music and intercultural music practices. In so doing, this article further develops the notion of multimusicality – a concept previously used by the author to reconsider musical practices of Saharawi music moving between refugee camps in Algeria, Mauritania and Europe (2004–2015).*

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Introduction

Villena – a town of approximately 34.000 inhabitants – is situated in the province of Alicante in the eastern Mediterranean coast of Spain - also known as the Spanish Levant. The *Cancionero popular Villenense* (Soler 2006) contains 254 songs in musical transcriptions and more than 2500 couplets – octosyllable rhymes in ABAB – in the literary section. Since 2020, I conducted the revitalization of the *Cancionero popular Villenense* through local and intergenerational participation of more than 300 local citizens from primary schools, music conservatories, senior citizens, choirs, or professional musicians among others. Primarily, the goal of this revitalization project was rooted in the possibility of knowing how the songs of this songbook sound through their local population because there are no historical recordings of the songbook's musical transcriptions.

During my in-depth analysis of musical transcriptions from the *cancionero popular Villenense*, I encountered musical and poetic connections between the above-mentioned musical transcriptions and my previous revitalization projects on historical recordings from southern African countries at the International Library of African Music (ILAM), the creation of a Saharawi archive in refugee camps in Western Sahara, the historical study of music circulation between al-Andalus and India; and Afro-Latin music in Mexico and Brazil. To explore such musical and poetic connections, I composed the album *Cancionero popular-experimental: The Unknown Spanish Levant (Volume 1)* – funded by the Instituto Valenciano de Cultura (IVC) in 2021. From 2021 to 2024, other grants and fellowships helped me to compose the album series entitled *The Unknown Spanish Levant* in Egypt, Mexico, Brazil, Turkey, Spain, and Germany. In so doing, I asserted how revitalization projects of songbooks could contribute to promote intercultural music practices and simultaneously to address the interaction between regionalization and cultural circulation of music historically. Specifically, this article analyses the making of *Voices on the River Rhine* during 2024 and it addresses such intercultural music practice as multimusicality.

A multilocated context for the completion of *Voices on the River Rhine* in Cologne

Since the Europe's so-called 'refugee crisis', the city of Cologne has been observed through multiple lens either as highly intercultural (Salzbrunn and Ellinghaus 2023) or to fall into racial prejudices over African and Asian migrant communities (Wigger, Yendel and Herbert 2022). Salzbrunn and Ellinghaus highlight how *Kölner* musical culture provides a rich heritage of intercultural coexistence between German and migrant communities through choirs, humorous carnival songs or even through the promotion of annual events like Carnival or festivals as Africologne – a festival promoting African music

concerts, theatre, films, etc. As part of Salzbrunn and Ellinghaus's narratives on interculturalism, Wigger, Yendel and Herbert address how racist and xenophobic discourses stretching over a large number European cities affected cultural coexistence in Cologne. Disparate narratives based on cultural consumption of non-German music, annual events celebrating tolerance and even the possibility of discussing social issues affecting migrant communities provide a valuable platform to foster coexistence.

To consider such intercultural aspects of Cologne, the making of the album *Voices on the River Rhine* offered me a valuable platform to collaborate with German nationals and migrant and refugee musicians from Iran, Kurdistan, Cuba, Spain, and Greece. The title of the album coheres the possibility of embodying multiple voices across the world during the process of music-making in Cologne; a critical approach to the complexities of analyzing intercultural nuances in many European cities; and a comparative approach on how interculturality is observed in previous albums for the completion of *The Unknown Spanish Levant series* in North Africa and Latin America.

Multimusicality in relation to historical circulation of music and intercultural music practices

The notion of multimusicality (Amoros 2014; 2018) provides a critical approach to the lack of musicological analysis for the study of intercultural music practices. A significant number of studies on intercultural music practices are rather focussed on the representation of music such as the development of jazz in Africa as a form of musical cosmopolitanism (Turino 2000; Feld 2012), the sociological aspects of Malian musicians performing multiple Malian styles in Bamako and defined as Afropolitanism (Skinner 2015), and more recently by reconsidering music and citizenship as a way of studying musician's mobility (Stokes 2023; Turino 2016; Avelar and Dunn 2011).

Stokes and Turino highlight emergent issues on the notion of music and citizenship by focussing on cultural interactions with migrant communities, the rise of right-wing parties, and environmentalism conditioning musician's mobility in European and North American (United States mainly) societies. However, during the making of *Voices on the River Rhine*, the notion of citizenship offers a wide range of definitions including those from the Global South as an attempt to unravel the relationship between "ex-coloniser and ex-colonised" in the postcolonial or decolonial period (Mamdani 1992, Mbembe 2001, Pillay 2021, De Souza 2020). During the making of *Voices on the River Rhine*, musicians' mobility evokes multiple notions of citizenship moving towards narratives of historical reparation through intercultural music practices in the West. Thus, multimusicality does not only define present intercultural music practices but it also asserts how revitalization projects of songbooks

could contribute to the interaction between regionalization and cultural circulation of *musica Villenense* across the world through music-making.

Multimusicality and the making of *Voices on the River Rhine*

The album *Voices on the River Rhine* was composed during my visiting professorship at the University of Cologne from October 2023 to January 2024 and during my present Humboldt fellowship (also hosted by University of Cologne at Global South Studies Center). By evoking the possibility of embodying multiple voices and musical styles in Cologne, this album collects couplets and traditional Levantine musical styles (Trovos, Malagueñas, Parrandas, romances and *cantos de pandorga*) from “*cancionero popular Villenense*” to an unknown dimension together with Cuban, Kurdish, Greek, German and Iranian voices.

1. Trovos

Trovos's cyclical cadence I-V-ii-III-I-V-III-ii was popularized by “tio Juan Rita” (1912–2020) from the region of Murcia - approximately 100 kilometers away from Villena during the last century. Traditionally, the main features of Trovos lie in improvising humorous couplets accompanied by bandurrias, guitars, and clarinet. For the album *Voices on the River Rhine*, Trovos were sung by the Cuban singer, Mirta Junco Wambrug, and accompanied on electric guitar by the author. The Cuban singer improvised over the traditional melodic structure of Trovos by highlighting her local influences from Cuban *repentismo* and captivated by the bucolic character of someone imprisoned improvising couplets in her cell such as: *El pajarillo en la jaula, se divierte en el alambre, asi me divierto yo, en las rejas de la carcel* [The bird enjoys while singing in its cage, that is the way I enjoy while being imprisoned].

By exploring ways of singing couplets either as Trovos or *repentismo*, Junco Wambrug and the author evoked the transoceanic and historical circulation of couplets such as “*Al mar fui a por naranjas*” found in *cancionero popular Villenense* and sung by the Chilean Hector Pavez (2008), Germán Habana Silva y Enrique Ayona in Mexico (1967), or in Spain by Victor Manuel (2001) and the author (2021) among others.

As a case in point, by reconsidering the notion multimusicality in European cities through the making of *Voices on the River Rhine*, selected couplets from *cancionero Villenense* (Soler 2006) promoted interculturality and addressed historical and social reparations such as: anti-colonial sentiments related to Cuban independence in couplet 399, racism against the Roma community (909), or even “devotional” couplets to the virgin Virtudes from Villena (635).

During the compositional process of the song ‘Trovos’, linguistic, poetic, and musicological relationships between Cuban and Spanish ways of singing couplets provided a valuable platform to reconsider the historical nuances of intercultural music practices. Stanton (2018: 4) defines such musical encounters

as “musicking the borders” and furthermore, as a way of providing a platform for historical and cultural reparation through music-making. However, to highlight the impact of intercultural music practices as reparatory, from a historical and musicological point of view, it is also important to address that the use of couplets in Trovos evokes coloniality, assimilation of a new culture, and, as a result of such colonial context, new musical styles emerged in Latin America. Many Latin American cultures were absorbed into an “imagined mestizo nationalism” – like the foundation of certain trends of Mexican nationalism based on the metaphor of being the sons of an indigenous woman known as Malinche and Hernan Cortes – created and supported by the middle classes and the intellectual elites in Latin America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Harrison 2012: 505). Thus, a significant number of Latin American nations represent its popular music as a form of cultural and historical reparation in the attempt to disintegrate the notion of colonizer and colonized in national cultures. Beyond national narratives of popular music, multimusicality offers a valuable platform to reconsider both regionalization and cultural circulation of *música Villenense* through music-making and by two Spanish-speaking migrants composing music together in Cologne.

Regarding traditional ways of performing Trovos, the possibility of singing couplets related to someone imprisoned does not relate to the joyful and *picaresca* atmosphere of Trovos in the region of Murcia. In addition, Trovos’s cyclical cadence was performed by the author on electric guitar and by using different forms of improvisation closed to West African blues – based on his multiple musical experiences in Mauritania (2020) and Mali (2014). Contrary to traditional ways of playing the guitar strumming chords in Trovos, the author used his electric guitar for comping melodies arrangements.

2. *Malagueña*

Malagueña is a type of fandango (in relation to the musical structure performed across the Iberian Peninsula and not related to the fandango as a festivity in various Latin American countries like the fandango in Son Jarocho in Mexico) (Goldberg and Pizà 2017; León 2016).



Transcription 1: Melodic structure of the *Malagueña* de Villena from the recording ‘Grupo de danzas de Villena’: *Danzas alicantinas 3* (1997).

The musical and cyclical structure of the *Malagueña* from Villena is slower than the *verdiales* from Huelva and closer to the meditative character of the flamenco’s *granaina* or the old miners’ songs from the region of Murcia between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to Maruja López (interviewed in March 24, 2021), the first choreographer of the Villena dance group in the 1950s, the *Malagueña* was introduced to Soler and López by Lola Mira – a woman born around 1860 who introduced them to the choreography of the *Malagueña* when she was ninety years old and sitting in a wheelchair. Soler (2006: 165) also comments on how the *Malagueña* is related to the Valencian *rondeña* in his transcription 207 from the *cancionero Villenense*. The relationship between the Valencian *rondallas* and the *Malagueña* can be perceived in present recordings of *fandango a tres* by ‘La colla del canter’ – a band from Denia.ⁱ

In the album *Voices on the River Rhine*, the song *Malagueña* is performed as a duo with electric guitar by the Greek singer, Ronia Topalidou, and the author. Topalidou sings couplets from the *cancionero Villenense* containing social criticism translated into Greek such as: ‘In the journey of this world the rich ride a horse, those in the middle go on foot, and the poor keep dragging on the floor’ (translated by the author). As a rebetikon and lyrical singer residing in Cologne, Topalidou offers new ways of singing *Malagueñas* through breaking the octosyllable rhyming into either longer or shorter verses in Greek. Such flexibility during compositional practices of intercultural music reveals what Bayley and Dutiro (2016: 1) defines as ‘inter’ or the space between two musical cultures. In other words, the reinvention of *Malagueñas* through Topalidou’s

reinterpretation becomes both, an intercultural music practice in Cologne and a musical bridge between Rebetikon and Eastern Spanish music. From a historical perspective, such intercultural music practice offered by Topalidou in *Malagueña* appears in flamenco styles developed between Latin America and Spain like milonga flamenca, vidalita, rumba, colombiana, guajira and habanera. As *Malagueñas* performed across Spain, musical styles developed across multiple locations tend to be enriched and made distinctive in each of the locations.

In addition to Topalidou's musical contribution in the song “*Malagueña*”, the author offers new *falsetas* – melodic variations based on the cyclical structure of *Malagueña* – and innovative ways of including Haul music guitar techniques from Mauritania like *barmasaga*, a similar technique to *alzapua* in flamenco guitar but rather focused on the melodic arrangement than arpeggios based on chords structures. Thus, the song *Malagueña* enables a cultural bearer to combine his musical knowledge from “home” with other non-inherited musical styles like Haul music from Mauritania.

3. *Parrandas Villenenses*

Parrandas are widespread in southern Spain; however, *Parrandas* mostly refer to a dancing style. In the *cancionero Villenense*, Soler (ibid.: 165) transcribed the now extinct *Parrandas Villenenses* in transcription 219 – sung by Rafael Sáez, 'el cuartelero' in 1949:

219.- *Parrandas.*

The musical notation consists of three staves of music. The first staff starts with a treble clef, a 3/4 time signature, and a tempo of 132 BPM. The lyrics for this staff are: "Por bai-lar las pa—rran-das y el pan to—rra—". The second staff continues with the lyrics "do —do y el pan to—rra—do". The third staff concludes with the lyrics "mi—ra qué pan—to—rrí—llas se me han que—da — do". The music features various note values including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests.

Transcription 2. Excerpt from parranda 219.

The *Parrandas* obtains a major and joyful tonality in the *cancionero*. By offering a comparative study between the *Parranda Villenense* and the *Parrandas* from other locations in Spain, specifically in the Region of Murcia

and the province of Albacete, Maruja López (interviewed on March 24, 2021) comments that the *Parrandas* from Villena contain a clear influence from the *Parrandas* danced during '*los bailes del niño*' in Caudete (from Castilla la Mancha community, 12 kilometers from Villena).ⁱⁱ

In the album *Voices on the River Rhine*, *Parranda Villenense* offers a faithful version of Soler's musical transcription from *cancionero Villenense* and it is performed with traditional instruments (*bandurria*, Spanish lute and guitar). The *Parranda Villenense* is sung by Raul Micó (a flamenco singer) and, as a result, it provides an interaction between *parranda* as a musical style previous to flamenco and flamenco appearing in the nineteenth century. Provided that musical transcriptions from *cancionero Villenense* offer an approximation to popular music, the possibility of recording *Parranda Villenense*, as transcribed by Soler, connects to older forms of music-making. Further to this, *Parranda Villenense* does not only revitalise or reinterpret Soler's musical transcription but it also provides ways of promoting transcultural capital by Spanish migrant communities in Cologne. In agreement with Perman (2007), the representation of transcultural capital by migrant musicians is not only a characterization of "modernity, tradition, and nationalism" but it also includes a set of dispositions formed by the relationship between the author and the multiple locations in Germany, Spain and elsewhere during the recording of *Parranda Villenense* – sound engineers at KRB in Spain, Spanish artists living in Cologne, a music manager residing in Cairo, etc. As a result, the compositional process of *Parranda Villenense* offers a valuable approach to intercultural music practices as a way of fostering relationships through revitalising *cancioneros*, as a resident in Cologne, and in a multilocated context with the above-mentioned agents implicated in the making and promotion of *Voices on the River Rhine*.

4. *Romance de Don Pedro*

Romance stands as the oldest form of both rhyming and storytelling in Spanish-Castilian songs. In the *cancionero Villenense*, the cyclical melodies from the romances were sung by various local women. In the *cancionero*, Soler notes that María Gómez and her friends – from whom Soler does not include their names in the *cancionero* – sung the transcribed romances while working at local factories in the 1940s. Soler (2006: 181) adds that Maria Gomez – one of the singers of the transcribed romances – came from Ciudad Real, therefore, it shows how romances from the *cancionero* were sung broadly in Spain. In addition, the romances transcribed in the songbook contain a historical value such as the Sephardic romance *Gerineldo* from which there are multiple versions within the Mediterranean such as the one from Tetuan (Morocco) collected by Alvar (1951).

The romances collected in the popular songbook of Villena are sung a capella and contain cyclical melodies mostly sung in ternary rhythms and in the key of A minor (227), E minor (228), G major (226) or C major (253). In the album

Voices on the River Rhine, Romance de Don Pedro (Soler 2006: 184) has been recorded as an instrumental song based on Soler's musical transcription of the mentioned romance from *cancionero Villenense* and it is accompanied by Özgür Evrim Şengün on the *bağlama* (a string instrument performed in Turkey and across Central Asia), Sheyda Ghavami on vocals and Johannes Nilles (PhD candidate in Ethnomusicology) on the Brazilian *pandero*. Another form of multimusicality during the recording of "Romance de Don Pedro" resides on the guitar lines based on Saharawi music due to the author's experience playing with Mariem Hassan and other Saharawi artists over the past two decades.

In *Romance de Don Pedro*, the *bağlama* – performed by Şengün, a German musician born to Kurdish parents – offers a meditative solo projecting the notion of lament stretching historically from the *nawba* in Al-Andalus to Iranian *Dastgāh* or the modal *maqamat* among other poetic-musical modal systems within Islamic musical cultures. As a result of such cultural interconnectedness, *Romance de Don Pedro* reveals a poetic and musical development beyond geopolitical boundaries from the Spanish Levant to Kurdistan. The notion of lament is also reflected in a *mawal* (introduction) of *Romance de Don Pedro* by the Kurdish-Iranian singer, Sheyda Ghavami. The Kurdish-Iranian singer sings two verses of the romance in Kurdish by combining the *Hijaz* mode – or *tchahargah* mode in the *dastagh* modal system in Iranian music – in *Romance de Don Pedro*. As Ranade notes (2008: 9), interconnected musical styles are based on a 'performative exchange' that 'does not begin, continue and end somehow'. In Ranade's notion of 'performative exchange', he asserts that 'the most important and inevitable achievement of cultural zones is of course the circulation of ideas, processes, and objects' (ibid: 11). In other words, the circulation of intangible ideas (music, philosophy, etc.) through tangible musical instruments. For Ranade, the cultural zone where Hindustani music originates includes Ancient Greece, the Arab world, Persia and India. Thus, the compositional process of *Romance de Don Pedro* addresses certain cultural relationship that commenced in the pre-colonial world such as the possible link between Eastern Mediterranean and Kurdish-Iranian music through the notion of lament. Due to personal limitations to understand historical complexities of music circulation, compositional processes of the so-called intercultural music practices, I could only modestly evoke certain echoes with the shared histories of musical styles, their coexistence, their latitudes, and their convergences through musical compositions.

In *Romance de Don Pedro*, Johannes Nilles's collaboration offers a new perspective from a German PhD candidate inspired by the possibility of accounting his musical knowledge on *pandero* – including his recent research trip to Rio de Janeiro and Salvador de Bahia – into the author's album. As a result, Nilles's collaboration in *Voices on the River Rhine* moved from institutional research to the unknown terrain of intercultural creativity outside

his academic interest in Brazilian percussions and more related to merge his broad musical knowledge through the *pandero* into *Romance de Don Pedro*.

In general, such intercultural music practices do not always find productive ways of communicating through music as noted by the Ethnomusicology lecturer, Rose Campion – during informal conversations – and in relation to her Intercultural Lab where many local musicians attempted to experiment with different musical styles at the University of Cologne. As previously noted, there is a possibility that musicians are not open to interculturality due to multiple reasons such as non-improvisational skills, reluctant to move beyond certain notions of authenticity, musical limitations between instruments such as a lack of quarter tones or identity politics among other reasons. In addition, it is legitimate to have a choice to not part-taking in intercultural music practices.

Like in the Intercultural Lab, the compositional process of *Romance de Don Pedro* remains a process of musical experimentation with its possibilities and its limitations; its dissonances and its consonances. In *Romance de Don Pedro*, there is a specific focus on reshaping and reconsidering the historical circulation of music from the Spanish Levant by a cultural bearer, German nationals and migrant communities residing in Cologne. Regarding the different musical identities participating in intercultural music projects, as Campion and Dieckmann note, “each element of the work is a layered refraction” (2024: 209).

Due to the amount of the layers involved in intercultural music practices, there has been a clear tendency to frame such studies on the representation of music (Afro, Euro, Gender, Racial, Intercultural, Transnational, Refugee, etc.), however, studies on intercultural music practices hardly examines its musicological aspects. By considering the musicological aspects of intercultural music practices as central in this article, there is a potential for a better understanding on how musical idioms interact during intercultural music-making, and, of course, a potential to develop certain sensitivity on how musicians from different parts of the world are willing to communicate with each other through music.

5. *Cantos de pandorga and the mandolin*

The *pandorga* – a percussion constructed with a mud body, a rabbit skin patch and a stick of wheat or other material placed in the center of the patch from which it is shaken making a friction- has a clear African origin and similar instruments are found in various Latin American countries like Venezuela, Brazil and Cuba. The development of the *pandorga* in the Spanish-speaking world also refers to the creation of a certain type of Christmas carols by the African slaves as a sign of devotion during the colonial period (Rey Sánchez 2010: 155). Specifically, Rey Sánchez (ibid.) provides historical references of villancicos (carols) sung by Afro-descendant converts on Christmas Eve in the church of Toledo in 1661 (ibid.: 221). Within the villancicos collected by Sor

Inés de la Cruz in Mexico in the seventeenth century, there is a type of villancico that also includes songs in this musical genre with a social and even sarcastic critique of the slave condition and sung by African descendants (Aguirre 1996: 276). Humorous and devotional aspects of the villancicos can be also found in couplets from Villena accompanied by the *pandorga* during Christmas. The accompaniment of the *cantos de pandorga* (*pandorga*'s songs) contains different types of melodies sung in different keys: major, minor or Phrygian mode.

Transcription 3. *Cantos de pandorga* in major key.

In *Voices on the River Rhine*, there is a song entitled *Cantos de pandorga* and composed by the author (Transcription 3) inspired by the *cantos de pandorga* in Phrygian mode. The song has been recorded by Annika Hinsche, professor of mandolin at the Cologne Conservatory of Music and Dance. As a way of evoking histories of music circulation between Germany and Spain, I selected the mandolin as a popular instrument widely used in Europe and related to instruments from the Spanish Levant such as the bandurria.

The author's musical transcription for mandolin helped to include new musical nuances such as the use of vibratos, dynamics or even harmonic elements as the use of fourths and fifths – a musical resource broadly used in traditional music for the festivity of Moros y Cristianos in Villena in September – rather than tonality rooted on triads. In comparison to the compositional process with the rest of the musicians during the making of *Voices on the River Rhine*, the possibility of working with musical transcriptions speeded up processes of learning melodies inspired by *música Villenense* rather than learning it through oral or aural transmission. However, contrary to the limitations of interpreting musical ornaments in musical transcriptions, oral and aural transmission allowed musicians to include new musical nuances like quarter tones or to sing couplets in different languages (Greek and Kurdish).

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that the notion of multimusicality does not only relate to mastering various musical traditions – or the use of them in musical compositions – but it is also fundamental to understand cultural coexistence as the result of musicians' mobility over centuries and in the present. The

revitalization of *musica Villenense* and the later production of *Voices on the River Rhine* in Cologne as part of *The Unknown Spanish Levant* series provides a valuable platform to analyze the rich array of compositional processes based on intercultural music practices. The series bring awareness of the cultural circulation of *musica Villenense* historically and at present such as: the circulation of couplets across Latin America, the adaptation of couplets in Greek and Kurdish, the transcultural capital of Spanish migrants through reinterpretations of Parrandas in Germany, the notion of lament in Kurdish-Iranian music, German scholars creating new rhythms with a Brazilian *pandero* over a romance; or the use of musical transcriptions to compose songs based on *cantos de pandorga* for mandolin.

Equally important, couplets from *cancionero Villenense* somehow contains the ‘vox populi’ of many issues that easily extrapolate from local to national or to continental in Europe – or even to transoceanic interactions with Latin America. As a result, the complex and multilocated set of musicians collaborating in the abovementioned album provided an ideal platform to further developing the notion of multimusicality by the author.

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Interviews

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ⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6zlQE0ToPQ> accessed on 20 January 2022

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