Cielito Lindo (Lovely Sweet One)

Chances are you've belted out your share of *“Ay,ay, ay, ay”* choruses in that timeless Mexican song about a lovely lady with dark eyes. Everyone knows ‘Cielito Lindo’, right – even if you've never been to Mexico. And even if you have no idea what
“Sierra Morena”
means in the first line. Or why the lady's eyes are called
“contraband.”
Besides dark, flashing eyes, the lady was said to have a lunar (a mole) near her mouth. The blemish got into the song this way:
“Ese lunar que tienes” (“That mole you have”).
The composer (apparently a mole man) goes on to say.
“Don't give it to anyone...it belongs to me.”

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“Cielito Lindo,” a ballad in 3/4 time composed by Mexico’s **Quirino Mendoza y Cortés** in 1882, is based on the old Spanish rustic-song carol (villancico) and has become one of the best known Spanish-language songs in the world. The words
“cielito lindo,”
interpreted literally, mean
“pretty little sky,”
or
“lovely sky.”
However, in the context of this song, they are used as an affectionate term for a beautiful young girl.

Quirino Mendoza y Cortés

According to his biography, Quirino Mendoza y Cortés was inspired by a girl he met on a trip into the mountains who had a beauty mark. He wrote the music and all but the opening verse which was, except for small changes, lifted from a much earlier song from Spain.

"Ese lunar que tienes"

Like most Latin golden oldies, Cielito Lindo has several versions, and lots of meanings. In one translation, the lyrics are said to have come from 17th century legends about a mountain range in southern Spain called the Sierra Morena. Quirino Mendoza y Cortes, is believed to have heard yarns about bandits hiding out there, and of a cielito lindo who was somehow smuggled – here, the meaning is particularly fuzzy – out of the hills. Hence the word, *"contraband."*

Sierra Morena

The style of this Mexican music is Mariachi: a cross-pollination of the area's influx of Spanish culture including violins and guitars, and that of the indigenous Mexican Indian and "Mestizo" cultures featuring hand-built instruments with unique shapes resembling their European counterparts.

Cielito Lindo

The use of the *"Sierra Morena"* lyric in the opening verse describes where the beautiful young girl is from. The line *"two dark eyes like robbers"* describes her as a *"gypsy thief"* from Sierre Morena, Andalucia Spain, a notorious area that became a center for deported Romani/Gypsies hundreds of years earlier.

Sierra Morena

Because ladies' hairstyles at the time were long tresses often folded atop the head and held together with pins and a comb, Sierra Morena is interpreted as the girl's hair rather than the mountain range in Spain. Viewed in this light, the first verse sets the tone for a young man's teasing love song. Also, the Spanish word morena refers to a person's hair and skin color, furthering this interpretation.

Cielito Lindo

'Cielito Lindo' is a song that's reached iconic status in Mexico. It's also become a favorite to welcome international musical artists on the stages of Mexico. It is a tune very close to the Mexican heart. It has been sung to everyone from Faith No More to Divididos. But the list of those it has been recorded by is even more impressive.

Cielito Lindo