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An Oddity of Catalan Folk Songs and Ballads

Simon Purey

Catalonia lies on the Mediterranean coast, straddling the Pyrenees. Its people are very musical, and dancing in the streets is still commonplace. Anyone who has observed its national dance, the sardana, however, will have noticed a most peculiar feature: the dancers do not seem to dance in time to the music, yet the circles of dancers are all in time with each other. In fact, they are dancing to a rhythm that only coincides with the accompanying music after a fixed number of bars, a number which depends on the particular dance or part of it. It follows, therefore, that these dancers are likely to have a highly developed rhythmical sense. Indeed, one of the things I first noticed when I began to take an interest in Catalan folk songs was the complexity of some of their rhythms, and it is this complexity I will explore. I am not concerned here with the specificities of syllabic rhythms, which have already been dealt with in some depth by others (Aiats 1990: 93–109; Rövenstrunk 1979: 40–63), but with the rhythms and meter in relation to entire lines of text.

A case in point is the ballad “L’estudiant de Vic,” a sad tale of a widow courted by a young man sent away to become a priest (Fig. 1, opposite, top). This is, of course, only a fragment of the complete song, but it is enough for our purposes. In general, every second line ends in -a, and the syllable count is a more or less consistent, alternating 7/8; there is nothing unconventional about the text verse structure as written. Readers unfamiliar with Catalan, and trying to work out the syllable count, should be aware that adjacent vowels are generally condensed into a single syllable (h and final r behave “invisibly” and are silent). The main exception in this text is the line, “Bon amor, adéu-siau,” which is not condensed and has seven syllables.

If we turn now to the music, two features are apparent. First, the rhythm is uneven; listening to the song reveals that the mixture of 9/8 and 3/8 rhythms is only a written approximation of the actual pulse. Fig. 2 (opposite, bottom) shows the musical phrasing. We can see that the tune contains only three different musical phrases, which form the pattern abcbcabc. If we superimpose these phrases on the words, we get a most odd result (Fig. 3, overleaf).
If we first take the $b$ and $c$ phrases together in pairs, as marked by the horizontal lines in the diagram, we notice that the end of a verse does not coincide with a musical-phrase end. The chorus is simply absorbed into an extended verse. Indeed, there is no separate tune for the chorus. If we then take the $b$ and $c$ phrases separately, we notice that the end of the $b$ phrase happens in the middle of a word: a/mor and e/studiant.

What this means is that we have a clear structure for the words and one for the tune, but they do not fit together. Indeed, we might write the metrical structure of the words as sung in the following form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Una cançó vull cantar,</th>
<th>a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>una cançó nova i linda,</td>
<td>b/c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d'un e/student de Vic,</td>
<td>b/c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>que en festejava una viuda.</td>
<td>b/c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bon a/mor, adéu-siau,</td>
<td>b/c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>color de rosa florida.</td>
<td>b/c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bon a mor, adéu-siau.</td>
<td>b/c</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>La viuda s’hi vol casar,</th>
<th>a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>el seu pare no ho volia;</td>
<td>b/c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l’e/student me n’és anat</td>
<td>b/c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a servir una rectoria.</td>
<td>b/c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bon a/mor, adéu-siau,</td>
<td>b/c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>color de rosa florida.</td>
<td>b/c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bon a mor, adéu-siau.</td>
<td>b/c</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 3. Effect of musical phrasing in “L’estudiant de Vic.”

Part of the charm of this song, I think, is its apparent freedom. Yet it is not free; it simply has an unconventional combination of words and music. Here, perhaps, we have a song parallel to the sardana, but instead of the circles of dancers not following the tune, the lines of text do not. This unconventional
A combination can be characterized by the term “musical dislocation.” The layout for the text of “L’estudiant de Vic” is a convenient, shorthand way of demonstrating it.

I originally put this song down as an oddity, having found no others quite like it among the collections published before the Spanish Civil War. However, I encountered another instance on a record produced in 1994 by the Catalan group, Clau de lluna. The song, “El pobre banya,” is an amusing—and allegedly true—tale about a willing cuckold and comes from the town of Organyà in the district of Alt Urgell. It begins this way (as written in the sleeve notes):

Déu vos guarga, l’armenteu, quina botiga n’heu muntada
i de fil i de cotó i altra roba delicada
Feu-li llum, feu-li llum el pobre banya, feu-li llum.

This song appears in some collections (for example, Amades 1982: 523) with a different and more-regular tune but has the same tune in volume six of Obra del cançoner popular de Catalunya: Materials, published in 1996. A short digression is in order here to explain the significance of this work.

In 1921 an ambitious project was undertaken to collect all of the folk songs of the Catalan-speaking lands. Small teams were sent to all points, near and far, to collect both words and music. They were successful beyond their wildest dreams and collected thousands of songs. Meanwhile, in Barcelona, another team had the unenviable task of editing the material into published volumes that contained not only the songs but background information and commentary on Catalan folk music. The editorial team was swamped, and as the years went by, the backlog of unpublished material became enormous. The situation was further complicated by political instability in the region. Collection came to a halt in 1936 with the outbreak of civil war, although a limited amount of editorial work continued during the hostilities until 1938. Over the period of the Obra’s activity, five books were produced, three of which contained songs collected up to 1925.

Following Franco’s victory in 1939, Catalan culture was suppressed and much material destroyed. Fortunately, the unedited Obra papers were hidden away and preserved almost entirely. In the early 1990s, a project began at Montserrat Abbey, outside Barcelona, to publish the materials under the supervision of the eminent Catalan scholar and folklorist, Father Josep Massot i Muntaner. Publication began in 1993 at the rate of one volume per year, and Father Massot estimates that it will be nearly 2010 before selections of all of the material have been published.
The newer publications differ from the prewar ones in one important respect. Instead of printed scores that are the result of editorial work and amendment, facsimiles of the original collected musical notations are included. The reader can analyze original field notes and see where the singer has probably varied the performance and where the collector has attempted to record these variations. The disadvantage is that mistakes, omissions, and inconsistencies caused by the method of recording are also present. Unfortunately, where uncertainties exist, it is no longer possible to ask the collectors about the right interpretation.
That said, one can only marvel at the quality of the notation, given that it was done in the field, almost entirely without phonographic recording apparatus.

Volume six of the Obra materials contains the notes from the field trip of Palmira Jaquetti and Maria Carbó to Alt Urgell, Pallars, and Arán undertaken between 9 July and 3 September 1925. The songs include a version of “El pobre banya” entitled “Deu lo guard, galant Minguet” (no. 54), collected in Organyà. The tune is the same as the one in the Clau de lluna recording, although the title is different, and the words are not quite the same (it is clearly a close variant but written down in a slightly different format than the one in the record notes). The following extract is from the Obra materials. It should be remembered that this version was published two years after the appearance of the recording, although collected nearly seventy years before it. It is almost certain, therefore, that the Clau de lluna version has come down through oral tradition independently of the Obra version, and it confirms the structure of the song as collected and notated in 1925 (Fig. 4, left). In fact, the Obra version seems simply to have removed some garbling from the first line of the Clau de lluna version, and it expresses the stanzaic form more clearly.

When we examine this song (or better still, listen to the recording), we sense the kind of dislocation that we noticed with “L’estudiant de Vic,” and it happens in both the written and recorded versions. In this instance, there is a chorus tune, but it starts halfway through the last line of the verse, and there is another break halfway through the chorus line. Thus, if we use the text shorthand from the previous example, the chorus of the first verse is sung as follows:

...cada feu-li llum
feu-li llum al pobre
banya feu-li llum.

There is a clear dislocation between the tune phrasing and the words, in this instance half a line.

This is not the only example of such anomalies. The Jaquetti-Carbó notes contain a number of other songs that exhibit this phenomenon. Here is another, “Dona i prenda” (no. 58), a tale of a lord about to kill his fourth wife, who is saved by the intercession of her baby who miraculously speaks and pleads for her (Fig. 5, overleaf). There are all sorts of interesting things about this particular ballad which merit analysis but are outside the scope of this present investigation.
From a musical standpoint, some interpretation is required. The music has a triplet indicated underneath the second note of the second bar, using a shorthand notation seen elsewhere in the collection. Applying this to the entire melody (otherwise the time signature makes no sense) results in a havanera rhythm. The beginning has an anacrusis but one that creates a most odd result. To fit the rhythm, each line “steals” a syllable from the following one to make up the count. This is very apparent in the music. When taken into the preceding line of the melody, however, this syllable does not produce an anacrusis. Instead, the havanera rhythm keeps its longer note at the end of each phrase. The result is that each line, as sung, ends on the first syllable of the next line as written.

The effect in the first verse is that, instead of rhyming or creating assonance on the last syllable of a written line, assonance is created on a first syllable, thus,

Do
  na i prenda se’n passeja per
  una sala molt grande vé
  nen les dolors de part que
  no deixaven cessar-la.

Note that in Catalan, per is pronounced almost as pé and thus rhymes (or at least creates assonance) with vé, whereas que and la rhyme with a schwa vowel. At the end of the verse, the syllable loss creates a dramatic pause, which is no accidental arrangement. It would be possible to fit the words without the anacrusis
and syllable shift. However, the notation makes quite clear what is happening. It is another example of dislocation, this time of a single syllable.

There are one or two other less-clear examples in the same printed collection, which contains eighty-seven songs. Thus, the phenomenon seems uncommon. It is worth pointing out that the published Obra materials generally contain only a small sample of the songs collected; the reader is thus at the mercy of the editor as to what is available for analysis. The total number of songs actually collected by Jaquetti and Carbó is not noted, and the frequency of occurrence is therefore impossible to ascertain from the evidence examined so far.

I have chosen to use the term musical dislocation because each tune has a structure, and the text has a structure, but it seems that the singer does not feel constrained to put the two together in the conventional manner so that the text phrasing coincides with the musical phrases. Instead, they may be combined to obtain completely different effects, as in the examples shown. Does this dislocation occur in other traditions, or is it a Catalan peculiarity? I have not found evidence of it in Castilian, French, Italian, or Provençal songs as yet, and further research is necessary before making any generalizations.

It is sometimes argued that where the words do not fit the tune, it is simply the result of a hack song peddler fitting an existing tune to some new words and doing a poor job. I do not accept that argument in this case. First, the tunes do not seem to belong to any recognizable families that have better word fits elsewhere (and Catalan folk music certainly contains tune families). I cannot be positive about this since the corpus of songs is simply too large for me to be totally familiar with it, but I think that ballad sellers would primarily have used common tunes where possible, and these are easy to recognize. Secondly, the songs are found all over Catalonia and particularly in the foothills of the Pyrenees. Until relatively recently (the 1980s), roads to some of the small villages were only dirt tracks. Indeed, the Obra collectors in the 1920s write of days on muleback to reach their destinations. Communication was extremely difficult; thus, I think it is unlikely that ballad sellers would have traveled to such far-flung places, especially because the people—particularly Catalan speakers—were probably illiterate anyway. In other words, we are looking at song transmission that has a high probability of being oral. The oddity is, therefore, in my view a genuine part of the Catalan song tradition, not just a clumsy accident.
References

Recordings