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# Traditional Chants in Catalan Pyrenees

## Social Construction of Pyrenean Villages

In the closing decades of the 19th century and the opening decades of the 20th century, the Catholic Church made an effort to stamp out all music from the liturgy that it considered inappropriate for maintaining the “right attitudes” and for the interests of the Catholic faith in the contemporary world. Between years 2008 and 2010 we carried out a research in order to discover the tradition and their current validity of the polyphonic singings of religious look that its sang in the zone of the Catalan Pyrenees of Catalonia. From all this work a whole an sonorous, bibliographical and audio-visual materials have appeared of great diversity and quality, which encourages us to continuing working this subject in the future.

En les darreres dècades del segle XIX i en els inicis del XX, l'Església Catòlica féu un gran esforç per acabar amb tota la música de la litúrgia que considerava inadequada per mantenir una “actitud correcta” i per als interessos de la fe catòlica en el món contemporani. Entre anys 2008 i 2010 vam dur a terme un treball d'investigació per tal de descobrir la tradició i la validesa actual dels cants polifònics d'orientació religiosa en la zona dels Alps Pirineus catalans. De tot aquest treball n'ha sorgit un gran gruix de materials sonors, bibliogràfics i audiovisuals de gran diversitat i qualitat, que ens animen a continuar treballant aquest tema en el futur.

The study “Cants religiosos a l'Alt Pirineu” (IPEC-Anàlisi, 2008-2010) has revealed the profound implications of singing together during various religious rituals in mountain villages in Catalan Pyrenees until around the middle of the 20th century. Beyond the specific religious beliefs of each, and even further from

the official rituals of the Catholic Church, the liturgies performed in these villages and the manners and behaviour displayed during singing helped to make the social order visible and sensitive. Despite the possible differences in religious feeling, singing allowed people to individually experience the hierarchies and roles of social life in small villages (with populations of around 100 to 1,000 inhabitants).



**Singers of Gerri de la Sal (Pallars Sobirà) before the lecterns of Col·legiata de Santa Maria, (08/2007). ANNA COSTAL**

**Keywords:** Catalan Pyrenees, religious singings, popular song book

**Paraules clau:** Pirineu català, cants religiosos, cançon popular

Singing revealed divisions of gender, age and origin, the skills and unique qualities of specific persons, money and power, the relations between individuals and the community and other roles that ordered society. All these relations and social constructions were demonstrated through monodic and polyphonic chants transmitted orally and rarely accompanied by instruments. These chants' aesthetics and structures surprise "contemporary" audiences and often arouse interest in learning about their uncommon sonority and expression. In this paper, we propose a synthesis of the research conducted for more than three years, a summary of the main findings together with research publications that we have created so far and a preview of work we have planned for the future.

### Forgotten Chants: Subjects for Research

Contemporary society has all but forgotten the religious chants that formed the basis of the liturgy in villages until the first half of the 20th century. They have become so neglected that most Catalans are just as likely to believe that these chants never existed in this country, especially the polyphonic ones. However, part of our social milieu is rediscovering interest in these chants from a perspective that views them as exotic, with captivating new formulations of the repertoire emerging, especially in Corsica and Sardinia (and sometimes even further away). And yet we are convinced in Catalonia that "we don't have these kinds of traditions". What is the cause of this total ignorance? We shall try to synthesise the response in the three events described below.

In the closing decades of the 19th century and the opening decades of the 20th century, the Catholic Church made an effort to stamp out all music from the liturgy that it considered

inappropriate for maintaining the "right attitudes" and for the interests of the Catholic faith in the contemporary world. The main symbol of this was the *motu proprio Tra le sollecitudine* of Pius X in 1903. Music considered inappropriate was gradually kept out, particularly when it resembled opera and dance music. But the new "correct" repertoires (which ranged from the restructuring of liturgical singing as proposed in Solesmes to the composers of a new model of "religious music") also banished and replaced oral chants considered "rustic" and "of the old regime", as well as the ways of singing them. This process took

differently than "popular songs": they were generally in Latin (and not in Catalan as sought), they were considered of cult origin and some were polyphonic, when searching especially for *rustic* simplicity, and it was believed that everything sung in different voices had to originate with a *technical* musician. But these chants did not attract the attention of historical musicologists, who sought the scores and original works of specific authors situated in time and downplayed strictly oral music. As such, they were neither *cult* nor *popular* and remained outside all theoretical models in the 19th and 20th centuries.



■ Singing couplets for Saint Martin in the choir of the church of Sant Martí de Bescaran (Alt Urgell) with the accompaniment of an accordion (08/11/2009). ESTER GARCIA LLOP

place in the Catholic world especially between 1914 and 1945, according to the country and historical circumstances. Later, the liturgical renewal and abandonment of Latin according to the rules of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), with new repertoires and "updated" styles, ended up pushing aside what little repertoire remained active of the chants that interest us, with rare exceptions.

For the collectors of popular and traditional chants, such as the extensive work of the Obra del Cançoner Popular de Catalunya between 1921 and 1936, religious chants were conceived

In the post-Franco years, religious chants primarily in Latin also failed to capture collectors' interest. After years of government-supported Catholicism and Latin, the positions split between those that fled from anything having to do with religion and those that worked out the alternative of a modern ritual in the Catalan language. While Latin was experienced in Corsica and Sardinia as an alternative to the Frenchification or Italianisation of religious life, which led to these chants being seen as part of their own identity, things took another path in Catalonia, where old religious chants were replaced by modern ones in Catalan.



■ Rehearsing to record the chants: singers of the choir of the church of Enviny in Pallars Sobirà (10/11/2006). IRIS GAYETE

This leads us to understand that despite the high level of intensity of oral and material signs left by these chants for years, almost nobody is aware of them today. Only very rare examples were included in some recordings made in the last two decades (Crivillé and Vilar, 1991 and 2007; Ayats, Roviró and Roviró, 1994 and 1996; Torrent, 2001a and 2001b; *La música religiosa de l'Andorra del 1800*, 2000). It is also true that memories of them were gradually erased from many Catalan counties over the course of the 20th century and that examples were confined to specific areas, and mainly to the Pyrenees, due to old social circumstances and social history established in the last two or three centuries.

Thanks to chance and the interest and insistence of Margarida Barbal, in 2006 we heard some home recordings made by the Barbal family of Enviny during family gatherings in the early 1980s whose liturgical chants evinced depth and human and musical interest with various examples of polyphony. Initial assessment research in Vall d'Àssua and in El Batlliu (sponsored by Sort City Council and the County Council of Pallars Sobirà in July 2006) showed us that the memory of these chants was

very much alive and aroused intense emotions among many of the older residents of Pallars Sobirà. It also showed that according to the village, social and musical memory was restricted to those over 70 years old.

Thus, a broader study was proposed with the IPEC-Anàlisi project presented by the Centre d'Art i Natura

in Farrera, created by a research team from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona that forms part of the SGR 2009/227 "Les músiques en les societats contemporànies" MUSC (a project rejected in the 2007 call, but approved in 2008). In addition to the research itself, the results anticipated an awakened interest in these chants in Pallars Sobirà that has had implications for summer music festivals and other initiatives that we cannot cover here due to limitations of space.

### Religious Chants in Catalan Pyrenees

The study was conducted in seven counties in the Pyrenees. From the starting point in Pallars Sobirà—the county where these chants have left their most intense mark to date—we expanded our research to Vall d'Aran, Ribagorça, Pallars Jussà, Andorra, Alt Urgell and a part of Cerdanya. Led by Jaume Ayats, the research team enjoyed the participation of Anna Costal, Iris Gayete, Amàlia Atmetlló, Ester Garcia Llop and Joaquim Rabaseda. Pere Casulleras also participated as



■ Singers from Llessui (Pallars Sobirà) with Jaume Ayats (12/11/2006). IRIS GAYETE

the recording technician in a disinterested capacity. In total, more than 200 people were interviewed from more than 80 villages, yielding 150 hours of recorded information and chants. Though they were in no way easy to synthesise, the main results may be discussed as follows.

### *Singing in Social Life*

Probably the most surprising aspect of the results was the great importance that religious chants had in expressing and experiencing social life in the village. An initial study in these aspects focusing only on the county of Pallars Sobirà was published in the book *Cantadors del Pallars. Cants religiosos de tradició oral al Pirineu-Religious Chants of the Oral Tradition in the Pyrenees* (Ayats, Costal and Gayete, 2010).

The first element that stands out is that only certain men of the village (generally adult heads of households) were *singers*: each had a specific seat in the church's raised choir (and space exclusively for men), with privileges like having their own psalm that they had a right to *intone* (begin alone). Leaving aside the lower-level labourers, these men's singing depicts and expresses a system of egalitarian households of which the social structure of the village is composed. This is demonstrated at significant times and in the control of the space and of the initiates' language (Latin) when singing the core texts of the divine Word (mass and the divine offices, vespers and compline of the main holidays of the year).

In the lower part of the church, women and children share the space and roles in a layout equivalent to the geography of the village and related to the representativeness of each household (the chapel they care for, a closer position to the altar, etc.). They join in chants that do not represent the divine Word, especially couplets and processional

chants, as well as the more "modern" ones in the Month of Mary.

The details and subtleties of how this is organised, combined with the act of reading and using books—as well as pilgrimages to sanctuaries and the structuring of the territory based on devotion and spaces ordered by religious singing—immerse us in a concept of the territory, of the yearly life and of the society specifically and emotively expressed in the singing. Secular festi-

vals and the tavern—a place for men to sing together—may be understood as both reflecting and contrasting with religious chants.

Unlike in other counties, it is surprising that religious singing is not managed by brotherhoods, but by this meeting of heads of households, who were also the representatives of the municipal structure under the old regime. Thus, polyphonic singing has a special splendour and power.



■ Double choir of singers in the church of Bosost, in Vall d'Aran (03/2008). AMÀLIA AMETLLÓ

### Recording the Singing and Musical Performances

Up in the choir, the singers “made the walls of the church tremble!” explains a woman from Vall d’Àssua excitedly. Indeed, the construction of a unique musical aesthetic fit with the social effects mentioned above: powerful singing, individualising each voice with ornamentation and timbre and hearing the effect of the harmonics and the density of the men’s voices (perceived individually and criticised by the women) were all musical characteristics that corresponded to social ones.

From this point of view, we have studied some events—especially the vespers and signing of the *Magnificat*—as rhetoric that builds emotion from all senses of the body during the village’s festive gathering in the church (see Ayats, Costal, Gayete and Rabaseda, 2011). Thus, sonorous and polyphonic elements gain significance in each person’s social and individual life.

Furthermore, we have seen how in each step of the liturgy, depending on whether it was the divine Word or more peripheral rituals, the time reserved and rhythmic codes were distributed so that only by listening to the type of rhythmic articulation, a seasoned listener could tell what kind of ritual it was, as well as the degree of sacredness that had to be attributed to it (for more detail, see Gayete, 2012 and Ayats, 2012). A particular aspect of this may be seen in the musical structures of couplets (explored by Garcia and Llop, 2011).

Finally, we must mention the link we found between the aesthetic intent of the singing and the acoustics in certain churches, where the shape of the nave, the location of the singers and the effect of the wooden platform and choir stalls helped to strengthen the sonority desired by shaking the walls



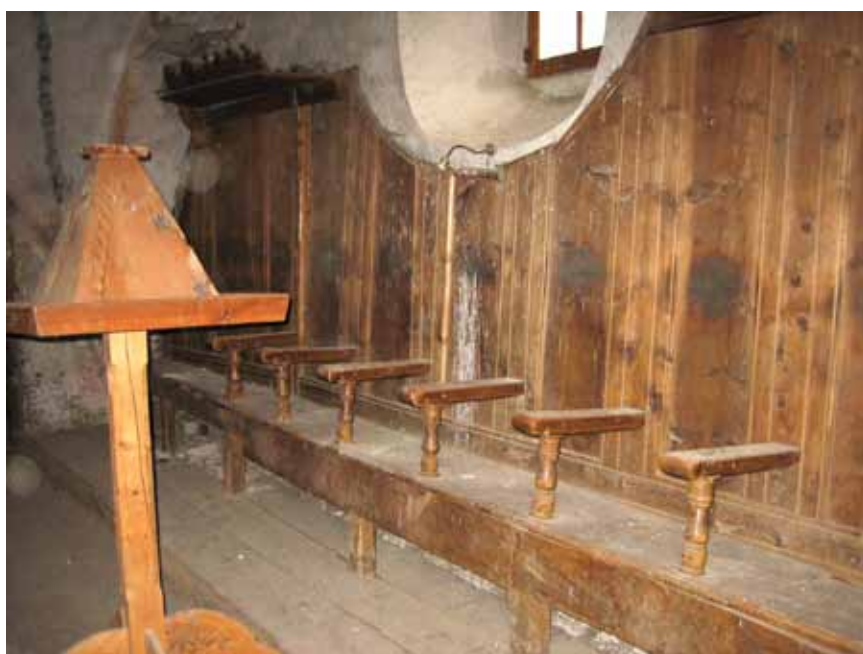
■ Congregation of Santa Pelaia de Perles, in Alt Urgell (23/05/2010). JAUME AYATS

and bodies of those participating in the ritual.

### Historical Information

The information collected has also shown us how in each county and community, the historical transformation of this singing and its disappearance from liturgical use took place at different speeds and under various circumstances. This ranged from large

towns that already began to abandon them in the 1920s, and especially in the republican 1930s, to villages that finally gave them up when implementing the directives of the Second Vatican Council in the late 1960s. In some places, some of the most emblematic chants were still being sung decades later, aside from the singing of couplets, which were still active in some others.



■ Choir of the church of Unarre (Pallars Sobirà), with a lectern and choir stalls for the singers (30/09/2006). JAUME AYATS

### Material and Heritage Elements

The findings also include the material objects that remained in the churches and sacristies from when the rituals were performed. First are the architectural elements, both the general architecture of the building (the distribution of space, access stairwells linking the choir to the bell tower, high platforms, high balconies in the nave, spaces in the walls for brotherhoods) and the more specific architecture of the choir, generally built from wood with large platforms and particularly choir stalls with the exact location of each singer. Second are the movable elements, such as the lecterns, railing lecterns, mobile choir benches and reclining chairs for the women of each family, as well as the benches of the labourers of the brotherhood. Finally are the large songbooks, smaller books from more recent times and typographic plates couplets. All this could be joined by crosses and processional symbols, pilgrimage banners and flags and various objects used inside the church, during processions and Holy Week.

In recent decades, these elements have been underappreciated and are sometimes systematically destroyed. In some cases, the alleged restoration of Romanesque walls—with an obsession for strictly mediaeval authenticity and a direct view of the rock—has devastated the choir where the oldest men in the village sang 50 years ago (in the same way as their forefathers had 400 years before). In some villages, this has kept some old men from wanting to return to church.

In this regard, an appeal must be made to the heads of churches and to the architects and experts that do restoration work to be aware that the space and objects are the surroundings (and result) of centuries of continuous activity that they often fail to grasp. In our case, we must also insist on the impor-

tance of the acoustic aspect, which is so easily altered in new “interventions”.

The aforementioned book *Cantadors del Pallars* offers an introduction to these social and musical elements and includes a CD with a selection of recordings made by singers of the county and a DVD documentary by filmmaker Aleix Gallardet about some aspects of our fieldwork to get stories and chants from some informants.

Finally, we have also developed several international collaborative relationships that have allowed us to link our research to wider geographical areas and enriching scientific exchange. Alongside the research in the Pyrenees, we conducted specific fieldwork with the brotherhoods of the Corsican city of Calvi (through agreements with the Voce de U Commune and in cooperation with researcher Ignazio Macchiarella) that resulted in an article comparing the creation



■ Choir of singers in the church of Jou, in Pallars Sobirà (11/2006). ANNA COSTAL



■ Lectern of the choir of the church of Les Esglésies, in Pallars Jussà (08/2009). ESTER GARCIA LLOP

of rhetoric of the senses in Calvi's *officium tenebrarum* and the vespers in Pallars: "Polyphonies, Bodies and Rhetoric of the Senses: Latin Chants in Corsica and the Pyrenees" by Jaume Ayats, Anna Costal, Iris Gayete and Joaquim Rabaseda, published in the magazine *Transposition* in 2011. We have also established links and cooperation with the project FABRICA (ANR 2009-2012). Promoted by the University of Toulouse-Le Mirail and under the leadership of Phillipe Canquillhem, it studies both the historical and oral aspects of fauxbourdons in France.

These activities have led us to participate in various congresses, where we have published various publications (Ayats and Martínez, 2011; Gayete, 2012; and Ayats, 2012), and in various university studies, including research

papers presented by Iris Gayete (2010), Amàlia Atmetlló (2010) and Ester Garcia i Llop (2011). A specific aspect of this research is currently the subject of Iris Gayete's PhD thesis.

### Future Research

However, the different possibilities in studying these chants could go many different directions and hold many surprises. This is why we have planned future research that is currently taking shape. The best defined lines of investigation so far include the study of temporal construction procedures for chants not governed by a pulse (a prominent theme in the work of Iris Gayete); analysis of the different logics of temporal construction and rhythm as markers of different ritual situations (a problem being studied by Jaume Ayats); the acoustic study of different churches in the Pyrenees

to establish a correlation with the aesthetics of singing, a problem being studied by acoustic engineer Enric Gaus and by Jaume Ayats (an initial treatment of the oratory of Calvi was already presented at the Conference on Interdisciplinary Musicology held in Glasgow in August and September 2011); and specific research on couplets and the corresponding territorial and emotional implications (a continuation of Ester Garcia i Llop's study, with the collaboration of an international specialist in the subject, Dominique de Courcelles). Finally, in the next few months we hope to publish a summary of the findings from all counties studied in the monographs of the collection "Subjects of Ethnology of Catalonia". ■

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