

Bertsolaritza

Improvised Basque Verse Singing

Thursday 28 Feb 2008

Magisterio, Salon de Actos, 12:40-2:00

Bertsolaritza is a form of Basque popular poetry, often competitive and always practiced with audience participation and feedback, in which a singer improvises short verses fitting into traditional metrical patterns, melodies and rhyme schemes. The subject matter can be suggested by audience members or by a moderator, collectively chosen by the performing *bertsolari*, or some combination of these. Often there is an improvised oral confrontation between two or more *bertsolari*. It requires, above all, memory, poise under pressure, humor, and creative intensity.

▪ Partial list of topics proposed in the final round of the 2000 championship:

Social customs regarding alcohol	University education in the Basque	Father-son/father-daughter
Division of labor in a marriage	language	problems
Dispute between mayor and local	Himalayan mountaineering	Sheep farming
rock band	Lesbian relationships	Accidents at the circus
	Port-a-potties (mobile toilets)	

Although it is sung, there is no instrumental accompaniment. As a cross-cultural reference for *norteamericano* students, it slightly resembles a combination of the improvisational TV comedy show hosted by Drew Carey, *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, and the rapping contests in the Eminem movie *8 Mile*. However, *bertsolaritza* has nothing to do with mass media other than occasional coverage on radio and TV. It is first and foremost a live performance medium. Sometimes a very successful *bertso* will be written down and later recorded as a popular song.

Keywords: *bertsolari(ak)* = singer(s) *bertso(ak)* = verse(s) *puntu(ak)* = rhyme(s)
azken puntua = final or “punch” line at the end of a *bertso*
gai-jartzailea = moderator or “presenter,” the person who gives the topic to the *bertso*

Example: At a festival in 1997, the *gai-jartzailea* proposed to *bertsolari* Aitor Mediluze the following theme: “A good friend of yours has offered you some performance-enhancing drugs. You hesitate about taking them.” Recalling this moment, Aitor said he thought for 15 or 20 seconds, during which he made up an *azken puntua* (in **bold** below), picked a melody that worked with these lines, and mentally listed possible *puntuak* (the ones he ended up using are underlined below). He then began to improvise his song. (The middle column lists the number of syllables in each line, predetermined by the meter he chose.)

Ene laguna uste zintudan	10	
Jatorra eta <u>noblea</u>	8	I thought you were an honest and faithful friend
Zuk ere alde ilun triste bat	10	
Nonbait zeneukan <u>gordea</u> .	8	But even you have a hidden, dark side.
Egin didazun eskeintza ez da	10	
Uste bezain <u>dotorea</u>	8	Your offer is not as nice as it might appear.
Emango dit <u>umorea</u>	8	It will put me in a better mood.
Ta abildabe <u>doblea</u>	8	And I will increase my skills two-fold.
Hartu ezkerio izan naiteke	10	
Naizena baino <u>hobea</u>	8	Once taken, I would be better than I am.
Hobetuko naiz baina orduan	10	
Ni izan gabe <u>ordea!</u>	8	I would be better, but I would not be me.

Note in this *bertso* that, as in all metrical patterns in *bertsolaritza*, the rhyming words are all of the same consonance. In this particular meter (called *zortziko handia*) the rhymes all fall on the even-numbered lines – the ones with eight syllables – with a clever exception: did you notice that, when he sings of doubling his skills, he throws in an extra eight-syllable rhyming line, thereby “doubling” it?

Fun Facts to Know and Tell

- According to a survey conducted in 1993, of the approximately 600,000 Basque speakers in the Spanish and French states, 15% classify themselves as great lovers of *bertsolaritza*, 35% say they are fans, and 28% say they are attracted to it in some way.
- Approximately 1200 contracted performances take place every year, from major concerts and championship contests to informal events at schools, frontons, cider houses and gastronomic societies. Over twice as many performances take place in Gipuzkoa than in any other province.
- There are about 100 practicing “professional” *bertsolari* (as of 2001), median age 26, with the oldest and youngest being 19 and 69 years of age as of about the year 2000
- While the top-ranked *bertsolari* enjoy high artistic status within their community, they are accessible to the average person – they are not “superstars.” They sing at weddings.

A partial list of problems, scholarly questions, debates and other topics for discussion:

1. How old is the tradition? Who were its first practitioners?
2. What part of the tradition is written, and what part strictly oral?
3. How are the regional variations to be analyzed and classified?
4. What was (and is) its status among Basque intellectuals, among “average” Basques, and within particular regions of the Basque country? How has its reputation developed among international scholars of oral traditions?
5. How has writing, recording and other media technology affected the tradition and practice? How does it continue to do so? Can it enhance *bertsolaritza* without dominating, commercializing or distorting it?
6. How will *bertsolaritza* continue to evolve and how will the *bertsolari* community transmit its traditions and practices?
7. How will the revival of interest and activity that has taken place over the last two decades of the twentieth century be sustained into the twenty-first and beyond?

Sources

Joxerra Garzia, Jon Sarasua & Andoni Egaña, *The Art of Bertsolaritza: Improvised Basque Verse Singing* (Bertsolari Luburuak, 2001). A thorough analysis of the tradition and current practice, written by practicing *bertsolariak*. Most of this summary is based on their work.

Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe, *Shooting from the Lip: Bertsolariak Ipar Amerikan, Improvised Basque Verse-Singing* (North American Basque Organization, 2003). Concentrates on *bertsolariak* active in *los estados unidos*.

<http://www.dantzariak.net/bertso.htm> Click on the photo halfway down the page to see a video of a couple of dueling *bertsolariak*. There are also a lot of clips on <http://youtube.com>.