

Ornitorrinkus: Maialen Lujanbio, Judith Montero

# Stripping off the corset in public

Ornitorrinkus: bertsolaritza  
and experimental music



## Ornitorrinkus session

To convey the notion of a *verse session*, English uses the term *performance*. The term in Spanish is *actuación* and in Basque *saioa* [session]<sup>1</sup>. Note the similarity: a performance is the act of forming or executing an action or feat. In other words, a session.

When we first started Ornitorrinkus, and had to explain what it was in writing, we were faced with the problem of what to call it? It is not a show; or a concert; it is not a *happening*, in the classical artistic sense. It may be performance: but who performs it and who receives it...? An «event»? As yet it is not a term that is generally used to describe an artistic activity... Like so many other occasions, the answer lay back at the source, in the very word that we had heard so often we had forgotten all about it: *saioa*, or session.

Ornitorrinkus is a session that combines *bertsolaritza*<sup>2</sup> and experimental music.

## Performance and Ornitorrinkus

Esther Ferrer argues that performance art is the art of presence, of space and of measured time. For John Cage, music «is something that happens in a measured time».

Music and performance art, therefore, have one important characteristic in common: they are actions that occur over time, they are situations. Ferrer herself defines her work as «gesture music».

Performance art is, therefore, a situation. A situation created through action.

1 Translator's Note: Rather than attempt to transfer into an English context this comparison of the different terms used in different languages, this passage adheres closely to the original Basque, with close cognates used in the translation.

2 *Bertsolaritza*: extemporary verse singing in the Basque tradition. A verse is a «bertso» and the performers are «bertsolaris».

### Sound/word action in bertsolaritza and in music

It may be performance art, then, but if it is an action, what is an action? Does it inevitably need to be physical? Gestural? Can the actions be only word-actions?

In verse sessions the action is in the words: not in the gestures; not in corporeal expression; not in physical action. Action is represented by word, and happens in the mind of the listener. It is imaginary.

The world of music is tremendously broad, but if we limit ourselves to instrumental music, then we can say that the physical action consists of creating sound, of playing.

Any other gestures that may be produced will be gestures intended to emphasise the rises and falls and the movements of the music. Furthermore, what the sound action expresses is something entirely abstract.

But even without representing anything specific, music has an extraordinary capacity to activate our most private feelings (the adjective *universal* is often applied to music, but it is also considered to be manipulative).

What action happens then in the mind of the listener, when he or she listens to the sound, to the music? This is not easily decipherable; it is not descriptive. So what imaginary action happens in the mind-stomach-crotch-foot-etc. of the receiver?

Might one say, perhaps, that there is a common imaginarium when it comes to building those actions in the minds of the listener? Are there timeless codes with collectively unified meanings? And what is the weight of gender in giving meaning to the actions?

## Performance and gender

«For Judith Butler, gender is a way of acting, a kind of performance, a result of the obsessive repetition of actions to construct identity.»

Ramos López, Pilar (2003) *Feminismo y música. Introducción crítica*. Madrid: Narcea Ediciones.

The first step is to be aware of that *learnt way of doing things*; to observe the way of going about things, and to start working from there.

As the Alexander technique says, if you want to correct an incorrect body movement the first thing to do is not to try to change the movement itself, because the result will always be inadequate. The first step is to stop doing what you are doing. Applying this principle to gender, instead of modifying those repeated actions, stopping doing them would be a major step forward: not doing what you do.

If gender is a way of proceeding, then we need to ask ourselves what are the «ways of doing things» in *bertsolaritza* and music.

Relating the characteristics of performance art with *bertsolaritza*, we might say that there are two main features:

Presence: stillness of the body but important: physical presence and voice presence. Occupation of space, being the centre...

Action: of word, argumentary, opinion, positioning. Taking the floor, keeping the floor... in *bertsolaritza* the message is a basic element; one bases oneself on argumentation and dialectic. The

stillness of the body is a support to the message, a way of avoiding distractions; this is how it is performed today.

In the case of music, the presence and the action are entirely joined. The very action of playing an instrument entirely conditions the presence; some are played sitting down, others standing; they can be played by knocking (percussion), plucking (strings) or by placing them in the mouth and blowing (wind), etc.

Historically, musical instruments have been gender-classified: originally women were banned from playing instruments that needed to be placed in the mouth, and later on they simply avoided them.

A woman who plays the harp is seen very differently to one who plays the drums or the trombone; her presence on the stage is entirely different.

Ornitorrinkus uses the whole family of saxophones, from the soprano sax (the smallest) to the baritone sax (the largest with the lowest sound). The presence of the instruments, combined with the fact that they are being played by women, can entirely condition the way the action is perceived.

## Actions in public spaces

*Bertsolaritza* and musical actions take place in public spaces.

What historical difficulties have women endured in performing in public spaces?

To date, *bertsolaritza* has been seen as being a man's field. But we know that there have also been women *bertsolaris*. The first reference we find is in the old *fueros*, or laws of Bizkaia, drawn up in 1452.

«Women who are known as shameless local troublemakers and make stanzas and verses in the form of libel (whom the law calls *profazadas* (abominated women)). Such *profazadoras* were banned from singing verses to the dead, on pain of a fine of one thousand maravedis.

And precisely because of that prohibition, we know that women were singing. In other words, the known history of women *bertsolaris* begins with a prohibition.

We do not have to go so far back in the world of music to find similar prohibitions. For example, in the Alarde (troop review) procession in Irun, women members of the bands do not play on San Marcial's Day —«of their own free will» they tell us. The women of the *txarangas* or brass bands who participate in the St. Sebastian's Eve celebrations in San Sebastian have had a lot of trouble joining some of the societies. The musicians at the Vienna New Year's Concert are all men: women are banned from participating... Things are changing gradually, but it is still easy to find such examples. How do these attitudes affect women's experiences with music?

Since the «*profazadoras*» there have been other women *bertsolaris* working with improvisation, as their children and grandchildren can still attest today: «The *bertsolari* in our house was our aunt».

Yes, they sang verses, but always in the private sphere, within the four walls of their houses. Not in public spaces.

A woman in a public space, as the centre of attention, the holder of the word, the protagonist of the festival..., was something completely inconceivable until very recently. And this is still the case today, even if things are gradually changing. A woman who wants to sing (or anything else) in public, will encounter major problems.

In music too, there have always been women musicians. But the difference is between composers and performers: many women have been performers, primarily in the aristocracy. Subsequently, with the emergence of the bourgeoisie, many households had musical

instruments, and with the introduction of the upright piano (which could be placed against the wall of the sitting room), a broad range of new possibilities opened up for people wanting to play music at home. It was common for the members of a family to gather together each night to play music, each one on a different instrument. Women too, of course. In the private space.

It was seen as proper for a woman to know some music, but almost as an ornamental feature. While she was still single. As a kind of entertainment.

Yet although Mozart's sister was a hugely talented performer, her father decided that the great musician would be the son, and it was he who was brought to court.

Clara Schumann (Germany, 1819-1896) was an extraordinary concert pianist; she was born and raised in a famous family of musicians, and was highly successful on her 40 concert tours. She was one of the great names of her time. She married Robert Schumann, had 8 children, and for a long time the family lived off the money she had earned... but despite having a solid grounding as a composer, and still being admired as a pianist and a composer, she said: «I once believed that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose —there has never yet been one able to do it. Should I expect to be the one?» Her case is as significant as it is singular.

Although things have changed somewhat, has the change been the same in all areas and genres of music? There are plenty of women music teachers, but what about stage performances? How many women performers do you get in the festive *verbena* groups, when it comes to making instrumental music in a party atmosphere? Or are they mostly just singers? Why? What function do singers in groups perform? What happens to women when they go out on stage?

## Sound/word presence: in bertsolaritza and music

Women are not trained to occupy a space or to take the floor and keep it. The centre and the floor (the word), the spotlight: these are not the places for them.

Women are not brought up to lead a large group, much less if that group is formed by men.

Seeing a woman at the centre of attention often conveys a sense of discomfort and insecurity to the receiver... even when the receiver is a woman. Feelings of identification, of representation, tend to arise that are clear examples of an unhealthy situation.

«Verse has helped me feel uncomfortable in the world» (...) «The exercise of responding to the rhymes has taught me that I have not been taught to say things without thinking» (...) «When opening the verse session I learnt that I was not educated to take the initiative: it's better if someone else starts and I follow on afterwards» (...) «The moment I went up on stage I realised I hadn't been educated to go round unprotected: if there are six bertsolaris, I find it difficult to go first or last. I'd rather be in the middle, protected from in front and from behind» (...) «When choosing a companion to versify with, I realised I wasn't brought up to have an authoritarian voice. Why did I call that guy to come for the verse session in that area?» (...) «Why do I sometimes need a male voice at my side?» (...) «Why do I feel more comfortable in a theatre than in a pelota court? Why do I sing lower and lower? Why do I like the music I do for the verses? Why do I sometimes feel like sitting down on a stool, putting on a dress and singing with my legs crossed?»

Uxue Alberdi: «Zu emakumea zara»  
2008/10/29, *Berria*.

At the same time, a woman's word does not have either the weight or the credibility of a man's. Women have had the experience of not being listened to, and they are afraid it might happen again. They always start their involvement by asking for permission: *I think... I don't know, err... but... I feel that, err...* It is men who grant legitimacy. At a popular meal (and in many other contexts), the fact that there are two women singing provokes—even for the bertsolari herself—a sense of insecurity and doubts as to the legitimacy of what they are doing.

Women aren't used to being the centre, let alone being the heart and soul of the party. Fiestas and women, like humour and women, are still delicate subjects even today... subjects that need to be investigated.

Someone who acts in public needs to display self-confidence. Through the word, through the body, through the pose. And that security is what is often lacking amongst women. Of course, men may be lacking it too, but women, in general, are not educated for this purpose.

## How do we move on?

Despite all the difficulties, many women have managed to make a name for themselves in *bert+solaritza*.

«The one from Arrate is a forcible, full, single-pieced body, and that means that it is rooted in Basque Culture (...), that it is a body that matches the corporeality of *bertsolaritza*. But at the same time it implies a challenge to its own culture and from inside it».

(...)

«My central argument is that the body has had a central role in the presence and legitimising of women in a world of men, just as *bertsolaritza* has been until recently — and as it continues to be in some way more generally in Basque society».

Esteban, Mari Luz (2004) *Antropología del cuerpo: genero, itinerarios corporales, identidad y cambio*. Barcelona: Ediciones Bellaterra.

When it comes to singing verses, women have been judged mainly in terms of those characteristics that are considered most masculine: swiftness in responding, firmness, self-confidence, force, lack of embarrassment, uncowardliness... Mari Luz Esteban, however, adds that these characteristics are not masculine, but poses and attitudes that form a whole with Basque culture.

In short, the people who have been successful in *bertsolaritza* to date have been people with these characteristics. (In *bertsolaritza*, being a *drag-king* means being a *plazagizon*, in other words, being self-assured in front of an audience). But the problem is that from their wide range of characteristics they have only managed to use those ones. Is *bertsolaritza* possible with other types of characteristics?

Something similar happens in the world of music; skill is often measured in terms of strength, speed and the capacity to reach the loudest notes, in the role of the *leader*.

And so it is clear that in order to succeed in public artistic activity, the only way is to be good, twice as good, better than men themselves at these skills.

But even going part of the way down the road with these skills, even being accepted on the basis of those characteristics, one also feels other desires. A desire to show and demonstrate different attitudes. To remove the corset that oppresses us.

But, how then can we find a way of showing those other attitudes, those other tones of voice, those other themes, in another space?

Ornitorrinkus was set up to try to answer that question.



## Ornitorrinkus

The principles of Ornitorrinkus are clearly set out in the name of the group: *Ornitorrinkus* means duck-billed platypus, an animal that was unknown to Europeans and yet existed. When they did discover it, European scientists took years to work out how to classify it. The classifications they proposed varied depending on the particular aspect they used, but there was always something left undefined. It didn't fit their moulds. It looked like an animal made up out of different pieces from other animals, and in a single body it contained features that had previously been thought to be incompatible.

The idea of the unclassifiable, of the ambiguous, whose identity cannot be told; that is the form and meaning of Ornitorrinkus. And its raw material is experimental verse and music.



## Presence, time and space in Ornitorrinkus

One of the aims of Ornitorrinkus has been to deconstruct, in the broadest sense, the «learnt action» to which we have already referred. Deconstruct or question: the way of being a woman; the way of understanding spectacle and its place; the way of understanding music; the way of understanding *bertsolaritza*, the singing of verses...

Pointing out what cannot be seen, what cannot be heard, what is not important, is one of the recurring themes of Ornitorrinkus. Not only pointing out through word and description, but transforming what-it-is-not into something that is; and the raw material for that transformation is, precisely what-is-not: silence as a part of the contents and a sound element, as the raw material for creation; and likewise, breathing, which is given a presence and importance it does not normally receive; volume... We normally focus our attention on sounds that have no presence. Ornitorrinkus examines sounds, words, situations that are out of the spotlight.

And the same is true of the physical space of the session. Making the invisible visible. Ornitorrinkus's first session, for example, was performed in the Leoka wash-house in Hernani; the session was intended to examine in a new way a place that has always been there, or rather over there, separate, hidden.

Just as postmodernism has done, we utterly question the divisions

between concert/folk, oral/written and traditional/experimental music. Our aim is to offer synthetically things that *a priori* seem distant and incompatible, and to do this we try to find a common language.

Ornitorrinkus asks questions about the role imposed on the audience by the well-known common codes used in *bertsolaritza*, and about the place in which the experimental music places the listener. Using imaginary common codes and altering them through action, offering our perception multiple possible interpretations.

It tries to change the relationship with the audience; turning the audience into an active part of the situation/session. Beginning with the position, and continuing through the action.

Ornitorrinkus, as its name suggests, is a session for questioning classifications and studying what happens when one escapes from the attitudes corresponding to those classifications.

Centre/fringe, important/unimportant, heard/unheard, obligation to be a certain way, inability before the audience, postural attitude... clearly; these are all metaphors that are directly related to gender roles.

Speaking about the need to classify and regulate everything, Ornitorrinkus says: «What cannot be classified, then, classifies as 'unclassifiable'».