

Social Features Of *Bertsolaritza*

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[The Bertsolaritza Setting](#):¹ *The Basque Language Community*

Sung, extempore verse-making in Basque (hereafter referred to as *bertsolaritza*, as it is known in the Basque language) holds an important place in the culture of the Basque language, a speech community of about 600,000 people. This community is divided among four territories inside the Spanish state and three inside the French state; the population in these territories put together is around three million. The Basque language community is a small speech community and finds itself in a minority in its native land.

Nevertheless, we are talking about a community that goes back a long way in history. The most recent findings by a number of scientific disciplines appear to confirm its Pre-Indo-European origin, since the community of Euskara, the Basque language, is regarded as one of the oldest in Europe. It is important to bear in mind the key characteristics in the development of our speech community: a firm determination to maintain its roots and its ability to adapt unceasingly in so many eras and contexts by preserving its essential nature in difficult balances. These key characteristics and behavior are linked to the way the present and future of *bertsolaritza* is understood and, in general, to the way that the evolution of the Basque language is experienced.

Right now, the Basque language finds itself at an especially critical moment; on the one hand it is on the point of losing the battle for revival in some of its territories, and on the other it is going through a difficult normalization or development process. For the *bertsolaritza* movement, however, this situation tends to be more stimulating than dramatic and desperate. In the last 20-25 years, *bertsolaritza* has been organizing itself and adopting a sociocultural strategy; it is not possible to understand that sociocultural strategy outside of the context of the minority situation of the Basque language and the efforts being made to revive it. If it were not for this context, the whole movement might never have come about, since it is unlikely that it would have arisen through the power of improvised sung verse alone.

Bertsolaritza is one of the manifestations of traditional Basque culture that is still very much alive. A sociological survey conducted in 1993 painted a general picture of the position held by *bertsolaritza* in our speech community, while a study conducted in 2006 confirms that

¹ For photographs associated with this article, click on link.

view with updated figures. In 1993, 15% of Basque speakers regarded themselves as great devotees of *bertsolaritza*, 35% regarded themselves as devotees, and another 28% expressed a certain devotion to it. The 2006 survey provides similar figures, despite not using exactly the same categories or methods. According to these latest figures, 40% of Basque speakers are devotees of *bertsolaritza*. A further 25%, more or less, are peripheral devotees—that is, they generally keep abreast of this cultural activity from a distance, but are in direct contact with it, for example, during the championships. Finally, a third of Basque speakers, 33%, said they had no interest whatsoever in *bertsolaritza* (the survey defines this group as non-devotees of extempore verse-making in Basque). The devotees, 40% of the Basque-speaking population, are divided into two groups: those classified as strong devotees of extempore verse-making in Basque account for between 10% and 15% of all Basque speakers. The rest, those with an average interest or those who are less enthusiastic, account for the other 25-30%.

According to these surveys, devotion to *bertsolaritza* in the Basque speech community can be divided into three concentric circles. The innermost circle (the most enthusiastic one) provides a sufficient critical mass to ensure the future survival of *bertsolaritza*. In other words, the revival or transmission involving all the participants (*bertsolaris*, theme-prompters, critics, judges, teachers, organizers, committed devotees) required by *bertsolaritza* in the future takes place within this 15%. So there is a nucleus in this cultural activity that will guarantee its future.

However, it is no coincidence that in today's Euskal Herria (as the Basque Country is known in the Basque language) there is a group strong enough to ensure the revival of *bertsolaritza*. On the one hand, *bertsolaritza* has a historical basis, and its place in the Basque provinces is hardly a new phenomenon. On the other hand, its continuing existence is the result of the efforts made over the last 25 years by a generation of *bertsolaris* determined to revive verse-making and to imbue it with content of interest to today's society, and, particularly over the last 20 years, by a sociocultural strategy set in motion by a generation of *bertsolaris*, devotees, and organizers who have, as a collective, guided *bertsolaritza* through the Association of Friends of *Bertsolaritza* (hereafter referred to as the *Bertsozale Elkartea*, its name in Basque).

Levels of Expression in Contemporary *Bertsolaritza*

Today's sung, extempore verse-making in Basque appears on many levels and in many spheres of expression. It represents a section of Basque oral traditions that corresponds to the Basque language; within that section we also have a small sub-ecosystem. Extempore verse-making in Basque is not the only aspect of verbal art; we also have verse-making schools and many other activities. What follows is an attempt to provide an overview of these levels of expression, with the aim of giving a comprehensive picture of *bertsolaritza*'s sociocultural reality.

Public Show or Performance

The top level, the core of today's *bertsolaritza* is its expression in the form of a show or entertainment. Every year about 1,200 verse-making sessions are organized all over the Basque-

speaking region. These sessions do not all have the same level of formality: some take place in cinemas or theaters in the capital cities, others on Basque pelota courts or at verse-making dinners, or in town and village squares on feast days. A minimum of two and a maximum of eight *bertsolaris* chosen by the organizers from among the approximately 100 practicing verse-makers participate in these events. About 20 of these *bertsolaris* receive the majority of the requests.

We can distinguish between several different kinds of public sessions:

1. A performance guided by a theme-prompter.
 2. A free session among two or three *bertsolaris*; such sessions are led from start to finish by the *bertsolaris* themselves, without anyone proposing the topics.
 3. An after-lunch or after-dinner performance, following meals organized especially for the purpose.
 4. As sessions that complement other kinds of events: funerals, weddings, inaugurations, political events, ceremonies in honor of somebody, and many other social functions
- New formats: verse-weaving (an ad-lib session that develops a kind of screenplay proposed by the guide), and experimental sessions (monographic sessions on a single theme, others accompanied by music, and so on).

Competitive Events Adhering to Certain Rules: Championships

One special type of public performance is the *bertsolari* competitions or championships. *Bertsolaris* compete before a panel of judges who award prizes on a point basis. These competitions or championships are held at all levels: for children, for young people, for a valley or province, and so on. The highlight of all of them is the top *bertsolari* competition organized once every four years: the Euskal Herriko Txapelketa Nagusia (Basque National Bertsolari Championships). These events perform a twofold function in the *bertsolaritza* ecosystem of the last few decades. On the one hand, they have attracted media and social attention (when they became a top-level event in the Basque Country); on the other hand, they have supported quality production by *bertsolaris*.

Informal, Fun Group Activity: Verse-Making Schools and Verse-Making Groups

Another level of expression of *bertsolaritza* is the group game, an oral, fun activity organized locally at verse-making schools. At one time, this less formal type took place in cider bars, inns, and on farms, but today it is done at such schools or in groups formed especially for this purpose in cities and towns. It is the most spontaneous expression of *bertsolaritza* and lays the groundwork for preparing the players for the *bertsolaritza* of tomorrow.

If the main aim of the Bertsozale Elkarte is diffusion and transmission, the verse-making schools are the basic nuclei that carry out these two tasks at a local level. In other words, in addition to being a group that undertakes to transmit *bertsolaritza* to new generations, these schools also organize verse-making sessions in the area, perform the task of setting the topics, take on the job of informal verse-making sessions, participate in formal verse-making sessions,

and so on. Thus we could say that verse-making schools are the basic cell of the larger movement.²

There is another issue linked to the subject of schools or workshops that is interesting and raises many questions. To what extent is verse-making an activity that has to operate solely on a national level? In other words, should the sole aim of those verse-makers excluded from the national elite be to participate in this top-level circuit or do they have other spheres? As with other expressions of culture or sport, is there any point in the small provincial and regional circuits? Does it only make sense to be a national-level sportsperson or a national-level musician, or can musicians also find their local niche, playing locally and setting up a choir locally, without operating on a national-level circuit? In regard to *bertsolaritza*, could somebody be a verse-maker locally? Is it possible to distinguish between the functioning of the verse-making activity on a national level (with its own market mechanisms) and verse-making activity regionally?

With respect to these questions, it could be said that the different spheres of verse-making activity have yet to be established. This situation has led to problems in recent years. In fact, while there are more and more *bertsolaris* coming out of the verse-making schools, the number of openings for working at a national level is limited and the system is structured like a pyramid, in accordance with prestige criteria that are difficult to detect. This structure or system deprives many young verse-makers of the chance to perform at a national level, so the more modest circuits provide the main opportunity for them to sing their verses.

In any case, at a more grassroots level than either the national or local town or village circuit is the informal, group activity. This is the real seedbed for verse-making. But it is also a sphere of activity in its own right and one that incorporates a sense of fun, far removed from any public show or market.

In today's Basque society, verses have two further manifestations—statutory education and media treatment—that in a sense stem from these first three.

Statutory Education

After initial steps were taken in 1981, *bertsolaritza* has over the last fifteen years been moving into primary and secondary education. The use of *bertsolaritza* as a component of, and a complement to, the teaching of language and literature is, if not general, then certainly widespread. A reasonable range of teaching materials has been published, and new pedagogical approaches are being developed, based on the contribution *bertsolaritza* can make to school language training, in particular approaches designed to fill the gaps in oral expression that have been detected in younger generations.

In any case, we have yet to reflect on the contribution that *bertsolaritza* can make to education and to invent the strategies necessary to incorporate it into the basic primary and secondary curriculum of Basque students. I believe it is high time that this be done properly and fully. We offered one possible framework in *Bat-bateko bertsoari buruz: Gakoak eta azterbideak*

² “Verse-making workshop” is perhaps a more appropriate name than verse-making school, because the word “school” is closely linked to an academy.

(*The Art of Bertsolaritza: Reality and Keys to Basque Oral Improvisation*),³ with the aim of producing at some point the groundwork we need for this purpose. A summary of this framework is as follows:

- To work on developing personal skills
 - Attitudes toward and abilities for improvisation
 - Ability to organize the act of communication
 - Ability to develop relationships with other people
 - Memory development
- To incorporate the student into our cultural heritage
- To provide complementary work on linguistic competence
- To provide complementary work on musical competence

Media Treatment

Bertsolaritza also has a place as an audiovisual subgenre through special radio and television programs. For practically the last two decades there has been a weekly television program featuring verse anthologies with commentary. For their part, radio stations have for about the last thirty years been producing similar kinds of anthologies and other kinds of *bertsolaritza*-related programs.

What Sets *Bertsolaritza* Apart in Today's Society: Essential Features

Bertsolaritza has a number of features that have little to do with the main orientation of today's mass culture. We will be referring to some of the most thought-provoking ones below.

Spontaneity or Absence of Mass Production

Mass production is one of the bases of modern culture and the market. In the past, production was unique (a homemade garment, a dessert), whereas a large portion of what we consume and what we call culture is now mass-produced. The basis of most ordinary things (books, discs, videos, films) is reproduction, and this also applies to the "goods" spread by the latest new communication technologies, whereby they can be reproduced at a specific time and place very far away from the original site of creation.

Cultural expressions that take place before a live audience are a different matter, but in most of these forms of expression there is also considerable reproduction. A song performed live will never be exactly the same as on any previous occasion, but it is the same song, the continual reproduction of something produced at another time. The same applies to other cultural expressions, such as theater.

³ Available online at <http://www.bertsozale.com/liburua/euskera/sarrera/>. See also Garzia, Sarasua, and Egaña 2001.

Bertsolaritza is one of the few public cultural expressions that is not based on any kind of mass reproduction, and therein lies its contribution as well as its limitation. For that is precisely what a verse session is; it is not the repetition of anything produced ad hoc in advance. Its essence is spontaneity, radical originality in a specific place and time. The creativity of the verse-makers cannot be repeated: the ability to create in a fleeting moment is what gives the verse meaning. Such verse draws meaning from its irreversible transience, on that narrow precipice where the person who performs spontaneously stands; this is where both the ordinariness of the straw and the miracle of the seed are created.

Audience Participation and High Level of Feedback

Audience response is important in any public performance, and in verse-making (verse sessions) it plays an indispensable role. When the show is based on spontaneity, with the unrepeatable quality of that time and place, the fact is that everything that takes place between the performer and the listener becomes vitally important.

The Live Aspect, the Group Aspect, the Street Aspect

Just as in many other oral expressions, *bertsolaritza* largely takes place live; it encourages the listener to attend a public event and participate. In today's mass society a large portion of culture is consumed individually in the privacy of one's own home. That is how we receive books, records, videos, websites, and so on. Along with performances of music, theater, and the arts, however, *bertsolaritza* brings people out of their homes. The live, group, and street aspects constitute an essential part of *bertsolaritza* and involve complicity between artist and audience, the absolutely indispensable ingredient for the spontaneous creation of verses.

Mixed Nature of the Audience

The *bertsolaritza* audience does not belong to a specific generation or to a special type of Basque speaker. To a certain extent it mirrors the heterogeneity of the Basque community, including a wide range of Basques of different ages, cultural levels, jobs, and views.

Accessibility of the Artist

Attempts to define "popular culture" generally lead to confusion. Hollywood films constitute the popular culture that is most loved and most consumed by ordinary people. So the question is not what people consume, but what people create. In other words, we need to ask whether the creator him- or herself is rooted in that nucleus of consumers, whether he or she is just another person belonging to that nucleus of consumers, without any special economic or social status. As I see it, the verse-maker is just another participant in that group of enthusiasts that consumes the own cultural creation. He or she does not enjoy a different economic status due to the mere fact of being a verse-maker, and he or she is neither physically nor symbolically far removed from the nucleus.

Topics Covered by Verse-making

In our society—modern, post-modern, industrial, keen on travel, and divided—one of the keys to the social response prompted by *bertsolaritza* is that verse-makers sing about topics that reach a heterogeneous, new audience. Basically, they can treat any aspect of social life. Naturally, they avoid topics that lack interest at a given moment and ones that society unconsciously regards as taboo (or are regarded as such by the performer). But one could say that all the subjects that may be brought up at the kitchen table, in the pub, or on radio debate programs have a place in the verse sessions. Moreover, subjects that are not developed in other ordinary circles also find expression in *bertsolaritza*, primarily because of the concern of the theme-prompters in recent years to come up with fresh subjects and perspectives.

Bertsolaritza is a kind of alternative communication circuit that provides space for rumination on what is going on at a national, state, regional, town, or world level, sometimes poetically and other times ironically or in a way that attempts to be witty.

The word rumination is apt and thought-provoking. This is rumination in the strictest sense: to chew the cud. Today, citizens in the western world swallow a tremendous amount of information from the mass media, and one of the characteristics of the (post-)modern human being is his or her inability to digest all that biased information. Through participatory, collective, artistic activity, *bertsolaritza* offers a small opportunity to ruminate or reflect on a piece of that information in a humorous tone or in a poetic as well as personal key.

One could dispute what kind of contribution the improvisation of the verse-maker makes to a current issue or a universal question. One could argue that it is paltry, and that a truly intellectual contribution requires serious scientific analysis and profound literary work. Conversely, there are those who see tremendous, unique contributions in improvisation. In any case, verse-makers play around, they mix information with poetic, fun improvisation, they enjoy themselves; and when they get it right, others enjoy themselves as well.

The special contribution of *bertsolaris*, if there is one, is that they mix ideas and levels: current social, political, sexual subjects with the references they give the audience, along with a sprinkling of personal allusions, and in competition with the message their colleagues are improvising. The originality of improvisation arises from that mixture.

In this sphere, characterized by rumination on social and personal information, the role played by the verse-maker is a cross between that of communicator and poet, leader and jester, newspaper columnist and satirical cartoonist, while at the same time he or she is also an ordinary participant in that social environment.

Media as the New Stage

As was mentioned above, *bertsolaritza* has plotted its own course in television and radio. These media have considerable affect on the perception of extempore verse-making in Basque, owing to their large and influential audience. Television can draw in a single day more people than the live verse-making sessions that take place in the open air or indoors can engage over an entire week. Television supplies the most far-reaching expression of verse-making and

influences the verse-making ecosystem. It influences the perception listeners have of specific *bertsolari* and the prestige dynamics of the verse-makers, and this dynamic has an effect when verse-makers are called to perform in towns. But there is more. The weekly TV anthologies also affect the perception that Basque speakers have of the quality criteria for the verses. Here it is important to bear in mind that verses are improvised in a specific context and that their relevance is linked to that context. If they are later broadcast on television as part of a weekly anthology, these *bertsos* lose part of their meaning. To a certain extent television distorts many features of verse-making, especially those linked to its live aspect and feedback.

Nevertheless, the *bertsolaritza* movement made a decision two decades ago to get verses televised. It was a risk worth taking, because the spirit of *bertsolaritza* is not one of “preservation” with an attitude of fear when faced with change or danger. *Bertsolaritza* finds itself in a dialectic relationship with today’s tools of mass culture, and in the sphere of television as well it has tried to deal with both its potential and its risks. Television has tremendous potential for spreading verse-making, but the movement has conceptualized it as a kind of “nuclear energy”: used properly, it can be beneficial; used inappropriately, it can be highly dangerous.

The condition set by Bertsozale Elkarte has always been that the television program should be monitored by the Association itself in conjunction with the public television broadcasting corporation. In actual fact, the natural aim of a television channel is to achieve media success and large audiences, but Bertsozale Elkarte is keen to preserve verse for the long term and knows that television successes can “burn up” anything very quickly. The *bertsolaritza* movement sees verse as “fragile” with respect to the market logic of mass media. Aware of this fragility, the movement strives to see that verse appears in a dignified and measured way in the media.

As far as radio is concerned, this medium is perhaps uniquely suited for giving verse-making the most refined treatment. Radio offers ideal conditions for playing with different elements: verse anthology with commentary, monographic programs, critical comparisons, interviews, thematic sections, historical analyses, and so on. The fact is, even though the public and private radio stations have been broadcasting verse sessions constantly over the last 30 years, there has been little success in developing this potential offered by radio for a variety of reasons. It could be said that, despite numerous broadcasts, there is today no radio program on verse-making that has become an obligatory reference. It is a gap that the movement needs to fill.

Chronicles and verse session reviews have their place in the written press, too, mainly in connection with the championships, because when these events take place they arouse the greatest social curiosity and following. It remains to be seen what kind of potential *bertsolaritza* may have with respect to the communication opportunities offered by the Internet. Recently, we have seen the appearance of websites that provide an opportunity to read and listen to verse sessions, but as yet no experience or data has been obtained on their success or effect.

The Vitality of *Bertsolaritza*: Balances and Challenges

Over the last two decades the *bertsolaritza* movement has acted on intuition, facing the challenges posed by the new era; maintaining a dynamic balance will develop *bertsolaritza* in today's culture without ignoring its own instincts. We can summarize these various aspects as follows.

Recognizing Our Values

The intuition that has guided our movement, and an important source of its merit, has been attention to our values. These can be enumerated as follows:

- Spontaneity
- Absence of mass production
- Accessibility of the artist
- Audience participation
- Absolute importance of feedback
- Mixed nature of the public, collective, and live aspects

We value these attributes because they have worked for us. And taking them as a starting point, we have gradually reflected further: it is true that these features are not mainstream ones in today's cultures. We may give the impression of being eccentric; we may not have a bright future, we may be hypertrophied, and some people may find us ridiculous, but these attributes work for us; they are valid and they help us to live, to enjoy ourselves, to create art, and to communicate. Recognition of these values has given us the confidence to go forward and to start experimenting. As we gather speed in today's cultural channels, we are always aware that increased velocity can pose dangers on any curve, but the fact is we want to continue at the speed we consider appropriate.

To Live, Not Just Survive

The *bertsolaritza* movement does not hold all characteristics of mass culture contemptible, nor does it demand that the idealized characteristics of *bertsolaritza* have to be maintained. This is not the attitude at the heart of the Basque language and its culture, which have survived for so many centuries. In fact, with such an attitude it is unlikely that either *bertsolaritza* or the Basque language would have survived so many conquests and influences. *Bertsolaritza* is strongly committed to the present, to today's reality as well as tomorrow's.

Is it possible to strike a balance between the reigning trends and conditions and still maintain *bertsolaritza*'s unique personality? Where is the point of equilibrium between adaptation and tradition? This is an eternal question and one that constantly needs to be readdressed, at least by cultures that, though not very large, nonetheless have deep roots.

The question of the point of equilibrium between adaptation and tradition effectively highlights one imperative: to go on creating or to have a creative attitude. The fact is that if you fail to create you copy what is done by mainstream cultures; you try to be more like them (as Euskal Telebista—the TV network of the Basque Autonomous Community’s broadcasting corporation—does in most of its programs, for example). But if you paranoically defend your own culture, you turn it into something sclerotic and quaint. In my view, there is only one way of breaking out of that circle of dependence, particularly for small cultures like our own or in oral expressions like ours, and that is to create. When you create, you change; you mix your own tradition and the opportunities that today’s society offers. When you mix, you are creating and following a tradition. Tradition is not something that has to be clung to; it is the accumulation of creations. Tradition itself is constant adaptation or adjustment. And the only way to be loyal to the accumulated creations is to go on creating.

Accepting the Risk of Development

Verse-makers, and those engaged in this movement in general, have favored trying out new places and formats, getting involved with television, and seeking out spheres and forms formerly untouched by *bertsolaritza*. This set of initiatives has led to numerous contradictions, risks, and distortions. The *bertsolaritza* movement has, to a certain extent, engaged these distortions. For example, as we mentioned in the section on the media, exposure on television through a program that enjoys strong audience ratings—buoyed by the weekly broadcast of a verse anthology—generates great enthusiasm for verse, but that enthusiasm involves risks.

Aware of such risks, the *bertsolaritza* movement has been keen to wage the struggle in that very sphere. The movement wants to keep *bertsolaritza* alive by facing the changes associated with new ways, by maintaining the essence of sung spontaneity, and if possible by developing that essence as never before—in its modesty, its nakedness, and its authenticity of improvisation. Along with doubts and contradictions, the reality of *bertsolaritza* is compelling if one contemplates the indicators at different levels: the number and quality of performances, the authenticity of improvisation, the organizational capacity, the social reception, the renewal of young artists, and expansion of the art through school instruction or programs.

Some Keys to Development

I shall now highlight some of the key factors in this development—not all of them, but certainly those that have been particularly significant and that help to explain the way *bertsolaritza* has developed over the last two decades:

Self-confidence

Verse-makers themselves have to develop their self-confidence alone on stage; they perform spontaneously and can never be absolutely sure that they won’t make a fool of themselves. To be

sure, verse-makers create verses, they improvise. Yet at another level the *bertsolaritza* movement itself is to a certain extent improvising, even as it endeavors to discover channels for its cultural heritage when faced with the challenges of mass culture. This collective improvising has to be developed with the same self-confidence displayed by the individual improviser, and I would say—admittedly looking at it from the inside—that this is what, to a certain extent, has been done until now. This confidence in the *bertsolaritza* movement manifests itself on different levels:

- Self-confidence when faced by voices from the intellectual and literary world that accuse us of hypertrophy in oral production and of mediocrity with respect to written production.
- Self-confidence about what we are and what we want. Self-confidence when facing the difficult challenge posed by the survival of our language and culture.
- Self-confidence when facing political pressures of different persuasions and in the long political strife that our people have suffered, which has also influenced cultural activities.
- Confidence to forge ahead along a path that has had to be invented without any external reference, in the absence of any signpost along the way or any benchmark against which to measure ourselves.

The Intergenerational Transmission Instinct

The instinct for transmission began to germinate before the establishment of Bertsozale Elkarte, and before verse-making began to be taught in verse-making schools as well as in mainstream schools. This imperative is most likely linked to a deep-seated attitude. In other words, as a small culture we have spent many centuries striving to survive; the unusual situation we are experiencing now has awakened in us this instinct for transmission. Languages have been obsessed with expansion and space, whereas we Basque speakers have been obsessed with surviving rather than expanding. The Basque-language community in its smallness, and enmeshed in difficulties imposed by having no power apparatus, seems to instinctively create transmission mechanisms, and *bertsolaritza* is no exception.

This whole movement began with transmission, and over the last two decades the *bertsolaritza* movement has put its faith in younger generations to continue the process. One could say that transmission has almost turned into an obsession. We have set up verse-making schools and new verse-making groups, and entered mainstream schools; each group of verse-makers has unconsciously taken great care to prepare the way for the next generation and to transmit all their knowledge. Because of this obsession with transmission, special (on occasions excessive) attention has been paid to youngsters who have displayed the required talent for verse composition.

Bertsozale Elkarte: The Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza

The key that has made these developments possible has been the creation of the Bertsozale Elkarte, an association that has brought together the movement surrounding *bertsolaritza* and supported this cultural activity at all levels. Around 1986, the world of verse-

making adopted a special strategy: it decided to organize and manage itself. The aim was to create a meeting point for those who felt in some way involved in *bertsolaritza*, and to work with a single project in mind and avoid leaving the future to the mercy of external factors. The Association's project can be summed up as follows: to lay the groundwork for breathing new life into *bertsolaritza*.

General Characteristics of the Organization

In 2006 Bertsozale Elkarteak had approximately 1,800 members.⁴ The organization brings together all those involved in *bertsolaritza* (verse-makers, verse-setters, theme-prompters, judges, teachers, organizers, committed devotees of verse-making, and so on), whose aim is to work together to design strategies and undertake initiatives in different spheres: the running of the Documentation Center, negotiations with the media and organizations, championships, special events, coordination of the verse-making schools, research, publications, international relations, and many other activities and programs.

Throughout the 20 years of its existence, this movement, which revolves around the Association, has gradually been designing its cultural project, and certain clear references have been established. The aim of the Association, the *bertsolaritza* cultural project, has three aspects: generational transmission, the organizing of its expansion, and documentary research. In addition to these, there is a fourth area that binds together the other three: territoriality. In other words, the idea is that the project should cover the entire Basque-speaking territory, without relegating to a secondary level those provinces that are experiencing the most critical threat to the survival of the language.

One of the most important goals of Bertsozale Elkarteak is to find a way of uniting verse-makers and verse devotees alike in the organization, and, on the other hand, to explore how the verse-makers themselves can reconcile their nature as artists and as members, activists, militants, or voluntary workers in the movement. Initially, the title adopted was Bertsolari Elkarteak (Association of Verse-makers), but that name did not reflect the true nature of the association. From the very start it was clear that it was an association of devotees, and that it was devotion to verse-making that brought us together, rather than aspirations to be verse-makers in the strictest sense. The association has been promoted by devotees who are not verse-makers, and they have borne—and still bear—a large portion of the weight of the activities.

Yet it is also true that many *bertsolari* have been willing to combine the two profiles. They are verse-makers onstage, but offstage they have been building a sociocultural movement: organizing, holding meetings, negotiating fund-raising, and so on. What was important was to get a large group of verse-makers involved, and it was also significant for people to see that many poets who had been at the top were totally committed to the organization. In this respect, the Association has taken on another meaning; it is a unique organization, because the artists themselves on the one hand, and the devotees of the art on the other, have over the last 20 years merged or fused together into a single association, a single project. It is very likely that if some

⁴ The Association is decentralized throughout provinces of the Basque Country; an affiliated group operates in each of the provinces, together making up the association of the Basque Country.

of the verse-makers had not been so deeply committed to the movement, the Association would not have had sufficient moral strength to enable the devotees to give their all to the movement. So the qualitative participation of the poets has been crucial, and must be in the future as well if the movement is to remain healthy.

Essential Points of the Bertsolaritza Culture Project

In the course followed by the Association, a more consolidated project has gradually emerged from the initial one aimed at promoting verse-making. Its meaning, aim, and direction can be summed up in three topics: nurturing, expanding, and transmitting *bertsolaritza* to the new generations. This project has in most aspects been a dream that has gradually turned into reality. As stated above, this project has three main areas: transmission, compilation-research, and expansion, with an additional concern, territoriality. Let us briefly examine these different areas:

- *Transmission*: The aim is to guarantee the transmission of *bertsolaritza* to the new generations. This sphere has two main aspects: first, the monitoring of *bertsolaritza* introduced into statutory education; and second, the verse-making schools or workshops. The Association conducts research and offers didactic communication about the contribution that has to be made by *bertsolaritza*, and in the broader sense by artistic oral creation, to education in the Basque Country. Outside statutory education, the coordination of the verse-making schools calls for a special effort; in fact, these verse-making schools, which are scattered all over the Basque territory, constitute the center and the seedbed for the *bertsolaritza* movement of today and tomorrow.
- *Compilation-research*: The aim of the second area is to bring *bertsolaritza* into the sphere of research and documentation. Steps have already been taken to gather the results of *bertsolaritza*, not in a widespread but in a systematic way, and this field of culture is starting to be included in present and future lines of research. The Xenpelar Documentation Center is the main facility for turning *bertsolaritza* into something that can be analyzed. There is no doubt that this has been and continues to be a strategic step taken by the Association.
- *Expansion*: The goal is to bring about an ongoing and balanced expansion of *bertsolaritza*. It is not a question of merely spreading verse-making under the slogan of “the more, the better,” but to consolidate enthusiasm in a manageable and sustainable way. This requires that a number of fronts be taken into consideration: watching over the presence that *bertsolaritza* may have in the media, promoting *bertsolaritza* on a province-by-province basis, organizing special sessions of symbolic importance, holding championships, bringing out publications, and in general launching initiatives linked to expansion.
- *Territoriality*: the territory of *bertsolaritza* is that of the Basque language. From the very outset, people from the whole of the Basque Country have been involved in Bertsozale Elkartea. Separate organizations have been set up in the Northern Basque Country (the part

of the Basque Country under French administration), and in Gipuzkoa, Araba, Bizkaia, and Navarre (the four provinces under Spanish administration). At present EHBE (Euskal Herriko Bertsozale Elkarte, the Association of Friends of *Bertsolaritza*) is the umbrella organization for these five associations. In fact, right now the five associations—the Bizkaiko Bertsozale Elkarte, Arabako Bertsozale Elkarte, Nafarroako Bertsozale Elkarte, Iparraldeko Bertsozale Elkarte, and the Gipuzkoako Bertsozale Elkarte—make up EHBE through a federation. Aside from organization, the concept of territoriality is always present in our aims: it is up to Bertsozale Elkarte to make special efforts and investments in the places where the health of the Basque language is poorest, because we want *bertsolaritza* to be a tool for breathing new life into the Basque language.

The Self-management of Bertsolaritza: A Type of Societal Activity in the Cultural Field

In addition to developing a cultural project, the *bertsolaritza* movement has put its faith in self-management. The following are the bases of its policy:

- Voluntary participation of those involved
- Absence of limits for ideological reasons and recognition of internal diversity
- Participatory and democratic organization
- Respect for the processes developed by each town and province
- Culture of debate and development of different attitudes: agreement by consensus beyond the majority-minority game
- Combination of voluntary and professional work

It has been 20 years since Bertsozale Elkarte was founded. Now that the *bertsolaritza* movement is reaching maturity, it seems that the time has come to make contact with other forms of improvised singing traditions that are alive in other parts of the world, in order to become a more active node in a global network of improvised singing.

References

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