

History of Improvised *Bertsolaritza*: A Proposal

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Historical Antecedents

As Joxe Azurmendi (1980) points out,

A curious contradiction arises. On the one hand, a myth surrounding the origins of *bertsolaritza* has been gratuitously created, trying to date it from time immemorial; on the other, in these dizzy times where all myths are opposed with such ardor, a counter-myth, just as gratuitous as the myth it claims to combat, has arisen: that *bertsolaritza* in the Basque Country is a phenomenon more or less modern, with its origins about the beginnings of the nineteenth century.

According to Azurmendi, the myth of the immemorial origin of *bertsolaritza*¹ comes from Manuel Lekuona, the first real scholar of *bertsolaritza* and of other manifestations of Basque popular literature. In Lekuona's work, we find a number of references to the "neolithic" or "prehistoric" character of the artistic activity. According to him, the origins of *bertsolaritza* have to be looked for in the times of pastoral farming. Azurmendi states that all subsequent references to the remote origins of *bertsolaritza* owe a debt to the position held by Lekuona. And Azurmendi produces some evidence in the form of quotations, which can give us an idea of the tone of the arguments over the remote origin of *bertsolaritza*. So, for example, it is stated that "All Basques sing; the whole people sing . . . from the earliest times which prehistoric science managed to penetrate, the Basques have shown examples of their poetic activity" (Gorostiaga 1957). Another formulaic statement on the same theme is the claim that "*bertsolaritza* is as old as Euskara itself."²

The counter-myth, at the same time, has a considerable tradition among us. On the one hand, the list of those expressing their reticence—or even their scorn—towards *bertsolaritza* is well stocked with famous names. The fact is that when the first recorded mention of *bertsolaritza* occurs (towards the end of the eighteenth century), it is referred to as a phenomenon of

¹ For photographs and audio/video associated with this article, click on link.

² See, for example, Jautarkol 1958 and Onaidia 1972.

considerable age and, what is more important, the documents clearly treat *bertsolaritza* as a cultural expression that has a high degree of maturity in its forms and in its social roots, judging by the references to the verbal combats between *bertsolaris* and the social importance that such ad hoc compositions appeared to have had at the time.

Luis Michelena, distancing himself equally from the two extremes, states that, “the tradition [of the *bertsolaris*] is very old, and dates at least from the *damas improvisadoras (improvistraces)* of fifteenth-century verse whom Garibay talks about” (1960:25). J. M. Leizaola and other scholars have also held the same opinion. Azurmendi’s work on this question is of great importance because it involves two references from the Ancient Charter for Bizkaia, put down on paper in 1452. These are undoubtedly the oldest written records of *bertsolaritza* and irrefutable proof that, as early as the mid-fifteenth century, improvised verse singing, or some manifestation thereof, was sufficiently common and deep-rooted to merit its express banning. First, Title 35, Charter Law VI:

. . . hereafter, when one wishes to mourn for a defunct person in Bizkaia or outside the same, by sea or on land, no person in any part of Bizkaia, in town or village, shall dare make lamentations, pull their hair or scratch their head, nor shall they make singing lamentations . . . under pain of payment of one thousand coins for each person acting in contrary and every time.

In addition to these “mourners,” there is a second mention in the Ancient Charter for Bizkaia, even more significant, about the sung improvisation of the period. It appears in Title 8, Law I:

Regarding those cases where arrests can be made without delinquents seeking sanctuary under the Tree of Guernica. First, they say: there are Common Law rights . . . sanctuary . . . and as regards the Women, known for being shameful, and agitators of peoples, they make couplets and songs in an infamous and libellous manner.

The Charter Law refers to these women as “profanesses” who, in all probability, can be regarded as the direct ancestors of modern-day *bertsolaris*.

Despite this record, the reality of these adlibbing women is that we can do little more than confirm their existence. To find a corpus of *bertsolaristic* literature of any substance we have to wait until the end of the eighteenth century. The nineteenth century is better documented, both regarding names and biographical data as well as regarding actual preserved pieces (*bertsos*). Nevertheless, these refer more to non-improvised, written *bertsos* (*bertso jarriak*). It is known, from cross-references, that the *bertsolaris* who wrote these verses also improvised, but the number of *bertsos* (entire improvised sung poems) of which we have knowledge is quite scant and we can say little about their characteristics.

Not until the mid-twentieth century did the use of recording technologies become widespread, thus allowing the guaranteed preservation—and subsequent faithful transcription—of the *bertsos* improvised by the *bertsolaris* in town squares and at village crossroads. If we subscribe to the point of view of Michelena, Leizaola, and Azurmendi about the origins of improvised *bertsolaritza* and consider the forms used and the end-product of the ad

hoc *bertsolari* improvisers, we can see that it is only from the 1960s onward that we have a corpus of improvised *bertsos* worthy of the name. Before that time, what survives is a collection of fragments and anecdotes that do not provide sufficient material on which to base thorough research. Those who are considered “classical” *bertsolaris* (Etxahun, Xenpelar, and Bilintx in the nineteenth century; Kepa Enbeita, Txirrita, Pello Errota, Udarregi, and others between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) were, according to all accounts, great improvisers. But the status they enjoy within the world of *bertsolaritza* is almost entirely due to their written or dictated—rather than improvised—*bertsos*. The fact that the *bertsos* that make up most of the creative corpus of these classical *bertsolaris* are “conceptually” oral (some of the poets quoted did not know how to write) should not blind us to the fact that, given the forms of reproduction, these *bertsos* belong to a genre more akin to ballad sheet culture than to improvised *bertsolaritza*.

The Transformation of *Bertsolaritza* in the Twentieth Century

However it may have come about, the reality is that throughout the twentieth century *bertsolaritza* underwent a progressive and radical change. Although the name is the same, *bertsolaritza* at the beginning of the century has little to do with that at the end. Far from being superficial, change has affected practically every aspect of the artistic activity.

Among other things, written *bertsolaritza*, the most important format at the beginning of the century, ceded primacy to the improvised form. By the end of the twentieth century, it was the people improvising their *bertsos* before the public who were seen as the true *bertsolaris*.

It is difficult to determine the point at which the two forms of *bertsolaritza* met, one on the way up and the other in decline. Nevertheless, some of the causes for the change can be outlined:

- The defense of oral poetry by Manuel Lekuona in Bergara in 1930 produced a change in the way in which the Basque intelligentsia evaluated the phenomenon of improvised *bertsolaritza*. As a consequence of this shift, what can be seen as the first-ever *bertsolari* championship was held in 1935, and then repeated the following year. The organization of both competitions was the responsibility of Euskaltzaleak, which was closely linked to Basque political nationalism.
- After the civil war and the harshest years of Franco’s dictatorship, the Basque Language Academy, Euskaltzaindia, assumed responsibility for the organization of the third championship in 1960, with hugely successful results. Three more competitions followed in 1962, 1965, and 1967.
- The advent of radio as a popular means of communication, and the attention that a few broadcasting stations afforded *bertsolaris* from the outset, provided almost the only form of Basque language not prohibited at the time.
- After the death of General Franco, the Academy once again began organizing *bertsolari* championships, the first one being held in 1980. The idea was to hold the competition biennially, and indeed the next one took place in 1982.
- The 1985 competition gave rise to a heated confrontation between the organizers and the group of *bertsolaris* (or at least the most active among them), which resulted in the creation of the

Association of Bertsolaris of the Basque Country.³ This Association then assumed responsibility for organizing the championships on a quadrennial basis; the 1985 contest was held (finally) in 1986 and, since then, three more have taken place: in 1989, 1993, and 1997. Moreover, each of the seven provinces (four in peninsular Euskal Herria and three in the continental Basque Country) holds its own championships, and there is no dearth of school and youth events. Self-managed within the Bertsozale Elkarte, oral artistic activity has become a touchstone for other aspects of Basque culture.

– The improvised *bertsos* in the championships were recorded, both in writing and in audio-visual format. The transcriptions of the *bertsos* of the 1935 and 1936 championships are still precarious, but from 1960 on each contest (or at least the final) had its own recorded edition. We have, therefore, for the first time in the history of *bertsolaritza*, a corpus of improvised *bertsos*.

– In 1989, the Association published a book with an anthology of the improvised *bertsos* from the various events held during 1988, under the title *Bapatean 88*. This book was the first in a series that has been published uninterruptedly ever since; in total, eleven books containing the best moments of improvised bertsolaristic events, including the championships. At the Xenpelar Archive Center, the Bertsozale Elkarte continuously files and catalogues this entire corpus of material, placing it at the disposal of any interested researcher. The Center's new website, <http://www.bertsozale.com/english/xenpelar/xdz1.htm>, aims to make access to the archives ever quicker and easier.

– In 1988, the program *Hitzetik Hortzera* made its appearance on the first (exclusively Basque language) channel of the autonomous Euskal Telebista broadcasting corporation. Consisting basically of an anthology of *bertsolari* events around the country, it coincided with the boom in popularity of *bertsolaritza*, the high point of which can be situated in 1991. The audience for the recordings of the impromptu performances reached hitherto unheard-of, even unimaginable levels.

– Festivals and events of all kinds multiplied, particularly from the 1990s onward. The topics became more diverse and more concrete. In order to acquit themselves well at a difficult verbal juncture, *bertsolaris* had to be aware of what was happening in the world. References to fictional characters, films, literature, and so forth—anything and everything could become the object or the butt of this improvised singing. Not only the content but also the dynamics imposed by the theme-prompter or the opponent became increasingly diverse, sophisticated, and, consequently, difficult. Just one example among the many that could be given: a *bertsolari* is asked to improvise two characters, one for each microphone. The singer therefore has to predict what each one would say in response to the other with regard to the topic imposed—and imitate the register that each would use! It is clear that this goes far beyond the definition of what, according to experts, are the universal features of oral poetry.

– The *bertsolaris* at the end of the twentieth century are young, mostly university students or graduates, and are also involved in written literary creation in all its forms. At the beginning of the new millennium, the presence of female *bertsolaris*, competing on a par with their male counterparts, is now commonplace.

³ The Association changed its name in 1996, and since then has been known as Euskal Herriko Bertsozale Elkarte (the Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza). The change of name aimed to reflect the reality of the Association more faithfully, since the number of actual *bertsolaris* was no greater than 15% of the total membership. Hereafter, we will refer to this association as the Bertsozale Elkarte, or by its initials, EHBE.

– For the first time in history, it is the *bertsolaris* themselves who provide the most novel and interesting reflections on the art that they perform. Even though these thoughts may in principle be merely intuitive, they have nevertheless firmly established that it is wise to treat improvised *bertsolaritza* as an oral genre in a class of its own.

In short, although evidence exists to suggest that improvised *bertsolaritza* was a deeply rooted activity much earlier, the documented history of the art dates from 1935. Up until this date, the only records we have are of challenges and a series of individual *bertsos*, preserved in the collective memory of the local people. Consequently, there is little we can say about improvised *bertsolaritza* prior to this time.

Histories of popular *bertsolaritza* generally begin at around 1800 and establish a series of long periods, each dominated by one or more major figures. Juan Mari Lekuona,⁴ for example, establishes the following eras, which have been more or less generally accepted by later historians:

Period	Years	Key <i>bertsolaris</i>
Pre-romanticism	1800-1830	Fernando Amezketarra, Zabala, Txabolategi, etc.
Romanticism	1839-1876	Etxahun, Otxalde, Xenpelar, Bilintx, etc.
Pre-renaissance	1876-1935	Pello Errota, Udarregi, Txapel, Zepai, Kepa Enbeita, Txirrita, and so on

While I firmly believe that Lekuona has been and continues to be a key reference in the field of research into *bertsolaritza*, this classification fails to satisfy for two fundamental reasons. First, as stated earlier, he mixes up two clearly separate genres: improvised *bertsolaritza*, whose corpus from these periods is practically non-existent, and non-improvised *bertsolaritza*. Second, the names of the periods themselves refer to external categories that have nothing whatsoever to do with improvised *bertsolaritza*.

I therefore propose a new series of eras in the history of *bertsolaritza*, with the following basic characteristics:

- They concern only improvised *bertsolaritza*.
- The eras for which there is no acceptable corpus of improvised *bertsos* are all considered as part of the pre-history of improvised *bertsolaritza*.
- The criteria used for establishing the periods stem from the nature of improvised *bertsolaritza* itself.

In accordance with these criteria, the following chronology can be identified in the history of improvised *bertsolaritza*:

⁴ See Lekuona 1982:111-22.

Period	Years	<i>Bertsolaris</i>
Pre-history	from its origins until 1900	Pernando Amezketarra, Etxahun, Xenpelar, Bilintx, etc.
From marginal <i>bertsolaritza</i> to the first championships	1900-1935	Txirrita, Kepa Enbeita
Time of silence	1936-1945	
Survival <i>bertsolaritza</i>	1945-1960	Basarri, Uztapide, Lasarte, Joxe Lizaso, Agirre, Lazkano, Lazkao Txiki, Mattin, Xalbador, etc.
Resistance <i>bertsolaritza</i>	1960-1979	Azpillaga, Lopategi Uztapide, Basarri, Joxe Lizaso, Agirre, Lazkano, Lazkao Txiki, Mattin, Xalbador, etc.
From singing to the people to singing to the public	1980-1998	Amuriza, Egaña, Sarasua, Peñagarikano, Sebastián Lizaso, etc.
Multi-polar <i>bertsolaritza</i>	1999-	Maialen Lujanbio, Unai Iturriaga, Igor Elortza, Amets Arzallus, Sustrai Kolina, etc.

Of course, in each period, and particularly the more recent, there are many more *bertsolaris* worth mentioning than those included in the table. This is, nevertheless, a brief outline of the way in which I shall organize my overview of the history of this art, and the reader has only to consult the section referring to a specific period in order to find a more comprehensive list of prominent *bertsolaris*.

From Marginal *Bertsolaritza* to the First Championships: 1935-36

During the years leading up to the Spanish Civil War⁵ another priest, Ariztimuño'tar Jose, alias Aitzol, an enthusiastic supporter of nationalism and literature, felt obliged to intervene in the world of *bertsolaritza* on account of its having been marginalized. There were many *bertsolaris* in the Basque Country, and *bertsolaritza* was a thriving and diverse movement, an activity with no set rules or regulations that had not even the tiniest inkling that it was in fact an asset of strategic national importance. *Bertsolaritza* had not fallen silent; rather, what had happened was that the *bertsolaris*, particularly in Gipuzkoa, moved in areas far removed from all official activities. Bizkaia had Kepa Enbeita, a nationalist activist and one of the fathers of the Basque movement, alongside Evaristo Bustintza, alias Kirikiño. But no disciples arose.

⁵ The so-called "Spanish Civil War," that is, the fratricidal war provoked by the coup d'état led by Francisco Franco against the legitimate republican institutions, began on June 18, 1936, and ended on April 1, 1939, giving way to 40 years of dictatorship (1936-75).

Aitzol must have engaged in tremendous private arguments with other intellectuals of his period. Although all were looking for a cornerstone on which to base the “renaissance of Basque culture,” they disagreed openly regarding the role that *bertsolaritza* should play in this renaissance. In Aitzol’s opinion, it was important to find and train good *bertsolaris*, in order to ensure that “popular poetry would flow out over the joyous flower-covered countryside and the throngs of Basque people lit up by the bright rays of a vigorous renaissance.” Moreover, the following year, in another paper on the subject, Aitzol aimed to dress the figure of the *bertsolari* with appropriate clothing, stating that he should be “discreetly attired with archaic garments” in order to present the appearance of a “romantic troubadour with golden locks.” He also aimed to lend a certain mobility to his declamatory body language and radically change the somewhat prosaic décor.⁶

These measures were never adopted, but the quotes make it quite clear that the value being assigned to *bertsolaritza* was, even in the best of cases, instrumental rather than intrinsic. In other words, the art was appreciated only in so far as it could serve as a vehicle for achieving the much-desired renaissance of Basque culture, an undertaking that was far from easy given that the majority of the population was illiterate in their own tongue. Since written poetry by the great poets of the period (Lauaxeta, Lizardi) served only to alienate the ordinary people, some, like Aitzol, believed that a form of “cleaned-up” *bertsolaritza* could serve their purpose.

A poor imitation of a competition had been organized some years earlier in 1877 by the Consistory of Floral Games, and had been repeated every year since then in San Sebastián’s Teatro Principal on Saint Thomas’ Day. However, Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship (1923-31) did away with any trace of Basque culture and the Basque language itself was prohibited.

In 1930, a tribute to Toribio Alzaga, the first director of the School of Declamation, was arranged, and was attended by Txirrita, Lujanbio, Telaetxipi, Zabaleta, Agirre, and Bitoria. It was an attempt to entice the *bertsolaris* out of the cider houses, the “university of *bertsos*,” and into the theater. The initiative, however, was not followed up, and then later, during the Republic, the possibility of taking direct political action relegated the establishment of a set of official rules for *bertsolaritza* to second place. At a cultural level, the efforts of the Euskaltzaleak centered for various years around the Olerti-Eguna, Umeen-Eguna, and Antzerti-Eguna. During the middle of 1934, Xabier Lizardi, Luis Jauregi, Antonio Labaien, and the *bertsolaris* Erauskin and Jose de Ariztimuño, alias Aitzol, met in the Alegia mill. They enlisted the help of the barber from San Sebastián, Iñaki Uranga, who had sat on the judges’ panel in the meeting organized by the Consistory, and thus the first proper championship of *bertsolaris* arose, with its rules, judges’ panel, and prizes. The youth organization of the nationalist movement, Euzko Gaztedi, was enlisted to copy the *bertsos* for subsequent publication. Although the system was not completely reliable, it nevertheless gave us the first proper document in the field of improvised *bertsolaritza*.

⁶ See Aitzol 1931.

The Paradigm of Classic Bertsolaritza: Txirrita

During the first 30 years of the twentieth century, improvised *bertsolaritza* was dominated by the imposing figure of the Hernani-born poet Jose Manuel Lujanbio, alias Txirrita (1860-1936), who, at the beginning of the 1900s, was one of the key figures on the oral scene. A corpulent man who had an acute aversion to doing anything other than singing verses, Txirrita himself is today somewhat obscured by his status as a legendary hero, a status shared also by other *bertsolaris* from earlier eras, such as Etxahun, Pernando Amezketarra, Bilintx, and Xenpelar.

In comparison with these *bertsolaris*, however, quite a few of Txirrita's improvised verses have survived, all linked to anecdotes illustrating his crafty, cheeky nature. Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that all the improvised verses attributed to him were in fact really improvised. The most striking, due to its excellent quality, is the verse he is supposed to have composed in San Sebastián upon seeing the widow of the then recently assassinated Cánovas del Castillo.

Gorka Aulestia records and translates the first of the two verses supposedly improvised by Txirrita on that occasion as follows:

*Ill da Canovas, fuera Canovas,
pikaro gaizki eziya,
galdu zituen gari-zelaiak,
gallendu zaio sasiya;
galdu zituen ipar garbiak,
gallendu trumoi nasiya,
galdu zituen fueruak eta
Jaungoinoaren graziya,
galdu zituen bizilekuak,
galdu du bere biziya.*

(Cánovas is dead, / out with Cánovas, / rude villain, /
he destroyed the wheat fields, / the burrs have vanquished him; /
he chased away the fresh breezes, / he drew the dark storm, /
he lost the *fueros*⁷ and / the grace of God, /
he destroyed homes, / he has lost his life.)⁸

Although much of the force of the original verse is lost in translation (particularly the anaphoric use of the verb *galdu*, which in Euskara means both “to lose” and “to destroy”), it is hard to believe that it was really improvised.

General incredulity is even greater with regard to the second verse attributed to him:

⁷ The *fueros* are a traditional set of Basque rights and privileges.

⁸ Taken from Aulestia 1990:116, trans. by Lisa Corcostegui and Linda White.

*Hiru reloju, hiruna kate,
hiru mailakin bakoitza,
buruan hiru korona eta
petxuan hiru orratza;
amodioa hiru dobletan
tximixta bezain zorrotza,
hiru tirokin utzi zizuten
zuri senarra hilotza,
hiru ezpatak zulatzen dute,
señora, zure bihotza.*

(Three clocks, three chains, / three links in each, / three crowns on his head / and three needles in his breast; / love in three folds / sharp like lightning, / three shots turned / your husband into a corpse; / three swords pierce / your heart, madam.)

The distribution of the resources and the density of the figures all indicate that this piece is in fact a written verse, or, to be more precise, a dictated one, since Txirrita did not know how to write. As for the rest of Txirrita's *bertso-paperak*, they are in no way inferior to those quoted above. And it is on this corpus of *bertso-paperak* that either explicitly or implicitly, the model of classic *bertsolaritza* is based.

Juan Garzia has carried out a literary analysis of the style and resources that underlie the verses dictated by Txirrita.⁹ At the end of the day, what has become known as "Txirrita's style," the paradigm of classic *bertsolaritza*, can, according to Garzia, be described as "a small number of poetic-rhetoric resources admirably used in accordance with the expressive requirements of each moment."¹⁰ The accumulation, antithesis, precision, and graphic expression, all integrated into a syntax dominated by parataxis, constitute the cornerstone of "Txirrita's style." Metaphor, on the other hand, is used little.

The figure of Txirrita is omnipresent throughout the last 25 years of the nineteenth century and the first 30 years of the twentieth century. We find him in the first *bertsolari* championship, in which the then young and unknown Basarri sang the "verse of the little dove," winning the competition against all expectations. Txirrita had to make do with winning the next one, held in 1936, just a few months before his death.

It is in these two competitions that Txirrita's true talent as an improviser becomes apparent, since the remainder of the improvised verses attributed to him are simply individual snippets. If we study the verses composed during the competitions, another aspect of Txirrita's style is revealed, an aspect that renders it fiercely modern: its ingenuity. The *bertsolari*'s wit is revealed in his ability to come up with responses to even the most difficult dialectical situations. In Basque, these witty and unexpected responses or remarks are known as *ateraldi*.

⁹ See Garzia 1997.

¹⁰ Personal interview with Juan Garzia.

Let us return, then, to these first championships. Txirrita was mainly used to singing in more informal atmospheres. It has become a bit of a cliché to describe the *bertsolaritza* of that era as “cider house *bertsolaritza*,” since these traditional-type eating houses were his most frequent, and preferred, venue for the performance of his art, although he did participate in the somewhat sporadically held competitions. The championships, however, were a solemn occasion, a kind of rite, and the audience was also different, in that the Basque intelligentsia (who had recently begun to view *bertsolaritza* as a vehicle for achieving the much-desired “renaissance of Basque culture”) were also present, alongside the usual spectators. Txirrita had trouble adapting to the competition. Far from being dazzled by the importance of the occasion, his self-assurance bordered on disrespectfulness.

We will never know how Aitzol reacted when Txirrita unexpectedly sang the verse quoted below, pointing at Aitzol, who was sitting on the judges’ panel, as he pronounced the last part of the poem:

*Larogei urte gainean ditut
nago hanketako minez,
Donostiara etorria naiz
herren haundia eginez.
Bi bastoiekin txit larri nabil
pausorik eman ezinez.
Euskera ia ahaztu zait eta
erderarikan jakin ez,
maixu batekin eskolan laster
hasi behar det latinez.*

(My eighty years weigh heavily on me / and my legs ache, /
I have come to San Sebastián / limping heavily all the way. /
I hobble along with two walking-sticks / unable to take a step. /
I’ve almost forgotten my Euskara / and I cannot speak Spanish, /
soon I’ll start learning Latin / with a teacher at school.)

He was not 80—just 75. A bachelor, reveller, and uncompromising with regard to work, Txirrita was the prototype *bertsolari* denigrated by the majority of the educated classes, particularly the Spanish-speaking ones.

During the 1936 championships, which were performed to a full house in the Victoria Eugenia theater, and while the other contestants moralized about the evils of war in five-rhyme verses, Txirrita sang this four-rhymed poem:

*Zenbait errezo egin izan det
nere denboran elizan
ta pozik nago ikusirikan
pakean nola gabiltzan.
Ni naizen bezin kobarderikan*

*inor ezin leike izan
semeak gerrâ ez joateâtik
mutil zahar gelditu nintzan*

(I have prayed several times / in my life / and it makes me happy to see / that peace has come. / No one can be / more cowardly than me: / because my sons did not go to war / I remained unmarried.)

We can easily imagine the audience's reaction: Txirrita was not exactly known as a frequenter of churches, and he had sung on more than one occasion of his disastrous love affairs in a humorous tone, promising to organize a bullfight with Machaquito and Bombita on his wedding day, and so forth. With the same characteristic irreverence, he expressed his gratitude for the stick he was presented with during a ceremony held in his honor just a few months before his death, as follows:¹¹

*Hirurogeita hamasei urte,
garaia det umiltzeko,
bultza beharrik ez nadukake
goitik behera amiltzeko;
bi makil hoiek aski nitun nik
munduz mundu ibiltzeko,
hirugarrena andregaiari
arkakusoak hiltzeko.*

(I'm seventy-six years old, / I suppose it's high time I swallowed my pride
I don't need to be pushed / to fall flat on my face; / these two
sticks are all I need / to walk wherever I want, / this third one I'll use
to kill / my girlfriend's fleas.)

The Bizkaian Tradition: Kepa Enbeita, or "Urretxindorra"

Although it is often said that there was no tradition of *bertsolaritza* in Bizkaia prior to Kepa Enbeita, alias "Urretxindorra" (1878-1942), this affirmation now needs to be revised following the recent work of Xabier Amuriza and others.¹² Gipuzkoan centrism, justified in part by historical events, now needs to be reviewed and corrected in light of these and other

¹¹ The ceremony was held on March 22, 1936, and Txirrita died on June 3rd of that same year.

¹² Over recent years, Xabier Amuriza has done admirable fieldwork, compiling an enormous quantity of oral pieces, especially *coplas* or verses. In addition to recording them in writing, he has also written a play in which, with the help of a group of musicians, he interprets some of the *coplas* he has gathered, providing also a wealth of information about their content and context. A series of publications has arisen out of this work under the collective title of *Bizkaiko Bertsogintza*.

findings—findings that clearly demonstrate that, although Gipuzkoa was undoubtedly the center of *bertsolaritza*, it was by no means the only place in which the art was practiced.

Indeed, Kepa Enbeita's father had himself been a *bertsolari* of a certain standing. He was nicknamed “Txotxojeurei” and seems to have been rather like Txirrita himself, if not physically then at least as regards his eccentric, amusing, and clever nature. Unfortunately, not enough documents survive to enable us to explore his character and work more closely.

As things stand, then, Kepa Enbeita is the first Bizkaian *bertsolari* whose work can be analyzed in any detail. Born in the Areatza district of Muxika (Bizkaia), he is the first in a long line of *bertsolaris* that continues right up to the modern day: his son Baldendin (1906-86); his grandson Jon, son of Balendin; and his great-granddaughter Oihane, daughter of Jon and a leading member of a generation (our generation) in which the sight of a female *bertsolari* is no longer cause for astonishment.

Two phases are generally distinguished in the poetic activities of the founder of the Enbeita dynasty.

Early phase: 1897-1904

During this period, Kepa Enbeita first made a name for himself as a popular *bertsolari*, with a quick and able style and an ingenious mind, comparable to Txirrita himself. In 1903 he won a competition held in Las Arenas-Getxo, in which he competed against Txirrita and other leading *bertsolaris* of the era, including Pello Errota, Frantses-Txikia, and Aizarna.

Second phase: 1905-36

After being exposed to the doctrine of Sabino Arana, Kepa Enbeita's *bertsolaritza* changed radically. Abandoning the simple, direct style of his earlier period, he attempted to apply Arana's linguistic teachings to the art of sung verses. The result was a loss in the freshness and vigor of his verses, which became more artificial, elaborate, and ideological. Kepa Enbeita participated in nationalist rallies and his verse speeches were a huge success. However, he almost stopped taking part in “normal” *bertsolaritza* sessions altogether, nor did he participate in the 1935 and 1936 championships.

The following two *bertsos* may serve to illustrate the radical nature of the change his poetry underwent. Although the first was sung in competition or banter with another *bertsolari* and the second is a non-improvised piece, both deal with the same element that remains one of the archetypal elements of rural *bertsolaritza*: livestock (in this case, cows) as a primary source of nourishment.

The *bertso* from his early period is a *zortziko txikia*, a four-rhyme stanza (eight verses: the odd ones containing 7 syllables and the even ones, which are rhymed, containing 6). It is the *bertso* that opens the session:

*Komedi tokia da
gure okoilua:
behiak adarrak dantzan*

ta hik akuilua.
Bi alditan hor habil,
mutil kankailua,
esnez bete ezinik
heure katilua.

(Our stable / is quite a sight! / the cows toss their horns /
 and you toss your prod. / You're so clumsy, / even after two tries, /
 you still haven't managed / to fill your bowl).

The title of the session is also significant: *Behi zaharraren bertsoak* ("The verses of the old cow"). When Enbeita returns to the figure of the cow during his second phase, he turns it into a symbol rather than a real animal. In fact, a cow used to appear to the *bertsolari* in his dreams, hence the rather ambiguous title: *Behi zaharraren ametsa* ("The dream of the old cow"). This *bertso* is a good example of Urretxindorra's second phase:

Atzo goizian amets ein nuan
ai, ha zan amets ezia!
Ikusi neban behi nabar haundi
eta ganera luzia,
Euskalerrian muturra daula
eta Madrilen erreperia;
hemen jan ta jan, han zirri-zarra
erasten esne guztia.
Behin aurrian euzko mutil bat
errimia ta gaztia,
esku batian makila daula
ta bestian idazkia.
Idazki hartan idazkun hauxe:
"Kendu behi honi askia,
emon egizko gosia,
hauxe dalako lotsabakoai
ein bihar jaken gauzia."

(Yesterday I had a dream, / oh, what a sweet dream! / I saw an enormous cow / yes enormous and very long, / it had its nose in the Basque Country / and its udders in Madrid; / here it ate and ate, there it was milked / right down to the last drop. / Suddenly, a Basque lad appeared, / young and strong, / he had a prod in one hand / and a piece of paper in the other. / The paper contained the following legend: / "Take this cow's trough away, / let her find out what real hunger is, / this is the only thing / those scoundrels deserve.")

We hope that even in translation (always a somewhat treacherous act) the difference between these two ways of making verses is clear. In purely formal terms, the four-rhyme stanza of the first verse becomes, in the second, a nine-rhyme stanza. The meter, before 7/6, is now 10/8. The first *bertso* is a gibe, a graphic comment about a specific situation; it does not require much space to make its point. The second *bertso*, on the other hand, is a fable, a parable in the true sense of the word; hence the need to lengthen and broaden the format. All this results in a sensation of artifice, of moving forward with difficulty, as opposed to the fluidity of the first *bertso*. Doubtless, expressions such as *euzko mutil* (“Basque lad”) and above all *idazkun* (“legend or inscription”), both clearly inspired by Sabino Arana’s theories, do nothing but accentuate the contrast and the sensation of artificiality with which the *bertso* is imbued.

Whenever the process that took *bertsolaritza* out of the cider houses and into the theaters is talked about, Basarri is usually identified as the sole architect of this change, and people often forget that Kepa Enbeita had already started down this path before the war. Basarri knew Kepa Enbeita, since in the few “normal” *bertsolaritza* sessions in which Urretxindorra participated at the end of his second phase, he was often accompanied, among others, by the then very young Basarri.

Another indisputable merit of the founder of the Enbeita line, closely linked to the one stated above, is that he turned *bertsolaritza* into a functional means of communication. The *bertsolaritza* of Kepa Enbeita’s second phase played a propagandistic role in the promotion of nationalist ideals. Enbeita knew exactly how to make the most of the emotional elements of his art (melody and voice) in order to reach out effectively to a public who enthusiastically applauded him during the rallies in which he participated.

However artificial the *bertsolaritza* of his second phase appears in his texts, Kepa Enbeita is in this sense a modern *bertsolari*, the precursor of the *bertsolaritza* of our era, not so much as regards style and ideology, but definitely in relation to intentions and objectives.

Time of Silence: 1936-45

It would be a patent oxymoron to dwell in detail on the improvised *bertsolaritza* of a period that we have termed the “time of silence.” Following the horrors of the war, the post-war period was no less horrendous, especially in regions such as the Basque Country, which had been declared “traitorous” by the insurgents.

Juan Kruz Zapirain was an illiterate *bertsolari* who sublimated the horrors he had experienced by dictating to his wife the verses he composed while trying in vain to fall asleep. His brother, Joxe, was left widowed with nine children, the oldest of whom was fourteen and the youngest less than three months. A few months earlier, his sister-in-law had died of influenza. The two brothers were widowed almost simultaneously, and both composed *bertsos* expressing their pain. Tradition has it that Joxe Zapirain would go out into the street with the baby in his arms, so that the local women who were still nursing their own children could feed it on their way to the San Sebastián market.

I can think of no better description of this period than the clamorous silence of this *bertso* by Juan Kruz Zapirain:

*Sentimentu asko dauzkat nerekin
 orain kontatu beharrak
 ez dakit nola zuzenduko 'iran
 egin dituzten okerrak,
 pazientzitik ez naiz atera
 Jaungoikoari eskerrak;
 leku askotan jarri dituzte
 tristura eta negarrak,
 lehen hamar lagun ginan etxean
 ta orain hiru bakarrak.*

(Many feelings overwhelm me / and I have to sing them, / I don't know how all the evil that has been done / will ever be remedied; / I have not yet lost patience / thanks be to God; / they have brought sadness and weeping / to many places, / before there were ten of us at home / now there are only three.)

Survival *Bertsolaritza*: 1945-60

Key figures: Basarri and Uztapide

After three years of exile and another three of forced labor in the disciplinary battalions, Basarri finally returned to Gipuzkoa in 1942. Together with Uztapide, he began singing at town and neighborhood festivals in the province. Years would pass before they started singing in Bizkaia or Navarre. They sang as if nothing had happened, ignoring many things both past and present. Of his experience as a woodcutter in Les Landes, we are left with one of Basarri's most accomplished *bertsos*:

*Halabeharrez sartu ginen behin
 Landesko pinu artera
 eguneroko ogi zuria
 irabaziaz jatera.
 Hogei euskaldun bagera baina
 hau da guzision galdera:
 nere famili edo sendia
 gaur zer modutan ote da?
 Gorputzak hemen arkituarren
 gu beti han bizi gera¹³*

¹³ The Unzurrunzaga family carried out invaluable work during the harsh years of the dictatorship, both in their printer's workshop and through their collection *Kulixka Sorta*. Indeed, it was this collection that restarted literary publication during the post-war period, with Salvatore Mitxelena's *Arantzazu* (1949) and Orixe's *Euskaldunak* (1950).

(Fate brought us / to the pine forests of Les Landes / in order to eat white bread bought with our wages. / There are twenty of us Basques / and all of us wonder: / how is my family doing? / Our bodies are here / but we live there with them.)

Iñaki Eizmendi, alias Basarri, was born in Régil (1913), but spent most of his life in Zarauz, located just a few kilometers from his place of birth. When he returned from exile, he worked incessantly. As an improvising *bertsolari*, he visited almost all the towns in the Basque Country, first in Gipuzkoa, and then later in the other provinces also. His habitual companion was a young man from Cestona, Manuel Olaizola, alias “Uztapide” (1909-83), who had also participated in the championships of 1935 and 1936.

Uztapide’s *bertsolaritza* was more simple and popular in style than Basarri’s. Despite not sharing Basarri’s intellectual concerns, Uztapide was, nevertheless, the ideal complement to the Régil-born poet. Today, older *bertsolari*s who had occasion to practice their art alongside Basarri and Uztapide remember that the dynamics of the pair’s performances were always the same, with Basarri marching ahead, clearing the path, deciding when and how to deal with each theme. Needless to say, these performances were carried out without a theme-prompter, meaning that it was the *bertsolari*s themselves who decided which themes to sing about and how long to dedicate to each.

Basarri’s *bertsolaritza* was basically more intellectual. As Lekuona (1998:364-79), points out, it all formed part of a well-defined project. Average *bertso*-lovers, however, tend to prefer Uztapide. Crouching behind Basarri’s initiative, Uztapide lost no opportunity to hit the ball deftly back into his companion’s court, answering every comment with adroitness. In addition to being a *bertsolari*, Basarri was also a journalist, working for both the written press and the radio, and also a great composer of written verses. Uztapide, on the other hand, is remembered mainly for being an accomplished improviser and a talented narrator. His memoirs, published in Auspoa by Father Antonio Zabala, are a monument to popular prose and a great lesson on good narration. The quality of his written verses, however, rarely matched that of his improvised ones.

But Basarri and Uztapide’s merit goes far beyond the texts of their verses. In an era in which *bertsolaritza* was practically the only activity carried out in the Basque language that was tolerated by the regime, they managed to ensure the continuity of their art, laying the foundations for its later development. This period, in which Basarri and Uztapide constructed the foundations for the subsequent evolution of *bertsolaritza*, is poorly documented, at least as regards improvised verses. Since tape recorders were a prerogative of the moneyed classes, all that is left from that period are the testimonies of listeners and the most veteran of the modern-day *bertsolari*s. However, things changed significantly from 1960 onwards, thanks to the initiative of Euskaltzaindia—the Basque Language Academy.

The Rebirth of Bertsolaritza in the Continental Basque Country: Teodoro Hernandorena

Historical circumstances were, needless to say, very different in the continental Basque Country. At the end of the Second World War, an exiled physician from Gipuzkoa, Teodoro Hernandorena, began going from town to town throughout the three continental Basque

provinces in search of *bertsolaris*. After a couple of attempts in Donibane Lohitzune, which drew only very small audiences, he began to organize festivals and competitions, often contributing not only the sweat of his brow but money from his own pocket as well.

The first festival-competition organized by Hernandorena was held in 1946 in Donibane Lohitzune and was attended by a large group of *bertsolaris*, some of whom eventually became part of the *bertsolaritza* elite during the sixties and seventies, and not only in the continental provinces. Contestants included Xalbador, Mattin, Zubikoa, Intzabi, Iriarte, Etxahun, Larramendi, Aintziart, Errexil, Etxexuri, Meltxor, and Goikoetxea. After the qualifying round in Donibane, the final was held in Hazparne, the winner being Etxahun, from Iruri (Zuberoa), a famous *xirula* player and songwriter who had already made a name for himself in the field of popular Basque songs. However, it was the two *bertsolaris* mentioned first, Xalbador and Mattin, who years later took improvised *bertsolaritza* from the continental Basque Country to its height, and they did so in the company of other *bertsolaris* not present at this first competition, who appeared out of the woodwork little by little thanks to the tireless work carried out by Hernandorena: first Xanpun, and then later the Ezpondas, Mendiburu and Alkat, and so on.

Soon *bertsolaris* from both sides of the River Bidasoa (the river marking the border between the peninsular and continental Basque Countries) began performing together, both in festivals held in the northern zone and those organized in the zone subjugated under the military boot of Franco's regime.

Bizkaia: Alfontso Irigoien

In 1948 Alfontso Irigoien, a philologist and scholar from Bizkaia, made use of the protection afforded by his position as a member of Euskaltzaindia, the Basque Language Academy, to organize (under the shadow of the Academy, needless to say) the first *bertsolaritza* championships in Bizkaia, timed to coincide with the Bilbao city festivals. The competition was won by Balendin Enbeita, son of Kepa, who performed alongside the following *bertsolaris* (listed in order of the scores obtained): Juan Ormaetxe, Jose Alberdi, Asensio Bidaurrezaga, Eusebio Zubiaga, Pedro Kastrejana, and Florencio Zarraga.

The second championships, held the following year in 1949, were won once again by Balendin Enbeita, who on this occasion competed alongside a number of *bertsolaris* who were not present at the previous year's event: Basilio Pujana, Deunoro Sarduy, and above all Jon Azpillaga, who would later become a key figure in the *bertsolaritza* of the final years of Franco's regime and the first years of the transition, alongside Jon Lopategi. This same year, 1949, also saw the arrival of Jon Mugartegi, one of the most important figures in Bizkaian *bertsolaritza*.

Resistance *Bertsolaritza*: 1960-79

At the end of the 1950s Euskaltzaindia took on a huge task, going all over the Basque region in search of *bertsolaris* and encouraging them to perform in public, organizing provincial championships as preliminary rounds for the Basque national championships. The result of these efforts, in which the work carried out by the academic Irigoien proved especially decisive, was

the *bertsolari* championships of 1960, arranged by the Academy. As stated above, provincial championships had been organized as preliminary events, with the winners being those who competed in what can be considered as the third national championships in the series begun in 1935, before being interrupted by the war. In Gipuzkoa the first *bertsolari* championships were not celebrated until 1959 and took place in Eibar during the tribute ceremony to the writer Juan Antonio Mogel.

The championships were arranged by Euskaltzaindia as qualifying rounds for the Basque national championships, and were attended by seven *bertsolaris*: Uztapide, Manuel Lasarte, Jose Lizaso, Zepai, Txomin Garmendia, Jose Agirre, and Jose Joakin Mitxelena. The absence of Basarri is telling, since this *bertsolari* always did have a somewhat complicated relationship with formal competitions.

A major controversy arose towards the end of the competition. The organizers had stated that each *bertsolari* should sing a nine-point stanza, a *bederatzi puntukoa*. Uztapide refused to do so, and all the other competitors followed suit, except one. The judges' panel, made up by leading figures from Basque literature and culture (Arrue, Mitxelena, Bordari, Antonio Zavala, Juan San Martin), were forced to back down. Basarri, who had already spoken up against the exercise, recounted the events as follows in his newspaper column the next day:

Given the complicated mechanism of the nine-point stanzas, this demand was totally unreasonable. Only one *bertsolari* sang the nine points, and he did so without any obligation, since the judges had revoked the order and had announced that they should sing “verses in four points.” And the only one who dared to take on the nine-point stanza did actually manage to start and finish it, but without mentioning the given topic and without endowing it with *effective content*.¹⁴

I have emphasized “effective content” because I believe that this is the key to understanding what actually happened. On the one hand you have the *bertsolari*, whose only aim, as stated above, is to be effective, in other words to provoke some kind of emotional reaction in his listeners. And on the other hand, you have the competition organizers, learned and distinguished scholars who, it seems, hoped to glean from the *bertsolaris* something that for the latter was totally secondary—an elaborate, complicated, and, if possible, brilliant text. This pretension of finding in *bertsolaritza* something that in no way corresponds to its essence is something that characterizes the recent history of *bertsolaritza* as well. And although not all its effects have been negative, it has nevertheless given rise to a perhaps unnecessary amount of tension.

Whatever the case, the first champion of Gipuzkoa was Uztapide, who alongside the runner-up Jose Joakin Mitxelena represented the province in the Basque national championships held in 1960. After their corresponding qualifying round, held in Bilbao on November 9th, 1959, the following *bertsolaris* represented Bizkaia: Jon Mugartegi (champion) and Jon Azpillaga (runner-up). A provincial championship was also held in Navarre in order to select the contenders for the national competition. After the qualifying rounds held in Lekunberri and Elizondo, the final was held in Lesaka on September 25th, 1959, with two *bertsolaris* being

¹⁴ Taken from Etxezarreta 1993:160.

selected: Andrés Narbarte (champion) and Juan Perurena (runner-up). The contenders in this first championship of the second era also included Xalbador and Mattin, from the continental Basque zone (who were chosen directly, without a qualifying competition, as a result of their being the two most well-known trans-Pyrenean *bertsolaris*); and Basarri, who was also excused from having to participate in any of the qualifying rounds.

As expected, Basarri was proclaimed champion. However, the next championship was won by Uztapide, and, following a complex controversy in the press, Basarri never participated in the championships again, although he did take part in other competitions. Without Basarri to contend with, Uztapide triumphed again in 1965 and 1966, thus becoming the *bertsolari* with the most championships to his name in the history of *bertsolaritza*.

Auspoa: “*The Bellows*”

The driving force behind *bertsolaritza* during the 1960s was without doubt the championships, although *bertsolaris* continued performing at the sessions organized in the various towns and villages. The verses improvised during the finals were published in *Auspoa*, a collection created by Father Antonio Zavala in 1964, based in Tolosa and a true treasure chest of *bertsolaritza* and oral literature in general. Well over 200 volumes later, Father Zavala still continues to publish his collection, nowadays in association with the Sendoa publishing house from Oiartzun. The name of the collection has proved much more than a mere metaphor. *Auspoa* means “bellows,” and the collection has indeed been and continues to be a true bellows, constantly reviving and strengthening the flame of oral literature.

The Four Championships of the Sixties

It was in these four championships that the *bertsolaris* who would sustain *bertsolaritza* throughout the whole of Franco’s regime and the first years of the transition emerged: alongside the famous duo formed by Uztapide and Basarri, as well as the aforementioned Xalbador, Mattin, Jose Lizaso, Jose Agirre, Garmendia, Mitxelena, Mugartegi, and Azpillaga, a number of other, younger *bertsolaris* such as Lazkao Txiki, Lopategi, and Gorrotxategi began making a name for themselves. There are also some other *bertsolaris* from this era who, despite not participating (or participating only very sporadically) in the championships, nevertheless carved for themselves a niche in the history of *bertsolaritza*. The most eminent of these was Manuel Lasarte. Born in Leiza in 1935, he settled in Orio and was much loved and admired among enthusiasts. Lasarte’s *bertsolaritza* was based mainly on fine expression, the extremely elaborate appearance of naturalness with which he imbued his rhymes and fitted his phrases into the corresponding molds. His verses are therefore extremely difficult to translate, at least as regards conveying the charm that they held for his avid listeners.

During the sixties and to a certain extent in the seventies also, *bertsolaris* sang for audiences with whom they shared a certain way of looking at the world and a certain set of fundamental values. The cornerstone of this context was the sense of oppression under which the Basque people and their language lived in light of this situation, any element that seemed to ensure the survival of the language evoked an emotion that had no need to manifest itself in

rousing texts or resources. Not being free to directly express Basque sentiments, topics, and values (particularly religion) enabled *bertsolaris* to evoke powerful emotions in their listeners through very simple *bertsos*, merely by referring to traditional ideas. Even in the championships, rarely were stanzas of more than four rhymes used. And we have already seen what happened when those outside the genre attempted to force the *bertsolaris* to sing longer stanzas.

Anyone hoping to find works of great poetic density among the texts of the improvised *bertsos* from these championships will be disappointed. The topics proposed to the contenders consisted mainly of clichés and archetypes. *Bertsolaris* knew that the mere reaffirmation of all things Basque, no matter how veiled, would produce intense emotions among the audience in the almost liturgical context of the performance. *Bertsolaris* knew that their listeners shared their Christian faith and their traditional values—mother, work, and honesty.

In the 1967 championships even the ritualized greeting *bertsos* had their own specific guidelines. Thus Alfontso Irigoien invited each *bertsolari* to direct his address to a specific person. The following are some of the people the *bertsolaris* were asked to greet:

- The many Basques who are in exile or have emigrated, and who are not present here today.
- The mothers and wives who have stayed by the hearth.
- Young people, asking them to learn to love *bertsolaritza*.

When Xalbador's turn arrived, he was not given a specific target. Instead, he was asked to say in his verse that “a bad peace is always better than a good war,” and so forth. Gorrotxategi was told not only to whom he had to address his verse, but also what he had to say: “the holy father Paul VI has been praying for peace for many years. Mention the holy father in your greeting, while at the same time greeting all those gathered here today.”

A typical *bertso* from these championships is that sung by Txomin Garmendia in 1967. He was told to sing, alone, three *bertsos* “to a guitarist.” Here is the last of the three:

*Neure zorion maitekorrena
zutzat, Lurdes Iriondo;
euskaldunaren biotz apalak
ukuttu dituzu ondo;
zu aingeru bat etzeranikan
inork ez baidu esango,
gure Jainkuak mundu ontatik
ez al zaitu eramango!*

(My most heartfelt congratulations / to you, Lurdes Iriondo; / you have managed to move
/ the humble heart of the Basques; / no one can deny / that you are an angel, / I only hope
that God / does not take you from this world!)

In an era in which the Basque language seemed condemned to disappear, since it was given hardly any channels for development and expression, the *bertsolari* finds hope in the figure of

Lurdes Iriondo, a singer-songwriter who at that time performed frequently at festivals. For the *bertsolari* and his listeners, Lurdes Iriondo was proof that, despite everything, Euskara was capable of conquering new fields, especially one as important as that of modern music, due to its capacity to attract the younger generations.

We cannot argue against those who claim that the text of the *bertso* itself is not exactly a literary jewel. Nevertheless, there is a great difference between this kind of evaluation and denying that the verse was capable of moving the audience within the context of the *bertsolaritza* session and the worst years of Franco's dictatorship. Nor are all the *bertsos* from this era guilty of this low level of textual relevance. Indeed, there are two *bertsolaris* in particular who stand out for the textual quality of their verses, despite the fact that each has different strong points. One of these is Lazkao Txiki, and the other Xalbador.

Lazkao Txiki

Jose Miguel Iztueta, known as "Lazkao Txiki" (Lazkao, 1926-93), is without doubt, and already was by the last years of his life, a mythical figure of improvised *bertsolaritza*, on a par with Pernando Amezketarra, Txirrita, and so forth. He shares with Txirrita his confirmed and somewhat clichéd bachelorhood, which, combined with his short physical stature, gave him the appearance of a rogue that was nevertheless very different from that offered by the more corpulent poet from Hernani. Like both Txirrita and Pernando, Lazkao Txiki was above all a *bertsolari*. His wit and ingenuity are now proverbial, and these attributes, combined with his short stature, innocent and fragile voice, and melodious way of singing, made him extremely popular in his lifetime and sorely missed after his death. In addition to his verses, he left us with a wealth of anecdotes about his life—again another similarity with Pernando and Txirrita. It is hardly surprising that these three *bertsolaris* have each starred in their own cartoon series, broadcast with resounding success by ETB (the Basque broadcasting company).

Like various other *bertsolaris* of his generation, Lazkao Txiki knew how to change with the times, and for that reason was always in demand. One of the unforgettable instances of his *bertsolaritza* was his performance at a *bertsolari* dinner organized by the program *Hitzetik Hortzera* in 1989. The topic was a hand-mirror, with which he was presented by the theme-prompter of the session at the appropriate moment. Without taking his eyes away from his reflection in the mirror, Lazkao Txiki improvised three memorable verses, two of which are transcribed below:

*Aizak nik hiri bota behar dit
bertso koxkor bat edo bi,
bebingoan jarri geranez gero
biok aurpegiz-aurpegi.
Neri begira hotik daduzkak
alferrikako bi begi:
hik ez nauk noski ni ikusiko,
baina nik ikusten haut hi.*

(Hey, since we're face to face / for a change / I'm going to sing you a verse, / or perhaps even two. / I don't know what you're doing looking at me from there / with those useless eyes: / because, of course, you won't see me, / but I can see you.)

*Neri begira jarrita, motel,
zertako hago honela?
Ta pentsatzen dit aspalditxotik
ezagututzen hautela:
mutilzarraren moko horrekin
ez dek ematen motela,
azal zimurtzen ari haiz, motel,
Lazkao-Txiki bezala.*

(What on earth are you doing, / with your eyes on me? / I get the feeling I've known you / for a long time: / with that bachelor's face you've got /you don't seem completely stupid, / and what's more, you're getting wrinkles, lad, / just like Lazkao Txiki).

Throughout his life Lazkao Txiki had to put up with the clichéd characterization of being a small, funny, ingenious, bachelor *bertsolari*. Many of the topics given to him at the festivals were related to this cliché, and the poet knew exactly how to make the most of them. However, attempts to combat the characterization by affirming that Lazkao Txiki also had a more sentimental (or lyrical) facet have themselves become more of a cliché than the one they strive to do away with. At the end of the day, the majority of fans tend to prefer the ingenious Lazkao Txiki to the lyrical one. And indeed it seems a wise choice.

Xalbador

The story of Fernando Aire Xalbador (Urepel, 1920-76) is completely different. Perhaps the influence of his dialect, which was so different from the basically Gipuzkoan model that the majority of listeners were used to hearing, had something to do with the fact that, although he was much admired during his lifetime, he did not manage to touch his audience's hearts to the same extent as did *bertsolaris* such as Uztapide, Lazkao Txiki, or Martin Treku Mattin, his inseparable companion and a kind of Lapordi-style Lazkao Txiki. Despite this peculiarity, or perhaps because of it, the texts of Xalbador's improvised verses are those that have best withstood the passing of the years. In other words, they are the ones that sound most modern to our current-day sensibilities.

Given that he was by profession a shepherd in his hometown of Urepel, the poetic refinement of his verses is particularly striking. His book of written verses, *Odolaren mintzoa* (*The Voice of Blood*), is a wonderful work and a first-rate anthology.

In addition to his written verses, many of which have now been turned into songs, Xalbador was also an outstanding improviser, gifted with extraordinary poetic sensitivity. In the 1965 championships, he was asked to improvise two verses on the following theme: "To the dress of your deceased wife." The two resulting pieces were of exceptional quality:

*Pentsa zazute alargudu bat
ez daike izan urusa,
dolamen hunek, oi, ez dezala
anitz gehiago luza!
Orai urtea ziloan sartu
andreñoaren gorputza,
haren arropa hantxet dilindan
penaz ikusten dut hutsa.*

(Know that it is impossible / for a widower to be happy; / Let this
suffering / not last for long! / A year ago we placed / her body in the
niche; / her dresses swing now / empty before my sorrowful eyes.)

*Geroztik nihaur ere nabila
guzia beltzez jantzirik;
ez dut pentsatzen nigar eiteko
ene begiak hesterik.
Ez pentsa gero, andre gaxoa,
baden munduan bertzerik
zure arropa berriz soinean
har dezakeen emazterik.*

(Ever since then I too / have worn black mourning; / I will not close my
eyes / to my tears. / Don't worry, my poor darling, / there is no other
woman in the world for me / who may wear / one day your dresses.)

The recognition that Xalbador enjoyed during his lifetime, and the merit awarded him today, was earned on the basis of *bertsos* of this quality, since his voice, unlike Basarri's and Uztapide's, was nothing unusual nor was his charisma on a par with that of Mattin or Lazkao Txiki.

We stated earlier that Xalbador's language prevented his listeners from fully appreciating his verses. The most telling example of this phenomenon occurred during the 1967 championships, when the judges announced their verdict, choosing Xalbador to participate in the final round alongside the reigning champion Uztapide. After the decision was announced the audience began to protest, jeering at either Xalbador or the judges—we do not know precisely which. The booing and hissing was extremely loud and went on for a very long time. At one point, Xalbador walked over to the microphone and began singing a verse, which could hardly be heard over the din:

*Anai-arrebak, ez otoi pentsa
ene gustura nagonik;
poz gehiago izango nuke
albotik beha egokik.
Zuek ez bazerate kontentu,*

errua ez daukat ez nik . . .

(Brothers and sisters, do not think / that I am happy; / how much better would I
feel / looking on from a corner! / If you are not content / it is not my fault . . .)

At that moment, the whistles and catcalls turned into applause and cheers for Xalbador, who was hardly able to finish his *bertso*:

*. . . Zuek ez bazerate kontentu
errua ez daukat ez nik:
txistuak jo dituzute baina
maite zaituztet orainik.*

(If you are not content / it is not my fault: / you have whistled at me /
but I still love you.)

Largely as a result of this scandal, the Academy stopped organizing *bertsolari* championships. Soon the bitterest years of repression arrived, alongside ETA's first victims and the Burgos trials. With the exception of the odd fleeting reprieve, the state of emergency was for years the norm in the Basque Country.

Xalbador died on the very same day that the world of *bertsolaritza* arranged a tribute to him in his hometown of Urepel, on November 7th, 1976. He left behind a book few can ever hope to better as well as a memory, as an improviser, that only grows more powerful as the years go by.

Before and After Franco: Lopategi and Azpillaga

During the seventies, with both Basarri and Uztapide practically retired from the *bertsolaritza* circuit, attention turned to those *bertsolaris* who had appeared on the scene during the championships of the previous decade. As the imminent end of the dictatorship became increasingly apparent, so the need to say things more directly became more pressing, with or without the permission of the governing authorities.

A more directly political and protest-based *bertsolaritza* gradually emerged, resulting in not a few *bertsolaris* being punished for daring to say what the public demanded. Two *bertsolaris* especially stand out from this era: Jon Lopategi and Jon Azpillaga, both from Bizkaia, the former by birth and the latter by adoption.

In 1997 these two figures described the *bertsolaritza* of that era as follows:

*Animu asko ez zan izaten,
pertsekuzino ugari,
baina bihotzak hala aginduta
ez ginan ibili nagi.
Zazpi probintzi pasa genduzen*

*bertso ederrez kantari,
ze egun eder gozoak haiek
Euskadiren pregoilari.*

(Too few good spirits, / too much repression, / but our hearts prompted us / not to remain idle. / We went around the seven provinces / singing beautiful verses; / how happy those days were / in which we proclaimed the Basque Country of the future.)

*Deitzen euskuen leku danera
botatzen gendun pausua;
alaitasunez jartzen genduan
herria eta basua;
arrazoitzako berba genduan,
arma moduan bertsua,
gaurko moduan eskatzen gendun
Euskal Herri bat osua.*

(We always went / wherever we were called; / we took happiness / to towns and villages; / words were our reason, / verses our weapons, / we called for then, as we do now, / a single, unified Basque Country.)

*Honek premisak joten zituzten
eta konklusinoak nik,
ez zan hain gatxa sentimentua
argumentutzat izanik.
Asko ez ziren kontuan jausten
abertzaleak ziranik,
baina bihotza zabaltzen jaken
“hau Euskadi da” esanik.*

(He gave the premises / and I drew the conclusions: / it is not so difficult when argument / is based on feeling. / Many did not realize / they were nationalists, / but their hearts were filled / when they heard us say: “this is the Basque Country.”)

*Askok pentsatzen ez badau ere,
kristonak paseak gare,
Euskadi eta euskerarentzat
badegu hainbat bondade.
Atzetik hainbat polizi ziran
eta gu gogor hala ere,
hamaika multa pagatu gendun*

*batere kulparik gabe.*¹⁵

(Although many do not know it, / we have been through hell; / such was our loyalty / to the Basque Country and its language. / The police followed us everywhere, / but we remained firm, / how many fines we had to pay / without being guilty of anything!)

Following the death of Franco, a climate of optimism and hope spread through the Basque Country, punctuated by outbursts of rejoicing occasioned by each conquest made: the first releases from prison, the legalization of the *ikurriña* (the Basque flag), the amnesty, and so on. Although the political climate was radically different, *bertsolaris* continued performing for a public who shared their dearest hopes. It is for this reason that we have included the first years following the death of Franco in this section entitled “resistance *bertsolaritza*,” since the contextual conditions in which the *bertsolaritza* of the first years of the transition existed were more similar to those present during the dictatorship than to those of later times, when disappointment and division arose in the public, most of whom were nationalists belonging to different parties.

Although the first symptoms of disappointment and conflict had already appeared, the passing in 1979 of the Statute of Gernika marked the turning point at which *bertsolaritza* started to face an audience very different from that before which it had performed during the years of Franco’s regime. This new public was basically divided into two sectors: the one that took the Statute as its principal line of strategy, and the one that rejected the Statute and demanded self-determination for the region. Far from being purely ideological, this conflict went very deep. Friends turned against friends, and people who had known each other all their lives stopped greeting each other in the street. It is clear that in this new context *bertsolaris* could no longer achieve their objective merely by mentioning certain values, since said values were no longer shared by all.

From Singing to the People to Singing to the Public: 1980-98

Amuriza

After an interval of 13 years, Euskaltzaindia finally decided to organize another *bertsolari* championship, the final stage of which was held in San Sebastián on January 6th, 1980. The overall situation (the *bertsolaris*, the way in which the verses were composed, and so on) did not seem to have changed greatly since the last championships in 1967, during which the audience had booed Xalbador. Some of the eight finalists (namely Garmendia, Azpillaga, and Gorrotxategi) had been finalists in 1967. They were accompanied on this occasion by Patxi Etxeberria and Angel Larrañaga, two *bertsolaris* from Gipuzkoa with a simple, direct, and popular style. Also competing was Xanpun, as a representative of the continental Basque Country (Xalbador had passed away by this time, and Mattin, who was to die the following year,

¹⁵ Taken from *Bapatean* 97:184-86.

hardly ever appeared in public anymore). The novelty of the 1980 competition was provided by two *bertsolaris* from Bizkaia with a different, more elaborate style: Jon Enbeita, grandson of Kepa and son of Balendin, and, above all, Xabier Amuriza, precursor of modern-day *bertsolaritza* in practically all facets.

Born in Zornotza-Etxano in 1941, Xabier Amuriza had formerly been a priest and had spent time in prison, along with other members of the clergy associated with the fight for Basque liberation. He had also been one of the judges in the 1967 championships. During his time in prison, he spent many long hours thinking about *bertsolaritza* and composing written verses.

From a theoretical point of view, Amuriza's greatest achievement is, without doubt, his *Errima-Hiztegia (Dictionary of Rhymes)*, which was written while he was in prison and published some years later. He was not content simply to compile lists of rhymes; he also arranged them according to grammatical categories, in order to aid the composition of improvised verse. Later on, he published *Zu ere bertsolari*, a method that, as its title indicates, put an end to the myth of the "innate *bertsolari*," offering anyone with normal linguistic skills the opportunity of learning how to dominate the art of improvised verse. This method has had an enormous influence in *bertsolari* schools, which adopted it straightaway as both a guideline and a basic reference. Although from our perspective the method may seem overly mechanical, since it places emphasis mainly on the more formal aspects of the art of making verses, it cannot be denied that its publication was an enormous step forward.

Amuriza was also one of the first people to try to return relevance and social functionality to non-improvised verses. In this sense, his performances in various towns throughout the Basque Country, with musical accompaniment, were of great importance. Prior to the performance, Amuriza collected information about the situation in the town that had requested a performance, memorizing a great many different political, geographic, and social references. Once he had collected enough information, he wrote the corresponding verses, integrating them all into a script. Thus he was able to sing about the idiosyncrasies of each town, to mention their most popular figures and refer to their best-known legends. Amuriza is also a great writer, having produced novels, essays, poetry, and newspaper articles. However, his greatest and most decisive contribution to Basque culture is the work he has carried out in the field of improvised *bertsolaritza*.

But let us return to the championships of 1980 and Amuriza's participation. Even during the qualifying rounds, the style of this *bertsolari* from Etxano had surprised his listeners. It was, however, during the final that he truly demonstrated his peculiar way of understanding the art of *bertsolaritza*. That competition was the first of those won by Amuriza, following a tie-break with Jon Enbeita. Two years later he won again, this time after a dramatic tie-break with another *bertsolari* mentioned earlier: Jon Lopategi (b. Muxika, 1934), one of those who adapted most adroitly to the new era, and who himself became champion in 1989 with a brilliant, deep, and highly elaborate verse.

Much has been said about the revolution initiated by Amuriza in the 1980 championships. The following are some of the aspects that are generally mentioned:

- For the first time ever, a *bertsolari* composed his verses in Euskara *batua* (standardized, unified Basque).

- He used rhymes that had never been used before.
- Amuriza's imagery, which was of great poetic depth, is matched only by the improvised verses composed by Xalbador.

However, from the new (more rhetorical than poetic) perspective that we advocate here, Amuriza's greatest contributions to the field are, in addition to those mentioned above, as follows:

- Over and above the unusual nature of the rhymes, their arrangement in accordance with a set of predetermined communicative strategies.
- The strategic use of oral resources for a new purpose.

With regard to this last aspect, particularly noteworthy is the use Amuriza makes of what is known among oralists as "formulas," that is, contents expressed in metrical molds that can be easily inserted into the narration. Far from using them as a mere technical support in the expression of somewhat hackneyed situations or values, Amuriza gives them enormous poetic-rhetorical power, bestowing on them great communicative importance in his verses.

Among his best work are those verses he composes during solo performances, when the action is totally in his hands. During the final of the 1980 championships, when he was given the topic "Bihotzean min dut" ("I have a pain in my heart"), Amuriza improvised three verses. However, the same can also be said of many of his other verses, such as, for example, the two transcribed below, which were improvised during the same championships. Here Amuriza was asked to sing solo about the following theme: "Man cannot live on bread alone." Here are the first verses:

*Gai horrek badu mamia
baldin ez banago gor;
hainbat jende gizaseme
ikusten ari naiz hor;
ogiaz gain gizonari
anitz gauza zaio zor,
bestela mundu hontara
hobe ez gintezan sor:
ogiakin justizia
behar dugu derrigor;
hau sinisten ez duenik
ba al da hemen inor?*

(Either I'm deaf / or this theme is quite tricky; / I see before me / a lot of men; / as well as bread / man needs justice / otherwise / better not to have been born; / Is there anyone here / who does not agree?)

*Nik ez dakit ogi-puskak
indarrik baduenentz
baina beste zerbaitekin
bart egin nuen amets;
esperantza zuri daukat,
nahiz etorkizuna beltz;
ogi hutsez bizitzerik
nik ez nezake sinets;
gizon batek hortxe ditu
bihotza ta bi saihets;
zuek ezetz esan arren
nik esango dut baietz!*

(I don't know whether a piece of bread / has strength enough, / but
yesterday I dreamed / about something very different; / my hope is radiant
/ despite the black future; / I cannot imagine a life / in which bread is
everything; / a man has both his heart / and his two sides; / however much
you deny it / I will continue to insist!)

Amuriza began a trend towards the use of verses with more than four rhymes, a trend that gradually became more and more accentuated during subsequent championships. Furthermore, in addition to traditional melodies, he also used ones of his own making. This practice, now fairly common among modern-day *bertsolaris*, provides the singer with a variety of different melodies to call upon. Some adapt better to narrative-type themes, others are more efficient for lyrical registers, still others are best for evoking a more solemn atmosphere, and so on.¹⁶ This tendency to extend the verse appears to be related to the need to produce texts with greater poetic-rhetorical consistency, a need that in turn is related to the loss of a single, shared context, as I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere.¹⁷ Without doubt, Amuriza is, even in the opinion of the very latest *bertsolaris*, the precursor of almost all the aspects of modern *bertsolaritza*.

From Amuriza to Egaña

The figure of Amuriza dominates practically the whole early eighties. Little by little, the other *bertsolaris* started integrating some of the innovations made by the two-time champion into their own improvisations, although they often copied only the most banal aspects such as exotic rhymes, verses with more rhymes, and so forth. As stated earlier, Amuriza won his second championship in 1982, after a tie-break with Lopategi. We have also mentioned the controversy that arose around the next championships, which were proposed for 1986 and were organized by

¹⁶ The best collection of *bertsolaristic* melodies is Dorronsoro 1997, a monumental work that includes and comments on over 3,000 different melodies. It can be consulted over the Internet at <http://www.bertsozale.com>.

¹⁷ See Garzia et al. 2001.

the Association of Bertsolaris (now called the Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza). The first two championships organized by the Association marked a period of transition. Following the major upheaval brought about by Amuriza, few important contributions were made during these years.

The 1986 championships were won by Sebastian Lizaso (Azpeitia, 1958), son of another *bertsolari*, Joxe Lizaso, who was mentioned earlier in this discussion. It is interesting that Sebastian Lizaso should have won this contest, since he is not the type of *bertsolari* who usually stands out in this type of event. His natural habitat is really festivals, *bertsolari* dinners, and open-air performances. His powerful voice is coupled with an incredible gift for expressing himself in verse and an almost proverbial ability to find the right argument at the right moment and to come up with brilliant responses to his opponent's statements. Extremely quick on the uptake, Lizaso also has an innate ability to make use of the resources or strategies employed by other *bertsolaris*. During the nineties he was, alongside Andoni Egaña, the *bertsolari* who gave the greatest number of contracted performances year after year. His performance is dialectic and direct, exploiting the most common oral resources to their fullest. In order to put his strategies into motion, he does not need verses with a large number of rhymes, and indeed it is in this type of *bertso*, which is so popular and well rewarded in championships, with which he struggles most. On the other hand, few of his fellow verse-makers can match him when it comes to arguing and singing for hours in front of an audience.

The 1989 championships were won, as mentioned earlier, by Jon Lopategi, another of the major figures of modern-day *bertsolaritza*. However, one year earlier, in 1988, a television program called *Hitzetik Hortzera* had begun to be broadcast. Following an almost clandestine start due to lack of funds and a certain lack of confidence on the part of the directors of the autonomous broadcasting company, ETB, this program became a factor in the revival enjoyed by *bertsolaritza* at the beginning of the nineties.

Basically an anthology of the verses sung in different town squares, this program was only one of a number of driving forces behind the boom. The main factor, without which all the others would have been rendered ineffectual, was the emergence of a new generation of *bertsolaris* toward the end of the eighties.

Up until the advent of the program *Hitzetik Hortzera*, the championships were the best (and almost the only) platform for *bertsolaris* to make a name for themselves and to present their new proposals. This was certainly the case with Amuriza, whose verses would almost certainly have gone unnoticed if they had merely been sung at a village festival. From the moment the program started to be televised on a regular basis, it became the most effective medium for *bertsolaris* to present and disseminate their proposals. The verses sung at normal festivals now reached the ears of a hitherto unreachable audience, and they did so on a weekly basis. Little by little, the main purpose of the championships began to be undermined, and in this context it is not hard to understand the critical stance adopted by Jon Sarasua during the Gipuzkoa championships of 1991. Today, we can safely say that *bertsolaris*' most important contributions and innovations are presented mainly during normal events, outside the championships.

Given this development, one would be forgiven for thinking that the appearance of the television program heralded the decline of the championships. Nothing, in fact, was further from the truth. The championships continued to be organized and were attended and viewed with great

enthusiasm by both the public and the press. What happened was that their function changed radically, and they were forced to rethink their approach in order to adapt to a new purpose. In any case, this change happened gradually rather than overnight.

In 1986, the finalists, in addition to the reigning champion Sebastian Lizaso, were Jon Enbeita, Xabier Amuriza, Jon Sarasua, Jon Lopategi, Angel Mari Peñagarikano, Iñaki Murua, and the young *bertsolari* from Zarautz, Andoni Egaña. Some of these, such as Enbeita, Amuriza, and Lopategi, were already very well known. Others, such as Peñagarikano and Murua, had been performing in town squares for years. Sarasua was a member of the first generation to graduate from the *bertsolari* schools, in whose competitions he had shared first prize almost always with Xabier Euzkitze from Azpeitia, who failed to reach the final that year. The only unknown, about whom no one had heard anything, was Egaña, whose name would be on everyone's lips a few years later.

Nothing much changed through the 1989 final, in which the reigning champion Jon Lopategi competed again with Jon Enbeita, Andoni Egaña, Sebastián Lizaso, and Iñaki Murua. The only new faces were Imanol Lazkano, chairman of the Association since its foundation, and Mikel Mendizabal, another *bertsolari* from the same generation as Murua and Lizaso.

As we can see, the majority of the young *bertsolaris* in the top rankings were from Gipuzkoa. In Bizkaia, the veterans Lopategi, Amuriza, and Enbeita were still going strong. Another popular *bertsolari* was Gregorio Larrañaga, alias Mañukorta (Larruskain, 1944), who became a great hit among the public at large when the television programs first started broadcasting, due to his way of singing, his gestures, and his Txirrita-style stereotypical image of a confirmed bachelor and joker. However, the generation that was currently in their thirties found itself unable to access the highest echelons of *bertsolaritza*, and ended up abandoning the art.

This situation is clearly reflected in the provincial championships of 1991, in which the finalists in the Gipuzkoa competition had an average age of thirty, with none of them being more than six years above or below the mean. In Bizkaia the average age of the finalists was also 30, but in this case the mean was achieved by the participation of, on the one hand, *bertsolaris* aged around 40 or above and, on the other, those under the age of twenty. Thus the members of the younger generations in Bizkaia were forced to assume certain responsibilities much earlier than their Gipuzkoan counterparts. Igor Elortza and Unai Iturriaga were the two most noteworthy young Bizkaian *bertsolaris*. Both were disciples of Jon Lopategi. (We should clarify that, for the purposes of the championships, Araba and Bizkaia were considered a single region.)

The Navarre championships were celebrated annually and were attended also by *bertsolaris* from the continental Basque Country: Alkat, Ezponda, Mendiburu, Xalbador II, and Laka shared center stage with Manolo Arozena, Bittor Elizagoien, and other more veteran *bertsolaris*. The situation at the beginning of the nineties was, however, rather worrying, due to a lack of upcoming young talent to take over the reins. This was the situation at the beginning of the decade, then; unlike in previous championships, by the time the 1993 contest was held the *bertsolaris* had become household names. Children asked them for autographs in the street, they were constantly being invited to appear on all kinds of television and radio programs, and no social event was complete without a *bertsolaritza* session.

Thanks mainly to television, fans knew exactly what each *bertsolari* had to offer, and the odds were overwhelming: Andoni Egaña was to be champion. This generalized forecast, based

on the *bertsolaris*' prior performances in non-competitive situations, was proven correct, and Egaña's victory ushered in a new era.

The Bertsolaritza of Distancing: Andoni Egaña

Andoni Egaña is an atypical and self-taught *bertsolari*. Born in Zarauz in 1961, he earned a degree in Basque philology and was formerly a civil servant at the Vitoria City Council until he left in 1993 in order to pursue his creative activities. In addition to participating annually in over 200 *bertsolaritza* sessions, he also composes written verses, both on paper and in other formats. Novelist and habitual collaborator in almost all the Basque media, he is the linchpin of a new way of understanding the art of *bertsolaritza*.

Egaña freely acknowledges that it was Amuriza's impressive performance in the 1980 championships that prompted him to become a *bertsolari*. He spent several years training almost in secret and his first, very surprising public performance was at a local competition in which he won first prize, beating other fairly well-known *bertsolaris* and astounding the members of the judges' panel, who could not even begin to imagine from where such a phenomenal talent had sprung.

Even before being proclaimed champion in 1993, Egaña had been hailed by fans and fellow performers alike as the new star of *bertsolaritza*. As an indication of the prestige that *bertsolaritza* enjoyed at the beginning of the nineties, it is telling that on the day of the championships, which were held just a few meters from the Velodrome in the then recently opened Anoeta stadium, the public broke into applause when the electronic scoreboard on the playing field announced Egaña's victory. The players' astonishment at this impromptu ovation can easily be imagined, especially since the ball was nowhere near either of the goals at the time. We should add, however, that the Real Sociedad fans also had another reason for applauding the result as they did, a reason that had nothing whatsoever to do with their love of *bertsos*: the game was in its final minutes and Real Sociedad was beating Real Madrid 2-0. The match ended in victory for the local San Sebastián team.

Having talked about a new way of understanding and practicing *bertsolaritza*, and having mentioned Egaña as the key figure in this new model, I feel we should clarify things somewhat. Egaña has contributed much to the style of the *bertsolaris* of his generation, but he would not be what he is today without the contributions made in turn by his fellow verse-makers. Other key figures in this generation include (at the very least) Jon Sarasua (Aretxabaleta, 1966), Sebastian Lizaso, Xabier Euzkitze (Azpeitia, 1966), and Peñagarikano (Anoeta, 1957). Although there are many others also worthy of merit, these five represent almost all the trends and styles of their generation, which, needless to say, would not have developed to the extent that it has without the influence of the more veteran *bertsolaris*: Amuriza, Lopategi, Enbeita, Lazkano, Agirre and Lazkao Txiki, and so forth.

If we had to highlight just a couple of characteristics of this new *bertsolaritza*, which was the foundation upon which the boom rested, we would mention first the distancing of the topics dealt with and second the ingenuity of the improvisation.

The first characteristic, distancing, is to a large extent due to the division present among the audience itself. Egaña describes this phenomenon as follows:

Basarri and Uztapide commented more than once on how sordid it was in Franco's era not to be able to say what you wanted. It must have been awful, as must the punishments inflicted on Azpillaga, Lopategi, Lazkao-Txiki, and others simply for saying what they felt. But what occurs nowadays is even more painful: a doubt here, a detail there. Here the meaning, there the desire to say something! How simple it must have been when the "others" were on the other side of the Madrid wall, or the secret police were hidden among the audience! How distressing now to know that the "others" are right here, that these "others" are none other than ourselves. Politics has divided us into two different groups . . . our upbringing has served only to deepen the ravine separating us . . . and language, although the same at the end of the day, has broken us.¹⁸

When faced with a divided public, the possibility of kindling common emotions merely by mentioning a set of shared values is considerably reduced. What pleases some will almost certainly make others uncomfortable. In light of this situation, distancing became a method, albeit a method that required another complementary quality: ingenuity—the ability to find an *ateraldia* (a witty, effective response) to any topic, however compromising or complicated.

Only distancing and ingenuity enable *bertsolari*s to emerge victorious from the battlefield dealing with certain topics before an audience. Furthermore, in Uztapide's time, a *bertsolari* could repeat the same *bertso* in two or three town squares without almost anyone being the wiser. Now, however, such events are broadcast on the radio and on television, and the best *bertsos* are published in anthologies. And if we also consider that the number of performances has increased drastically, we can gain some idea of the pace and degree of originality demanded nowadays from top performers.

The topics proposed are increasingly sophisticated and less archetypal, and require *bertsolari*s to have a much greater level of knowledge about both the Basque Country and the world at large. During the early nineties, due in part to the presence of television cameras at many sessions, the topics became increasingly complicated in form as well as content. *Bertsolaris* were asked to play both parts in a debate, singing each role into a different microphone; instead of being given the topic in word form, they were presented with a garment of clothing, for example; they were asked to associate their colleagues, one by one, with different animals, or to imagine what they would be like in the future, or to paint an aural portrait of each one. It was sometimes forgotten that the topics proposed by the theme-prompter were really only bridges designed to aid communication between the *bertsolari* and his or her audience. If the topic (or the garment that substituted for it) were too brilliant in itself, then the *bertsolari* would have trouble adding anything original to the effect that the mere proposal of the theme (or the presence of the corresponding garment) had already provoked in the auditorium.

Furthermore, the dissemination of the *bertsos* through television required each verse to have a force of its own, something that often had a negative effect on the session as a whole. It is rather like what happens with football fans who, accustomed to seeing the highlights on television, become bored when they actually go to a match and find out that great shots and exiting moments are more the exception than the rule. Having become accustomed to a certain

¹⁸ This was taken from an as yet unpublished translation of Egaña and Sarasua's 1997 text, *Zozoak beleari*.

level of intensity, they are unable to enjoy the quieter strategies that, at the end of the day, are the cornerstone and the determining factors of these culminating moments. Under such circumstances, then, Andoni Egaña leads a generation that has somehow managed to combine in its *bertsolaritza* the best of the oral tradition with the contributions of literature, comics, film, and so forth.

Nor should we forget also that Euskara, or the Basque language, still continues to spread to hitherto inaccessible areas of life. As the language normalization process advances, *bertsolaris* (and writers as well) find they have an increasingly wide range of resources at their fingertips. For example, the growing social use and awareness of specialist jargon and registers enables both their utilization and their parody. As a result, the improvised *bertsos* of our era have, without doubt, reached the highest quality level ever in the history of *bertsolaritza*.

The main defining characteristic of modern-day *bertsolaritza*—distancing—involves the adoption of a distanced, ironic, or, to put it in a better way, almost cynical attitude toward the majority of themes, although it is true that for the external observer the overall impression may perhaps be of a discourse closer in nature to that of the left-wing nationalists.

Distancing and ingenuity are, in fact, the two major contributions made by Andoni Egaña to this art form. As in the case of Amuriza, these contributions have been made consciously. Never before have *bertsolaris* reflected so much on their art. Following the example set by Amuriza, modern-day performers get together after their sessions to discuss their respective performances. Many of the strategies they use are developed in advance. They cannot, obviously, prepare the verses beforehand, but they can and do prepare a series of strategies that can be employed for a number of different possible themes. The conscious use of strategies and resources is evident in all types of *bertsos*, but it is in the stanzas of more than five rhymes where they appear most clearly. Egaña has, on occasion, called upon musician friends to compose melodies based on a metrical structure pre-established by the *bertsolari* himself in accordance with the strategies that he plans to use in each part of the verse. In verses with many rhymes, says Egaña, it is important to know where it is best to use metaphor, where to use exclamations, and where to just stick to presenting your arguments.¹⁹

It would be impossible to describe here all the resources of this new *bertsolaritza*, which we have centered around the figure of Andoni Egaña, the only *bertsolari* to have won four national championships (1993, 1997, 2001, and 2005). However, any interested readers are invited to consult other essays in this special issue of *Oral Tradition*, which contain a number of examples.

¹⁹ Egaña himself talks about these and other related aspects in his contribution to this collection of essays for *Oral Tradition*, as well as in Garzia 2000.

Multi-polar *Bertsolaritza*: the Latest Generations (1999-)

The *bertsolaritza* of the post-Egaña generations is surely too recent a phenomenon to be analyzed properly at this moment in time. I will therefore confine myself to outlining what I believe to be the basic characteristics of improvisation of recent years:

- The social context in which the youngest generation of *bertsolaris* have had to develop their art is basically the same as that described by Andoni Egaña: a divided and conflicting public, lack of strongly shared values, and so on.
- The majority of top *bertsolaris* are university graduates, a circumstance that results in a greater diversity of aesthetic and cultural references.
- For modern-day fans of *bertsolaritza*, the art of improvised poetry is only one of many means of cultural consumption.

As a result, contemporary *bertsolaritza* is characterized by the wealth and variety of its proposals.

With a split audience, and without a common context of shared values, the texts of verses have taken on great significance. This performers' development is further intensified by the fact that the media tend to reward precisely those verses that are able to hold their own outside the context in which they are sung. This does not mean that all modern-day *bertsolaritza* works in this way. On many occasions, a small-scale, homogeneous improvisation arena enables another type of more contextual, less text-dependent verse-making. Such, for example, is the case with *bertso* dinners, or thematic sessions, used by some *bertsolaris* for developing certain aspects of their art that would be difficult to cultivate in normal sessions. Thus erotic, black humor, or absurd *bertsolaritza* sessions are organized, as well as ones in which, rather than proposing the topics, the theme-prompter improvises a script that the performers bring to life by taking on the role of the various characters that appear. These kinds of sessions are generally held in small venues, bars, or pubs. However, the *bertsolaritza* that sets the mainstream trends continues to be that practiced in open sessions, particularly festivals, since they are the venues that attract the most media attention.

At the dawn of the new millennium, the *bertsolaritza* scene was more varied than ever before. Igor Elortza (Durango, 1975) and Unai Iturriaga (Durango, 1974)—the Bizkaian *bertsolaris* who were forced to shoulder the responsibility for ensuring the survival of *bertsolaritza* at a very young age—have now matured and become key figures in the youngest generation. Fortunately, both Iturriaga and Elorza were able to decide not to participate in the 2006 Bizkaia championships without fear of shaking the very foundations of Bizkaian *bertsolaritza*. The new generation, among whom we can highlight Arkaitz Estiballes, the Paia brothers (Fredí and Xabi), and Iratxe Ibarra, among others, have demonstrated that they are more than ready to step to the fore. In Araba, although there are, as yet, no *bertsolaris* of the same level, there is a certain degree of coordination and an ongoing promotion campaign that will no doubt bear fruit in the future. In Navarre, the annual championships continue to be the best platform for promoting the art in the region. Fortunately, however, a new generation has arisen to take up the torch, with young *bertsolaris* like Xabier Silbeira (Lesaka, 1976) and Estitxu

Arozena (Motriku/Lesaka, 1975) occupying center stage. In the continental Basque Country, following the retirement of the Alkat, Ezponda, Laka, and Mendiburu generations, two young *bertsolaris* have emerged as new members of the elite: Sustrai Kolina and Amets Arzallus, both finalists in the 2005 national championships. In addition to these, Miren Artetxe is also a bright new talent, and many younger *bertsolaris*, currently still at school, look extremely promising.

Gipuzkoa continues to breed many extremely able *bertsolaris*, with Jesus Mari Irazu (Larraul, 1972), Jon Maia (Zumaia, 1972), Maialen Lujanbio (Hernani, 1976), Aitor Mendiluze (Andoain, 1975), and others proving their worth again and again. Coming up behind them, the new generation, currently led by Jon Martín from Oiartzun, appears no less gifted.

The new *bertsolaris* openly acknowledge their admiration for the generations led by Amuriza and Egaña. Moreover, inter-generational dialogue is more fluid today than possibly ever before in the history of *bertsolaritza*. In addition to performing together in *bertsolaritza* sessions, both generations freely recognize each other's merits, and the art's commitment to self-management, represented by the Association of Friends of Bertsolaritza, is a common undertaking.

ETA's truce and the Lizarra-Garazi agreements as well as, to a lesser extent, the new ceasefire declared by ETA in March 2006, returned a sense of unity once again to *bertsolaritza* audiences, although even before the events mentioned above had occurred, evidence of a new change in attitude was already evident. It is difficult to predict what course *bertsolaritza* will take during the twenty-first century, or whether or not contextual strategies will once again gain supremacy over textual ones. For now, however, *bertsolaris* are increasingly persistent in their preference for simple, four- or five-rhyme stanzas, over and above the more complex ones that proved so popular during the most intense years of the revival.

It seems that *bertsolaris* now feel able to deal with topics that were taboo just a few years ago. It is telling that it was, in fact, a *bertsolari* himself who dared to propose one of the latest deadly terrorist attacks perpetrated by ETA as a theme for improvisation. The *bertsolari* in question was Jon Sarasua, who was acting at the time as a theme-prompter rather than a performer. The session was being held in Zarauz, where one month earlier terrorists had killed Iruretagoiena, a local politician and member of the right-wing PP party. The exact theme proposed by Sarasua was: "Less than a month ago a man was killed here in Zarauz." The *bertsolaris* to whom this topic was addressed were Andoni Egaña and Jon Maia. This is the verse with which Egaña opened the debate:

*Hilabete bat oraintxe dala
nago pentsatzen hasia;
holakoetan geratzen zaigun
itxaropen exkasia!
Pentsatzen degun besteren lepo
doala erru guzia;
pentsamentua izanagatik
pertonaren askazia,
ideia denen gainetik dago*

*pertsona baten bizia.*²⁰

(I am thinking about / what happened a month ago: / how little margin is left for hope / when such things occur! / We believe it is always someone else's fault; / and although thought is / the essence of all people, / a person's life must come / before all ideas.)

We quote this verse here because it gives us an idea of the importance of contextual changes in improvised *bertsolaritza*. However, *bertsolaris* continue to sing about all kinds of topics, and verses referring specifically to the situation in the Basque Country are usually the exception rather than the rule, unless something out of the ordinary occurs.

We would like to conclude with two *bertsos* that illustrate a number of other characteristics of the *bertsolaritza* of our era. They were composed by two of the *bertsolaris* at the forefront of the movement to integrate women into the *bertsolaritza* circuit. Now that we have finally come through the consolidation period, when their mere presence of women was apt to become a topic for improvisation, female *bertsolaris* draw the same crowds and sing about the same themes as their male counterparts. The first of the *bertsos* we will quote here is by Estitxu Arozena, who had been given the role of the girlfriend of her partner for the debate (Aitor Mendiluze), and the task of breaking the news to him that she was planning to go and live with another woman:

*Badakit zaila dela denentzat
holakoak ulertzea;
neskak neskekin edo mutilak
mutilekin ibiltzea.
Baina halere ez zait iruitzen
horrenbesteko trantzea
zuri gustatu izan zaizuna
neri ere gustatzea.*

(I know it's hard for all of us / to accept this kind of thing: / girls going out with girls / or boys going out with boys. / But even so I don't see / that it's so very strange / for me to like / exactly what you've always liked.)

The other *bertso* is by Maialen Lujanbio, the first woman ever to reach the finals of a national championship (indeed, she has done so three times in a row—in 1997, 2001, and 2005; in 2001, she finished second, after a hard-fought battle with Andoni Egaña). Although at first she was known almost exclusively for the self-confidence with which she dealt with the themes proposed, Lujanbio has managed to free herself of this stereotype and develop her own individual style, characterized by a great capacity for observation and detailed explorations of both feelings and experiences.

²⁰ Taken from *Bapatean* 98:64.

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