

Singing in silence

Nowadays, the activity of singing in our society (European, Western society) has been restricted into special moments or events socially allowed, specially designed for it, such as concerts, religious ceremonies, parties or other exceptional situations, and generally performed by professionals or people who have a high skill in that activity, considering them as professionals or trained amateurs, which are judged following preset aesthetic canons depending on the style. That rule is only broken occasionally, such as the situation of “emblematic feast”, when a crowd sings together in order to express their own common identity through a song -like the supporters do in a football match, for example-.

Singing, thus, is not seen anymore as a *day-a-day* activity but rather extraordinary, framed into special moments outside daily routine, and because of that, because its “speciality” and requirements, it needs to be taught as a school subject or in special academies, in order to create these “singers” for the special situations. It belongs to the category of “art” rather than a social-common activity.

But unlike playing an instrument, everyone can sing, and one can do it without being trained, so when we look backwards, we see a society -our society- with a strong habit of singing, attached to a every usual daily activity. Singing, rather than an “art” category, was a general form to communicate news, tell stories or express identity or feelings over a circumstance or event: in short, it was a way to create spaces of sociability and to draw the limits of the community’s reality, as the Catalan musicologist Jaume Ayats has remarked: “Musical expression in individuals does not act only as a symbol, but rather it is the experience of this musical activity what builds the social reality of the individual.” (Ayats, 2005b). Even after the popularization of broadcasting systems and recorded music during the 20th century, singing still continued being a necessary tool for building up social relationships and demarcating the community’s boundaries.

It is evident, however, that radio and recordings had influence in popular music material, such as tunes or even songs that were incorporated into the common repertoire. We have lots of examples of what I am saying, like this “Catalan version” of the Italian song “Torna à Surriento”, relised in 1902 by Ernesto and Giambattista Curtis, and which quickly became very popular thanks to the recordings made by singers like Enrico Caruso o Beniamino Gigli. This particularly version is made following the pattern of “giusto syllabic”, a traditional model of making ballads spread over all latin countries and described for the first time by the Romanian ethnomusicologist Valentin Brailoiu in 1952.

So, unlike than what we *a priori* could think, recorded music did not kill singing activity, but rather helped it to gain new material to improve, keeping it into the traditional song-making system.

One place where the songs were taught, learnt and widely transmitted was at the work place. I have been conducting several researches about singing at work in industrial environment, among Mallorca, Menorca and now, Belfast. Despite the obvious differences between Catalan Countries (Catalonia, Valencia and Balearic Islands, in Spain) and Northern Ireland, the role of the industrialization and the impact in terms of economy, work conditions, time routine and social changes -the new role that women acquired, for example-, can be seen under the same prisma. As Betty Messenger highlighted in her extraordinary work about Northern Ireland’s linen mills, *Picking up the Linen Treats* (1980:

6), “one can find parallels in Belfast and elsewhere with the singing of hymns by women at their looms [...] and the influence of music halls on the songs” [...]. Referred to Mallorca, only a few scholars have focused on the worker's social life in the industrial environment, and nobody has worked about their music or songs, so this field still remains almost unknown. Going over the researches done here in Belfast, or in Britain by scholars like Marek Korczynski or Emma Robertson, thus, can help us to set a model over which we could work properly.

Hence, singing at work, or in the way to go and come back from it, was a crucial element for the way that labourers organized their work routine. One reason is given by Betty Messenger (Messenger, 1980: XIX) who pointed out that despite the bad conditions that most of them had to suffer, workers “could and did find ways to mitigate their damaging effects”, and singing was one of these ways. It is the same that I was told by a former mill's female worker, “singing at work made us happy”; and that is what a doffer's song collected by Joe Graham remind to us:

*Twenty doffers in a room, oh weren't they cosy.
They sang so sweet, so very sweet.
They charmed the heart of the Bantier,
O! the bantier, O! the bantier, O! the bantier.
The charmed the heart of the bantier,
O! (Graham, 1984: 15)*

But singing also had other functions, Jaume Ayats (*et al.*, 2005) reported about how Mallorquin landowners hired their labourers according to their ability to sing, because in this particularly rural environment, singing properly was interpreted, thus, as a sign of a good workforce, and this mentality remained when many of those peasants came into the factories.

Therefore, singing at work had the *emic* finality to do less tough the working time, but also it was necessary for drawing the workers' identity, as individually as collectively.

Summarizing, we see all this singing activity in the factory like the remaining of rural or pre-industrial (artisan) concept of working, and this does not only involve the action itself, but also the mode which the workers thought and organized themselves the working time, how their working experience was. Those manners struck radically against the idea of the “mechanized-man” (Garcia, 1995: 105-106) that the industrialization, factories and machines, production, etc., required. As Marek Korczynski said:

“A number of social historians have argued that singing was one of many folk customs that were seen by many employers as inimical to the discipline demanded in the factories of the industrial revolution [...]” (Korczynski, 2007: 8)

As others scholars, like James Murphy, have pointed out (Murphy, 2012: 2) the maintenance of “working-songs” in the factory were the way through employees expressed their “[...] opposition to the mechanization of work, and workers' consciousness of themselves as a social class.”

Under this sight, thus, work-songs were considered like an obstacle for the purpose of the industrialization at the employer's eyes: so it had to be controlled or eliminated.

Singing in the factory: the need to sing in silence

The control of the factory's soundscape became a priority for the owners, in order to adapt the workers' pace to the required productivity's pace. In other words: it was about how to set and ensure the real concept of industrial capitalist work and the human alienation attached to it, and which workers resisted to accept: rules and prohibitions against singing in the factory were made. And, in this sense, we can also see the machinery noise as a part of this control. Quoting Marek Korczynski:

“[...] With machinery increasingly pacing and coordinating labour, the functional role of work songs fell away after industrialisation. [...] For many workers, the noise of machinery would have provided a formidable obstacle to singing in the workplace. The imposition of musical silence by many employers can be seen as a wider development of management increasingly seeking to control the soundscape of the workplace.” (Korczynski, 2007: 8).

Another way to control the musical soundscape by the owners was, when that became possible, to provide their own music, according their interests, through broadcasting systems like radio or later, systems like Muzak. Thus, it was because the noise or because the broadcasted music, singing at work became more and more difficult.

However, any of this “control” tools was not enough to prevent to sing into the factory. Sometimes, like it happened in some linen mills in Belfast, the manager tried to put the radio so loud with the intention to cover any singing chance, so the female workers did reply to him singing louder: “we wanted to sing **our songs**, the songs that **we made**”, told me one former *millie*, “we didn't like *his* music”.

But other times, in other factories, due the noise or due the prohibition, it was impossible to sing anything. When that happened, most of the women sang in silence: “we were used to move our lips, looking to each other, at the same pace”, I was told in Belfast; Jaume Ayats (2008: 30), in Catalonia, explains a case of workers who sometimes managed to sing together using gestures. Or, in other cases, it was not a song but a pray that was sung through gestures, like female workers in the village where I come from sometimes did, and finished them all with a loud and strong Amen!

So therefore, the relevance of singing in the factory does not seem to rely on the aesthetics nor even the words (although all of that is also important), but rather on the fact of doing it together, even **in silence** in terms of setting a sense of class and, as we said before, draw the community's boundaries. There also is a sense of resistance against the control and the industrialization's purpose, against their own alienation, as workers and as human beings as well. Quoting Jaume Ayats (2005a), singing, even **in silence**, represented “the worthy gesture of singing together in one voice”.

But as it is widely known, capitalism always successes, and so it did this time. In some cases, the workers got used to not sing anymore. In others, different and less direct strategies were developed, like in Belfast. Here, after all the prohibitions were unsuccessful, the “solution” came after the Health and Safety Act. in 1974 and the establishment of the Health and Safety Executive.

That public body forced, in order to prevent accidents and diseases (that otherwise really occurred), to all linen workers to wear masks and earmuffs, to avoid dust and noise. But

there was another important reason they were told: this masks and earmuffs would help to be more focused on their work and, of course, productivity would be improved. With all this stuff, communication and singing together became absolutely impossible, even the “silent songs”.

Indeed, after all the prohibitions, finally, in the Belfast linen mills, it was through safety rules and a supposed improvement of workers’ conditions that any singing chance was definitely broken, and the capitalist production model, individual, alienating, was completely established.

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