

THE MUSIC OF THE "SARDANA"

THE "SARDANA" IS THE NATIONAL DANCE OF CATALONIA, AND ALONG WITH OTHER FORMS OF CATALAN FOLK DANCING, IS ACCOMPANIED BY MUSIC FROM A SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT OF ELEVEN MUSICIANS, UNIQUE TO CATALONIA, KNOWN AS THE "COBLA".

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The sardana —the national dance of Catalonia— and other examples of Catalan folk dancing are accompanied by music from a special arrangement of eleven musicians, unique to Catalonia, known as the *cobla*. The term *cobla* comes from the Latin *copola*, meaning group or union. In fact, this word, used to refer to an indeterminate number of musicians, is older than the *sardana* itself, and was used by the fourteenth century minstrels who played *flabiol*, *tambori* (the two most ancient instruments used by the *cobla*), *cornamusa* and *tarot*.

But it was not until the mid-nineteenth century, at the peak of the Catalan nationalist movement inspired by the *Reinaixença*, that a serious reform gave the *sardana* its present structure, as regards both the music and the choreography. The men responsible for establishing the dance for posterity were Miquel Pardas, from the Empordà region, and the composer Pep Ventura. Pardas and Ventura, working in close collaboration, and using insight as much as a clear sense of historical timeliness, realized that the

new Catalanist movement desperately needed a popular dance and that this could quite well be the *sardana*. All that was needed was to advance in two ways: Pardas's contribution, in 1850, was the publication of his "Metodo per aprendre a ballar sardanas llargas" (Method for learning to dance long sardanas); while Pep Ventura, collecting the latest technological novelties in the production of musical instruments—which flourished in the last century—and fighting against widespread adverse opinion, established and fixed the definitive form of the *cobla*, designed to cover all the new dance's musical needs as regards both melody and percussion. In the modern *sardana*, the music and steps are inextricably linked. More than this, today one can honestly say that the contribution made to the *sardana* by the musicians lies at the heart of its unique flavour.

The twelve instruments played by the *cobla's* eleven musicians are as follows:

— The *flabiol* (like a very short flute, tuned to F) and *tambori* (a small drum which is hung from the left arm and struck with a drumstick), played by a single

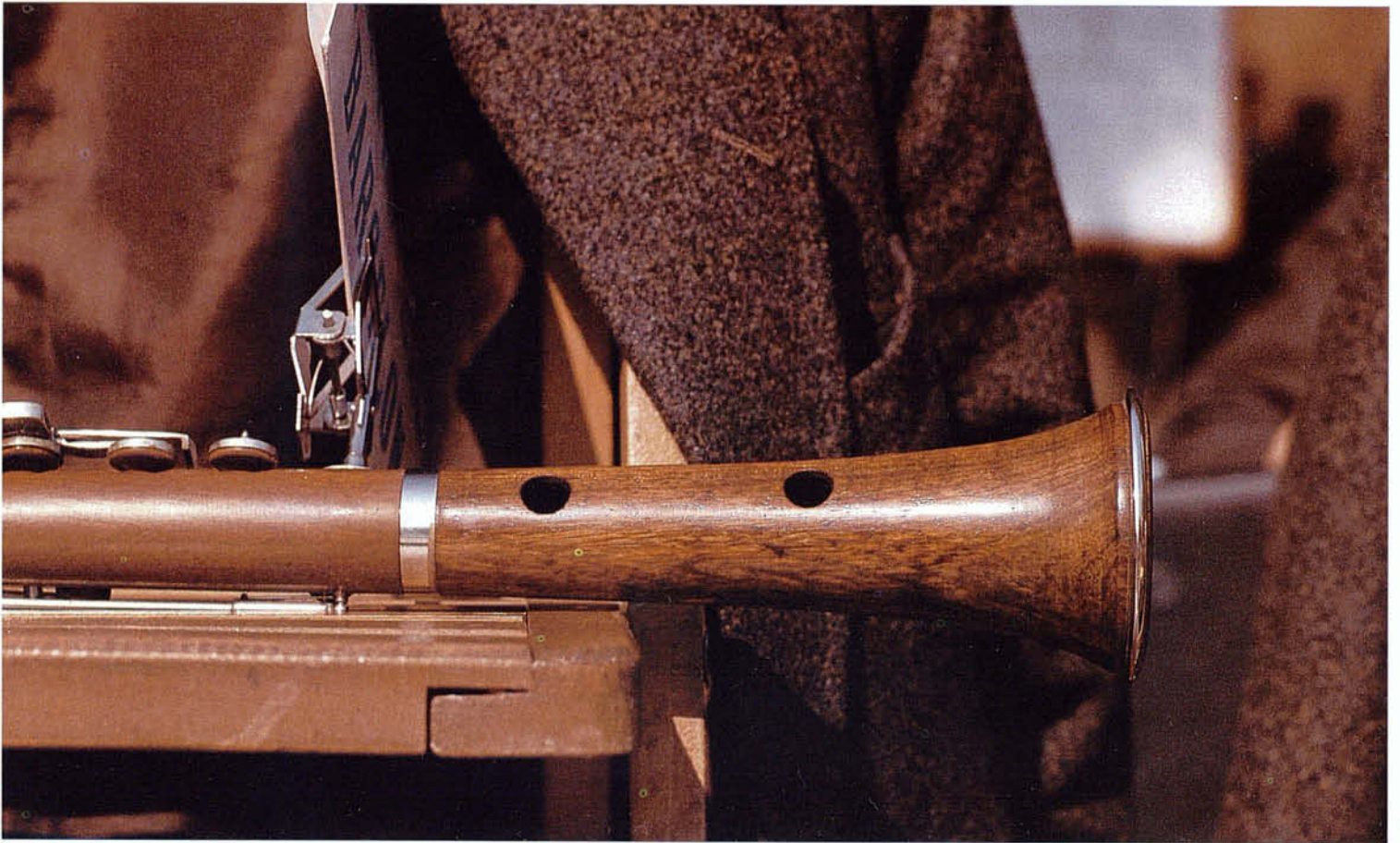
musician, responsible for introducing the start of the *sardana's* different periods;

- Two *tibles*, special, high-pitched woodwind instruments, also tuned to F;
- Two *tenores*, related to the *tibla* but slightly longer, made from jujuba wood, with thirteen metal keys, tuned to B flat. The *tenora* is the *cobla's* basic instrument, with its characteristic sound, of which the composer Garreta said, "There is only one instrument in the world which can produce a cry of joy or of pain, in a human voice, and that is the *tenora*";
- Two trumpets, conventional, chromatic or with valves, also tuned to B flat;
- One trombone, also with valves, tuned to C;
- Two horns, standard, with three valves, also tuned to C; and
- One double bass, normally with three strings (A-D-G), commonly known as a *verra*.

This arrangement produces a characteristic and unmistakable sound. Certainly it can be criticised for a certain bias in the timbre, which some contemporary composers have attempted to correct by



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adding, for example, saxophones, though with little success, but all in all this shortcoming is made up for, not so much by its natural expressiveness, as by the authenticity conferred on it by the real and effective popularization of its use.

But this is not all. Joan Llongueras, a leading figure in Catalan culture, sees in "the measuredness of the harmonic rhythm" of the *cobla* "the expression and faithful reflection of our temperament"; and also that "each of the instruments of the *cobla*, and the harmonious arrangement it results in, mirror the facets of our idiosyncrasy". He goes on to say that the *tenora* suggests melancholy, the *tibla*, irony, the horns and trombone, severity, the *flabiol* and the *tamborí*, a joyful stimulation, the trumpets, exultation, and the rhythm of the double bass, continuity. All of which adds up to give a faithful picture of the character of the Catalans.

At any rate, the *cobla* has been closely listened to and enthusiastically praised by a number of world famous composers: Harold Bauer, Albert Schweitzer, Max von Schillings and many others. Igor Stra-

vinsky attended a historic performance in the gardens of the Ateneu Barcelonès in 1924, where, after hearing *sardanes* by Juli Garreta, applauded with his characteristic enthusiasm and called out, "More Garreta, more...!"

Pep Ventura provided the practical example that was needed to back up his theories, by composing the music of a number of *sardanes* which are still frequently heard today —almost 150 years later—, such as "Per tu ploro". Amongst his early supporters were Joan Carreras, Bonaventura Frigola, Albert Cotó, Antoni Agramont and Pere Rigau. Later on, different aesthetic approaches appeared, allowing different treatments of the music of the *sardana*.

On the one hand, certain composers followed a more melodic line which was very popular —sometimes even populist—, as in the case of Vicenç Bou ("Llevantina") or Josep Vicens Xaxu ("Bona Festa").

Others found it essential to maintain more purist characteristics, with a greater formal quality. This can be seen in Josep Serra ("Perelada") or Joaquim Serra,

author of a "Tractat d'instrumentació per a cobla" (A treatise on Orchestration for the *cobla*), an indispensable tool for anyone wanting to extend their understanding of orchestration techniques for the *cobla*.

Two very distinctive personalities, both faultless musicians, with a great sense of the *cobla's* instrumental bias, from which they drew the greatest possible effect, were the two great composers Enric Morera ("Les fulles seques", "La sardana de les monges") and Eduard Toldrà ("Sol ixent"); and two remarkable individuals: Juli Garreta (no composer who has heard his "Juny" would ever think of trying to write a better *sardana*) and Pau Casals, who found time in spite of all his other activities to compose some magnificent *sardanes* (Sant Martí del Canigó).

This selection of *classics* of *sardana* music has had and has a series of worthy successors who, day after day, concert after concert, dance after dance, provide the music to which the steps of the *sardana* are performed, preserving the dance as something popular and, above all, alive. ●

