Singing in the Factory: Musical Practice among Menorca’s Shoemakers
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Introduction: Geographical and Social Context

Menorca is the most eastern member of the Balearic Islands, in the Mediterranean Sea. Even though it belongs to Spain, it is part of the so-called Catalan Countries, and so the predominant language there is Catalan. It is the least-populous of these Islands, with about 90,000 inhabitants, which makes it look like a rural area to foreign eyes. However, as we are going to see, it has been, in fact, the most industrialised of them all with a special relevance in the areas of shoemaking and costume jewellery.

This paper will make a first approach to the data collected in the research project Popular Singing and Industrialisation in Menorca, supported by the Institut Menorquí d’Estudis and the Institut Ramon Muntaner, two scientific non-profit Catalan organizations. We will also look at some of our first conclusions and present some preliminary ideas to be included in the theoretical frame.

Theoretical Frame: Singing at Work, Singing in the Factory

Our research focuses on singing at work in the industrial environment. Even if this is a quite uncommon approach in the field of Ethnomusicology, much work has been done in the Catalan-speaking area in the past 80 years. In the 1920s, the Catalan ethnomusicologist Baltasar Samper, was one of the first scholars to notice the relationship between singing and working simultaneously in a work environment in the Islands, although his work focused basically on agrarian activities. However, he noticed how the same kind of practices were common in the factories as well. His research in the musicological field, along with other colleagues, was collected in the huge project of the Obra del Cançoner Popular de Catalunya, which holds thousands of traditional songs from all the Catalan Countries in more than 30 volumes.

In the current musicological landscape, only Jaume Ayats has followed this initiative and dug deeper in the topic, with his study Cantar a la fàbrica, cantar al coro (2008), on the practice of singing in the factories within the area of the central-Catalan Ter River. Professor Joaquim Rabasseda stated that it was “the birth of industrial musicology” in our country. On the other hand, works such as Betty Messenger’s Picking up the Linen Threads (1978), set in Northern Ireland, or Mareck Korczynski’s several articles, have been especially relevant to the development of this specific field of knowledge. In any case, as Professor Korczynski points out, this is still an unexplored field: “the way in which music is used as a cultural resource within the workplace has been largely ignored by industrial sociologists and musicologists [...] (Korczynski 2011: 87)”.

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Singing while working and working while singing have appeared to be, throughout history, the same social activity without a clear or categorical distinction. But this pre-capitalist model of working collides with the later capitalist-industrial idea of Garcia-Balanya’s ‘mechanised man’ (1996), and with the division of labour that comes from the Fordist model of production. In this sense, the maintenance of singing at work in the factory environment can be seen as a mode of resistance against the consolidation of the capitalist design, and as a way of maintaining a more human and communal contact within the working space. Because of this, in many factories there were explicit rules against singing or talking, as Jaume Ayats and Marc Korczinsky remind us. Fortunately, this was not an issue in Menorca.

**Fieldwork: Music in the Factory**

Between last July and February 2016, we interviewed more than 50 people all around the island, from different ages, genders and occupations, that have or have had a direct relation with shoemaking. We also visited several factories such as Mascaró or Pons Quintana (Menorca’s most international brands), where we were able to have a look around and become familiar with the shoemaking process, and some archives that still hold relevant information in this regard.

We also covered the two main working spaces for the shoemaking process in Menorca: artisan workshops focused on complementary work for the factories— and factories themselves— where the major amount of assemblage takes place, using a Fordist model of production. In both cases, we found a division of tasks based on gender. The workshops, in this sense, are predominantly feminine—although they include some “youngsters”—while the factory includes about the same amount of men and women, but with divided tasks and working spaces. The musical activity in both locations is, therefore, necessarily different.

As we already have pointed out, in the pre-capitalist rural society, singing was a big part of the daily tasks of every individual, in and outside of work. Therefore, singing or listening to someone singing was a way to create, to evidence, the social reality of the community, to draw its boundaries. Quoting Jaume Ayats: “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, 2005)

The industrialised model of the factory is shaped after the previous models of putting-out-system, constructed towards a new one that concentrates all the workforce in the same building, with the intention of having more control over the labourers’ working schedule and the speeding up of the production process. The pre-capitalist consciousness of the workers around time and leisure (Garcia, 1996)—and singing was seen as a part of this behaviour—was perceived by many of the factory owners as opposed to their needs and wills (Korczinsky et alt. 2007: 8).
This also happened in Menorca, where the bench-shoemakers used to manage their own working time in a free way. That “they used to sing a lot” is what most of the interviewed people agreed on: they sang in chorus, taking turns to perform, and through this performance they embodied the workshop’s hierarchy: the young apprentices, for instance, never used to lead the ensemble or even sing at all. In this sense we can see the pre-industrial behaviour described in Robert Alzina’s research about Menorca’s rural tasks (Alzina 2008).

With the introduction of automatic or semi-automatic assembly lines, the roles of the workers became specialised and the time pressure on them increased. Measures such as the imposition of timekeepers (that is, people in charge of measuring the time taken in fulfilling each task) resulted in a progressive loss of the practice of singing in the factory: there is not time to sing, to talk or to even go to the bathroom; it marks the end of the pre-industrial conception of working time. Even so, new musical tools progressively took the place of the singing role, from the installation of broadcasting systems to the individualised use of iPods. For example, in the factory of Pons Quintana, they used to have a large collection of LPs and every morning they started the workday with music. In Mibo, on the other side, they still use background music nowadays, even if the opinions of the manager who plays it and the workers are quite different.

Summarising, the production system has evolved towards the model we see nowadays, together with the habits surrounding the musical production, from a performative model of musical production to a passive reception of recorded music, untied to the performance of work itself.

However, we still found some testimonies that reflected how it was a common practice to sing in the factories: the women in charge of polishing the shoe before it was packed, called embauladores, used to sing in chorus some arias of Spanish zarzuelas, a genre which was very popular, and still is, in Menorca. Some shoemakers, on the other hand, still continued to sing in chorus as well, even if they worked alone in the assembly line, sometimes using the actual noise of the machines as a fauxbordon. Marina was maybe the most popular zarzuela, since it was frequently performed on stage by the same workers in their own choral societies -such as in the Orfeó Maonès.

Menorca actually has a deep opera tradition and it ranks among the oldest Spanish opera theater, settled in its capital city, Maó. There is also another important theatre in the other main city, Ciutadella, along with smaller ones scattered around the smaller towns. These operas or zarzuelas were usually performed by the factory workers through the singing societies they themselves built. They agree on the fact that the noise produced by the machines was not a key factor for dropping the singing. It rather was the installation of the assembly lines and the inclusion of the timekeepers between their ranks that made it impossible.
In Ciutadella, before 1960, there were also estudiantines -orchestrated choral bands- which used to visit the factories on special occasions such as Carnival and perform for the workers (Alzina, 2002; Pons, 1991). As Jaume Ayats reports on his study, this shows the flexibility of the pre-capitalist model of spare time in the working environment, in terms of allowing workers to manage their own production and leisure time without breaking the dialogue between employer and employee (Ayats, 2008).

On the other hand, in the context of the artisan workshops, singing is still a part of their daily practices: popular songs from Menorca, Spanish boleros, or whatever they like. Since they are not factories in the Fordist sense of the term, they have mostly maintained the pre-capitalist practices of singing.

First Conclusions

As we have seen, the practice of singing in Menorca’s shoemaking factories was relevant until the installation of the automatic assembly lines around the 1960s, when a definitive capitalist model became common on the island. Not only the workplace but the labourer’s work-habits and degree of autonomy, changes, in regard to his own work-time management. Singing, considered as a part of this, also disappears. However, some older workers maintained the habit above the noise and rules.

We found that the most popular genres performed among male workers were, as in the 1960s, the opera choirs and zarzuelas. The men learned this musical material and performing skills in the estudiantines and choral societies. Women, although familiar with these repertoires, prefered Spanish boleros and pop songs of the time.

Although we have evidence that there existed typical shoemaker songs, many of which were gathered during the 1980s by the Col·lectiu Folklòric de Ciutadella, none of these songs made it to our current day.

Relating to the work-space, it was not usual for women and men to work together, as they had different tasks. However, sometimes they coincided in the same space depending on the positions assigned in the factory floor: it is the case of the men in charge of cutting the leather—talladors—and the women in charge of polishing the shoes—embauladores. One embauladora among the interviewed people, told us how a young tallador used to sing with them as he worked alongside their station because he was single. Meanwhile, the other talladors were not allowed to do it since “they were married!”, she said. Singing together, though, was not that much of an innocent practice when it involved both genders at the moment of performance.
On the other hand, regarding the aesthetics of singing we do not have a proper definition of what made a ‘good voice’ in the views of the women. However, a good male singer seemed to be one who had an operatic voice such as what he could learn in the choral societies.

To summarize, singing at the factory or in a workshop in Menorca was a usual daily activity, like it had been in every other daily context in the pre-industrial society, although, the introduction of a new production system and a strict time-conception led to a gradual disappearance of this practice. Following the history of singing in the factory in the island, we can observe process of adaptation and resistance against the implementation of a capitalist model of time management and productivity.

Quoting Marek Korczynski (2011: 88), “If we take an inquiry into how people live with and against the structures of rational capitalism as one of the starting points for contemporary cultural analysis, then the lack of attention given to cultural practices within the labor process is an alarming one. This is because the labor process represents the point where the contradictions of capitalism are at their sharpest, and it is there, therefore, where we may learn much about how people use cultural practices to live with and against the rational structures of contemporary capitalism. There is a gap in our knowledge that needs to be addressed.” And that is what we are trying to do with this project.
Bibliography


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