

PANTXOA ETCHEGOIN

KANTUKETAN
THE WORLD OF BASQUE SINGING

“In the Basque Country, as I have not only noticed
but also felt myself, singing and music are not confined
to stage art. This is a natural and
spontaneous expression of people’s life.”

Miguel Angel Estrellas, pianist

The tremendous importance of singing and music in the life of the Basque people is doubtless. Of artistic disciplines, singing in the first place reflects the rich sonority of the Basque language. It accompanies major moments of the people’s life, going easily beyond geographical and linguistic boundaries. Although singing in the Basque Country is one of the strongest varieties of social practice, over the recent years a certain decline of the collective memory, flaws in handing down the tradition of singing are negatively reflected in it. This is due to the fact that family no longer carries this function and there are no relevant training centres for children and young performers. Taking into account this situation, in 1998 the Institute of Basque Culture worked out a long-term project for the protection of Basque singing and music *Kantuketan* (“In Search of Singing”), which has been carrying out successfully to the present day.

The Spirit of *Kantuketan*: The Living Memory

From 1990, the Institute of Basque Culture set as its goal to support actively the Basque language and culture by means of projects submitted by local associations of culture. Along with this, it organizes its own actions as well. Thus, during the last three years it has been directing the special *Kantuketan* program for the protection of Basque singing and music. When the Institute of Basque Culture announced the main directions of this program, it became evident that our future steps are not at all dictated by nostalgia. However, the main mission of the program is to search for Basque songs and protect them, to look for new means for the preservation of the continuity of Basque singing in the national memory, and to ensure its creative progress. In addition, it should be taken into consideration that Basque singing - an inalienable part of the cultural heritage - is viewed mainly as the inexhaustible source of contemporary music. The project is ambitious, as it not only plans the organization of a great exposition, which will turn into the cornerstone of our future activities, but it will also acquire unprecedented dynamics throughout the Basque Country, which itself will offer a completely new vision in this sphere. The corporative spirit of the program is also noteworthy, for it is open for new partnership in cultural and economic spheres and is founded on the participation of numerous representatives of the field of singing. Finally, it will facilitate us to be more open in relation to the outer world, which is the precondition of its renewal and enrichment. This is the main goal of the Institute of

Basque Culture, which will try to lay a brick of the future in the considerable yet quite fragile edifice of Basque culture.

The Exhibition One Can Hear

From the outset, the exhibition was intended as the “heart” of the entire program, which would inspire a whole ensemble of activities. The Institute of Basque Culture had to find original and innovative means for diffusion and chose an interactive and audio moving exhibition. This conception became an object of unexpected and very interesting cooperation between the Quebec Museographic Society (GID) and Basque Communication Company (COMEDIA). The Quebecians demonstrated once again their innovative talent in museography. The result exceeded all expectations and surprised everyone: in 200 m² space, offering a new discovery at every step, a viewer will follow a wonderful route, which presents to him, by musical tunes and pictorial means, the entire history of Basque singing, its close link with the Basque people, and the urgency and variety of Basque singing and music.

This exhibition has been shown in 34 cities, both in the Basque Country and abroad, and more than 70 000 guests of various ages have visited it.

Initiation into Music

This uncommon exhibition is located in three central modules. Each of them covers one important topic: “History in Song” (the importance of the oral tradition, 1200-year-old Basque and world history in song, song related in songs, work for the accumulation of Basque songs beginning from the 19th c.); “Time of Singing” (various genres of everyday songs: drinking songs, lullabies, shepherd’s songs, versified improvisations, group festive songs, song as social contact, etc.) and “The Living Memory” (the process of renewal of Basque repertoire since 1960s, the rock phenomenon, the future of Basque singing). Each module comprises a two-sided world: on the one hand, by means of the original system of the “audio shower” the visitor is fully immersed in the atmosphere of the songs linked with the module topic and at the same time pictures associated with this topic are shown on the screen before him. In the other aspect of the module the viewer himself becomes a participant of the process. Two listening facilities enable him to make a choice among 30 songs reflecting the module topic, and in the multimedia section he is provided with an analysis of peculiarities of Basque songs, thus he can extend his knowledge and familiarize with rare visual documents and sound recordings, some of which have not even been published yet.

The visitor has a wonderful feeling when he is listening to the echoes of the voice of poet-improviser Etxahun-Iruri, the resonance of “heavy metal” music of group SuTaGar, improvised poems of a Basque shepherd recorded in the Idaho Desert, or a tender and sad folk song of young woman singer Anari, symphonic variations of group Itoiz, or when he is looking at the rare picture showing a Basque choir singing under the Gernika tree in 1930. The four-hour audio recording during the exhibition offers the guest an unforgettable journey in the world of song.

Archives Waiting to be Rediscovered

The *Kantuketan* exhibition, innovative according to its form, surprises the viewer by the richness of its contents too. In order to realize its plan, the Institute of Basque Culture from 1999 began to inventory documentary collections linked with Basque singing and music. Thus the localization of phono-, audiovisual and iconographic documents became possible. The Institute of Basque Culture has purchased many of them and continues to protect them. Through the cooperation with the Paris Museum of Folk Art and Traditions the songs recorded in the Basque Country in 1947 as well as photographs of Basque improvisers of the same period have been restored. We have also bought some extracts from the materials of the ethnographic poll conducted in 1928 in the Soule province by request of the Paris Song Lyrics Museum (at present the Audiovisual Department of the National Library of France). The Bois d'Arcy National Centre of Cinematography provided us with two films of the pre-war period: *The Film on the Charpentier Family* (silent film about the village of Saint-Pée-sur-Nivelle, shot in 1923) and *Ramuntcho* (1938, according to a work of Pierre Loti, showing the performance of legendary choir Eresoinka in the village of Sare). Finally, various fragments from feature and documentary films preserved at the Euskadi Film Collection in San Sebastian (in particular, the first film shot in 1930 about the Basque Country, the documentary film by Basque cinematographer Antton Eceiza about a new Basque song, shot in 1983) have been given the Institute of Basque Culture. The merit of the *Kantuketan* program is that these documents have been brought out from shelves and that their awakened memory acquires a new life before our eyes and we can hear its voice here at this exhibition and beyond it too.

Gathering of Songs, Polls, Valorization Instruments

The study methods preceding the opening of the exhibition stimulated at the same time numerous initiatives from the viewpoint of the protection and valorization of the collective memory. Thus, many associations began to invest funds for gathering and recording songs. E.g. one of them renewed in its village of Saint-Pée-sur-Nivelle the tradition of "the feast of singers". This turned into another means to rediscover partially or fully forgotten songs, along with the old ones, for recording them and offering ethnomusicologists to study them, to participate in their distribution by publishing a special catalogue. Basque local radios having rich archives of sound recordings, broadcasting for already twenty years, as well as the Basque Service of Public Broadcasting "France Bleu" inventoried their collections and broadcast this unique musical heritage, to which they devoted special programs.

Along with the general enthusiasm, accompanying the protection and distribution of song memory, it was exactly owing to the *Kantuketan* dynamism that today as never before singing has become the primary object of sociological and ethnographic study. This is confirmed by the extensive poll conducted together with the Basque Choir Federation, in which one thousand choir singers participated. This is a quite serious document, offering a full picture of the situation at various places and enabling us to familiarize better with singing practice and performers, to evaluate its weak points and envisage future prospects (in particular, in the training of choir chiefs).

The devotion and indefatigable efforts of these researchers, with the constant support of the Institute of Basque Culture since the day of creation of the project, triggered not only the idea of organization of this unique exhibition, but was crowned finally with the publication of reference-catalogue “*Kantuketan - the World of Basque Singing*”. Today it is an indispensable complement to the exhibition, which offers rich material for reflection and analysis to everyone interested in Basque singing and wishing to gain a better insight into it.

The Love for Singing

But what is the use of preservation of the memory without caring for its transmission? In order to ensure its life and creative development young generations should have an opportunity to familiarize with it. It should arouse in them the love for singing and the wish to sing themselves. In this regard too, the *Kantuketan* program offers the Institute of Basque Culture inexhaustible opportunities for the transmission of the heritage of singing and allows discovering and introducing new pedagogical means, such as a CD-ROM of Basque songs for children of the age of 6-12, released by the company Elhuyar d’Usurbil (Gipuzkoa), working in the multimedia field. For the preparation of this CD-ROM the Institute of Basque Culture worked together with the Pedagogical Committee made up of pedagogues, teachers and other specialists of musical education. The result of this cooperation is this game production, which familiarizes children with one hundred Basque songs by means of five musical games: *Score Game* develops the ear for music in a child; in *Mixer console* a child finds himself in the role of a disc-jockey, tries to discover and add different instruments (including voice); *Game of Pairs* offers him an opportunity to play again the song after hearing it and associate with it the face of a singer; *Creation Game* allows a child to compose a song himself (write lyrics and use them with a familiar melody); and finally, *Game-Improvisation* is devoted to the “core” of Basque singing - song and verse improvisation. These musical games were released in 2001, more than 3000 families have bought them, and 4000 children familiarized with them with great interest during the *Kantuketan* exhibition.

School-Partner

At present, against the background of ineluctable evolution of forms and means of knowledge transmission, school is an unchanged and desirable partner in all the undertakings linked with the spheres of education, culture and art. The Academic Inspection of the Pyrenees-Atlantic Department recognized the Institute of Basque Culture as a centre-resource in the field of school and nonschool cultural education and training of specialists in Basque culture and the Basque language. Since 1999, it has been participating actively in every joint project aimed at the popularization of Basque singing and music. Similar “cultural excursus” are conducted annually in a large number of Basque schools - state, private and Basque-language schools - and are designed for primary and secondary school pupils. During several months they familiarize with Basque singing and music by means of indirect topics, such as agropastoralism, carnival, traditions linked with bear, as well as the history of the old

period... Art workers (musicians, singers, sculptors, dancers, writers, etc.) guide children in these educational adventures. Teachers at will may receive special training and work with a class on topics chosen by them.

Pedagogics of Singing

Along with this cultural program, which will make the school more open towards the outer world, numerous other events have been planned and realized within the framework of *Kantuketan* with its own support and that of the associations related with it, such as Herri Soinulariak. They have enriched further the register of the possibilities of the transmission of singing and music and proved thereby the vivacity of the tissue associating education and culture in the Basque Country. In 1999/2000 academic year on the initiative of Rural Music Centres about 20 teachers and 500 pupils from the village of Hasparren worked on the project devoted to the anniversary of the Basque composer and singer Mikel Laboa. The children studied for several months the work of this major artist and appeared before him together with other vocal groups and clubs of the village during an exceptional concert. This stage experience will certainly remain for a long time in the memory of the pupils.

As regards choral singing, in 2000 by request of the Institute of Basque Culture the young composer Joxean San Miguel went through the repertoire of traditional and contemporary Basque songs in order to select some of them for choirs of educational institutions. As a result, in autumn 2000 choirs of several schools began to experiment with the new pedagogical material (song collections with new arrangement, compact-discs, etc.) and started to work on this familiar but renewed repertoire. In this case too, at the end of the year young singers and musicians were given an opportunity of performing on the stage before professional musicians and the general public.

Forward in Search of Singing

The fact that today the Basque Country remains the nursery of young singers is greatly due to joint initiatives, such as the singing competition – “Haur kantu txapelketa” (children’s singing championship), organized once in two years in seven historical provinces of the country. Within the *Kantuketan* program, the amateur singers - winners of this competition are given an opportunity to receive training. Thus, discovered talented persons may go further in search of singing, to develop their vocal technique, familiarize with contemporary music, or more general musical culture. Along with the love for singing, we probably need transmission of the singing consciousness as well. This consciousness is already deep-rooted in the most direct and loyal continuers of Basque oral tradition: “bertsolari” (masters of versified and song improvisation). In this field, more than in any other, there are great changes in the transmission and continuation of the tradition, which in the past occurred only in the family, taverns and village squares. Today this process is directed by improvisation schools (there are five similar schools in the North Basque Country) and improvisers proper by their performances in educational institutions. Here again the *Kantuketan* program supports the training of professional specialists, which is necessary to ensure

the continuation and new development of the jewel of our culture, rare and noble genre, which causes great interest and astonishment of researchers worldwide.

Ensuring the Future of Singing

Basque singers and musicians, both amateurs and professionals, equally need support. Naturally, over the recent years they have sought help (to receive professional education, to demonstrate their work, to create a new work) at the Institute of Basque Culture, the only structure that is able to “manage” Basque culture in the North Basque Country. Owing to the *Kantuketan* program and newly acquired partners, the Institute of Basque Culture succeeded in finding funds for further development in order to meet the demands and expectations of artists. Thus, during the entire year 2000 modules for perfection of vocal art functioned, headed by the Vitoria-Gasteiz Conservatoire. At first it was open to everybody, but now it focuses on stage singers and ensembles. Judging by its success, this undertaking will certainly continue in future. New prospects take shape for the promotion of Basque performers, both in the Basque Country and outside its borders. Many Basque singers, rock groups, vocal ensembles and improvisers have been given a chance to demonstrate their art in Bordeaux, Bilbao, Beirut, Paris, Wales, South America, California, Uzbekistan, Sao Tomé and Quebec. The special effort of the Institute is directed to the support of contemporary Basque singing. As a result, talented young graduates of the Conservatoire of the Bayonne-Côte Basque region and various competitions prizes winners were given an opportunity to appear on the stage before the local audience (concerts, festivals and performances organized within the *Kantuketan* exhibition). On the basis of partnership with the Landes music school an original joint music performance was created, in which five young singers selected by the Institute of Basque Culture and five instrumentalists of the music school participated. Thus, the group “Hegalka” was founded, whose performance was a success on the stage of the Basque Country and Quebec in February of the last year. Finally, the Institute of Basque Culture diffuses the spirit of *Kantuketan* in various cultural events by ensuring the participation of Basque performers: Musicora Salon (Paris), Festival of Dance and Music of the World Peoples (Ris-Orangis), Festival of Atypical Nights (Langon), where Basque artists sent by the Institute demonstrated their talent before foreign spectators admiring this message.

Stimulation of Creation

In order to ensure the future of Basque singing, we should begin to care for its creative process today. Therefore, the goal of the *Kantuketan* program is to stimulate and encourage any initiative, which serves the diffusion of Basque songs with all their diversity, and creative work itself is the main axis of the future activities. Creative process is demonstrated not only be means of the support of musical events (song and dance concerts, poetry evenings, choral works), but by unique experiments as well, of which mention should be made of the concert with the participation of well-known performer of traditional Basque songs, singer-shepherd Erramun Martikorena, musicians of Bayonne-Côte Basque and 40-person choir of the National Conservatoire of the region. This was an unprecedented event, whose success triggered concert

tours in the Basque Country and abroad. Another confirmation of our openness and innovation support is the newly created cantata “Isiltasunaren ortzadarra” (The Rainbow of Silence) by Nicolas Bacri, great French composer. It is a 25-minute piece, inspired by poetical works of Basque writer Josanton Artze. This work is the result of successful partnership of the Institute of Basque Culture and Bayonne-Côte Basque, which enabled Nicolas Bacri during one-year creative mission to familiarize well with Basque culture. The cantata was performed in two concerts, in Hendaye and Anglet. It was also recorded on a disc, which was released in 2003 by company “Digital Records”.

Cultural Contacts as Creative Stimulus

These important creative contacts allowed not only the intersection of different musical genres and worlds, but brought together in an amazing manner various cultures of our planet. One of the priorities of the Institute of Basque Culture is the familiarization with songs of the peoples of the world. Listening to others enriches us even more: thus, during the recent months the Basque audience has listened with pleasure to Georgian and Berber women singers of folk ensembles “Mzatamze” and “B’Net Marrakech”, Gypsy singers of “Urs Karpatz”, Bulgarian quartet “Slavei”, Chechen women singers of “Daimakhkan-Aznach”, Uzbek group “Doutortchilar”, and Croatian group “Navalia”. These are the voices which joined their emotions at concerts and exciting meetings with school pupils, and Basque performers, who came to listen, study and share experience.

After *Kantuketan*

It is early of course to evaluate final results of the *Kantuketan* program. However, even a superficial analysis of main directions of its three-year activity allows us to conclude that all the initiatives that lay in its foundation have been realized effectively and has been very dynamic. In every sphere, linked with the preservation of the memory, training of professional specialists or the work proper, every action started by it, has always met the expectations and wishes of artists, associations, partners and audience. The exhibition, the “lighthouse” of this program, has been a great success. This moving exhibition, already visited by 70 000 guests, continues its journey. In near future the showing of the exhibition is planned over the Atlantic Ocean, and Basque communities of the United States of America will have an opportunity to see it. At the end of this long journey, covering numerous places, the Institute of Basque Culture wishes the exhibition to remain forever a living museum of Basque singing, maybe housed in some other museum, but adhering strictly to the continual renewal, cultural evolution and live creation.

Along with this, the *Kantuketan* program has never been a self-purpose for the Institute of Basque Culture. It has been a certain “pretext” for new contacts and innovative activities aimed at the perpetuation of Basque language and culture, as well as their renewal and prosperity. The development of this program called for numerous corrections and projections, which by their dimension go beyond Basque singing and music and therefore, this challenge may be accepted only in the years to

come. One of our main goals is to work out a single policy for accumulation, preservation and valorization of oral musical heritage in the Basque Country. This should be manifested in the creation of a structure that will turn into a true oral centre-resource. Provided that this project is realized, the result of the immense work carried out within the *Kantuketan* program will occupy its legitimate place and the promotion of Basque culture will be continued on the new basis.

By means of *Kantuketan*, this ambitious and unifying program, the Institute of Basque Culture has paved the future way for the singing memory of the Basque people. This means that the resonance of the sonorous and poetic world of Basque singing is heard in every place where *Kantuketan* brings it.

Reference

ಇಂಟರ್‌ನಾಷನಲ್ ಮ್ಯೂಸಿಕ್ ಇನ್‌ಸ್ಟಿಟ್ಯೂಟ್ ಆಫ್ ಬಾಸ್ಕಿಯಲ್ಲಿ ನಡೆಸಿದ ಕಾಂಟುಕೆಟನ್ ಪ್ರೋಜೆಕ್ಟ್‌ನ ಬಗ್ಗೆಯೇ ಈ ಲೇಖನವು ಬರೆಯಲ್ಪಟ್ಟಿದೆ.