

Poets, Composers and Singers. The Renewing and Diffusion of Catalan Literature

Poetry has been closely connected to music since its very origins and these two artistic forms of language have fuelled each other over time.

Poets express ideas, feelings and values through a set of aesthetic codes that are made tangible through metric, rhyme and rhythm: elements that give each poem its unique musicality. Like all displays of art, poetry responds to the aesthetical codes characteristic of an era and, beyond merely offering a message, it has its own special way of conveying it.

When we consider the realm of literary heritage, classics are defined as such because they are not constrained by eras, tastes or methodologies; rather their message reaching us today remains as current as it ever was.

Poetry may be enjoyed through individual and silent study, in a group through the spoken word or through music when an author's text lays the foundations for a new work, and it is through music that the verses of the past take on a new meaning and are read as a clear allusion to the present. The cultural, aesthetical and, in some cases, political values portrayed in the texts of men and women of letters often become contemporary once again.

This presentation aims to give some examples of Catalan poetry conveyed through music.

In doing so, we will make reference to the writers associated with Espais Escrits. Xarxa del patrimoni literari català, a non-profit organisation which centres around promoting Catalan literature and the Catalan language. This heritage-centred network located in the Països Catalans (the Catalan-speaking areas of Catalonia, Valencia, the Balearic Islands, Northern Catalonia in present-day France, Andorra and Alghero in Sardinia, Italy) brings together associations, universities, foundations, town and city councils, and other entities that protect and promote the reading and study of Catalan classics from the 13th century to the present day. We will give examples of the relationship between literature and music as per one of our most prominent projects, the Mapa Literari Català (Catalan Literary Map). Our internationally-recognised literary mapping model blends literature and landscape perfectly and integrates multimedia content such as sound. In order to integrate much of the music that we will detail

later, we signed an agreement with Música de Poetes, a virtual space promoted by the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Open University of Catalonia) and the Catalan Government Department of Education, which shows different songs that musicians have composed based on inspiration from our poets' verses.

Music has played a part in increasing the reach of poetry and, in some cases as we have already mentioned, it has increased its popularity. A good example of this is *L'Emigrant* by Jacint Verdaguer (1845-1902), which was set to music by Amadeu Vives (1871-1932) and sung to more than 14,000 people by the gypsy singer Peret at Palau Sant Jordi in 2012, thus bringing poetry closer to the lovers of flamenco and rumba:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtgT5RxIwDk>

Peret sang the song again the following year in 2013, first a cappella and then accompanied on his guitar. That time, he was at the Camp Nou stadium before 90,000 people at the Concert for Freedom, which aimed to defend the right of Catalan citizens and peoples around the world to decide their future freely and democratically.

The Middle Ages and Narrated Poetry

Music and poetry have walked hand in hand from the times of the troubadours. The troubadours of the Middle Ages created poetry to be sung. This literary tradition has its origins in 12th century Provence before spreading across the Països Catalans. Occitan troubadours wrote their poems to be sung and performed accompanied by musical instruments. Rhythm and musicality were core to their orally-transmitted compositions.

The influence of the troubadours was decisive in the poetic tradition of Catalan culture. Minstrels sang their texts as part of the courtly love tradition. Some of these texts were satirical, such as those of 12th century Catalan troubadour Guillem de Berguedà. As a matter of fact, Francesc Ribera, popularly known as *Titot*, set the sirventes of the troubadours to music and adapted them into modern Catalan in 2003, accompanied by a quartet of musicians conducted by Marcel Casellas (2024).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFd3SmNYSU4>

The Majorcan philosopher, mystic and writer Ramon Llull was the first to write in the Catalan language between the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century, and we may consider him and Valencian knight and poet Ausiàs March (c. 1400-1459) the most prominent medieval Catalan poets.

Llull took the rhetorical and prosodic techniques of lyrical poetry as we can hear in this version of his *Cant a Ramon*, written to the music of a piece by the medieval troubadour Guiraut de Borneill (1138-1215),¹ and performed in this recording by Jordi Savall on a disk edited by Alia Vox in 2016.

¹ The troubadour master who served Alfonso I, known as the Troubadour, King of Aragon, Count of Barcelona and later of Roussillon, and Viscount of Millau, Carlet and Provence.

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Lo Desconhort: <https://www.mapaliterari.cat/ca/espai/lo-desconhort/ramon-llull>

Another version of the same text by Ramon Llull can be found set to music and sung by Celdoni Fonoll as arranged by Rafael Subirachs on the 1989 album *Enllà del temps*:
<https://www.mapaliterari.cat/ca/espai/cant-de-ramon/ramon-llull>

There is also a more recent version with music by Majorcan composer Jaume Sampol, debuted in June 2017 to commemorate 700 years of the death of the Majorcan poet and mystic:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfqCI8PgvPk>

During the 14th century and the first half of the 15th century, the Catalan poets who wrote in Provençal moved around the royal courts, where they enjoyed protection and encouragement.

Narrated and improvised versification became present in spaces of festivity and community from the 16th to the 18th century. Cultured literature from this period is often referred to as being decadent as a consequence of literary creation being combined with the loss of political and social supremacy and the disappearance of centrality in academia.

Nevertheless, the Catalan language remained present in popular and anonymous poetry, which was generally sung, and it was transmitted orally with tweaks and reworkings over time. Here we are referring to the joys (goigs), carols, tambourine songs, corrandas and glossas (glosses), of which numerous versions are preserved.

We know that all this musical heritage was highly popular thanks to the work initiated by intellectuals and writers who wanted to preserve such a rich heritage and began to systematically collect it in the second half of the 19th century. Upon the sponsorship of Rafael Patxot (1922), this heritage was indeed collected in *Obra del Cançoner Popular de Catalunya* with the aim of bringing the whole musical and popular corpus in the country together.² The project *Càntut. Cançons de tradició oral* initiated in 2012 is just one example of the permanent renewing and dynamisation of this oral heritage:³ <https://cantut.cat/festival>

² More than 40,000 documents were collected from 1922 to 1936. Together with the songs, they gave light to interesting research projects with photographs and some phonographic recordings made on wax cylinders. The Patxot family donated the materials to the Montserrat Monastery in 1991 and they may be consulted at the Catalan Government Directorate-General of Popular Culture and Cultural Associationism and at the National Library of Catalonia:

<https://cultura.gencat.cat/ca/temes/commemoracions/2022/anycanconerpopular/inici/index.html>

[Consulted on 14.10.2024]

³ This initiative was awarded the Catalan Government National Prize of Culture in 2022:

<https://www.cantut.cat/> [Consulted on 14.10.2024]. The Commemorative Year of the Works of the Popular Songwriter that closed with the event *Versar el Cançoner* at the Bartrina Theatre in Reus with

Romanticism and Folk Music

In the mid-19th century, the romantic movement of the Renaissance was particularly interested in highlighting the value of the Catalan language and preserving popular culture and folklore. As we have already mentioned, the task of collecting the oral tradition was systematic and decisively influenced the literary creations of many authors of the time. The incorporation of pieces from the popular repertory into their literary works contributed to the increased strength and survival of the texts.

We will give some examples. Jacint Verdaguer (1845-1902) incorporated the popular song *Muntanyes regalades* into his epic poem *Canigó*. Majorcan poet Marià Aguiló (1825-1897) worked extensively on folklore and recovering popular songs. The Catalan-language writer Àngel Guimerà (1845-1924), born in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, was both an excellent playwright and a great folklorist who integrated popular Catalan traditions into works such as *Terra Baixa*. The Barcelona-born poet Clementina Arderiu (1889-1976) took inspiration from popular culture, whereas the Empordà-born writer Caterina Albert (1869-1966), who was at the time obliged to use the pen name Víctor Català, integrated topics from popular tradition into her works such as *Solitud*. The Barcelona-born writer and poet Joan Maragall (1866-1911) worked on collecting traditional oral songs and incorporated their style and tone into his own creations with *La vaca cega*.

Els Cors de Clavé (Clavé's Choirs), founded by Anselm Clavé (1824-1874) in Barcelona in 1850, were created to promote solidarity and a sense of community, and to educate the working class through music. They quickly extended throughout Catalan territory. They mainly sang songs written by Clavé himself and by other Catalan authors that became very popular. Choral societies were created around the country, and they still exist today.

Les nines del Ter: <https://www.mapaliterari.cat/ca/espai/les-nines-del-ter/josep-anselm-clave>

We can see examples in poems such as *El Virolai* by Jacint Verdaguer, which Josep Rodoreda (1851-1922) set to music in 1880. Rodoreda won the competition to set Verdaguer's lyrics to music, which was entered by 88 compositions. This devotional song to the Mother of God of Montserrat is also a religious and patriotic piece that has been used in protest at several points during Catalan history. On 6 October 1934, during the Second Spanish Republic, this hymn accompanied the proclamation of the Catalan State made by Lluís Companys.

The Montserrat Choir School sings Rodoreda's version daily.
<https://www.mapaliterari.cat/ca/espai/cami-dels-degotalls/autors-diversos->

the participation of musicians who are experts in oral tradition and improvised song:
https://cultura.gencat.cat/ca/detall/Noticies/N_ActeCloendaOCPC [Consulted on 14.10.2024]

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The hymn has taken on a new meaning and been set to music by new artists on many occasions, branching out into more diverse genres such as the Pastorets Rock version⁴ (2008): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkUICsL5RBo>. Minute: 23:55

Dictatorships. Primo de Rivera (1923-1930) and Franco (1939-1975)

The Catalan language was prohibited by Royal Decree during the dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera and it became compulsory for teaching to be given in Spanish.

Under the second dictatorship, which occurred as a result of the coup d'état led by General Francisco Franco (1939-1975), Catalan underwent brutal aggression and was reduced to family use. Spanish became the only language of teaching, administration and the media.

Nevertheless, Franco's government considered that Catalan literature must be presented as an expression of regional language from the 1950s and he sponsored the opera *Canigó* by Jacint Verdaguer in the Liceu concert hall (1953), among others. He later promoted an international tour of the scenic cantata *L'Atlàntida* by the same author, set to music by Manuel de Falla and completed by Ernesto Halffter (1962).

The Barcelona-born tenor, Gaietà Renom (1913-1997), a soloist in the Orfeó Català choir, published *Canciones catalanas* where he sang pieces by Tomàs Garcés, Josep Carner, Josep Maria de Sagarra and Apel·les Mestre, among others, under the direction of composer Joaquim Serra i Corominas (1907-1957) on the Alhambra label (1958). He later used the more Spanish-sounding name of Cayetano Renom to record poems by Catalan authors such as *L'Emigrant* by J. Verdaguer, *Romanç de Santa Llúcia i Abril* by J. M. de Sagarra (1894-1961) and pieces by Apel·les Mestres (1854-1936).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3GiASrPcOo&ab_channel=vinilissim

Nova Cançó

Nova Cançó began to decisively contribute to the popularisation of Catalan poetry from all eras in the 1960s.

The Nova Cançó movement originated during Franco's dictatorship following the tradition of songs of protest and the *Chanson française*. It desired earnestly to recover the Catalan language and make the voices of the poets that wrote their creations in Catalan heard. The first record label, Edigsa, was founded and it allowed people to listen to pre-recorded music without needing

⁴. *Musicant Verdaguer* (2020) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkUICsL5RBo>. Minute: 23:55
[Consulted on 10.10.2024]

to attend concerts. The producer was immediately interested in printing the lyrics sung so that people could read them as they listened.

Barcelona-born Joan Salvat-Papasseit (1894-1924) was the first poet set to music by the Nova Cançó at the end of the 1950s. His texts were composed and sung by Barcelona-born Miquel Porter i Moix (1930-2004). This task would be followed by other singer-songwriters, including those listed below.

The Valencian **Raimon** who, alongside protest songs, composed *Per destruir aquell qui l'ha desert* in 1968, where he masterfully sang both medieval and modern Valencian authors such as Jordi de Sant Jordi (1395-1400), Joan Roís de Corella (1435-1497) and Joan Timoneda (1520-1583). Here we can listen to *Veles e Vents han mos desigs complir*, one of the songs written by Ausiàs March (c. 1400-1459), set to music by Raimon in 1989 and performed at numerous concerts since then:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEpKnhTj-0&ab_channel=calmosca

By Joan Roís de Corella (1435-1497). In 2003, he set *Balada de la Garsa i l'Esmerla* to music:

https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=KVh3UsTrg8I&list=OLAK5uy_kT2oUKfbzunP-RMopp2TF_3bvScyPDskU

By Ausiàs March. *Raimon Canta Ausiàs March* (1989):

https://music.youtube.com/playlist?list=OLAK5uy_ns3ZwF5hxBt3-U4ZTI2e8HaFB-4KQULcA

And by other medieval writers *Clàssics i no* (2023):

https://music.youtube.com/playlist?list=OLAK5uy_kT2oUKfbzunP-RMopp2TF_3bvScyPDskU

Raimon also set 20th century Catalan poets to music with whom he had the opportunity to talk, such as Salvador Espriu (1913-1985) on the disk *La roda del temps*.

He mirat aquesta terra:

<https://www.mapaliterari.cat/ca/espai/he-mirat-aquesta-terra/salvador-espriu>

Raimon canta Espriu (1985): https://music.youtube.com/playlist?list=OLAK5uy_IzNIXnTB-9rT0hdZZmeuN8Tln3jTVcQes.

The Catalan composer **Rafael Subirachs** (1948) set Catalan and Valencian poets to music in the 1960s. He released other albums dedicated to poets such as *Cinc esgrafiats a la mateixa paret* (1974) with texts by Miquel Martí i Pol (1929-2003), *Si com un infant aprèn de parlar* (1991) with works by Jordi de Sant Jordi and Ausiàs March, and *Miralls* (1991) with poems by Gabriel Ferrater and Carles Riba (1893-1959). He composed music for Joan Vinyoli (1914-1984) in *Cants d'Abelone* (1991) together with M. del Mar Bonet and he set poems by Jacint Verdaguer to music in *Cançó de la terra* (1995-2000).

Cants d'Abelone:

https://music.youtube.com/playlist?list=OLAK5uy_kc-U35LYNII5COLBHI1Vuh3B1zbHUSAz0

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Valencian actor and singer-songwriter **Ovidi Montllor** (1942-1995) was a prominent member of Nova Cançó and dedicated his professional life to singing poets such as Vicent Andrés Estellés, Joan Salvat-Papasseit, Salvador Espriu, Pere Quart and Josep Maria de Sagarra.

Tot l'enyor de demà by J. Salvat-Papasseit set to music by Toti Soler (1975)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnCCwB0qASo>

Majorcan singer **Maria del Mar Bonet** has also set Catalan folk songs and poets to music—Martí Pol, Maragall, Espriu, Lull and Verdaguer—as well as Majorcan ones—Joan Alcover (1854-1926), Gabriel Alomar (1873-1941), Maria Antònia Salvà (1869-1958), Miquel Ferrà (1885-1947), Llorenç Riber i Campins (1881-1958), Miquel dels Sants Oliver (1864-1920) and Miquel Costa i Llobera (1854-1922). We would like to highlight two poems by the latter:

El pi de Formentor:

<https://www.mapaliterari.cat/ca/espai/el-pi-de-formentor/miquel-costa-i-llobera>

La cançó de na Ruixa Mantells, on the disk *Jardí Tancat* (Ariola, 1981) which also contains poems by other Majorcan authors. The Valencian dancer Nacho Duato created a ballet based on the disk *Jardí tancat* in 1983 and the voices of Majorcan poets have been heard around the world since then.

We can listen to it and see it performed by the Centro Coreográfico Galego (2012) here.

https://youtu.be/W2cM83_Z6OE

Other singers and composers not to be forgotten are **Lluís Llach**, **Marina Rossell**, **Guillermina Mota** and **Joan Manuel Serrat**, who have set poems by M. Martí i Pol, J. M. de Sagarra, Salvat-Papasseit and others to music. Furthermore, Lluís Llach created the literary competition *Terra i Cultura (Land and Culture)*, which awards the Miquel Martí i Pol prize to the best song with original music based on a poem written or adapted into Catalan (2008).

Sílvia Pérez Cruz won the Miquel Martí i Pol prize in 2012 with *Covava l'ou de la mort blanca*, a poem by Maria-Mercè Marçal.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRnl-3wJ-cM>

Postmodernism and the Democratisation of Sound

Society began to undergo significant changes in culture production and playback mechanisms in the 1990s with the incorporation of new formats and the hybridisation of artistic languages that have gradually transformed creation and cultural consumption.

Access to culture has become democratised and both highbrow and popular culture have converged. The production and consumption of music and poetry have been radically transformed against this backdrop, which allows cheap and easy access to content from any device, but which subjects this content to cultural capitalism that monetises likes on social networks and puts the spotlight on the content which is most listened to.

One of the examples that went viral is *El Virolai* sung at the Les Santes festival in Mataró in July 2023.⁵

<https://twitter.com/i/status/1685095596435111936>

The celebration of centenaries or commemorations by institutions allows for new performances of the work of poets as well as budgets for musical projects to guarantee the renewing of literature.

The celebration of the Any Verdaguer (Verdaguer Year; 2002) on the centenary of the death of the poet sparked artistic creations from several musicians. One of the most prominent is Roger Mas (1975), who has often expressed that the task of setting Verdaguer to music allowed him to discover a poet who deals with universal themes wonderfully, and he has recognised that Verdaguer's value had been concealed from him by the religious and Spanish vision surrounding Verdaguer under Franco.

You can watch the highly-viewed videos recorded by the singer-songwriter at Vil·la Joana in Vallvidrera (MUHBA):

<https://www.mapaliterari.cat/ca/espai/voleu-que-vos-la-cante/jacint-verdaguer>

It is against this backdrop that cultural institutions like Espais Escrits that are dedicated to preserving literary heritage have both the need and responsibility to create projects that account for the fragility of native language and culture when they cease to be present in the circuits of digital culture and their presence in public spaces must compete with many other offerings in predominant languages such as English.

We have already seen that, at Espais Escrits, we aim to safeguard our heritage through the Mapa Literari Català (Catalan Literary Map), which we invite you to explore in search of other bolder examples and offerings through pop, rock and rumba. But we are not the only ones: our members also use music to extend the reach of authors, they incorporate it into workshops and

⁵. Here is the post on X: <https://twitter.com/i/status/1685095596435111936> [Consulted on 29.7.2023]

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training courses, and they even produce shows, such as *Verdaguer ombres i maduixes*, a production by Fundació Verdaguer (2016) with which we would like to conclude.

<https://www.verdaguer.cat/crea/produccions/verdaguer-ombres-i-maduixes/55> (from 0:42)

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