

The Pipe and Tabor is Alive and Well in the Basque Country

Jeremy Montagu

Back in 1997, I was invited by Sabin Bikandi Belandia, the town piper of Bilbao, to speak at a conference of Txuntxuneroak, the Basque for taborers, in Pamplona. This, I think, was chiefly because of my tabor pipe article in *Galpin Society Journal* 50 of that same year, and therefore what I said at the conference was based on that material.

Sabin greeted me at the airport in Bilbao with a long and elaborate pipe tune, a traditional welcoming melody, he told me, but causing all the other arriving passengers some considerable surprise, and covering me with much embarrassment! He had invited me to stay with him for the night before the conference and to stay on for a few days afterwards, at his home in Galdakao, a small town which today is more or less absorbed as a suburb of Bilbao and is now fully industrialised and with large blocks of flats. Nevertheless, much of it is only a stone's throw from the open countryside, one of the great advantages of so mountainous (and beautiful) a landscape, for there is less inducement to build on a one-in-five slope than on flatter ground.

We drove to Pamplona for the conference. While I and Jean Baudoin from Gascony were the only people from other countries, there were other 'foreigners' on the programme, Marcus Frengani Martins, who is a Basque but who is now working in Bamberg, who presented much interesting iconographic and historical material, three or four Catalans who were speaking on the flabiol; they were very pleased with my idea that the flabiol may have been the earliest form of the tabor pipe. This a pipe with holes for all the fingers of one hand, three holes in front and two at the back, one for the thumb and the other for the back of the little finger. (Apart from that, I assume that any of you interested enough to be reading this

have also read my *GSJ* paper and therefore that I do not need to rehash it here) There were several speakers from Extremadura, Salamanca and Zamora who were talking about their shawm, the gaita, one of them, Alberto Jambrina Leal, also with much interesting iconographic and historical material. Jean Baudoin was speaking about his flabuta or flauta and the tamborin or string drum which is used instead of the tabor in Gascony and Navarre, as well as the Basque country, of which he had several different types with different tunings and I think different string materials – certainly the sound was quite different between them, and both his flabuta and his tamborin were also somewhat different from the chiflo and salterio from Aragón which Alvaro de la Torre spoke about and played. The string drum, which has a different name in every province, is a long, narrow box with from four to six long, thick strings tuned to the tonic and dominant of the pipe, and which are struck with a quite thick wooden beater across all the strings. It often has a series of metal hoops, one over each string at the upper end, that act as brays. One of the fascinating things about the whole conference was the differences, sometimes subtle and sometimes very considerable, between the different tabor pipes and the different tabors, and the different shawms which we saw and heard.

The main participants were all Basques, from the different provinces of Euskadi (the Basque name for that territory), with their txistu, which is the world's only fully chromatic tabor pipe. This chromaticism is achieved by a support ring for the ring finger, so freeing the side of the little finger to cover the distal end to more or less flatten the pitch. Since all the papers were in Castilian (the language spoken all over Spain and thus understood by both Catalans and Basques as well as the Spanish), except for Jean Baudoin's, who spoke in French, and mine which was in English, I was lost a good deal of the time, save where there was musical or iconographic illustration. It was very clear, though, from what I could follow, that the txistu, flauta, gaita, etc, are the subject today of serious and comprehensive study, historical, ethnomusicological, and scientific and acoustic (one paper was illustrated with sonographs), as well as being very strongly in use, right across the Basque country and northern Spain as far south as the Balears, across into Portugal and up into southern France, just as I knew the flabiol to be throughout Catalunya.

While I was the guest of the txistulari as a whole, my participation was due to Sabin Bikandi, with whom I'd had previous contact. His duties as the town

piper of Bilbao were not as onerous as those of the city waits or the Stadtpfeifer of earlier times and places. He did not have to play from the town hall balcony every hour, for example, nor to walk the streets at night, keeping the citizens awake to show that he and the watchmen are also awake and on guard, but he was on call, with three colleagues (one of whom was ill in hospital when I was there so that I only heard and was able to record the three of them instead of all four) for all civic ceremonies and occasions. On average he played two or three times a week, and of course he wore a traditional costume when he did so. Nor was he alone in this; there are many pipers throughout the Basque provinces playing for all sorts of occasions, formal and informal, civic and personal (weddings and so on), dances, and processions, both as amateurs and, like Sabin, as professionals, though many of the latter are part-time, rather than full-time like Sabin.

The society of txistulari, or pipers, (they publish an excellent journal called *Txistulari*) was formed seventy years ago, and on our way back to Galdakao from Pamplona, Sabin took me to their anniversary meeting, which was held where they had founded the society, on the top of a mountain, in what is now a conservation area and nature reserve called Arrate. This was a very impressive occasion with a hundred or so pipers, plus dancers and a few side drummers. They are, incidentally, nowadays usually called pipers (txistulari), though this is a fairly recent practice – in the old days, as in the English tradition, where Thomas Slye was referred to as Will Kemp's taborer when he morrised from London to Norwich, they were always called tamborileros (Castilian) or txuntxuneroak (Basque) (txuntxun is the Basque name for the string drum), and it was noteworthy that the conference in Pamplona was called under the old title of Txuntxuneroak. When playing in large groups, as they were at Arrate, they often play only the pipe, leaving the rhythm to the side drummers. They play in four parts, txistu 1, txistu 2 (with or without tabors), and silbote, accompanied by the side drummer. The silbote (the player of which was the one who was missing from the Bilbao town-piping group when I heard them) is a longer pipe, a bit longer than a tenor recorder, but still with three holes. Because of its length, the player cannot reach the end with his (or often today, her) little finger, and therefore both hands are used, one on the three fingerholes and the other to close the open end for chromatics etc. The silbote player, therefore, never plays a tabor as well. I mentioned 'or her' just now. Traditionally, of course, taboring was an exclusively male thing,

but nowadays women are accepted, especially among the larger amateur groups, though not I think for such posts as Sabin's.

After a long church service, during which I was able to gossip with a number of players (some spoke English and a number spoke French as well as Basque), some of whom had been at the conference in Pamplona, and also with one of the side drummers who is also a percussionist in the local symphony orchestra. After an outdoor concert, processions, and dancing, there was an even longer, and pretty bibulous, lunch at which, through the kindness of that side drummer who lent me his drum and sticks, I was permitted to join in the playing and the fact that the 'professor from Oxford' was taking a part in the proceedings was well-received, and several people whom we later met had already heard of me as the drumming professor!

Sabin took me to meet various txistu and tamboril makers and also a shawm maker. There is a good deal of important and innovative work going on with these instruments, using new techniques, new designs, and new materials, as well as the long-standing traditional methods. One maker, Gancedo at Amurrio, who makes instruments in African blackwood and coca-bola, is also working in new plastics, for the sake of increased stability, making up his own plastic in order to maintain full control of the uniformity and the quality of the material. He has introduced devices to control the precise angle of the airstream through the mouthpiece and to where it meets the labium, with grub-screws and an allen key. While he also makes some alboka (the double hornpipe with single reeds) and cowhorns, and even serpent and french horn mouthpieces in the same plastic, his main work is with the txistu in all sizes, from a piccolo, the same size as the txirula, the smaller Basque tabor pipe, through the tenor silbote to an experimental metal bass, about the same length as a bass recorder and with a dogleg in the tube similar to that of the bass recorder made today by a number of the modern industrial makers, with a key that pivots a plate across to close the open end.

The shawm maker, Jose Manuel Agirre of Tolosa, is also using a resin plastic, producing the local dulzaina, an excellent instrument akin to the Navarrese gaita, but using, as the Navarrese do also (Navarre is over the border in the French Basque country), a reed closer to that of the bassoon than the original; both are made from *Arundo donax*, but the scrape of the modern reed is very different from that of the older pattern. I bought one of his dulzainas, which he made

up from stock parts while I watched, assembling together the plastic body, the metal trims, the staple and the reed. I have encountered similar changes on the Valèncian dulçaina, where one that I bought from Michael Morrow more than thirty years ago has reeds with a fairly unformed scrape, whereas one that I got a couple of years back in València also has a rather bassoon-like scrape. In València the name of the instrument is spelled with a c-cedilla, but here in Tolosa with a zed instead, but neither is in any respect dulcet in sound, and they are each just as loud as any other shawm. I had not needed to buy a txistu or txirula, because I had bought examples of those in Barcelona several years earlier, along with an alboka.

This maker, Agirre, is also using innovative techniques in the production of drum shells of all sorts, which he produces to a greater extent than he does shawms. Normally goat skin is used for the heads. His tambourines (pandero), like those throughout the area, have jingles which are stamped out as crinkled discs. The tabor for the txistu has a single gut snare, the tabor used for the dulzaina has two strands, the side drum has four strands. These are of gut for the txistulari but occasionally they are made from guitar wire-covered E strings for use with the dulzaina, when also brass shells are sometimes used. He makes all his tabors and drums to diameters that are standard in the pop world today, though these are still close enough to the traditional diameters, so that he can use plastic heads when required – much more useful for outdoor work when the weather can be bad.

Tabor technique is impressive indeed, far more elaborate than anything that Thoinot Arbeau ever suggested. For one thing, the drum hangs from the crook of the left arm so that the batter head hangs down as the lower head, facing obliquely downwards. For another, as a result, the players are striking the tabor upwards, instead of downwards as we do in England, requiring a very supple wrist technique. The snare today, incidentally, presumably following side-drum practice, is never on the batter head as it is in all mediæval iconography, but always on what would be the snare head on the side drum. It looks, judging from an old instrument in the Bilbao Museo Vasco, as though this change came at least a hundred years ago, and perhaps even longer ago. Players use flams, drags, and other multiple beating techniques, using their fingers or very relaxed wrists for the multiple strokes, whereas a side drummer depends on the bounce on an upward-facing head to help him reiterate. I have to say, though, that this may vary more than I first thought,

for while all the players that I heard used these elaborate beatings, one CD which Sabin gave me, of players from Gipuzkoa, sounds as though it could have come straight out of Arbeau's *Orchésographie*, and the photo on the cover of the booklet shows a snare on the batter head, as well as a pipe quite different from the normal txistu. I have not yet worked out the text of the booklet (which is in Basque, of course), but it is possible that this is a deliberate archaizing.

Many makers are interested in the older traditions, so that my slide of Frances Palmer's illustration from *Early Music* of the Mary Rose pipes attracted much interest, as did the Bate Collection drawings of the two nineteenth-century tabor pipes there (unfortunately, a slide of Bill Waterhouse's earlier English pipe did not arrive in time to be included), as well of course as the iconographic material in my and other papers. The main interest, though, is in the modern use, the modern design, its acoustics, how it can be further improved, and so on. While we in Britain and in other countries are mainly producing somewhat hypothetical Praetorius, Mersenne, Arbeau, and Will Kemp pipes, as well as wholly imaginary plastic and metal instruments, they are producing txistu, gaita, txirula, and all the other pipes, and judging from the range they achieve (two and a half to three octaves) and the quality of the sounds that they produce, I think that we have a good deal to learn from them.

Certainly they have there a living tradition that, however much it may have changed from the sixteenth century, is still in direct descent and in direct contact with the mediæval practice, and there is, I think, a good deal to be said for our pipe makers to establish firm contact with them. The txistulari were hoping to establish an international pipe and tabor society, though I have not heard whether they have done so, and I hope that when and if they do so, our makers and players will join them. I hoped then, too, that we might have been able to arrange a Bate or FoMRHI pipe and tabor day when Sabin was next in this country. Regrettably, I never got round to organising that; I had of course by then retired from the Bate, and my successor was never really keen on arranging such weekends.

I should also record my very grateful thanks to Sabin for the number of pipes, shawms, alboka, and a tabor that he has given me in return for the very small academic help that I have been able to give him, as well of course for his hospitality and the opportunity to attend that conference.

Meanwhile, the pipe and tabor, in all its varieties and ramifications, is alive and well and living in Euskadi.

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