

Anna Alberni Jordà

“Ioculator seu mimus”. Performing Music and Poetry in Medieval Iberia

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jtms-2018-0037>

1 Introduction and Research Questions

‘All Christian, Jewish and Muslim peoples are constantly concerned with composing and singing’. This was written by Ramon Vidal de Besalú, a Catalan troubadour who lived in the thirteenth century in the Crown of Aragón. He addressed his work, the poetic and grammatical treatise *Razos de trobar*, to a community of “connoisseurs” who saw the performance of courtly music and poetry as a fundamental civilising agent. But who were those poets and musicians? For whom did they perform? What was their role in fostering a performative dimension of cultural life in the late Middle Ages? Finally, how did this contribute to the social value of the poet and musician as an artist?

In order to answer these questions, the new ERC research project “Ioculator seu mimus’. Performing Music and Poetry in Medieval Iberia’ (MiMus; ERC-CoG-2017-772762) proposes to uncover and analyse the most extensive archival records in existence on the private and professional lives of medieval minstrels, their cultural backgrounds and the patterns of their agency through courts and cities. This research is complemented by the study of a specific repertory of Catalan lyrical texts, which will be reassessed on the basis of their performative component.

In the late Middle Ages the Kingdom of Aragón was an important political and cultural crossroads. The reign of James I of Aragón, known as the Conqueror (1208–1276), marked the starting point of a period of almost two centuries of political and territorial power of the Crown of Aragón in Southern Europe and the Mediterranean. From the early years of his reign, during the conquest of València (which began in 1232), we find the first documents to shed light on the status of musicians and minstrels, associated with donations in the distribution of the kingdom’s lands. Over the next two centuries, the Catalan Royal Chancellery developed a system of recording documents that was unique in medieval Europe, in terms of both its longevity and the variety and thoroughness of the information recorded in each series. The Archive of the Crown of

Aragón (ACA) in Barcelona retains these documents almost in their entirety. This makes them an exceptional source for research on the art of minstrels and their role as cultural agents in the courts of late medieval Europe.

This project proposes an analytical examination of all the documents preserved in the ACA archives of Royal Chancellery (Chancellery letters) and Mestre Racional (Accountancy) relating to the presence of minstrels, musicians and entertainment professionals at the court of Aragón from 1235 to 1435. An initial exploration of the collection at the ACA puts an estimate of the whole corpus at around 5000 documents, of which approximately 70 % have never been published. The extraordinary characteristics of this corpus, which are a consequence of the nature and quantity of the documents, make it a unique source with potential to unlock answers to some of the questions that have haunted scholarly approaches to medieval music and poetry production as well as to its performance, dissemination and consumption. In particular, the questions at the core of our research are

- What sparked and shaped the social status of minstrels as travelling artists at the service of a lord with the responsibility of entertaining the court? What were their profiles? How were their skills and functions assigned, and what kind of recognition did they receive from society and the political powers?
- To what extent did the contacts between different ethnic and religious groups coexisting in the late medieval Iberian Peninsula contribute to shape the nature of the poetry and music that was performed in the courts of the Catalan kings?
- Was there a form of intertextuality between Catalan poetry and the poetry produced in the neighbouring lands to the territories of the Crown of Aragón that was specifically mediated by the presence of foreign performing artists?
- Is there a gender bias in the role played by the queens of Aragón as agents of cultural transfer in the development of poetic and musical taste in the south of Europe?

2 State-of-the-Art, Objectives and Methodology

The importance of archival research on the history of musical institutions, as well as artistic patronage in the late Middle Ages, is widely acknowledged in scholarly literature. In Catalonia, following the pioneering yet incomplete work of Antoni Rubió i Lluch (1908–1921) and Higiní Anglès i Pàmies (1935),¹ Maricarmen Gómez

¹ RUBIÓ Y LLUCH 1908–1921; ANGLÈS I PÀMIES 1935.

Muntané (1979) published 287 musical documents from the period of 1336–1442 which demonstrate the potential of the ACA's documentation as a source of knowledge about musical life in the Iberian Peninsula.² However, this first body of documents has not yet been reviewed or fully exploited. The rest of the work on this subject, though extremely valuable for specific interpretation of sources, is based on documents that have already been studied, or it does not publish the sources used, leaving the field of research without the necessary foundations to advance reliably.

The choice of this case study is based on three facts:

- 1) In the late medieval period the Crown of Aragón was a political and cultural crossroads, a coveted destination for musicians and artists of various kinds who attended the refined court of the Catalan kings, especially, but not only, during the reign of John I (1387–1396) and his educated and intelligent queen, the French princess Violant de Bar. Indeed, King John emerges in his letters as something akin to a fourteenth-century musical impresario, constantly seeking out new and better performers, often through correspondence with other powerful aristocrats who, like him, were part of an international network of political actors in Europe.
- 2) It is in frontier areas such as Catalonia, regarded as a backwater in relation to what is considered to be the most important cultural centre of the Middle Ages (France), where one finds a greater capacity for integration, synthesis and transformation of artistic trends from neighbouring lands. By focusing on the ways in which poetry and music were produced and consumed in this area and were prone to linguistic and cultural hybridisation, important questions arise about the concepts of centrality, diffusion and peripheries. One of our aims is to measure how the Crown of Aragón, traditionally considered as peripheral in musical historiography, might have participated in, and contributed to, a common cultural history in the south of Europe.
- 3) The significance of the documents archived at the ACA goes beyond the dimension of music and poetry: they are an extraordinary basis for historical studies that analyse the structure of the royal household and the use of music and entertainment as instruments of the language of power. An example will suffice: thanks to the recent discovery of a new archival document we now know that in 1388 Queen Violant de Bar borrowed from Gaston Phébus, the Count of Foix, a *chansonnier* by Guillaume de Machaut that had been owned by the Duke Jean of Berry. This manuscript, extremely lavish and one of the most important musical witnesses from the fourteenth

2 GÓMEZ MUNTANÉ 1979.

century, has been identified as the Ferrell-Vogué Codex (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, Ms. Ferrell 1), and everything points to the fact that it played a key role in the troubled diplomatic relationships between Foix and Berry.³

Methodologically, two basic strands have been established on the basis of the four interlocking research questions just mentioned:

- a) Field research at the ACA and other Catalan archives in order to identify new documents, transcribe them and publish a new corpus of records. The objective is to create a large repository of documents that are scientifically reliable and, at the same time, manageable for the project's team for subsequent systematic analysis.
- b) Interpretation and analysis of the documents in tandem with a select corpus of literary evidence, drawing on expertise in history and musicology, philology and literary criticism.

The main aim of this research is to offer new, hitherto unexplored data (documents) and, at the same time, to provide the specific, highly specialised interpretive tools that are necessary to analyse them. *The Linked Data Corpus of Archival Documents on Minstrels in the Crown of Aragon* is the pivotal instrument for this analysis. In a second stage, research will focus mainly, but not exclusively, on cross-cultural and gender approaches to the records. Simultaneous to the second stage, we will undertake a philological and intertextual analysis of a select corpus of Catalan lyrical texts. As a complement to this line of enquiry, a comparative *Lexicon on the Language of Music and Performance* will be established on the basis of three different sources: documents (our ACA corpus), texts (Catalan poetry and music), contemporary poetic treatises (*Razos de trobar*, *Doctrina de compondre dictatz*, *Leys d'Amors*).

3 Intertextual and Cross-cultural Approach

We know about the remarkable French and Flemish influence on the music of the Crown of Aragón and Navarre in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Indeed, the lists of payments in the records of the ACA confirm the notable presence of foreign musicians from the north at the Catalan court. However, as the number of unpublished documents consulted increases, the number of artists from other

³ EARP e. a. 2014, 1; ALBERNI JORDÀ 2018.

kingdoms in Iberia rises dramatically. This presence has never been studied in relation to the surviving poetic and musical repertory in Catalonia. In fact, music historians have often succumbed to a prejudice that is very widespread in Catalan literary studies. Until just a few years ago, the unanimous position was to deny or minimise the importance of any foreign influence (notably French and Spanish) in order to reinforce the original nature of Catalan poetry at the time when national literary traditions were being forged. Consequently, the connection with the troubadour legacy was highlighted, as it was understood to be the natural roots of Catalan lyric poetry. However, recent studies and our own findings confirm that, even before the fourteenth century, Catalonia was the entry route to the Iberian Peninsula of major new poetic forms from France and Sicily.⁴

This new context, together with the unpublished documents that MiMus has started to uncover, calls for a reconsideration of the possible contacts between Catalan music and poetry and the legacy of the territories adjacent to the Crown of Aragón. In order to clarify this issue, attention will be paid to the presence of foreign artists at the court of the Catalan kings, and in particular to those coming from the rest of the Iberian Peninsula. The records of minstrels of Arab, Jewish and convert origin recently uncovered by Stefano Maria Cingolani⁵ encourage the idea that cultural contacts did actually exist, and that they might have been fruitful in terms of influences in musical performance practice. The project will explore the scope of these contacts as cultural encounters, which we suspect might have been considerably greater than has previously been assumed.

The research will also consider the debt of Catalan poetry to foreign musicians and to the fashion of poetry competitions with the aim of establishing whether the intertextuality between Catalan poetry and music and the poetry and music produced abroad was specifically mediated by the presence of foreign artists at the court of Aragón. In order to do so, the concept of ‘intertextuality’ itself will be re-examined and nuanced in view of the medieval Catalan repertory, taking into account Segre’s theory on “interdiscorsività”⁶ as well as the strong sense of genre underpinning all medieval lyric poetry (the system of lyric genres).⁷

In summary, the specific objectives of the project are

- 1) To create a comprehensive *Linked Data Corpus of Archival Documents on Minstrels in the Crown of Aragon* between 1235 and 1435 on the basis of the new records uncovered. This includes a thorough description and study of

4 LARSON 2004; LANNUTTI 2012.

5 CINGOLANI 2016.

6 SEGRE 1984, p. 103–108.

7 PLUMLEY 2013.

- the profiles of all the minstrels documented and an analysis of their agency and their social networks through courts and cities. This work is envisaged as a digital repository of linked data that can be interrogated through semantic queries and ontologies. Philological editions and annotation of all documents will be provided in an open-access format compatible with the standards established by the main EU infrastructures on digital humanities.
- 2) To analyse the impact of minstrelsy on late medieval Catalan poetry, both in terms of intertextuality/architextuality and of the implications of the contacts between different religious and ethnic backgrounds in the minstrel community; special attention will be paid to issues of queenship and to the contacts with the cultural legacy of al-Andalus and the rest of the Iberian Peninsula.
 - 3) To gather an analytical comparative *Lexicon on the Language of Music and Performance* drawn from a) the information recorded in the archival documents (our ACA corpus), b) the lyric texts themselves (Catalan repertory of poetry and music) and c) a selection of contemporary poetic treatises produced in Catalonia and Languedoc.

Bibliography

ALBERNI JORDÀ 2018

ANNA ALBERNI [JORDÀ]: “Machaut’s literary legacy in the Crown of Aragon. The Catalan chansonnier ‘Vega-Aguiló’ and the anonymous ‘Roman de Cardenois’”, in MORATO/SCHOENAERS 2018, 391–410.

ALBERNI JORDÀ/VENTURA 2016

‘*Cobles e lays, danses e bon saber*’. L’última cançó dels trobadors a Catalunya. Llengua, forma, edició, ed. by ANNA ALBERNI [JORDÀ]/SIMONE VENTURA (IRCVUM-Medieval Cultures 6), Roma 2016.

ANGLÈS I PÀMIES 1935

HIGINI ANGLÈS [I PÀMIES]: *La música a Catalunya fins al segle XIII*, Barcelona 1935 (etc.).

CINGOLANI 2016

STEFANO MARIA CINGOLANI: “Joglars, ministrers i xantres a la Corona d’Aragó (segles XIII–XV). Observacions i perspectives de recerca a propòsit d’un diplomatar en curs”, in ALBERNI JORDÀ/VENTURA 2016, 237–268.

EARP e. a. 2014

LAWRENCE MARSHBURN EARP e. a.: *The Ferrell-Vogüé Machaut manuscript*. Full colour facsimile 1: Introductory study; ... 2: Facsimile (DIAMM Facsimiles 5), Oxford 2014.

GÓMEZ MUNTANÉ 1979

MARÍA DEL CARMEN GÓMEZ MUNTANÉ: *La música en la casa real catalano-aragonesa durante los años 1336–1442* 1: Historia y documentos; ... 2: Música, Barcelona 1979.

LARSON 2004

PÄR LARSON: “Ancora sulla ballata ‘Molto à ch’io non cantai’”, *Medioevo letterario d’Italia. Rivista internazionale di filologia, linguistica e letteratura* 1 (2004) 51–72.

LANNUTTI 2012

MARIA SOFIA LANNUTTI: “L’ultimo canto. Musica e poesia nella lirica catalana del medioevo (con una nuova edizione del ‘Cançoneret’ di Sant Joan de les Abadesses)”, in *Romance Philology* 66 (2012) 309–363.

MORATO/SCHOENAERS 2018

Medieval Francophone literary culture outside France. Studies in the moving word, ed. by NICOLA MORATO/DIRK SCHOENAERS (Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 28), Turnhout 2018.

PLUMLEY 2013

YOLANDA PLUMLEY: *The art of grafted song. Citation and allusion in the age of Machaut*, Oxford 2013.

RUBIÓ Y LLUCH 1908–1921

ANTONI RUBIÓ Y LLUCH: *Documents per l’història de la cultura catalana mig-eval* 1–2, Barcelona 1908–1921 (etc.).

SEGRE 1984

CESARE SEGRE: *Teatro e romanzo. Due tipi di comunicazione letterario* (Einaudi Paperbacks 152), Torino ²1984.