

# Some Notes on the Pyrenean Stringed Drum

**with five musical examples**

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Some time ago, when studying past numbers of the R. I. E. V., I was interested to find an article entitled «Instrumentos de Música Vasca en el Alto Aragon» by Don Angel de Apraiz (1).

A kind gift of the said article sent me by its author has determined me to add a few words to the subject, although an interval of thirteen years intervenes between his paper and mine.

First as to the case of Basque instruments seen by Señor Apraiz in the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, London. The case is still in position, and the instruments have now been labelled correctly, after a little insistence on the part of the writer and later of Mr Rodney Gallop, a member of the Society, and author of «A Book of the Basques».

The said instruments are two *tchirolas*, or as they say in the Soule *tchülülas* (small three-holed pipes) and two six-stringed long, wooden drums, called *ttun-ttun*, one tuning key for these, and two drumsticks; also a coloured drawing by the French artist, Achille Zo, showing a young Basque playing the two instruments together. It was not incorrect to have labelled the drum as *tambourin*, for where it exists outside the French Pays Basque it is known as the *Tambourin de Gascogne*, though Monsieur Jean Poueigh says it is called *toun-toun* in the country round Auch (2) (Gascony) by onomatopoeia, as in La Soule.

The mistake of the Museum authorities was to have labelled

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(1) Tomo XIII. N° 4. Octubre-Diciembre 1922.

(2) *Chansons Populaires des Pyrénées Françaises*. Champion, Paris. 1926.

these drums as belonging to Guipúzkoa, which mistake is now rectified.

The six, or sometimes five strings are tuned in fifths, and an iron key is provided with which to tune them up. The sound-holes in the long upper face are often covered with a light openwork in wood or metal. The *tchülülas* of to-day are made by the musician-carpenter of Tardets. They are about 37 centimetres long, bulge a little for the mouthpiece, and have two holes on the top for the fingers and one hole on the under side for the thumb. There is reason to believe these instruments existed all over the French Pays Basque, and it may possibly be this stringed drum to which the Conseiller de Lancre referred in his infamous witch trials in Labourd in 1609. The confused description (3) says that the witches danced sometimes to the sound of a long instrument, which the musicians «*posent sur le col, puis s'allongent iusqu'auprès de la ceinture; ils le battent avec un petit baston.....*»

The next time we hear of it is a reference by Larramendi, quoted by Señor Apraiz. Larramendi remarked it in Labourd in the eighteenth century, and I myself knew of one at Ainhoa, in that province. It had belonged to the last of the village musicians, whose sister kept it; and because of this and of her own large musical repertoire, the old woman was known as Marie *Ttun-ttun*. I hoped this instrument might still be hidden away in the musician's house, after his sister's death. But kind inquiries by a Basque friend in the village, brought the answer that the new inhabitants of the house had seen it in the attic, and supposed their children had broken it. And that was the last *ttun-ttun* in Labourd.

The only one I know of in Basse-Navarre belongs to Monsieur Urruty, a musician of Beyrie, near St Palais (4).

When the Soule is reached *ttun-ttuns* multiply, but not, alas, musicians to play them. When, in 1930, a competition (5) for players was arranged by Monsieur Eugène Béguerie and Monsieur Elgoyhen, Maître de Danse of Tardets, with the support of the Musée Basque de Bayonne, the Syndicat d'Initiative du Pays Basque, and some English Bascophile friends, two classes had to be made,

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(3) Pierre de Lancre. «Tableau de L'Inconstance des Mauvais Anges et Démon». Paris, 1613.

(4) Kindly communicated by Monsieur Raymond Etcharts of the Château de Beyrie.

(5) See Le Bulletin du Musée Basque, N° 11, 1930, p. 72.

one for those who played both *tcülüla* and *ttun-ttun*, and one for those who played the *tchülüla* alone.

Four new *ttun-ttuns* were made locally. They proved excellent in tone, and good in appearance, and were lent at first, to competitors who did not possess a drum. Several young men practised upon them, but afterwards discarded them, finding the drumming with the left hand too difficult since they had learned to play their pipe with the right hand, and were naturally unable to change. So when the new drums were offered as prizes, two, at least, were returned with the announcement that money would be preferred! The new drums now hang in a case in the Music Room of the Musée Basque, awaiting another competition.

This first one did, however, induce young players to practise their beautiful airs, instead of leaving it entirely to their elders, and we hope to hold another competition in the future.

**Ostalertza. Suite de Saut Basque. One of the airs for competition.**

The musical score consists of five staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a time signature of 6/8. The melody is written in a single line. The second staff continues the melody with a repeat sign. The third staff also continues the melody with a repeat sign. The fourth staff features a more complex rhythmic pattern with sixteenth notes and rests. The fifth staff concludes the piece with a final cadence.

Noted by V. A. from the musician at Tardets.

It would be a kind and comradely act, if the Txistularis of the Spanish side of the frontier, would invite their French-Basque «brothers in Music» to meet them next time their society holds a reunion in France. Such a meeting would show the isolated players of the Soule what a *txistu* band can really be, and give them fresh ideas and encouragement—which is sorely needed, for they are fast dying out. May I venture to call the attention of the Society of Txistularis to this suggestion, and to earnestly beg them to extend a friendly hand?

Monsieur Hérelle (quoted by Señor Apraiz) is not quite correct in laying down that the *tchülüla* or *tchirula* is played with the right hand, and the drum stick held in the left hand. Although he gives a photograph in his «Le Theatre Comique», p. 36, and a drawing in his pamphlet «La Musique et la Danse au Theatre Basque» (ed. Gure Herria) showing a musician thus holding them, it is an exception to the general rule. Almost invariably the *tchirula* is played with the fingers of the left hand, the *ttun-ttun* is tucked into the bend of the left arm, and the drumstick is held in the right hand. That is the reason, as I have said, that the young men at the Tardets competition found such difficulty in drumming. They had learned to play the pipe with the right hand—which is the wrong one.

I have never heard the *ttun-ttun* called *soïnuu*, and believe this to be mistaken. It is both the instruments together which make the «soïnuu» or «music» (6), according to every one of my informants.

These instruments may be heard at the Soule Masquerades, at the Pastorales given in the open air about Easter time, and at rustic fêtes and weddings. The chief exponent to-day is Monsieur Lechardoy, carpenter and musician at Tardets.

Outside the Pays Basque they may be heard in the Val d'Ossau and in the valley leading up to Gavarnie, and probably elsewhere in this vicinity, unknown to me. The Laruns musician, Monsieur Augustin Arnol, (who is, I trust, alive and well) plays his *flute à trois trous*, and his *tambourin* while he teaches the young men to dance their *Branle d'Ossau*, to a variant of the *Godalet Dantza* tune from the Soule Masquerade, and the Béarnais versions of the *Sauts Basques*, *La Crabe*, *Monein* and even the well known *Mouchicou*—as it is written in Béarnais.

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(6) Cf Esku Aldatzeko Soñua, a tune for part of the Auresku, and Andre indeiko Soñua in the same dance.

## A Branle from the Valley of Ossau. Béarn.



Noted by V. A. from the musician at Laruns.

This is an ornate version of Godalet Dantza.

At the Laruns fete, on August 15th, he is to be seen and heard, playing for the long line of women in scarlet capulets, and men in big berets, as they circle round the place in their *Branlou Bach*, or Low Branle. His *tambourin* is a little larger than the Soule example, and the musician, alas, is a stubborn old traditionalist who does not care to teach younger men, and whose instruments and repertoire will die with him. There are two or three more players in the valley, but all old men.

Above Luz (Bigorre) there is or was at least one *tambourinaire*, who lives at Gèdre-Dessus, and who used to play for the Balladins accompanying the interesting Bear Rite (7).

On the other side of the range, and exactly back-to-back, so to speak, with these valleys of Béarn and Bigorre, we come upon the instrument which is the main subject of Señor Apraiz's article, —the stringed drum of Alto Aragon, called at Jaca *el chicotén*. Two photographs of it will be found in the article, and it will at once be remarked that the player is using his left hand for the pipe, his right hand for the drum stick.

The *chicotén* is larger than either the Soule or the Béarnais example, and needs a strap round the man's neck to keep it in place in the crook of his left arm. The accompanying *flauta* is thicker by far than the Soule *txirula*; but not so long, nor so well made as the Spanish-Basque *txistu*. It has three holes, two on the top for the fingers, one underneath for the thumb, and is covered with snake skin, not, as Señor Apraiz surmises, because the instruments are connected ritually with the serpent, but for the prosaic reason that without some covering the joints would part. For the *flauta* is very old. Some intrepid, modern hand has carved upon it *Año* 1402! I judged it to be perhaps one hundred years old. Possibly, like the costumes of the Seises of Seville, it has been patched and re-patched till nothing of the original flute remains.

As the article describes, quoting from the «Novena a Sta Orosia» by Sr. D. Victoriano Manuel Biscós, Jaca, 1906, these ancient instruments supply the music for the dancers on the day of Santa Orosia, June 25th. and on its Vigil. They and their musician go out to meet the Romeros who come into Jaca from the villages to the west of the river Gállego, to follow the procession of the Saint's body. Those on the east of the river make their own Romeria to Yebra, where they follow the procession of the Saint's head. The Jaca dancers perform a sticktapping dance called *Paloteado*. Dance steps are non-existent, the men simply marching in time to the music.

On the 25th they march and tap before the reliquary, underneath which creep the lamentable, so-called *endemionados*, who seek a miracle from the Saint. The musician told me his instruments belonged to the Confradia of Santa Orosia, and that formerly the

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(7) See Violet Alford, «The Candlemas, Bean», «The National Review», Feb. 1931 and «The Springtime Bear in the Pyrenees», Folk-Lore. Vol. XLI. N° 3. Sept. 1930.

dancers did use steps, and castanets also, and that sticktapping was only lately begun. Judging, however, from the Yebra dance and from long study of European ritual dances, I venture to suggest that the Jaca men allowed their stick dance to lapse, used *Jota* steps and castanets for a while (these taint many a Spanish ritual dance) and have now reverted to their proper performance, doubtless through the influence of Yebra. The musician played me the following airs—I could not hear them in the procession, nor see the Jaca danzantes owing to the uncertainty as to the procession being allowed that year— The first air, for the march, was impossible to note as a crowd of kindly people surrounded me, breathing down my neck and peering over my shoulder. But I give the few snatches I was able to write, and hope some one may finish it, for it is an interesting and ancient tune.

**Procession and Stick-dance for Santa Orosia at Jaca.**

The musical notation consists of five systems of staves, all in treble clef and G major (one sharp).

- System 1:** A single staff in 4/4 time. It begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody starts with a quarter note G, followed by eighth notes A and B, then a quarter note C. A triplet of eighth notes (D, E, F#) is marked with a '3' above it. The staff ends with a quarter note G.
- System 2:** A single staff in 4/4 time. It continues the melody with a quarter note A, followed by eighth notes B and C, then a quarter note D. A triplet of eighth notes (E, F#, G) is marked with a '3' above it. The staff ends with a quarter note A.
- System 3:** A single staff in 4/4 time. It continues the melody with a quarter note B, followed by eighth notes C and D, then a quarter note E. The staff ends with a quarter note F#.
- System 4:** A single staff in 4/4 time. It begins with a quarter note G, followed by eighth notes A and B, then a quarter note C. A quintuplet of eighth notes (D, E, F#, G, A) is marked with a '5' above it. The staff ends with a quarter note B. A section of the staff is marked "missing bars" with a double bar line and a repeat sign.
- System 5:** A single staff in 6/8 time. It begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody starts with a quarter note G, followed by eighth notes A and B, then a quarter note C. The staff ends with a quarter note D.
- System 6:** A single staff in 6/8 time. It continues the melody with a quarter note E, followed by eighth notes F# and G, then a quarter note A. The staff ends with a quarter note B.

The word "Palos." is written above the first staff of the fifth system.

Noted by V. A. from the musician at Jaca.

As he could not play at Jaca, this old musician went off to Yebra, determined to pay his musical respects to his Saint.

At this village, a few kilometres from Jaca, the same procedure takes place; the Romeros arrive on the Vigil, the whole village accompanies them in June 25th to the santuario of Santa Orosia, two hours climb up the mountain. The Yebra dancers escort the Saint's head, dancing when the path is wide enough to allow them to do so. On the 26th the village makes fiesta, and the afternoon is allotted to dancing and the *Pastorada*. The dancers, like those of Jaca,



The player of the Psalterio and flauta at Yebra de Basa, with the «Mayoral» and the little «Rabadán».

wear the showy costume of Alto Aragon, are decorated with ribbons and bells, and dance with a stick in either hand.

Their stick-tapping is extraordinarily varied, their figures also, their dance steps good. At the end of hours of dancing the *dichos* are recited, led by the *Mayoral* and the *Rabadán*. This is the *Pastorada*, which may long ago have been a drama (8).

(8) For a detailed study of the Santa Orosia ceremonies and for conclusions drawn from them, see Violet Alford, «Santa Orosia, a Thaumaturgical Saint», *Antiquity*. September 1934.

All of which simply leads us back to the stringed drum. The Yebra musician plays a *flauta* with three holes, covered, like that of his Jaca brother, with snake skin to prevent the joints parting. His six stringed drum is the biggest I have seen, so big that he prefers to sit to play, resting the end of the long instrument on a stone. Here the instrument takes the name of *Psalterio*. The tune to which the dances are performed is lamentable, consisting of one poor variation after another of a yet poorer theme. I give some examples.

### Stick dance for Santa Orosia. Yebra.





Noted by S. B. from the musician at Yebra.

Señor Apraiz is perfectly correct in recognising the similarity between these Aragonse stick dances and those of the Basques, (both in Spain and France), those of Catalonia, Huesca, Asturias (which I do not know) of Galicia and Castilla. I will add those of Béarn, & Bigorre, and more especially those (not of Scotland as the article ventures) but of England's *Morris Men*. They are in fact, all variants, and surprisingly similar variants, of the wide spread European ritual dance, connected with early Spring and Summer, with seasonal and agricultural ceremonies. The men of Yebra were perfectly correct when they impressed upon me their name— «Danzants de Yebra de Bass», *not* «Danzantes de Santa Orosia».

Señor Apraiz draws attention to the fact that the instruments of which we write are connected here with a religious tradition. That is perfectly correct, but when their use in other parts of the Pyrenees is kept in mind, it would be, I think, truer to say «with a ceremonial tradition». This extends the phrase to include secular, as well as ecclesiastical ceremony, and much of the secular tradition was once pre-Christian witness the Soule Masquerades (9), the Balladins and the Bear of Bigorre, and the festal Chain dance of Laruns.

Besides the two examples in Aragon that I have seen, Señor Apraiz mentions one at Sasal near Yebra, and there are probably others hidden away in the secluded valleys of Alto Aragon. Southwards we find the *gaita* instead, as at Huesca, eastwards the Catalan pipe-forms in the *graelle* and *flaviol* but no stringed drum so far as I know.

Let us briefly sum up the geographical disposition of the subjects, of this short study.

(9) See Violet Alford, «Ensayo sobre los orígenes de las Mascaradas de Zuberoa» R. I. E. V. Tomo XXII, N° 3. 1931, and Rodney Gallop «A Book of the Basques» Chap. X. Macmillan. London.

1. Gascony. A. The valley running up to Gavarnie.  
B. The Val d'Ossau.  
C. I have heard it mentioned in the Landes.

These regions call it the *Tambourin de Gascogne*.

- D. The plain round Auch.

Here it is called *toun-toun*.

2. The Pays Basque. A. La Soule.  
B. Basse Navarre, (one example)  
C. Labourd, (now obsolete).

In these regions it is and was called *ttun-ttun*.

3. Aragon. A. Jaca.  
Here it is called *Chicotén*.  
B. Yebra-de-Basa.

Here it is called *Psalterio*.

- C. Sasal.

I do not know the local name.

It becomes evident then, that this is neither an Aragonese nor a Basque drum-form. It is Pyrenean, and west-Pyrenean, eliminating Languedoc and Catalonia.

It has been mistakenly likened to a lyre—a gross error, for the lyre belongs to the class of plucked stringed instruments.

Larramendi's «*especie de harpa*» is equally wrong for the same reason.

It has also been taken for the *Tambour de Basque*, an error no less gross, for the *Tambour de Basque* is a *pandereta*; and (incidentally) why Basque I do not know, since it belongs to Spain and Italy, and is only very occasionally used by Basques and never by the Basques of France to-day.

More interesting is its Yebra name, *Psalterio*, although this also is completely mistaken, for the ancient *Psalterium*, like the *lyre*, was a plucked stringed instrument.

**Violet ALFORD**

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(10) See also P. Garnault «Le Tambourin et le Galoubet en Pays Basque et dans la Péninsule Ibérique» R. I. E. V. Tome XXII. N.º 1 pag. 123.