



VIDEO

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Bercebo: an ephemeral instrument

(2012, 9.30 min.)

Abstract

Bercebo (giant feather grass) is one of the popular names of the bunchgrass scientifically known as Stipa Gigantea, native to southern Europe. With this grass, shepherds once built ephemeral instruments, which they used to entertain themselves as the sheep grazed.

Angelo Arribas is a traditional musician and luthier from the Portuguese region of Tras-os-Montes, close to the border with Spain. We first met him during the development of a research project that involved different institutions and researchers: our duty was to investigate the idea of border in both sides of the frontier and value its impact on traditional music.

During a field trip, we spent many days in Barrocal do Douro, Angelo's village, to film the gaita's building process. One day, early in the morning, we joined Angelo in his daily duties: feeding pigs and rabbits and checking his orchard. While he was telling us stories about his family and his youthfulness as a shepherd with his characteristic good humour, he brought us through a little path into the countryside. Suddenly, he began to look into the grass, peering intently at the lush green and tall twigs scattered around us. He wanted to show us the construction of an ephemeral instrument -a clarinet with an idioglot reed- known as bercebo by the name of the plant from which it's made.

Along the interviews, he stated several times that he had been attracted to the music and the instruments of his area since he was a child. His passion led him to learn the bagpipes and the three-holed flute, as well as the snare drum and the bass drum. However, this learning process took place in his adulthood influenced by the traditional music revival and the creation of traditional music schools. This is probably because he didn't work as a shepherd anymore, ever since the nearby hydroelectric company employed him.

As he tells us at the beginning of the video, during his childhood he would build this instrument to play the same melodies that he heard grown-ups play on the gaitas, the instrument of which he was later to become a master.

Angelo was proud to show us the construction process and worked in front of the camera without any inhibition, enjoying the fact that his craft was given such importance. This short document reflects this tranquillity, perhaps also due to the fact that our intervention was minimal. In that occasion we choose to use an observational style: the documentary has very few cuts, as we wanted to show the entire building process and allow the viewer to fall into Angelo's perception of time. When he was a young shepherd, he had plenty of time to build as many bercebos as he needed until he was satisfied..

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Salvatore Rossano (University of Melbourne) also holds a degree in DAMS-Music from the University of Bologna, a Master in Hispanic Music from the University of Valladolid, and is currently completing his PhD in Ethnomusicology. He is currently working on two research projects at the University of Melbourne. His main research topic is the music of the Buenos Aires's carnival.

The filmmakers have been conducting research at the Spanish-Portuguese border in the frame of a Research Project fund by the Regional Government of Castilla y León between 2010 and 2013 (Project Director: Enrique Cámara de Landa, University of Valladolid).

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