



«*Change is a good thing. It means that Basque folklore is alive and well.*»

Juan Mari Beltrán

MUSICOLOGIST

Juan Mari Beltrán is one of the foremost experts in traditional Basque instruments. Beltrán was born in Donostia and raised in Etxarri-Aranatz, Navarra. At the age of seven he took up the txistu and at eleven joined the local *txistulari* group. At 16 he extended his range of instruments to *alboka* and the *dultzaina*, and began to arrange music for the Argia dance group. In 1996 he started working in collaboration with the local government of Oiartzun on what would become one of his major projects - Musika Txokoa - which opened its doors in 2001. Today Beltrán divides his time between Musika Txokoa and teaching at the Hernani music school, in addition to his own personal music endeavors.

What is the most difficult Basque instrument to play and which is the easiest?

There's no straightforward answer to that question. The *txalaparta* may seem simple. Someone who takes a weekend workshop might learn a few basic notions and be able to play the *ttakun* (the part consisting of two strokes repeated over and over again). But it gets more complicated depending on what goals the students have and how far they want to go. For example, I've been teaching *txalaparta* classes at the school in Hernani for 23 years and I still have students with me who started in my third year. In other words, they've been at it for 20 years. It looks like a simple instrument but perhaps for that very reason, there are always new things to discover.



Basque traditional instruments are most commonly used to accompany dantzaris...

When I was 17 and studying with Isidro Ansorena, I began to play with Basque dance groups. A group of *txistularis* almost always provided the music for dance groups. It didn't matter whether the dances were supposed to be danced to the txistu music or any other type of instrument. Then the movement to bring back different instruments and dances began. The same thing happened with outfits - before that people would wear any kind of costume for whatever type of dance. With this new movement dancers were more concerned about wearing the outfits that went with the dance and having the right type of musical accompaniment. So we said "if we're going to play *Baile de la Era* from Lizarra, let's use the bagpipes or the *dultzaina*." The same thing went for the dances from Behenafarroa. We began playing them with instruments from the latter period and then began to throw in the violin, the clarinet

And then *albokaris* and *txalapartaris* began to make an appearance in dance groups. The *txalapartaris* actually played between the dance numbers to add variety to the performances. This made Basque folk dance performances richer and more appealing. But traditionally the most important thing was for there to be live musicians to

«*Hemendik atera eta horren
beste kilometro egin ostean
badirudi etxean zaudela.
Hori sorpresa handia da*»

accompany the dancers. In Argia we began to play dances from Otsagabia using clarinets because the last local dance musicians were in fact clarinet players. When they disappeared the dancers began to bring in bagpipe players from Pamplona. And we started to revive these traditions. Before the clarinets the dances may have been played by other instruments. These types of changes are logical, and they're a good thing. It means that Basque folklore is alive and well. When a tradition dies that's when people want it preserve it, keep it static, not allow it to change. In the regions where dance music has been kept alive, it's changed. For example, the Bidasoa area, where they went from the *txistu* to the accordion, and where lantzi and his accordion became popular.

I think that dances can be done to whatever instrument you have available; a historically accurate performance is another thing. But if the dances are still alive, why not use a few violins for instance?

Could a Basque person living in another part of the world make himself an instrument such as a txalaparta?

Yes, a person could make his or her own instrument. I made my first alboka in my kitchen. I found the horn at the slaughterhouse in Sagües and a piece of wood at a wood shop. Then I bought a cane reed. I think you can find all of those things anywhere. You can usually find drawings and a lathe anywhere, so you can make an instrument.

Take the *txalaparta* for example. I know people who are making them. They ask me for a file I have with different models of txalapartas. It's not at all complicated.

What was it like to go on tour to the different Euskal Etxeak?

It was a really nice experience. It was a pleasant surprise to find that I could leave home, travel so far away and then practically feel like I was at home. You know that the Basque