

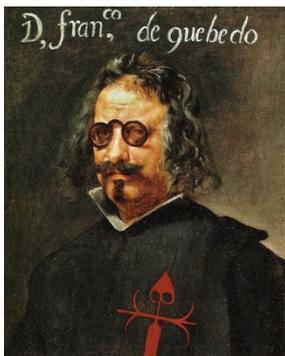
## Intellectual and Colloquial Discourse in the Music of Serrat and Sabina

Jessica Spanier



Joan Manuel Serrat (Barcelona, 1943) and Joaquín Sabina (Úbeda, 1949) are two of the most prominent singer-songwriters in the Spanish language who have achieved both critical and popular acclaim as much in their native Spain as in Latin America. A study of their lyrics reveals complex poetic and political texts which function as powerful cultural referents and provide a vivid and original chronicle of society over the past fifty years. Their approach to language and its subsequent evolution is as varied as their selection of musical genre to accompany the lyrics, with Sabina and Serrat running the gamut of styles, including Mexican *rancheras*, *el charlestón*, rock and blues. Similarly, so too have both *cantautores* been influenced by seminal Spanish authors, including Machado, Hernández and Quevedo, and language in its various applications is the arsenal through which they have connected with their audience. Francisco Domínguez praises the ‘capacidad creativa’ of both *cantautores*, as well as ‘su olfato para elegir el lenguaje concreto’. However, the talent of Serrat and Sabina does not only exist in the literary, high-register aspects of their lyrics. The weaving in of modern and often colloquial language facilitates their engagement with multiple, ever-evolving societies. This article will explore both the intellectual and colloquial discourse, as well as the interface created between these two seemingly disparate elements.

As well as this, the *cantautores* have many influences from famous Spanish writers as well as other poets and novelists: Machado, Hernández, Quevedo, Bécquer and Homer. “Sin Embargo” directly lifts Bécquer’s image of “golondrinas” from his poem “Volverán las Oscuras Golondrinas”, in the line, ‘un éxodo de oscuras golondrinas’. Bécquer wrote that the swallows symbolize love, so this migration of birds depicts Sabina’s feeling of *desamor*, the feeling love in his life has left like the migration of birds in the winter. As well as lifting symbols, his writing is also stylistically very similar to Quevedo,



channelling his cynical and satirical tone in his music. The political song “Mi vecino de arriba” is written in a style typical of Quevedo, containing anaphora and sarcasm, as well as being written in a hendecasyllabic metre. Quevedo’s style is reinvented by Sabina, recasting it for the purposes of a 21st century audience, with the satire focused around Franco. The song is a parody of him, using the allegory of an apartment building to depict Spanish society. Although the images are comic, ‘un día me pesco magreando su

hija', Sabina weaves in profound political statements about Franco's Spain, 'y llama libertinaje a la libertad'. This condemns the inequalities that plagued Spain after the civil war: los vencedores live "arriba" and los vencidos live "abajo". Serrat also lifts the character of Penelope from Homer's "The Odyssey" in his song Pénélope. He highlights the issues of traditional Spain: small-town gossip and status, "dicen en el pueblo...pobre infeliz". Much like Lorca's "Doña Rosita la Soltera", it comments on societal standards: a woman cannot be happy unless she is married, and her life cannot go on without a man "se paró tu reloj". As well as this, Serrat famously set two poems to music in his album "24 Paginas Inolvidables" (1993) ('Para la Libertad' and 'Cantares') and constructed a melody to go with them. Both Machado and Hernández were Republican poets, experiencing drastic changes in Spain. Machado, a member of the generation of '98, saw Spain transitioning away from its empire form. Hernández (and also Machado), suffered through the Spanish civil war, both tragically meeting their deaths whilst in exile and prison. Hernández's beliefs about freedom align with those of Serrat, they understand the fundamental right to freedom after having it taken away. As Serrat has commented, "los españoles conocemos lo difícil que es la reconquista de la libertad". Freedom is personified, and it is written in the first person from her perspective, "retoño porque aún tengo la vida". Freedom is necessary, and it will always prevail. Machado's poem "Cantares" focuses on introspection and existentialism: questioning what it means to be Spanish through Serrat and Machado's shared Republican lens.



The lyrics of Serrat and Sabina also incorporate modern and colloquial language to narrate the society around them that has transformed so drastically. They are both politically aware having experienced Franco's regime and have used their platforms to discuss contemporary issues in our turbulent society. Sabina has used his music to fulfil the role of a narrator of society, he discusses the changes and evolutions of modern concepts. After the Franco regime ended, there was far more freedom in political and sexual choices. They embraced this transformative era, often referred to as the "Movida Madrileña", without sugar coating it, unafraid to plainly state their beliefs. In Sabina's song "¿Quién



me ha robado el mes de abril?", the vignettes constructed explore new and provocative issues: teenage pregnancy, "la chica de BUP...preñada" and infidelity in marriage, "se largó con una peluquera veinte años menor". Furthermore, the song 'Princesa' highlights the issues with political instability between 1975-1977, '¿Con qué ley condenarte si somos juez y parte?'. All of Spanish society was part of this reaction to 39 years of Franco's rule, yet it meant that they could not help each other. Drugs, alcohol and sex lost their stigma and dominated society. Sabina's

“19 Días y 500 Noches” and Serrat’s “Tu Nombre Me Sabe A Hierba” freely mention “*bares de copas*” and “*cenicientas*” and the uses of drugs (“*hierba*” being a play on words).

The blending of these two linguistic aspects give Serrat and Sabina’s music immense variety in appeal, they are accessible to all. The lyrics that interwoven with academic and literary language are set behind popular Spanish rock, anyone can listen to it and enjoy it and if you pick up on the occasional high register word from Quevedo it is an added bonus. The *cantautores* dismantle and challenge social hierarchy and societal expectations, the old idea that only the rich and educated could engage with politics and literature is banished. It is no longer elitist and out of reach: the great poetry of Machado and Hernández is made available to all, sharing Serrat and Sabina’s ideology as well as the fantastic literary talent of those who suffered under Franco. As Francisco Domínguez comments, “[*la música*] trasciende lo puramente localista...se refieren a situaciones humanas características de la sociedad de nuestro tiempo, sin distinción de fronteras”.

