Joan Manuel Serrat and Joaquín Sabina are some of the most popular Spanish-speaking singer-songwriters in the world, and their songs are recognised as important parts of both Spain’s musical and literary heritage. Owing to their skillful use of poetic techniques and forms, both artists have earned comparisons with some of Spain’s most eminent figures from the literary canon, and their songs, whose lyrics are often layered with symbolism and allusions, have been considered accomplished works of poetry in their own right. This article will explore the various literary influences visible in the discographies of Serrat and Sabina and investigate how these influences are adopted and adapted within their lyrics.

The literary merit of songwriting has perhaps garnered greater respect in recent years, following Bob Dylan’s acceptance of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016 “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition.” Like Dylan, whom Sabina called “el mejor poeta de América y de la lengua inglesa actual,” Serrat and Sabina combine the traditionally high-art culture of poetry with the accessibility of pop music, and their verses actively incorporate and build upon the rich poetic history of the Spanish language. This is perhaps most direct in the songs of Joan Manuel Serrat, particularly from the albums ‘Dedicado a Antonio Machado, poeta’ (1969), and ‘Miguel Hernández’ (1972). In their respective albums, the eponymous poets Antonio Machado and Miguel Hernández share writing credits alongside Serrat. At times, these songs consist of *verbatim* performances of their poetry to music, whilst
others feature edited or completely original stanzas written by Serrat himself. In both cases, Serrat extends the poems’ original meanings—whether it be the exploration of fate and destiny in Machado’s ‘Caminante No Hay Camino’, or Hernández’s symbolic struggle for freedom in ‘Para La Libertad’—and creates newfound relevance in modern day politics and society.

Unlike many of Serrat’s ‘poem-songs’, evidence of Sabina’s literary influences are often more subtly woven into his lyrics; as the poet Luis García Montero explains: “Joaquín Sabina es cantante y poeta. Por ajustar más: no un cantante metido a poeta, sino un poeta metido a cantante.” Sabina adapts literary techniques popularised by traditional poets and frequently utilises poetic forms to structure his lyrics—for example, his use of hendecasyllabic lines in ‘Contigo’, a poetic metre pioneered by many of Spain’s Golden Age poets; this includes Baroque poet Francisco de Quevedo, whose poetry most critics consider one of Sabina’s greatest literary influences.

As illustrated in Juan Pablo Neyret’s detailed exploration of Sabina’s relationship with Quevedo, ‘Contigo’ in particular seems characteristically quevedesco; the song’s core message, repeated in the song’s refrain, even seems to echo directly Quevedo’s sonnet, ‘Amor constante más allá de la muerte’. The phrase “yo no quiero” is repeated eighteen times throughout ‘Contigo’, Sabina’s frequent use of anaphora in many of his songs is certainly comparable to Quevedo’s, as seen, for example, in his poem ‘A Una Nariz’.

Additionally, Sabina’s decision to dismantle the literary tradition of ‘el amor cortés’ (in which men are made to pursue an idealised and unattainable woman), combined with the use of a masculine poetic voice, which is for the most part negative in tone, is very much reminiscent of Quevedo’s realistic depictions of love and its associations with rejection. Sabina’s songbook is filled with unhappy lovers: those who are unfaithful, "cena con velitas para dos siempre es con otra", or even those affected by teenage pregnancy and abandonment, "la chica de BUP... preñada aquel chaval la dejó”. Sabina demonstrates a brutal honesty in these depictions, and in
his personal attitudes towards “un amor civilizado”. In addition, Quevedo’s signature morbidity - *morbo* - and cynicism is also visible in many of Sabina’s songs—for example in ‘Y Sin Embargo’ (“Te engañaría con cualquiera / Te cambiaría por cualquiera”), or ‘Pastillas Para No Soñar’, in which he humorously mocks people who live a dull existence out of fear of taking risks: “si en tus noches falta sal, para eso está el televisor.”

Serrat and Sabina’s literary influences are evidenced and highlighted by their frequent allusions to other literary texts within their lyrics. Sabina, for instance, has previously cited Peruvian poet César Vallejo, known for his highly emotional explorations of the human condition, as a great source of inspiration: “no lloré cuando murió mi padre, ni cuando murió mi madre; hace mucho tiempo que no lloro por una chica y sin embargo, en los últimos años no puedo recitar a Vallejo sin llorar. No puedo.” Sabina can be seen to pay homage to Vallejo in ‘Contigo’, conjuring the image of “París con aguacero” as a direct reference to his poem ‘Piedra Negra Sobre una Piedra Blanca’, in which Vallejo writes, “Me moriré en París con aguacero”. Similarly, Sabina references “Volverán Las Oscuras Golondrinas”, by Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, when he sings of “un exódo de oscuras golondrinas” in ‘Y Sin Embargo’. Here, Sabina also employs “golondrinas” as symbols of love, but chooses to reverse Bécquer’s use of the word to communicate his own feelings of isolation. As a trope, the *golondrina* or swallow accompanies Sabina on his poetic journey, re-emerging in his 2017 album, *Lo Niego Todo*, in the song ‘Leningrado’ - ‘anidó’, ‘se estrelló’ and finally ‘enviudó una golondrina en mi balcón’.

Biblical allusions are another recurring motif in Sabina’s lyrics. In ‘Y Sin Embargo’, love becomes positively associated with divinity through lexical choices associated with religion, specifically Catholicism: "el pan de cada día ... piedad ... al cielo de [su] boca ..." On the other hand, when discussing romance, Sabina also employs biblical symbols that connote evil ("los labios del pecado ... el purgatorio"), or temptation ("manzanas"), to subvert the traditional presentation of love and women as angelic, instead suggesting that they too can be corrupted and sinful.

Serrat also chooses words loaded with literary connotations. His choice of the name “Penélope”, for example, makes a classical
allusion to Homer’s epic poem *The Odyssey*, in which Penelope waits twenty years for her husband, Odysseus, to return from war. Serrat makes use of Homer’s character of Penelope, traditionally considered a symbol of uxorial fidelity, to inform his own modern reinvention of classical tales of marital devotion and female passivity. Incidentally, such fables have famously been subverted before, notably by Federico García Lorca’s play ‘Doña Rosita La Soltera’, in which "the grotesque treatment of women" abandoned by their husbands is similarly exposed. In this way, the lyrics of Serrat and Sabina come to both include and form a part of a richly woven literary tapestry, that combines threads from Spanish and classical literature with stories taken from the songwriters’ own personal lives.

However, whilst Serrat and Sabina are undoubtedly influenced by some of Spain’s most celebrated traditional poets, there is a cognizance of the traditionally elitist status of poetry and the potential pitfalls this may cause the twenty-first century listener. As a result, both songwriters simultaneously attempt to avoid excessive high register language in order to appeal and relate more truthfully to a wider audience. Inspired by the Spanish Republican post-war poets of the 1950s (including José Hierro, Gabriel Celaya and Blas de Otero) who, as Luis García Gil recounts, “pretenden que la poesía salga de los libros para anidar extramuros, en la calle, en el silencio, en los sueños, en la piel, en los escombros, incluso en la basura”. In Serrat’s song, *Las Malas Compañías*, for instance, people who “beben a morro”, “palpan a las damas el trasero” and “orinan en mitad de la vereda” become central characters; and, in *19 Días Y 500 Noches* (1999), Sabina openly sings “de gente sin alma que pierde la calma con la cocaína”. This focus on realism and the depiction of those marginalised in society seems also to be influenced by *la picaresca*—a genre of literature originating in Spain, which features protagonists and characters typically from the lower, often deliquent social classes, with narratives set on the streets. Some notable examples include the anonymously authored *La Vida de...
Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus Fortunas y Adversidades (1554), and Quevedo’s El Buscón (1626), aptly subtitled, ‘Ejemplo de Vagabundos y Espejo de Tacaños’.

Particularly in the case of Sabina, this effort to achieve a more naturalistic social commentary often involves the creation of a poetic landscape. Whilst many of Sabina’s songs are set in locations that are literal or even autobiographical (often “los bares de copas”), others seem totally imagined. Many of these *paisajes poéticos* are symbolic in their design, intended to connote feelings or ideas that establish from the beginning the song’s central themes without them needing to be explicitly stated. This literary technique is perhaps best illustrated in ‘Quién Me Ha Robado El Mes de Abril’, in which Sabina focuses on several vignettes that depict different experiences of loss and loneliness. The song opens in the fictionalised “posada del fracaso”, which, through poetic symbolism and imagery, comes to embody the feeling of solitude itself. Concrete nouns function as metonyms, those associated with luxury are noticeably absent (“no hay consuelo ni ascensor”), and are replaced by those which suggest a life of poverty and by abstract nouns of emotion (“el desamparo y la humedad comparten colchón”). Even before *el hombre del traje gris* appears, Sabina’s poetic landscape serves as a mirror to reflect the character’s struggle with poverty and abandonment through his physical and environmental surroundings. Interestingly, this literary technique is also employed to different effect in ‘Contigo’—in which "domingos por la tarde... recibos y escena del sofá" are symbolic of the domesticity and bourgeois lifestyle that Sabina himself rejects.

To conclude, whilst Serrat and Sabina are greatly respected by academic scholars for their skill in transposing the lost techniques of traditional poetry into the twentieth and twenty first century, and whilst their lyrics are considered important pieces of contemporary literature by critics, it is instead their ability to tap into the public conscience, to write directly and without pretence about universal experiences, that ultimately defines their popularity.

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