THE SARDANA AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL PHENOMENON IN CONTEMPORARY CATALONIA

by Josep Martí i Pérez

In this article I intend to describe some of the social processes that have led to the development of the sardana, a Catalan dance, to its present form. This is not meant to be a thorough description of the dance itself but rather a treatment of it as an expression of certain social and cultural processes which, although not of a strictly musical nature, have strongly influenced, and even determined, this dance and its music. My objective here is first to review the differentiated social perceptions of sardana in the course of its history and then to clarify the relationship between that dance and the phenomenon of folklorism. As a result, the interdependence of musical morphology, social customs, function and ideology in relation to the sardana should become apparent. Through this example, we can observe the function of music and dance as socially articulated elements within society.

The sardana (pl. sardanes) is the most widely distributed folk dance in Catalonia and possesses to the present an uncontested, important social meaning to the people of the region. Young and old alike learn to master this circle dance, which is accessible to everyone. At present it is still common for the casual visitor in Catalonia to come across sardana performances, which always take place outdoors on public plazas, both in the cities as well as in the countryside.

The dance is always based upon a duple rhythm, usually with meters of 2/4, 4/4 or 6/8. Each sardana consists of two musical sections which repeat themselves according to a definite pattern and are danced to different choreographies. The sardana is always accompanied by a cobra (pl. cobles), a musical band partially of folk provenience that consists of eleven musicians playing twelve instruments. The musicians sit in two rows. Those in the back row play two trumpets, one trombone, two flugelhorns and a bass. The Catalan folk musical instruments are played in the front row: a flute (flabiol), played by the musician with his left hand as he simultaneously hits a small drum (tambort) with his right, two tibies (a folk oboe) and two tenores (a kind of English horn). Cobra music is transmitted not aurally but rather by means of written scores.

The sardana is a collective dance in which an unlimited number of dancers hold hands with adjacent dancers. The circle built by the sardana moves left and right, and the dancers raise and sink their arms according to the two musical sections that comprise the dance. The dancers count the measures and convert them into steps; this is important in order to coordinate their common movements according to the traditional choreographic rules of the dance.

It would be a mistake to regard the contemporary sardana dance as a simple folkloristic phenomenon. An important difference lies between other types of traditional Catalan folk dance that are occasionally offered to audiences in stage performances and the sardana circles, which form on the street on
Sundays or on various festive occasions. Sardana dancers boast that their dance is not simply a formalistic spectacle; above all, one dances it in order to have fun. Still, the sardana and its music, as they are today understood and practiced, cannot be comprehended if one does not take into account the folkloristic dynamic as well.

In order to understand the contemporary reality of this dance, we must consider three basic stages in its history: 1) its beginnings as a local dance in certain areas of northern Catalonia, 2) its rapid spread throughout all of Catalonia between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, and 3) its setting down of roots as the "national dance" of Catalonia.1

The first stage saw the evolution of the sardana from an older form called sardana curta and from the Catalan folk dance con trapas and its consolidation into its present form. This process occurred in a rather small geographical area within northern Catalonia around the middle of the nineteenth century and can be traced to the efforts of particular musicians, among whom Pep Ventura played a particularly important role. The sardana was then only one dance among many that were fashionable at that time in the countryside, including the polka, the waltz, Scottish dance, the fox trot, the manzurka, and pasodobles. Characteristic for the sardana and its music during this period was a flexible choreographic and musical form as well as the manner of performance and the composition of the musical band. Formally, the dance was based upon local, folk-like elements; the musicians also ensured, however, that fashionable musical elements such as new rhythms and melodies from the Italian opera or zarzuela also were added. At that time, sardanes were already danced to the accompaniment of the cobla bands; differently from today, however, these musical bands were flexible in the types of instruments they contained, as well as their number. In addition, the playing activity of the cobla was not limited to sardanes but rather such groups also performed a wide-ranging variety of other kinds of music, including local and foreign dances, religious music and arrangements of classical or opera music.

In the second half of the nineteenth century some cobla bands began to perform in Barcelona, where they had been previously unknown. At first they performed as somewhat undefined musical bands that could play a varied repertoire in theaters, cafes or on the street. By integrating musical references to opera and zarzuela, these cobla groups wanted to make their sardana music modern-sounding.

The first visits of cobles to the city corresponded with the period during which Catalan nationalistic consciousness was growing quickly. One felt already in certain intellectual circles the necessity to bestow a weightier significance to the traditional heritage of the land. This significance was to be granted not only strictly due to cultural value but also because of the opportunities to use this heritage as an instrument for the encouragement of a sense of homeland, developed first in regional and then in national terms.

If the sardana music played by the cobles was formerly considered only one dance among many others in its place of origin, in Barcelona it was received as a dansa empordanesa2 and quickly came to be regarded from a folkloristic point of view.
During this period we hear the first critical comments against the formal development of the music accompanying the sardana. Although in earlier times the polka rhythms and borrowings from Italian operas had provoked applause from the audience, now any such foreign influences on the music were understood to be an outrage against the aesthetic of the sardana and its music. On the occasion of a còbila performance at a city festival in Barcelona in 1871, a chronicle harshly criticized the French and Italian influences that appeared in the music and wrote: “Ara que s’ha fet un bon aplec de cançons de la terra, ¿no hi haurà una bona ànima que salvi la sardana de la malvestat que l’amena?” (Capmany 1930: 121).

In this comment we find a significant detail: the equivalence of the music of the sardana with folk song. One begins at this time to regard this dance as a regional (or “national,” referring also to Catalonia) one and compares its value with, for example, that of the zortziko of the Basques. The sardana thus enters the category of musical products that we would today call “ethnic”—with the associated calls for the safeguarding of “genuine” versions. (Pella y Forgas 1983: 46).

From this point on, new còbila compositions for the sardana dance became more prescribed. Urban dwellers considered them “traditional,” and, just as more emphasis was placed on the maintenance of ethnic values, so grew the pressure to preserve the sardana and its music as it was. Of course this pressure grew out of a romantic and urban view of traditional culture which actually had little to do with the way of thinking behind the rural sardana of the time. Rural practice was less concerned with presenting atavism on the stage than with offering their audience modernity. The sardana as dance was not performed the same way each time but rather innovations were constantly being introduced. Furthermore, compared to their urban counterparts, rural residents were not interested in exclusive regional rights to the sardana as a cultural product. In Olot, a small city in the sardana region, a booklet about that dance was published with the intent of contributing to its expansion not only in Catalonia, but throughout the rest of Spain as well; it was therefore published in Spanish rather than in Catalan (Monsalvatje and Arieu 1895: 11). The urban view of the sardana—to regard it as a part of the Catalan heritage—would, however, soon prevail. Although the possibility was still discussed at the end of the last century of disseminating sardana throughout Spain, by the beginning of the twentieth century the following was being written about the dance: “La sardana ha d’ésse nostra i de ningú més. Ella, la digna, ens la farien indigna” (Millet 1905: 181).

Something had changed. That which was for some a dance of Catalan origin—which, like every other dance, could also cross the boundaries of its region—was for others an essential part of their ethnic heritage and therefore something not to be shared. Today it would be impossible to imagine that the sardana could—as had been earlier written—also belong to our “Spanish brothers.”

The sardana was no longer a dansa empordanesa, but rather as a “national dance” and a symbol of Catalonia (c.g. Tauler 1907: 5; Font i Mir 1915). Nationalism was growing quickly at that time in Catalonia and its proponents searched for nationally oriented cultural values and collective symbols of identification. To this end, the dissemination of sardana throughout Catalonia...
served as a good tool. Those most involved in "Catalanism" made every effort to spread the dance throughout the entire region, so that by the first third of the twentieth century it had indeed become "the dance of all Catalonia."

**Sardana** was thus disseminated differently from other fashionable dances due to the strong influence of its driving force, nationalism. Here we are able to determine a clear symbiosis between a musical and choreographic product and a specific idea. Owing to this symbiosis, the dance could reach areas far removed from the real home of the sardana. The main human agents of this expansion were the politically active circles, which later also founded the strongly nationalistic *sardanes* associations. Each and every village in Catalonia, so it was said, should have a song association, a library or a *sardanes* association and, when possible, all three (Llongueres 1933: 46).

This impetus given to the *sardana* was not, however, without cost. Every agreement reached contained conditions of give and take. First of all, the *sardana* obligated itself to ethnic exclusiveness. This meant that its dissemination would end exactly at the borders of Catalonia. Secondly, the *sardana* was encumbered in its future development: its forms would never be allowed to betray that "ethnic spirit" that was defined through folklorism.

The first institutions dedicated to the dissemination and preservation of the *sardana* and its music were founded during the first three decades of this century, and they prescribed the norms. The new compositions of *sardana* music had to remain true to the formal structures of the tradition as well as to musical scholarship. It was forbidden to use polka, pasodoble or jazz rhythms; melodies with "exotic characters" or from the *zarzuela* were also banned. Such institutions required musicians to follow properly the rules of harmony and counterpoint, and they constantly reminded dancers and musicians alike that the *sardana* had to retain its "ethnic spirit" (Anon. 1933: 328-29).

This conservatism was reflected not only in the formal structures of the musical composition, but also in the choreography of the dance and in the formation of the musical bands. These were required, by the end of the last century, to always have the same instrumentation and from that point on they specialized only in Catalan ethnic music. Occasional tentative attempts at innovation in the *cobla* music or in the *sardana* choreography were always met with opposition and musicians and dancers have never been able, to the present, to overcome such resistance.

As the *sardana* spread, it acquired that small-scale mythology that accompanies many elements of ethnic heritage. The *sardana* had to be a dance whose origins lay in the far-distant past. Already at the end of the last century there were discussions regarding the possible ancient Greek origins of the dance. In one of his earlier works about the *sardana*, Joan Amades speculates about the ancient astronomical meaning of the dance (Amades 1930: 22) and poses a hypothesis about the possible relationship between it and prehistorical paintings in which representations of dance can be observed.

Even if such speculation cannot be taken seriously, these ideas are still common today among the people and are often offered as fact to those tourists interested in the *sardana*. Also belonging to the small mythology of the *sardana* is the claim that it was subject to strong suppression during the Franco era, a claim that does not entirely correspond with reality.
The strong institutionalization of the sardana is also not surprising when we consider how firmly the dance was tied to nationalist ideology and the meaningful symbolic value associated with it. From the beginning of this century to the present, numerous institutions have been created with the intention of preserving and disseminating the sardana. These associations sponsor performances, arrange for lessons and produce publications devoted to the dance. Since 1959 Catalonia celebrates the “Day of Sardana” each year in May on the institutional level. On this day many diverse activities, all dedicated to the sardana, take place throughout Catalonia and one locality is selected to be awarded for their preservation of the dance. The political and administrative institutions of the region also do not ignore the sardana. The current Catalan government has two official cobles, it organizes sardana performances and the residents of various localities in Catalonia have erected monuments to the sardana or to the composers of its music.

A certain ambivalence has developed within the current social perception of the sardana: one regards it as a traditional product and therefore as folklore, but at the same time a clear distinction is made between it and other expressions of traditional culture that lead a purely folkloristic existence. The sardana is tradition but not “folklore,” if one is to understand the latter term as referring to “museum pieces.” The dance is therefore never to be understood as simply something to be performed: it is never danced on stage. A sardana occasion means above all active participation.

Since it is considered a national dance, every sardana performance can become an act of assertion of ethnicity. In this sense, the sardana stands in a paradigmatic relation to other musical phenomena of the region such as the “new song” (nova canfó) and to some degree the so-called “Catalonian rock,” both of which are sometimes conspicuously made a part of Catalan political actions.

Each traditional cultural product obtains through folklorism a certain ethnic value. Ethnicity is however not the only semantic connotation of folklorism. Behind the distorted folkloristic view of tradition, we must also recognize values such as rurality, simplicity and morality. The sardana also inherited these elements of folklorism, particularly regarding morality.

Before the sardana had been discovered by the city dwellers, it was often criticized by the priesthood for its immorality, a charge brought against many dances during their history. However, after the sardana received the label of folklore, it automatically joined that group of dances that were judged to be morally perfect. The fact that it was not a pair dance but rather a group dance also helped in regarding the sardana as a dance that was a model of morality. This resulted in it being taken over by reactionary and socially conservative people. By the beginning of this century the dance was looked upon as a tool to fight against new dances and other musical fashions that were immoral and, on top of that, foreign in a pejorative sense.

In writings concerning the sardana, the morality of the dance is often emphasized. At the end of the 1960s, sardana dancing was used as an example of moral superiority in contrast to the discotheques that were established at that time. The sardana titles and the song texts, when the latter also exist, express for instance quite clearly the kind of world the music wants to represent. We find references to an idealized rural environment,
to love of homeland or problemless and platonic romantic relationships — that is, those values that are strongly marked by conservatism. We need only compare these with the titles or texts of other musical genres such as the tango, blues or heavy rock, in order to see an enormous difference. The sardana has always played the role of a child with a clean face, to whom the prostitute or the tavern, misery or social and existential worries are all completely unknown.

The sardana is clearly much more than a dance. This is emphasized by the fact that concepts like sardanisme and Sardanista have emerged, the former to be understood as a description for that social movement which understands the sardana as a socio-cultural complex in form, meaning and values. A Sardanista is accordingly a person who adopts this Weltanschauung: those dancers who do not limit themselves to enjoying the dance but also believe strongly in what the dance means — music in the service of an idea.

Presently the sardana milieu finds itself in a certain crisis (Martí i Pérez 1993). Due to the strong institutionalization and support given to it since the reinstatement of democracy in Spain, the sardana has today an infrastructure that is better than ever: good and numerous musical bands, skillful organization of dance performances, numerous possibilities to learn the dance and the folk instruments of the cobla and financial support from the public administration. One can observe in the last few years, however, the rapid and progressive desertion by young people from the sardana world. Many performances suffer now from a worrisome lack of dancers, so that the main concern of the sardana milieu is the winning back of the younger generations.

It is not so that the Catalan population has turned their backs on tradition as a whole. Folldorism still flourishes well in Catalonia. The present situation of the sardana has various reasons behind it, including:

a) The entertainment function that the sardana always fulfilled has become less important because our society offers many more leisure possibilities than in earlier times.

b) The same pertains to the ideological function; the moderate form of Catalanism that had always felt itself so closely tied to the sardana now has many more possible channels of expression and is politically better represented than in earlier times.

c) The conservative social values associated with sardanisme are themselves in a state of crisis these days. It is clear that the symbolic value given to the sardana was mainly responsible for its early boom and widespread dissemination. This symbolic content simultaneously prevented, however, the sardana from developing formally or in terms of its social meaning, which in turn would have allowed it to accommodate to current social realities.

NOTES

1. A few words on the use of "nadon" and "national" in this article would be appropriate here. The Catalans always distinguish between "state" (Spain) and "nation" (Catalonia). The Catalans feel themselves a closely associated aggregation of people having a common cultural tradition and language; they have a strong historical and national consciousness. The Catalans in France and in Spain share the same nation, but not the same state.

2. Literally, "dance from the Emporda," the original home of the sardana.
3. "If a good collection of folk songs has already been written [a reference to a well-known song collection by Francesc Pelagi Briz], then is there no one who could rescue the sardana from the threat of sacrilege?"

4. "... hemos preferido emplear la lengua castellana, ya no sólo porque es frecuente que la mayoría de los hijos de esta región por el poco uso que hacen de las lecturas catalanas tengan más dificultad para la misma, sino también, porque dada la propagación rápida y extensa à que ha llegado hoy la sardana, tocándose, siquiera sea al principio por curiosidad, en poblaciones fuera de la región catalana, facilitaremos con esto el que nuestros hermanos españoles tomen conciencia de la misma conociendo sus principios y las bases en que se funda" (Monsalvatje and Aleu 1895: 11).

(We have preferred to use the Spanish language not only because it is frequent that most of the inhabitants of this region use Catalan writings not very often and thus they have problems reading in that language [at that time only Spanish was taught at school], but also because of how quickly widespread the sardana has become today - it can also be sometime played outside of Catalonia, although as first only as a curiosity. Thereby we will make it easier for our Spanish brothers to learn the principles and rules of the sardana and to become fond of it.)

5. "The sardana must belong to us. They [the non-Catalans] would degrade it."

6. "It should be made clear that what was involved here was the possession of the dance. The Catalans have spoken, since the beginning of this century, of the democratic character of the dance. The sardana circle is open to all and participants have always enjoyed seeing non-local people joining the circle. Presently there is even an institution — the Fundació Universal de la Sardana — which has the goal of promoting the dance on the international level. It does not, however, follow that the sardana should become, as many other fashionable dances, a "fatherless dance." The belief is that foreigners should know of the dance but it must always be regarded as a specifically Catalan dance.

7. At first there were attempts made, in the name of pan-Catalanism, to spread the sardana to the neighboring region of Valencia and to the Balearic Islands, areas where the Catalan language is also spoken. However, the ideological burden that was already associated with the dance prevented its spread in those areas that, though close to Catalonia culturally, did not share feelings of Catalan nationalism.

8. In addition to the sardana, the obsa bands also accompanied older Catalan folk dances in folklore performances.

9. Examples of such initiatives include attempts at the end of the 1920s to shorten the sardana, to introduce new steps (pasos libres) and to change the instrumentation of the obsa.


11. The Franco regime's suppression of Catalan political efforts is generally well known. In spite of this, the sardana world enjoyed a high degree of permissiveness. In contrast to other kinds of Catalan culture, the dance was regarded usually as harmless folklore.

12. Three groups are the musical bands "Barcelona" and "La Principal de La Bisbal." They became official through an initiative of the autonomous Catalan government of Spain's Second Republic (1931-1939), an initiative which was again enacted with the return of democracy.

13. "Cada dia es bailen més sardanes esperem que es pugui arribar a desterrar les danses exòtiques que desfiguren tant el nostre caracler" (Anon. 1906).

(Every day people dance more and more sardanes and so we hope to banish the exotic dances, which denaturalize so much our character.)

14. For example: "No puede tampoco desconocer la moralidad que entraña esta danza [la sardana], pues así como en la mayoría, especialmente en las modernas, existe el contacto, la proximidad de los personas de distintos sexo acarreando las pasiones carnals y por tanto ofreciendo la inteligencia, pues las dos están en razón inversa, en la sardana solamente se unen por las manos formando hermosa cadena de amor nacional. Considerando también que cuando se desarrolla una costumbre honesta decrecen las inmorales, no podemos menos de reconocer su benéfica influencia en la sociedad" (Monsalvatje and Aleu 1895: 40).

(We can't fail to recognize the morality of this dance [the sardana]; since in most dances, especially the modern ones, exists the contact, the proximity of persons of both sexes, inflating the carnal passions and confusing the judgment — because the more carnal
passion, the less judgment — [but] in the sardana the dancers are joined together only through the hands and form a beautiful chain of national love. If we take into account that promoting an honest custom diminishes the immoral ones, we have to recognize the beneficial influence of the sardana upon the society.

15. As a rule, the sardana is not sung; still, many do have texts.

16. Radical Catalanism could never fully identify itself with sardanisme.

REFERENCES CITED

Anonymous
Anadó, Joan
Capmany, Aureli
Fons i Mir, V.
1915 “La sardana.” La Veu Comarcal. Setmana catalana de Ripoll i la comarca 58: 14. Llongueres, Joan
1933 Per la nostra sardana. Barcelona: Emporium.
Marti i Perer, Josep
Miller, Luis
Monsalve, Jorge and Josep Alou
1895 La sardana. Su historia, importancia y exposición de las reglas que deben considerar para bailarla, según los sistemas ampurdanés y rebellí. Olot: Joan Bonet.
Pellà y Forgas, Josep
1883 Historia del Ampurdan. Barcelona: Luis Taso y Serra.
Tauler, Joan
1907 Art de bailar la sardana. Barcelona: L'Avenç.