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African drummers in late fifteenth-century Barcelona

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Abstract

Black musicians – including drummers, trumpeters, wind-players and singers – were active throughout Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries employed at courts and by civic authorities. Some were slaves; others served in an official capacity and, in addition to salaries or payments, were given silk or velvet uniforms to add to the lustre of the royal or noble entourage or municipality. This event spotlights the singular case of a black slave who escaped each night from the house of his master, a merchant in the city of Barcelona, to go to play drums with his fellow slaves. The sound of these African instruments must thus have been a regular feature of the urban soundscape.

Keywords

street music; traditional songs ; Miquel Oliva (merchant); Miquel Oliva (merchant); drum players; tambourine player; black people

Título

Atabaleros norteafricanos en la Barcelona del siglo XV

Resumen

Los músicos negros – entre ellos, atabaleros, trompeteros, ministriles y cantores – estuvieron activos por toda Europa durante los siglos XV y XVI, sirviendo en cortes y a las autoridades cívicas. Algunos eran esclavos; otros estaban asalariados y, además del sueldo o pago que recibían, se les proporcionaba librea de seda o terciopelo para identificar y ensalzar el boato del séquito real o noble, o del cabildo ciudadano. Este evento destaca el caso concreto y singular de un esclavo negro, el cual huía cada noche de la casa de su dueño, un mercader en la ciudad de Barcelona, para ir a tocar atabales con sus colegas esclavos. Por lo tanto, el sonido de estos instrumentos africanos se integraría en el paisaje sonoro urbano de la Barcelona renacentista.

Palabras clave

música en las calles y plazas; canciones populares; Miquel Oliva (mercader); Miquel Oliva (mercader); atambores / tambores; tamborino; negros

On 23 April 1498 the Barcelona merchant Miquel Oliva drew up a contract before the notary Pere Triter with his black slave known by the name of Nicolau. The merchant agreed to give his slave his freedom on one condition: over a period of eight years, Nicolau must desist from escaping from the merchant's home every evening to go to play the drums with his fellow slaves without asking and obtaining his master's permission.

['si … non derelinqueris nocte domum meum eundo sonando de tamborino aut aliter, absque licencia mea, a me petita et obtinenda'; Archivo Histórico de Protocolos de Barcelona, Pere Triter, Manual XX, fol. 21r; cited in Pierre Bonassie, La organización del trabajo en Barcelona a fines del siglo XV (Barcelona: CSIC, 1975), p. 101]

It is not clear from the document where Nicolau went to play drums with his fellow slaves – possibly a tavern or an alleyway, as assumed by Bonassie – but the sound of African drums must have been heard with some regularity in at least some quarter of the city. The furtive nature of the activity suggests a pastime rather than formal training of some kind, although black servants were widely employed as drummers at courts from Italy to Scotland as well as by civic authorities.

In the mid-fifteenth century, Juan II of Castile employed two African drummers in his household, and el atabalero Cristóbal el Negro served Ferdinand of Aragon between 1476 and 1500. A black drummer also served James IV of Scotland in 1504-5. At around this time, visitors to the Medinaceli court were impressed by the duke's entrance to his dining hall, preceded by his household trumpeters and two black drummers 'with large drums in the Moorish style' and other musicians ['iban delante todos sus trompetas y clarines, y dos moros con grandes tambores al estilo morisco, y otros muchos músicos'; cited in Juan García Mercadal, España vista por los extranjeros, 3 vols (Madrid, 1917-1919), I, p. 179].

The prestige of black drummers, and their association with the social elite, made them highly valued by civic authorities: in 1582 the city trumpeters and drummers of Barcelona announced the annual celebration of the Corpus Christi procession, dressed in uniforms provided by the city council: 'The Monday morning just before the Thursday of the feast of Corpus Christi, the cry was made by the trumpets and drums of the city, who are three black [drummers] and trumpeters, dressed in uniforms of crimson damask' ['Dilluns abans y mes prop del dijous de la festa de corpore Christi al mati fan crida ab los tabals y trompetes de la Ciutat, y los tabales, que son tres negres, y trompetes vestits ab vnes vestidures de domas carmesi'; cited in the Libre de coses asanyalades succehides en Barcelona y altres parts (Barcelona, 2011), pp.630-631].

These salaried, silk-clad black drummers playing in an official capacity as part of civic ceremony represent the flip-side to the liminal world of Nicolau and his fellow slaves almost a hundred years earlier, but there can be no doubt of the value placed on the skills of African drummers in the Iberian Peninsula of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. And not only drummers, but also trumpeters (see image), wind-players and singers.

Source

Arxiu Històric de Protocols de Barcelona, Pere Triter, Manual XX, fol. 21r.

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Resources

The black trumpeter 'John Blanke' depicted in the Westminster Tournament Roll (London, Royal College of Arms)

https://www.youtube.com/embed/ckhbeH__QW8

Ahmeilou (Tafraout)