

Sung Verses that Tell



the Story of Their Time

Universidad de Antioquia's Regional Musics Group (Grupo Músicas Regionales) has taken on the task of studying the multiple expressions that constitute us as a people. To this end, the group has followed a research line that takes music as a means to analyze the identity and cultural change processes in Colombia and Latin America.

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Medellin's National Festival of Trova, Grand Finale. Plaza Gardel, August 2018.
Photographer | Hugo Villegas Hernandez.

It's midnight in Plaza Gardel. Expectation fills the thousands of people who are gathered in this place. While some speculate about who the best is, others chant their favorite's name. Who will be king? Among coteries and screams, predictions come and go. Leonardo Cuervo, Juan Pablo Martinez and Juan Jose Castaño get on stage, approach the judges' table, throw the dice to determine who starts the session and stand in front of their respective microphones. The defining moment has come after three months of competition, from a selection process and qualifying rounds to the semi-final and grand finale. Only three of the 280 registered participants are still competing for the crown. When tension reaches its peak, the chords of the *tiple* (instrument of the guitar family, slightly smaller than a guitar) are heard all over, which signals that the devil's round is about to begin. What does this anecdote have to do with a research process? Why tell stories of mass events, contests, dice games, devil's rounds and kings? Because each of the components mentioned here, and many others, are part of the historical gear that has constituted Colombian popular culture. Thus, in the search to decipher symbolic elements that characterize the country's Andean northwest, the Regional Musics Group is developing the project *Trova from Antioquia: between Poetic Stability and Cultural Transformation (Trova antioqueña: entre la estabilidad poética y la transformación cultural)*. To carry out the research, first we had to look for the living sources, that is, the main actors who, for years, have been recognized as significant representatives of this manifestation by society. Second, we collected audio recordings, videos, photos and texts, from which memory is made visible. Third, we had to dive into the world of *trova* by attending events where it is present. Finally, we studied the testimony of *trovadores* (*trova* singers), the documents collected and our fieldwork to consolidate the historical, sociocultural, poetic and musical knowledge necessary to understand Antioquia's *trova*.

Let's begin by explaining what *trova* is:

Take a look at my tiple hands,
 they have their strings very well-
 tuned, they are ready to sing to
 you the *trova* I'll improvise soon.

As can be read, it is a *copla* made of four eight-syllable verses, for example: Take-a-look-at-my-ti-ple-hands. Moreover, the second and fourth verse rhyme—when the end of these verses is pronounced, there must be a sound agreement. In this case, tuned, which is the last word of the second verse, rhymes with soon, the last word of the fourth verse. That isn't all. The most significant fact is that these verses are made up as they are sung. They aren't prepared or learned by heart. *Trovadores* come up with an idea in an instant and sing it. They take into account, for example, the subject of conversation or the situation they are living. In most cases, *trova* is composed in a confrontation of opinions between two people that take turns to create *coplas*. Contrary to what happens with the verses, which are always improvised, the music that accompanies this manifestation is generally the same: a traditional bambuco tune accompanied by a *tiple*. Nonetheless, in recent years, this accompaniment has sometimes extended to other string, wind or percussion instruments, such as guitar, bandola, flute and drums. The *trovadores'* creativity has enabled innovation in other musical forms, and diverse expressions of this have taken place. The use of tropical music from Antioquia is particularly relevant in the *trova dobletiada*, a form of eight eight-syllable verses in which the second verse rhymes with the fourth, and the sixth rhymes with the eighth. The *copla* offered in the previous page shows the everyday, communicational, and at the same time, literary nature embodied by this expression rooted in Antioquia's popular culture. Based on a simple poetic structure and a reiterative melody, almost like a mantra, it contains a profound social and cultural sense that is often not fully estimated and goes beyond the ba-

riers of time. *Trova* still circulates through intimate environments and big stages as a mechanism for interaction and dialogue. The roots of this poetic expression are far away from Medellín's Plaza Gardel. This form of communication, which in Colombia's coffee region has been known as *trova antioqueña* (*trova* from Antioquia), belongs to an oral tradition that goes back thousands of years and is common to different parts of the world. The Spanish introduced, among many other manifestations, poetic forms that, after long miscegenation processes, gave birth to *trova* as it is known today. We know that, as early as the 19th century, the current structure of *trova* was used for improvisation. Personalities such as Antonio Jose Restrepo —Ñito Restrepo— and Manuel Salvador Ruiz —Salvo Ruiz— born in that century in Concordia, Antioquia, are legendary figures and references for current *trovadores*.

From mines, coffee plantations, roadside taverns, the intimacy of families or everyday meetings, *trova* has made its way to public spaces through contests called festivals, which have been held since the 70's. These events, where the winner is granted the title of king, have gained importance over time, to the point that they have become mass events with a national scope. Some of the kings that have won the most relevant festivals in recent decades are now famous in the world of mass media and comedy.

Back in Plaza Gardel, the three finalists fighting for the title of king face each other in the last stretch of the show, historically known as the devil's round. Juan Jose, the youngest of them, is aware of the difficulty of being up to the quality of his opponents and the tension lived in this moment. He is heir to this long tradition that tells, in sung improvised

verses, stories from the past and the present. It is a legacy from his father, Raul Mario Castaño, a man born in Marinilla, who picked up the farmer's way of creating poetry from his village and its rural settlements. Thus, throughout centuries, *trova* has gone from generation to generation through oral transmission. In other words, it is learned by listening to the voices of parents, grandparents and contemporaries. Juan Jose, just like Juan Pablo and Leonardo, is a young man from the city, who grew up in a time of profound social crisis. *Trova* isn't immune to this. As a result, in the midst of the cheerfulness experienced in the square, which hosts the grand finale, there is room for critical comments and reflections on diverse social problems:

“Who kills a living being with no reason, be it animal or human, has against all committed treason” (Juan Pablo Martinez, 2018).

Notwithstanding these possibilities, the phenomenon of improvised verses has shifted between two motifs. One is the construction of a space to denounce and reproduce the events taking place in the region and country. The other is the promotion of the image that the *paisa* (someone from Antioquia or the old Antioquia province) is a “superior being” compared to the rest of the people in Colombia, and Antioquia represents a historical, political and social supremacy in the nation's development. The strong influence of drug-trafficking on *trova* and its representatives in the 80's and 90's cannot be ignored. This was also the case with many other artistic and cultural manifestations. As Professor and *Trovador* Luis Fernando Macias said, “In the early 80's, successful drug-traffickers began to be the main clients of this expression. They hired trovadores for their private parties, bars, restaurants, trips and so on, and they paid well. *Trova* allowed us to know the intimacy of what would become the terrible cause of the country's corruption and violence.” Despite these comings and goings, the relevance of this cultural practice is confirmed in the significant number of people who express themselves through it. In many cases, they get their education in improvisation schools located in Medellin and various municipalities of Antioquia. Another confirmation of this expression's relevance is the presence of *trovadores* in mass media, where *trova*

has been established as a true alternative for humor and criticism. Finally, its relevance is witnessed in places such as Plaza Gardel, where thousands of people gather up to listen to and watch the dispute that defines the king. The devil's round is over. The defining moment has arrived. Juan Pablo and Leonardo have been kings in previous years. With their career, they challenge Juan Jose and let him know that he is still green. However, the die is cast. The son of Raul Mario Castaño, "Crispeta" (Popcorn), who was also national king, shows what he is made of and, as heir to a long tradition, prevails. At 19, he manages to become the new king of Medellín's National Festival of *Trova*, 2018, held during the Flower Festival. His song is testimony to this:



Juan Jose Castaño, king of Medellín's National Festival of *Trova*, 2018.
Photographer | Hugo Villegas Hernandez

“Medellin a long list of kings
 has known, and here I stand
 to take over the throne”
 (Juan Jose Castaño, 2018).

The night's last round of applause and final cheers are heard louder than ever in Plaza Gardel. As Juan Jose, beaming with joy, raises his trophy, his father, in the front row, is moved to tears. The crowd slowly leaves the place. The sung verses that tell the story of their time included, once again, in the midst of a personal dispute, social criticism, political judgement, regionalism and humor, the events of today and always. ✕