

PERFORMANCE AS JOURNEY TO KNOWLEDGE: THE “CANTIGA I” BY MARTÍN CODAX

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“Every cry is a song, every song is a prayer...”¹

The aim of the present contribution is to describe both the context and the creative and reflective processes which led to the completion of the project *Cantiga I: Tonnta Farraięi Vigo*² (2021–2023). This project is based on a loose interpretation of the eponymous Medieval Galician poem from the genre *cantigas de amigo* (songs of the beloved), attributed to Galician *trovador* Martín Codax (2nd half of the 13th century).

The main artistic output of the project is a short music video (11:22) directed by Dublin-based Czech cinematographer Jaro Waldeck,³ in collaboration with internationally acclaimed Irish singer and multi-instrumentalist Liam Ó Maonlaí (frontman of the band Hothouse Flowers), and the author of this contribution (see Appendix, images 1–2). The accompanying projections and presentations at cultural events, festivals and international conferences are aimed at raising general awareness of the timeless cultural relevance of Medieval song and music, as well as of the ancient cultural links between Ireland and the North-West of Spain, two European regions with shared Celtic roots. Last but not least, this paper highlights the significance of artistic research and performance as legitimate methods of enquiry. This dimension of the project in particular has been extremely relevant to me both as a performer and a Hispanist, since it has allowed me to engage with the poetic text in a way that was truly unmediated

1. Hothouse Flowers: “Isn’t it Amazing”. CD *Songs From the Rain*. London Records, 1993.

2. The project *Cantiga I: Tonnta Farraięi Vigo* was co-funded by the Trinity Arts and Social Sciences Benefactions Fund 2023, Trinity College Dublin.

3. See <www.jarowaldeck.com>.

and almost physical. Through performance, *Cantiga I* became a space for fascinating artistic discovery: Work on this project proved invaluable as it led to new reflections on issues related to song interpretation and the creative process in a more general sense.

The project, its context and background

The first impulse to perform Codax's *Cantiga I* emerged from a musical collaboration with Liam Ó Maonlaí during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021 we were approached by Dr Radvan Markus from the Centre for Irish Studies at the Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, Charles University Prague with a request to produce a video performance for the EFACIS⁴ 2021 Conference, which was to be originally held in Prague, but was eventually moved on-line. The resulting video performance "Live at Marlay House", directed by Beta Bajgart (a Dublin-based Czech photographer and documentarist), featured our first performance of *Cantiga I*.⁵ One of the key motivations for its inclusion into our shared repertoire was the song's link to our friend, poet and ocean explorer Danny Sheehy (1951–2017), an intellectual and one of the pillars of the Irish-speaking community in the West Kerry *Gaeltacht* of Corca Dhuibhne (Dingle Peninsula), Ireland. In the summer of 2017, Danny tragically lost his life at sea near the coast of Galicia in north-western Spain, during an expedition on board a *naomhóg* (a traditional Irish boat with four pairs of oars), that Liam had also participated in. In the immediate aftermath of the accident, the remaining crew of the *naomhóg* were forced to spend some time in the Galician port city of Vigo, and it was there that renowned West Kerry traditional musician and broadcaster Breannán Ó Beaglaoich translated the poem into Irish. Eventually, the *Cantiga I* was included in the soundtrack of the documentary *The Camino Voyage* by Dónal Ó Céilleachair (2018) which followed the *naomhóg*'s 2,500 km

4. European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies (www.efacis.eu).

5. See "Liam Ó Maonlaí & Kateřina García: Live at Marlay House." *YouTube* [online] [accessed 10. 7. 2023]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3iWn92yBbk&t=18s>>.

journey by sea from the west coast of Ireland, to Santiago de Compostela.⁶

Shortly after the completion of “Live at Marlay House” we were approached by Irish-based cinematographer and director Jaro Waldeck, who studied cinematography at Columbia College Chicago and at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU), and agreed to embark on an audio-visual collaboration. Martín Codax’s *Cantiga I* became our piece of choice, by virtue of both its aesthetic potential and broad cultural relevance.

The *cantigas de amigo* of Martín Codax

Cantiga I is the first piece of a cycle of seven short poems in the genre of *cantigas de amigo* (songs of the beloved) recorded on the *Pergamiño Vindel* (Vindel Parchment). The manuscript takes its name after Don Pedro Vindel (1865–1921), the illustrious Madrid second-hand bookseller, initially based in the Rastro flea-market and from 1893 the proud owner of a shop on 9 Calle del Prado. In 1914 Vindel discovered the parchment, which had been used as binding material for a Medieval manuscript of Cicero’s treatise *De Officiis*. It contains seven love poems in Galician-Portuguese and features, in its upper left corner, the name of their author, the Galician *trovador* Martín Codax, one of the documented authors of lyrical poetry in Medieval Galician-Portuguese.⁷

Shortly after the discovery, Vindel produced a facsimile edition of the parchment and in 1915 published a short study of its content, which he entitled *Martín Codax: Las siete canciones de amor, poema musical del siglo XIII* (Martín Codax: Seven Love Songs, A Musical Poem From the 13th Century).⁸ He subsequently

6. Instrumental motifs from *Cantiga I* appear in the documentary’s soundtrack performed by Carlos Núñez, while Liam Ó Maonlaí sings its first stanza by way of epilogue to the film’s final credits.

7. The content of the Vindel Parchment was contrasted against other known manuscripts featuring Codax’s seven *cantigas*, such as the Vatican Songbook (Cancioneiro da Vaticana) and the Songbook of the Portuguese National Library (Cancioneiro da Biblioteca Nacional). Cfr. Alvarez Sellers 1992.

8. Vindel, Pedro 1915: *Martín Codax: Las siete canciones de amor, poema musical del siglo XIII*. Madrid: Arte Español.



Pergamiño Vindel, M MS M979.

Available at: <<https://www.themorgan.org/manuscript/145456>>

sold the manuscript to Spanish diplomat and musicologist Rafael Mitjana i Gordón, who was at the time based in Uppsala, Sweden. Following Mitjana's death the manuscript's whereabouts became unknown, until it was acquired in 1977 by the Pierpont Morgan Museum, now the Morgan Library and Museum, New York (signature M MS M979).

The seven *cantigas de amigo* attributed to Martín Codax, usually referred to by Roman numerals I to VII, constitute a structured narrative cycle and are broadly regarded as canonical works of the Galician-Portuguese lyrical tradition. This specifically Iberian literary current enjoyed its period of highest prestige in the High Middle Ages, when it was appreciated as the Iberian counterpart to the more internationally influential Provençal lyric, with whom

it competed in the multi-lingual environment of Iberian court cultures.⁹

Little is known about the poet Martín Codax. He is sometimes referred to as a *jogral*, or minstrel, which would explain his interest in popular lyrical forms, as well as the directness and apparent simplicity of his poetic expression. It has been however suggested that during his lifetime he probably composed either at the Portuguese royal court, under the patronage of Alfonso III (r. 1248–1279),¹⁰ or at the court of Fernando III of Castile and León (r. 1217–1252) (Nunes 1931), which would place him, at least for part of his career, at the heart of the high literary culture of his time. We must consider him, in any case, an artist familiar with contemporaneous literary conventions and theoretical treatises on poetic composition (*artes bene dicendi*).

Since their discovery in 1914, Martín Codax's seven *cantigas* have been at the centre of attention of Early Music researchers and practitioners since they are the only *cantigas de amigo* which have arrived to us with extant musical notation (with the exception of Cantiga VI, which features an empty stave). Together with the secular *cantigas de amor* of King Dinis I (r. 1279–1325), found in 1990 on the Sharrer Parchment now held in the Portuguese National Library in Lisbon, they are the only known examples of Galician-Portuguese lyrical song with known original melodies. As such, they have naturally become interpretation and recording favourites.

I wish to reiterate at this point that the *Cantiga I: Tonnta Farraigi Vígo* project is not a historically-informed performance, but rather a loose, and indeed very personal, re-imagining of this iconic work of art: in our interpretation Codax's text is mirrored in its Irish

9. One of the fascinating realities of Iberian court culture during the period of the High Middle Ages was its internationalism, which resulted in a considerable degree of cultural and linguistic diversity, and the co-existence of competing poetic traditions. Galician-Portuguese and Provençal poets alike composed in a shared multi-lingual space, under the patronage of the Kings of Castile and León (Beltrán 2005).
10. Alfonso III of Portugal was son-in-law of Castilian king Alfonso X the Wise (r. 1252–1284). Alfonso X was son and successor of Fernando III of Castile and León, and himself an avid composer of verse in Galician-Portuguese.

translation, which situates the work into a new cultural context, opening new possibilities for its understanding and interpretation.

The poetic voice

One of the defining characteristics of *cantigas de amigo*, which sets them apart from the above mentioned *cantigas de amor* or indeed the sacred *cantigas de Santa María* (narrative songs of Marian devotion), is the protagonism of the female poetic voice. My own interest in the *cantigas de amigo* had originally been triggered by this feature, which aligns them with the Iberian popular song tradition, from which Codax undoubtedly drew inspiration (López Domínguez 2006), but also suggests parallels with other Medieval Iberian lyrical forms, namely the Andalusí Romance *kharjas*. These are brief stanzas, quatrains or couplets, which served as a conclusion (*kharja* meaning ‘outing’) to the Andalusí poetic form of the *muwashshah*. They were generally composed in a different language from the preceding verses, and oftentimes even independently from the main poem to which they were added. In the *diwans*, or poetic anthologies, of renowned Muslim and Jewish Andalusí poets of the Umayyad and late Andalusí periods we can find examples of *kharjas* composed in the local Romance dialect, i.e. in Andalusí Romance, which display striking similarity with the Galician *cantigas de amigo*: namely, the female poetic voice expressing anguish at the absence of her beloved and confiding her sorrow to her mother, sisters or girlfriends, that is, the closest solidary beings within her female collective. Of course, this similarity is not coincidental: the use of the female poetic voice in works composed by male authors, as a literary convention common to both Galician *cantigas de amigo* and Andalusí *kharjas*, has been linked to a shared Hispanic-Romance cultural influence, as well as a broader European tradition of ‘woman’s songs’ (Dronke 1968: 88–90, see also Klinck 2012: 521–527).

Another poetic link which became particularly relevant is the resemblance of some of Codax’s textual formulations with the poetics of the Biblical *Song of Songs*, which was one of the sources of inspiration for Medieval European lyrics and later, in

the Spanish Golden Age period (15th century), one of the pillars of Castilian poetic Mysticism (Fray Luis de León, Teresa of Ávila or St John of the Cross). When examined through a mystical lens, *Cantiga I* becomes a text at once sacred and profane: the main theme and narrative are reminiscent of the *Song of Songs*, while its language, poetic expression, metre and composition are firmly rooted in the popular song tradition. Furthermore, references to the city of Vigo (recurrent throughout Codax's song cycle) position the poem within the concrete geographical and cultural context of north-western Spain.

A key feature which makes *cantigas de amigo* such representative manifestations of Galician culture is the dominant sentiment of *coita de amor* voiced by their female lyrical subjects. The poems convey an acute sense of sorrow, which results from the narrator's separation from her beloved, who is either at sea or otherwise absent.¹¹ In this way, the *cantigas de amigo* reflect a trait typical of the culture of the Iberian north-west, namely its perceived poignancy and melancholy.¹²

With regards poetic expression, one of the most remarkable aspects of *cantigas de amigo* is their deceptive simplicity and resulting ambiguity. *Cantiga I* is in my opinion a outstanding example of poetic minimalism which lends itself to various levels of interpretation.

11. Within Codax's cycle, *cantigas* I, IV and VII express this sentiment, while in poems number II, III, V and VI the young woman voices her rejoicement at the return of her beloved. Thus, each sorrowful poem is followed by two joyful texts, while the entire cycle is opened and concluded on a sorrowful note (Alvarez Sellers 1992: 8).

12. This characteristic sentiment of deep sorrow can also be experienced in the sense of homesickness, in which case it is referred to as *morriña*, a term intrinsically linked to the sizeable Galician diaspora. In neighbouring Portugal, a similar concept exists also, known as *saudade*. This sense of profound sadness finds its perhaps most extraordinary manifestation in the musical style of *fado*. The sorrow and uncertainty voiced by the female poetic voices of the *cantigas de amigo* stands in contrast to both the overall mood of the *cantigas de amor*, and of other contemporaneous lyrical traditions: in the Provençal lyrical tradition, for instance, the prevalent sentiment being *joi*, a more cheerful dimension of romantic expectation (Alvarez Sellers 1992: 9).

Ondas do **mar** de **Vigo**, O waves of the sea of Vigo,
se **vistes meu amigo**? Have you seen my beloved?
E **ai, Deus**, se **verrá cedo**? And O God, will I see him soon?

Ondas do **mar** levado, O waves of the swelling sea,
se **vistes meu amado**? Have you seen my love?
E **ai, Deus**, se **verrá cedo**? And O God, will I see him soon?

Se **vistes meu amigo** Have you seen my beloved,
o por **que eu sospiro**? Whom I am sighing for?
E **ai, Deus**, se **verrá cedo**? And O God, will I see him soon?

Se **vistes meu amado** Have you seen my love,
por **que ei gran coidado**? For whom I feel great sorrow?
E **ai, Deus**, se **verrá cedo**? And O God, will I see him soon?¹³

The poem's structure itself is very simple: the text consists of four couplets with an added third line which acts as a refrain (*refram*). The rhyme is mostly assonant, aligning with the poetic conventions of Hispanic popular song. The rhythmic structure of the poem facilitates its phrasing when performed (in the lyric reproduced above the syllables marked in bold indicate word-stress). Semantically the poem is divided into two halves, whereby stanzas II and IV are minor semantical variations of stanzas I and III, respectively. Each stanza is concluded with the interjection *Ai Deus* (Ah God) followed by the anguished question *se verrá cedo?* (will he soon come to me?).

The poem as a whole is a minimalist, yet sophisticatedly constructed expression of sorrow, uncertainty, longing and hope. The lexical and syntactic economy of Galician *cantigas de amigo*, and *Cantiga I* in particular, allows the reader/listener to fully concentrate their attention on the depth of the feelings expressed by the lyrical subject, in a poetic flow devoid of any description or narrative. Herein lies the *cantiga*'s effectiveness and appeal:

13. Translation by Kateřina García.

its lyrical transparency and language, which emanate from the popular tradition, captivate the reader and listener with surprising directness, whilst its ambiguity makes it fascinating material for artistic interpretation.

Song as a sacred space

In light of the above, it becomes evident why Martín Codax's *Cantiga I* became our choice for a new interpretation. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the original Galician text with its translation into Irish allowed us to pay homage to the links between two cultures whose trajectories have often intersected, and which historically share many affinities.

At the same time, the song was a weighty choice, not only for its almost cult status as one of the foundational texts of the Galician lyrical tradition,¹⁴ but also due to its recent association with the tragic capsizing of the *naomhóg* Naomh Gobnait and the loss of its captain Danny Sheehy. It was in the aftermath of these devastating events that it was translated into Irish and became woven, through the soundtrack of Ó Céilleachair's documentary, into the story of the boat's crew. As interpreters, we were therefore faced with weighty decisions related to its significance, interpretation, and register. These we had to consider not only in order to create a formally "appropriate" interpretation, but above all to ensure that such an interpretation would be truly meaningful, and that it would do artistic justice to the *cantiga* and the events to which it related. Ultimately, the only conceivable approach, and one that was in fact determined by the song itself, was one guided by the utmost humbleness and honesty. Each word, each semantic and syntactic variation needed to be reflected and honoured as a fundamental component of the poem's structure and artistic expression, as an element carrying

14. The organisers of the first exhibition of the Vindel Parchment in Galicia since its acquisition by the Morgan Library and Museum in 1977, referred to the event in the following terms: "The arrival of the Vindel Parchment in Vigo in 2017 [...] is one of the most significant and extraordinary cultural events to take place in Galicia in recent times." See "Pergamiño Vindel: Un tesouro en sete cantigas." Museo do Mar de Galicia [online] [accessed 10. 7. 2023]. Available at: <<https://museodomar.xunta.gal/imaxes/821.jpg>>.



Cantiga I, Pergamiño Vindel. Available at: <<https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/cantigas-de-martin-codax-pergamino-vindel-manuscrito--0/>>

deep symbolism and meaning. We very soon realised that the simplest form can often conceal the deepest significance.

As musical practitioners we decided to draw inspiration from one of the many recordings available to us on the internet. The Vindel Parchment, as mentioned above, contains musical notation which, given the regular rhythmical structure of the lyric, allows for reasonably faithful reconstruction of the song's air. We chose, however, to take an existing interpretation as point of departure and model our own version on it. We settled on a live recording by Spanish Early Music ensemble EVO in collaboration with chamber

choir Cor de Cambra l'Almodí,¹⁵ which chimed with our own understanding of the song by virtue of its unaffectedness and formal intelligibility. In addition, we adapted the song's phrasing at times to facilitate the flow between the original text and its translation, and added elements of vocal improvisation. As a result, our version of *Cantiga I* is considerably novel in its composition.

The visual aspect of our project was the subject of lengthy discussions and underwent several conceptual modifications. Jaro Waldeck, the video's cinematographer and director, approached the song and its context with a very open mind and with great respect towards the work of art, its broader implications and our creative impulses. In a manner not dissimilar to the musical interpretation, here too the song itself showed the way.

Our first and fundamental choice was related to the filming location and overall visual language of the performance. Logically we envisaged *Cantiga I* set within an environment that would best align with the text and the events that we wished to commemorate. The Ocean, indomitable force and direct participant in the poem's drama, transcends the lyrical context and represents a connection with the natural world that surround us. The west coast of Ireland, which is to an extent morphologically similar to the coast of north-western Spain, was a logical choice. Our familiarity with the raw force of the Atlantic allowed us to perform the song with full awareness of the element addressed by the poem's lyrical subject. In Liam's case, performance was undoubtedly determined by personal reminiscences.

The outcome was remarkable: I believe that Jaro Waldeck succeeded to capturing the essence of the poem's message and at the same time reflect both its minimalism and depth. Her 'visual poem' is a succession of images and scenes connected by symbolism relating to the different times of day and the four elements, Wind, Earth, Water and Fire; that is, the essence of all things (see Appendix, images 3–6). The two interpreters, as two poetic voices

15. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdAKxA0OUnY>>.

each in their own right, establish a dialogue with the elements of Nature and sing their *coitado*, that is, their sorrow and longing, but also their hope in a positive outcome. Their counterpart is Nature herself, and above all the Ocean, key actor of the unfolding drama and ultimately its determining force. In Peter Dronke's words (1968: 104): "When she asks the sea for news of her beloved, the sea comes to carry the whole meaning of her love, the serenity and the tumult, the dangers, the thoughts of the lover's death and of his safe return. Yet these questionings are not only introspection – they are outgoing impulses, a surge of sympathy with all that is wild and beautiful on Earth."

Through her inspired editorial and post-production choices, Jaro Waldeck succeeded in capturing the very essence of the *Cantiga*'s poetic message. I would like to believe that in doing so she was guided by our interpretation, but most importantly by the song itself, which speaks to us in a language that is at once locally specific, yet universal.

Concluding remarks

In the course of the project's filming and production, *Cantiga I* gradually became a space of heightened awareness. With every subsequent performance the literal meaning of the text appeared less relevant, acquiring instead an almost transcendental significance; as if during the creative process itself everything somehow "fell into place" and the song touched every particle of the artists' being. The song became an unquestionably true message, a ritual, a prayer. This experience cemented my conviction that when a song is performed in a manner true to, and consistent with, its original purpose, it can garner exceptional power and have a transformative effect on both performer and audience. In the framework of artistic research, a performance conducted in a respectful, informed and honest manner, with full awareness of context and significance, can enable the practitioner to experience a powerful connection with the work of art, and through it ultimately contemplate, and comprehend, its very essence.

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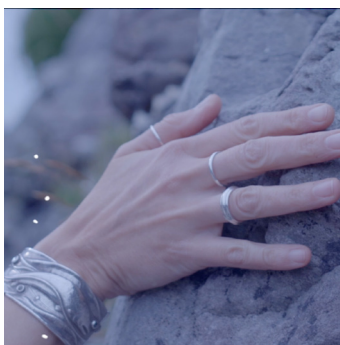
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Summary

This paper focuses on the recently completed audio-visual project *Cantiga I: Tonnta Farraigi Vigo*, featuring Irish singer and multi-instrumentalist Liam Ó Maonlaí and singer and academic Katerina García, and directed by Jaro Waldeck (2023). The project, which was co-funded by the Trinity Arts and Benefactions Fund, Trinity College Dublin, consists of the musical and visual re-imagining of an iconic 13th century Galician *cantiga d'amigo*, or song of the beloved, attributed to Galician trovador Martín Codax (2nd half of the 13th century), all while establishing a dialogue between the original Medieval Galician text with its hitherto unpublished translation into Irish. Taking *Cantiga I: Tonnta Farraigi Vigo* as a point of departure, the paper further reflects on more general questions, such as the roles of artistic research and performance as paths of enquiry. For we would argue that it is through the intellectual, aesthetic and physical dimensions of the performative act that the artist/performer is able to experience a more transcendental understanding of the work of art, and a deeper connection with the world that surrounds us.

Key words: Medieval Poetry; interpretation of historical works of art; arts practice as method of research; Martín Codax

Příloha / Appendix:



Záběry z hudebního videa Cantiga I: Tonnta Farraigí Vigo (režie Jaro Waldeck, 2023) / Images from the musical video Cantiga I: Tonnta Farraigí Vigo (dir. Jaro Waldeck, 2023)