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### Dalí's Musical Roundabouts

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before – performance at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. By this time, he had become so respected a public figure in France that he was being seriously encouraged to run for president. Apparently, however – though he remained active for any number of causes to the end – Montand did not share Ronald Reagan’s grand ambitions: he never became the *acting president* of France. He died while shooting a movie in 1991.

The exhibition and its handsome accompanying catalogue bring together images virtually each of which is emblematic of the “French scene” during the middle decades of the 20th century. The venue, the City Hall of Paris, could not be more appropriate for an artist who – in spite of his Italian origins – embodied *Parisianness* throughout his career.

### NEW YORK: DALÍ’S MUSICAL ROUNDABOUTS

The essay accompanying the exhibition *Salvador Dalí: Dream of Venus*. Queens Museum of Art, New York (22 June to 28 September 2003).

Dalí needs a stage with greater urgency  
than he needs an art gallery.  
*The New York Times* (1944)

Those familiar with Salvador Dalí’s contradictory nature as well as his propensity to mask his own thoughts will not be surprised to learn that, publicly, he despised music, though obviously that was not the case at all. In fact, many witnesses say – Amanda Lear, for one – he was actually quite musical and, time and again, he could be caught off guard singing or humming Catalan folk songs, sardanas, zarzuelas, and cuplés – all folksy, kitschy, and, by most accounts, tacky popular songs. Dalí, however, went to a great length to conceal this spontaneous love for the simple, uncomplicated folk and popular music of his rural Catalan upbringing. Indeed, his many (mis)adventures in the field of music could be seen as attempts to obscure the persistence of his musical memory.

As the son of a relatively wealthy notary, Dalí grew up in an atmosphere in which the arts were ever-present. Dalí’s uncle Anselm Domènec, for example, owned a bookstore across from the Liceu opera theater in Barcelona. The store was a hub for Wagnerian intellectuals, artists, and musicians and their *tertúlies* (gatherings) included the composers Amadeus Vives and Lluís Millet, as well as other members of the choral association Orfeo Català. Furthermore, early on, Dalí, Miró, the architect Josep Lluís Sert and the serialist Catalan composer Robert Gerhard founded an artistic group called *Associació d’Amics de l’Art Nou* to advocate new art and music. Later on in his career, Dalí kept up his connections in the music world, including

As for the comparison with Frank Sinatra, the record is mum on whether Montand indeed saw the American singer as his rival. One suspects that he was satisfied with the moniker that was affixed to him upon his smash Broadway debut and which accompanied him throughout his tours in the United States: “The Idol of Paris.” And if he did give the Montand-Sinatra rivalry a thought, he need only to have recalled the words of *The New York Post*, published the day after his opening night at the Henry Miller Theatre on 22 September 1959: “All our singers, including Mr. Sinatra, could sit at his feet.”

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his friendship with the Italian composer Giacinto Scelzi and Sol Hurok, the famous New York concert manager. To the artist’s delight, Hurok once arranged a sort of cultural exchange with the Soviet Union, including performances by Victoria de los Ángeles and Andrés Segovia, as well as one of Dalí’s canvasses from the impresario’s private collection. Dalí spoke of the painting as “reuniting” with its origins.

Without a doubt, one of the earliest musical influences on Dalí was the Pitxot (or Pichot) family. They summered in Cadaqués and they frequently held musical soirées. On nights of full moon, for example, they would set a grand piano on a boat from which music was performed. The fishermen and seasonal residents of the area would sit on the rocks along the shoreline to listen and see the musical boat smoothly drifting by. The brothers Ricard (Pau Casals’s student and friend) and Lluís Pitxot played the cello and the violin and, with Lluís Bonaterra, formed the Trío Hispania, an ensemble that toured Spain and Europe during many years. It was also during his early years that Dalí became familiar with the weekly concerts by the Figueres regiment’s marching band on the town’s Rambla, playing, among other things, excerpts from popular zarzuelas. Many years later, Dalí would sing on television a song from one of the most popular zarzuelas, the campy *La corte del Faraón*.

When the artist moved to Madrid, he became a member of the Residencia de Estudiantes, an elitist artistic center and university dorm that gathered the crème de la crème of the Spanish intelligentsia. There, he met García Lorca, Buñuel and the composer and critic Adolfo Salazar.

During those years, many European composers and performers came to present their music to the "Resi," as it was called including: Falla, Milhaud, Stravinsky, Poulenc, Segovia, Viñes, and Landowska. But Dalí, instead, became a jazz fan and, by many accounts, spent a large part of his allowance buying recordings of jazz. In Madrid, he attended performances of the Jackson Brothers and, taken by the Charleston craze it was, in the end, the roaring 1920s began dance lessons (earlier, in Catalonia, he also had mastered the tango). Around the same time, a Catalan art critic compared Dalí's art to the music of the Southern Syncopated Orchestra, a band that had just performed in Barcelona. Dalí loved the comparison and wrote: "One of my greatest loves [is] jazz, that fantastic, anti-artistic music... and industrial object."

As soon as Dalí moved to Paris, many composers, writers, and stage directors requested his collaboration in the design of sets and costumes for theater, ballet, and opera productions. Whereas a 1949 collaboration with Peter Brook for Wilde's *Salome* in England was considered scandalous and had to be withdrawn, his relationship with the ballet was more successful. In 1939, he designed a backdrop for the ballet *Bacchanale* for the Metropolitan Opera of New York (it had originally been designed for the Ballet Russes de Monte Carlo). The premiere coincided with his *Dream of Venus* pavilion for the 1939 World's Fair in Queens. Other ballets followed: *Babalou* (unperformed), *Tristan fou* (1944), *El café de Chinitas* (1944), *Ballet de Gala* (1941), based on the Scarlatti opera *The Spanish Lady and the Roman Chevalier*, and *Sentimental Colloquy* (1944).

Based on a Verlaine poem from his *Fêtes Galantes*, the music for *Sentimental Colloquy* was written by Paul Bowles and Andre Eglevesky created the choreography. Dalí's work was apparently disappointing. The *New York Times* took a dim view (see the quotation that heads this essay) and Paul Bowles pronounced himself "royally duped," while Dalí's wealthy patrons, the Spanish Marqués de Cuevas and his Rothschild wife, seemed indifferent. Dalí's backdrop represented some familiar surrealist imagery echoing the iconography of Buñuel's *Un chien andalous*. The stage set depicted a group of cyclists covered in wedding veils and shrouds sliding backwards and forwards past a piano whose interior box is a pool with a gushing pipe.

Dalí made plans for many other ballets. In his infamous diary, for example, he describes his intentions of writing a ballet called *Millet's Angelus*. The music, he says, will be from Bizet's *L'Arlésienne* and Nietzsche's compositions. Also in the diary we learn about more plans for a musical film to be titled *The Flesh Wheel-Barrel*. The story, which the artist describes in gruesome detail, includes a scene in which a group of gypsies kill and cut up an elephant and "in spite of their savage frenzy, do not for one moment stop singing flamenco..." Another scene was to include Nietzsche, Freud, Ludwig II of Bavaria, and Marx "singing their doctrines with incomparable virtuosity, answering each other antiphonally, to some music of Bizet."

In 1972, Dalí finally realized one of his megalomaniac projects, the "opera-poem" *To be God (Être Dieu)*. The respected writer Manuel Vázquez Montalbán wrote the libretto and Igor Wakhévitch set it to music (CD, Distributions d'Art Surréaliste, Barcelona DCD-50001-3). Written primarily in French, it features bursts of English, Spanish and what seemed to be coming back to him as an unavoidable memory - snatches of Catalan bawdy folk songs and childhood twisters. In fact, folk songs kept cropping up in his public appearances. In a 1966 BBC documentary about Lorca, for example, Dalí was interviewed and on a whim started singing the Granada popular song *El zorongo gitano* that he had learned from the poet. It is also a melody Albéniz and Falla used in their compositions (most ostensibly in the latter's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*). On another documentary he sings on camera "La filla del marxant," again, a Catalan folk song.

An any rate, it seems that, in his old age, Dalí went back to the musical origins that he had worked so hard to deny. It did not come as a surprise, for instance, when, on his deathbed he requested no Nietzsche, Wagner, Stravinsky, Gerhard or Scarlatti, not even Bizet, but Toselli's *Serenata*, also known as *Rimpianto* (a nostalgic, sugary melody very much in tune with French fin-de-siècle aesthetics) as well as a few light-hearted tangos and cuplés - indeed, the same music he grew up with and that had persisted in his memory. The circle had been completed.

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