



# EUSKAL KULTUR ERAKUNDEA

## INSTITUT CULTUREL BASQUE

Château Lota Jauregia - 64480 Ustaritz - Uztaritze  
Tél. 05 59 93 25 25 - Fax. 05 59 93 06 84 - eke@wanadoo.fr

Egilea - Auteur : Patxi HIRIART

Iturria - Source : Kattalin Totorikak 2004ko urrian egin elkarrizketa / Entretien de Kattalin

Totorika - Octobre 2004 - Itzulpenak - Traductions : Kattalin Totorika-Phillip Basterra

Urtea - Année : 2004

**Patxi Hiriart** is one of the symbols of the new generation of improvisers from the improvisation schools which have sprung up across the Basque Country

### THE BIRTH OF A PASSION

“I acquired a taste for improvisation when the ikastola (Basque-medium school) in Bayonne opened a class. I was in CM2 (10-11 years old) and we were only a small group. From then on, I’ve always continued. Karlos Aizpurua was our teacher. I must admit that in the beginning I was pushed by my mother, but afterwards, I realised that improvisation enabled me to learn many things. Also, it was something new, and it was a change from usual activities like football or pelota. When the improvisation schools got off the ground, we met outside lesson time for an hour a week with Karlos Aizpurua as our teacher. Then I attended to high-school in Cambo and there, a new group was set up: there were a few of us from the Lycée in Bayonne, others came from inland in the Basque Country. At present there are five of us, four boys and one girl. In the beginning, there were more of us, simply because some left. Improvisation is not everyone’s cup of tea.”

### IN THE TRADITION OF GREAT IMPROVISERS

“When I began, I didn’t have a model. We progressed little by little, at our own rhythm. Improvisation was a game for us and a way for us to mutually provoke each other, but without thinking of becoming great improvisers one day. We knew some improvisers like Egaña and Lizaso, because they’re very good. And the thought crossed our minds: I want to be like ... In improvisation class we studied the improvisations of Xalbador. He was a great improviser because in his verses he expressed both humour and feelings. We also worked on the improvisations of Bilintx who mostly write love poems. We worked on improvisations by current bertsolaris too: we read and studied those of Amets Arzallus and Sustrai Colina. They are true models for us because over the last few years they have kept company with the greatest improvisers and they’ve gone a long way in the Basque Country Championship: Sustrai made the final and Amets wasn’t far behind ... I do hope he manages at the next championship!”

### THE ROAD TO CREATION

“Once I’ve been given the subject, I think of the idea I’m going to place at



# EUSKAL KULTUR ERAKUNDEA

---

## INSTITUT CULTUREL BASQUE

Château Lota Jauregia - 64480 Ustaritz - Uztaritze  
Tél. 05 59 93 25 25 - Fax. 05 59 93 06 84 - eke@wanadoo.fr

the end of my improvisation because the audience always remembers the end. I then have to work backwards, preparing the last point, the one that carries the idea, and develop the explanation of this final point in the points which precede it. Melody isn't a problem because we choose it amongst ourselves and we use melodies we know. New melodies can be created and we learn them. I have more difficulties than the others because I don't have a musical ear, but nevertheless I manage to learn them. For me, the most difficult part is finding the idea. But now we have a certain amount of experience, we always end up finding something. Our teacher gives us techniques to improve our verse and our voice, mine is a little clumsy ... At the moment, at the beginning of each lesson we spend ten minutes studying old improvisations. We read and sing them. That's how we learn."

### **FIRST EXPERIENCES**

"I remember the first time I improvised. I don't know when it was, but I had to greet Sustrai Colina. We were very young and they had an improvisation session. Although we had prepared beforehand, I was really frightened. There were three friends with me, and they also had to do the same thing with the other improvisers present, and that was very difficult. Luckily you get used to it and eventually you take great pleasure in it. Every year we take part in the inter-school championship reserved for the under 18's. An eliminatory round was held in the Northern Basque Country and two or three of us made it into the final. I have taken part regularly and it's never easy."

### **THE QUALITIES OF AN IMPROVISER**

"Improvisation is not about talent, it's a question of practice. An improviser must above all master the Basque language. He must also have a sense of humour, and it's true that all improvisers, or almost of them, do. He must also be able to sing touching verses. Touching improvisations are mostly used at championships, although humour remains the most important. Throughout the history of improvisation the subjects used have evolved a lot. Previously the most popular subjects were country life, the Basque Country, tradition and faith. Today all subjects are dealt with, that's what's changed, and improvisers are educated, which wasn't the case previously. But the values remain unchanged. An improviser has to read the press. If you don't keep up with events you may find it difficult to improvise. You also need to read books and work on old improvisations. That's what we do in improvisation classes: we study the way in which former improvisers used metaphors, in order to learn to form our own ideas."



## **EUSKAL KULTUR ERAKUNDEA**

---

## **INSTITUT CULTUREL BASQUE**

Château Lota Jauregia - 64480 Ustaritz - Uztaritze  
Tél. 05 59 93 25 25 - Fax. 05 59 93 06 84 - eke@wanadoo.fr

### **PREFERRED SUBJECTS**

“I like to improvise on all subjects. For example, it’s amusing to put yourself in someone else’s shoes because it makes you defend ideas and arguments which you don’t necessarily share. I suppose it’s a little bit like acting, and that’s something we enjoy. I’ve even given my own opinion whilst I was supposed to be someone else. At the end of the day, we say what we think, we don’t always look for extraordinary things. Plus you don’t say the same things in front of a young audience as in front of an older one, you have to adapt what you say. And performing in the Northern Basque Country is not the same as performing in the South. You sometimes have to change certain words or expressions in order to be understood by everyone.”

### **THE CONTRIBUTION OF IMPROVISATION**

“Improvisation enables me to have a good time with my friends. We know we’re keeping the Basque language alive, which is very important for us. Improvisation also teaches you how to speak in public. I’m rather timid and thanks to improvisation I’m able to express myself more easily in public or when I have to speak in class. Since improvisation is not fully “standardised” in the Northern Basque Country, when we were at high school, some of the pupils laughed at us improvising. Improvisers are different. Now mentalities are changing, but I think that Amets, Sustrai and that generation suffered from this situation more than us. For me improvisation has become an integral part of my life and, even if I don’t become a great bertsolari, I’ll continue to support improvisation and I’ll go to encourage other improvisers. Of course this discipline requires a lot of time, for example Sustrai and Amets perform every weekend in a different place ... Plus, you have to practice together once or twice a week. But that’s a commitment I’m prepared to make.”

### **TODAY & TOMORROW**

“After improvisers like Ezponda and Alkat there was no-one until Amets and Sustrai appeared. People at that time thought it was the end of improvisation. Today it’s regaining popularity and is little by little becoming accepted. I have no doubt about the future of improvisation. It’s important to make more people aware of it. You can’t like what you don’t know. When an improvisation is good, the audience cannot help liking it. Of course, there’s still a long way to go, especially in the Northern Basque Country. Just like acting, improvisation enables the Basque language to stay alive. In the Northern Basque Country, improvisation is less popular than theatre, but there are more and more people followers of improvisation, and if it continues like that, this art will survive, there’s no doubt about that.”