

The Senses and The City: Interpreting the Semana Santa of Seville

Duncan Whitley

duncan@shotgunsounds.com

Abstract

The Semana Santa of Seville can be understood as a re-imagining of the city through a re-configuring of the senses: the visual, the auditory, the olfactory and the tactile. The city and the self are transformed through the Semana Santa, the city's major annual *fiesta*, in a form of multi-sensory theatre in which the urban landscape becomes the stage, co-habited by actors and audience alike. This paper will explore the soundscapes of the Semana Santa, the complex matrix of acoustic communication that underpins them, and how they are shaped by Seville's particular urban landscape, where sound and architecture take on a reciprocal and harmonious relationship.

Keywords: acoustic communication, urban soundscape, place and identity, reflexive ethnographies, religion and the senses, synaesthesia

1. Introduction

This paper is written to accompany an audio-visual presentation performed at *Invisible Places, Sounding Cities*, in Viseu (2014). The ideas explored, in both the paper and the audio-visual presentation, reflect recurring themes arising through sound-oriented studies and creative audio-visual work in Seville's *Semana Santa* (Easter Week) since 2006. The outputs of this work have ranged across audio releases, multi-channel sound and video installations, presentations, writing and a permanent collection in the British Library¹.

The paper and audio-visual presentation present a series of observations and reflections arising from these studies, that read like an exploded view of the *Semana Santa* in which some of the pieces are missing, or given only cursory attention. The religious images and the manners in which they are arranged on their *pasos* (floats comprising a number of visual elements in harmonious arrangement), processional music, the *saetas* (a form of flamenco prayer sung to religious images of the *Semana Santa*) the roles of the olfactory and the tactile senses, and not least the social and religious, spiritual life of the brotherhoods, all warrant significant attention in a more complete interpretation of the *fiesta*.

The ideas presented here attempt to shed light on the function and effects of sound within the *Semana Santa*, within the context of a festival which is in many ways synthetic. The study is specific to the *Semana Santa* of Seville, and it is worth mentioning that it is a festival celebrated with much variation according to local custom.

1.1. The role of the senses

We will see that there is a complex matrix of acoustic communication² at play within the *Semana Santa*, and that it is situated right at the heart of the *fiesta*'s expressive language. The aural aspects of the *Semana Santa* are regarded with importance, and there is "an acoustic of noises and sounds that aren't notated on any stave, and yet they are its authentic symphony, the most unmistakable. Noises and sounds that sevillians know instinctively, without having them classified" (Cué 2006, 83-84). I propose that a sound-oriented approach to interpreting the *Semana Santa* can reveal some of the dynamic relationships between memory, the senses and the city, which mark the experience of the festival.

1. British Library collection reference C1338.

2. See Truax 2001, 49-64.

The Semana Santa is a sensuous affair, whose language has a tendency towards synaesthetic experience: it is characterised by visual, olfactory, tactile and aural elements in interplay with private and collective memory. I propose soundscape studies as useful tool *in combination with other tools* for an ethnography of the Semana Santa of Seville.

1.2. Perspective

The interpretation of the Semana Santa requires a constant movement between the micro and the macro, between isolated detail and the harmonic whole. As such, I have attempted to present a set of ideas with a degree of non-linearity: an *exploded view*.

2. The fiesta and the city

The city is inseparable from the Semana Santa, both spatially and temporally. One cannot be understood without the other... The history of the city is not alien to the history of the Semana Santa, and vice versa. They flow in parallel, they mutually influence one another, they reflect as if they were two mirrors situated one in front of the other. (Robles, Roldán and Torres 2012, 22-23)

2.1. Ephemerality and the Semana Santa

The Semana Santa of Seville is a religious festival whose language is essentially ephemeral. There are sixty-one Catholic brotherhoods that make their station of penitence at the Cathedral between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. Each corporation carries their titular religious images (sculptures representing moments of the Passion of Christ) through the streets on floats, journeying between their church or chapel and the Cathedral. The journeying presupposes a series of temporal encounters between the religious images and the city, a dramaturgy in which “the city is not a mere backdrop, rather it forms an essential part of the fiesta, of the liturgy, of its emotions.” (Robles, Roldán and Torres 2012, 22) The evanescent nature of the Semana Santa is central to the reconfiguring of the senses, and the relationships between memory and the city.

2.2. Topography of the Semana Santa

The processions of the Semana Santa take place in public, urban space. The beginning and end points of the processions are marked by the moments of entry and exit of the processions from the churches or chapels in which they reside (known as the *entradas* and *salidas*). Each brotherhood is obliged by rule to visit the Cathedral to make its station of penitence, passing first by the General Council of Brotherhoods³ and followed by the city hall. Therefore the majority of Seville's Semana Santa takes place within the historic centre, each brotherhood with its unique itinerary through the old town's complex network of narrow, winding streets.

The topography of Seville is crucial to understand how this celebration is manifested in its streets. Seville is a flat city that sits on the lower reaches of the Guadalquivir. There are few sloping streets, such as the Cuesta del Rosario or the Cuesta del Bacalao... which in reality are gentle inclines that would pass unnoticed in another city. This is more important than it seems, since this terrain without inclines worthy of mention facilitates the carrying of the heavy floats, which would be difficult to perform in another city [with a less even terrain]. (Robles, Roldán and Torres 2012, 18)

It can be seen that the Semana Santa has evolved in response to the specific characteristics of the city. Indeed, the practical considerations of the carriage of the *pasos* (the heavy floats that bear the religious images) through the tortuous streets of the historic centre have further evolved into artistic considerations, where the navigation of a particular street corner may be elevated to a level of artistry due to its difficulty. This is particularly noticeable in the aforementioned *entradas* and *salidas*, where the passage of the large floats through the church doorways is calculated with mere inches to spare. For example, when the brotherhood of Jesús Despojado prepares to carry its religious images from its chapel, large crowds gather to witness the complicated manoeuvre of the religious floats through the doorway of the church. Due to the dimensions of the float and the doorway respectively, the float-bearers are required to carry out the whole operation on their knees, and the successful completion of this act is met with an emotional outburst of applause and cries of "¡olé!" from the public.

3. Consejo General de Hermandades y Cofradías de Sevilla.

2.3. Lexicon of the Semana Santa

To begin any explanation of the Seville's Semana Mayor (major fiesta) is a complicated task, without making reference to the veritable, dialectal lexicon which has developed in parallel to the fiesta.

The traditions of the Semana Santa, its dialectal and ethnographic actions, are not limited to the insider world of the brotherhoods, rather they form part the speech and the traditions of the city. In Seville, anyone knows what a *trabajadera*⁴ or a *maría*⁵ is, objects and terms which strictly speaking pertain to the imitation of the initiates who are the nucleus from whence the terms were coined. (Burgos 2004, 111)

The lexicon of the Semana Santa is extensive, giving linguistic expression to any of the composite elements of the fiesta: sculpture, embroidery, silversmithing, musical composition, musical performance, and the work (one might dare to say *performance*) of the float-bearers; all of which interact in a compositional whole, completed only when experienced in fleeting configurations within the fabric of the city.

3. Synthesis

The Semana Santa synthesises in many ways, which we will begin to explore here. It is worth making brief note in particular of the term *synchresis*, a fusion of the words *synchronism* and *synthesis*, “the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time.” (Chion 1994, 63)

4. A term describing the transversal wooden beams which form part of the structure of the underside of the religious floats, which rest upon the neck and shoulders of the float-bearers in order for them to lift and carry the floats.

5. A term describing the two candles mounted nearest to the image of the Virgin on the float.

3.1. The tale of Stravinsky

Igor Stravinsky visited Seville during the Semana Santa of 1921, accompanied by the Russian choreographer Diaghliev. Popular legend has it that during his visit Stravinsky was hosted by Spanish journalist and poet Juan Lafita. Upon witnessing the Virgen del Refugio carried through the Puerta de la Carne, whilst the band interpreted *Soleá, dame la mano*, he is said to have exclaimed to his host: “Congratulate the composer, because I am seeing what I am hearing and I am hearing what I am seeing!”

3.2. Solitude, give me your hand through the prison bars

In the mornings of Good Friday, returning from the cathedral to the neighbourhood of Triana, the Esperanza de Triana (literally, the Hope of Triana) would pass by the old prison named Pópulo in the street of Pastor y Landero. As the procession approached, the prisoners incarcerated within would press themselves up to the bars of the windows, apparently the only day of the year on which they would be permitted to do so. Upon passing by the jail, the float-bearers carrying the image of Cristo de las Tres Caídas and the Virgin nicknamed *Hope*, would detain the images, turning them laterally in the street to face the prison’s barred windows. And from behind those windows, prisoners would intone imploring *saetas*.

In film footage from the Twenties, fragments of which can be seen on YouTube today, something of these historical events remains: gesturing arms can be made out, extending through the bars of the old prison windows, though we have no way of knowing what those *saetas* might have sounded like.⁶

A curious trace of these lost *saetas* lives on today, in one of the city’s most celebrated compositions for the Semana Santa: *Soleá, dame la mano*. Manuel Font de Anta’s 1918 composition was written after Font de Anta witnessed one of these *saetas*, sung from the bars of the prison to the Esperanza de Triana, and the original sheet music bears the following inscription:

Soleá, dame la mano
A la reja de la carse
Que tengo muchos hermanos
Huérfanos de pare y mare

6. Early sound recordings of the *saetas* of Manuel Centeno, Vallejo, Tomás Pavón and others might give us some flavour. It should be noted however, that these recordings from the Twenties were made in recording studios by professional flamenco singers.

Solitude, give me your hand
Through the bars of the prison
For I have many brothers
Orphaned of mother and father

Below which is written the dedication: “To the unfortunate inmates of Seville’s prison who, upon singing *saetas* to the Virgin during the Semana Santa, inspired me to conceive this work.”

3.3. Pasos de palio

To shed light upon the synaesthetic experience alluded to in Stravinsky’s (possibly mythical) exclamation, we should first mention that Font de Anta’s composition *Soleá* is descriptive in nature⁷. Secondly, it is useful to understand the specific manner in which Seville’s *Dolorosas*⁸ are carried through the streets during the Semana Santa. The images of the Virgin are born upon a *paso* or float, carried by a team of float-bearers, usually numbering thirty-six in total, but varying upon the size and weight of the float. The float-bearers are located beneath the float, hidden from sight by hanging velvet drapes, and the mechanism by which the *pasos* are given motion being thus disguised, the images are given the impression of walking. Above the head of the Virgin is suspended an embroidered canopy known as the *palio*, which is support by twelve ornate vertical poles, or *varales*. These are mounted upon the float, six to each side of the Virgin. For this reason the floats bearing Virgins in Seville are known as *pasos de palio*, often shortened simply to *palio*. The synchronised work of the float-bearers in carrying the floats forwards also produces a rhythmic, lateral movement, causing in the canopy above the Virgin the appearance of lateral motion in the opposite direction (from the direction of movement of the float). This ingenious form of animation given to the *palio* results in a gentle and harmonic visual motion, which synthesises with the musical accompaniment provided by the processional band following behind the float. It is worth noting that as the *paso de palio* is seen approaching from the front, the processional band remains hidden from view behind the float, hence providing an acousmatic sound source⁹ until the float has passed-by (revealing the files of musicians following behind).

7. Curiously, the sheet music is headed by the inscription “*Soleá, dame la mano. Impression, in the form of a funereal march.*”

8. Denomination for images of the Virgin depicted in mourning for Jesus Christ. In Seville sculptures of this category are typically distinguished by glass “tears” on the cheeks of the image, and a white handkerchief carried in the right hand.

9. Chion 1994, 71-73.

4. Centripetal soundscape

The soundscapes of the Semana Santa, as we will see, are oriented around the religious floats and the religious images born on them. Each procession typically carries two religious floats: the first bears the image of Christ, or a collection of figures including Christ and together narrating a scene from the passion (known as the *paso de Cristo* or *paso de misterio* respectively); the second bearing the *Dolorosa*, referred to as the *paso de palio*. The floats carried by a given brotherhood are separated spatially by a number of *Nazarenos* (literally, Nazarenes), hooded members of the brotherhood processing in files two abreast. In this way, the soundscapes of each procession can be seen as having two moving centres (or one or three, in the cases of brotherhoods who carry these numbers of floats), which wind through the city across several hours following the brotherhood's processional route. Six to eight brotherhoods process each of the seven days of the Semana Santa¹⁰, such that at any one time there are a number of processions traversing the streets simultaneously. A map of the soundscapes of the Semana Santa might give us a picture of a number of moving focal points, all passing at some point down the *Official Route* leading to the Cathedral.

4.1. Processional music

The processional bands in their numerous denominations¹¹ accompany the floats bearing the religious images, animating them with musical narrative and, as we have alluded previously, synthesising with the visual elements of the floats through a *syncretic* relationship. The bands can often be heard approaching (or disappearing) from significant distance, so the processional music accompanying the images is perceived as a long, slow fade leading to a climax (as the float passes by), and followed by a further slow fade-out. The religious images are therefore announced long before they are seen, giving to an anticipative sense of expectation.

It is worth mentioning that particular processional marches take on specific meaning or colour when performed in certain places. In the street of Pastor y Landero, the Virgin *Esperanza de Triana* passes by the site of the Pópulo prison in the early hours of Good Friday. As the Virgin is turned in the street to face a plaque marking where the old jail once stood (the

10. With the exception of Easter or Resurrection Sunday, when only one brotherhood has its procession.

11. principally, *Bandas de Cornetas y Tambores* and *Agrupaciones Musicales* in accompaniment to the *pasos de Cristo* and *pasos de misterio*, and *Bandas de Música* accompanying the Virgins, each with their distinct instrumentation and repertoire.

prison was demolished in 1932), the band accompanying the Virgin interprets *Soleá, dame la mano*. There are countless examples of other such employments of processional music that achieve this high degree of *site* or *context-specificity*.

4.2. Saetas

As has been previously mentioned, the *saetas* are flamenco prayers, sung from balconies or from the streets as the floats are carried past, forming part of the centripetal pattern that we are sketching. The *saetas* are typically sung as the floats are detained (to afford the float-bearers a rest), at whichtime the processional music is also detained.

Saetas are often prepared or improvised to make some specific reference to the place in which they are sung, the religious images to which they are addressed, or the circumstances in which the singer finds themselves at that time. Consider for example the two five-line verses of this *saeta* sung by Pili del Castillo in 2013. The verses describe the face of the Virgin of *Las Aguas*, to whom the singer addresses her *saeta*, then lamenting the absence of Pepe Perejil, *saeta* singer and close friend of Pili del Castillo who died in 2011:

Madre mía de Las Aguas
Tienes la cara divina
Pero es tanto tu hermosura
Que no la quiebra la pena
Ni el llanto te desfigura

Si al llegar a tu capilla
Notas que te falta algo
No llores tu madre mía
Que Perejil desde el cielo
Seguro que te está cantando

Mother of mine, of Las Aguas
Your face is divine
But such is your beauty
That pity does not break it
Nor is it disfigured by crying

If arriving at your chapel

You notice that you are missing something
Do not cry, Mother of mine
I'm sure that Perejil
Is singing to you from the Heavens

4.3. The world of acoustic communication of those below

As previously mentioned, teams of float-bearers carry out the work of bearing their Christs and *Dolorosas* through the city's streets on their shoulders. The float-bearers are enclosed by a velvet drape hanging from the wooden structure of the float, both preventing them from being seen from the outside and conversely, from seeing out. Guiding them from the street is the foreman (known as the *capataz*), who acts as the eyes of those beneath the float. He communicates with his float-bearers through a veritable lexicon of verbal commands. So important is this detail of the Semana Santa that Antonio Burgos dedicates the an entire third of his *Folklore of the Sevillian Brotherhoods* to the discussion of the terminology employed by the foremen and float-bearers.

The foreman is charged with operating the *llamador*, also known as the *martillo* (the hammer):

A more or less artistically formed knocker, whose dry and spaced knocks alert the float-bearers that the march is to be resumed, and give the signal for the lifting of the float. The "martillo" - which constitutes a complete system of communication between the foreman and float-bearers, with its opportune semantic code - knocks against the "perno", a metal support which enhances the percussive effect. (Burgos 2004, 39)

The vernacular of the foreman in Seville's Semana Santa is expressive in every facet of the carrying of his work: the giving of orders to the unsighted float-bearers (which is his principle job); encouraging and inspiring his float-bearers to overcome difficult moments; and the solemn dedications to those no longer here. The local accent of Seville finds itself exaggerated in the voice of the *capataz*, applied together with the rules of economy of Seville's dialect, to produce phrases such as:

Vámano j'otra veh, mi árma! Tos poriguá valiéente! A eeeésta é!

Which in traditional Spanish reads:

Vámanos otra vez, mi alma! Todos por igual, valientes! A ésta [vez] es!

Meaning in English:

Let's go again! All together now! This time!

This kind of exposition of the voice clearly moves beyond a closed system of communication between the foreman and his team of float-bearers, entering into the realm of the performative:

This kind of voice to order the lifting of the float, varies and multiplies into infinity. Around an invariable semantic scheme (the calling to attention of the “*patero*”¹², the cry of “*a esta é!*”, the execution of the knock of the “*martillo*”), every discrete circumstance and the greater or lesser inspiration of each foreman gives it a special style. Each foreman gives the voice of command an inflexion with his own personal style, charging the accents melodically in each case. In this way, the ritual phrases... acquire the character of the psalms of the muezzin, almost of gypsy or flamenco song. (Burgos 2004, 48)

4.4. Silence

Not all of the religious images are accompanied by processional bands: A number of the images are preceded by a three-piece woodwind section, comprising clarinet, oboe and bassoon, which announced the arrival of the religious images with short, sombre piece of music known as a *saetilla*¹³. These *saetillas* have the effect of quietening the awaiting crowd, and a profound hush can fall amongst the multitude, observed in increasing rigour with the proximity of the religious image. The hush of the crowd is like an inverted reflection of the soundscape of the processional bands, fading away to an intense silence with the proximity of the *pasos*, and fading up to a sea of chattering once more as the religious images pass out of site.

12. *Patero* is the denomination given to the float-bearers positioned at each of the four corners of the float

13. Literally, a small arrow, or *saeta*.

In this quietened environment, punctuated by coughs and camera clicks, a whole set of sounds associated the *pasos* become audible and foregrounded: the unison shuffling of feet of the float-bearers, the creaking of the wooden floats, the tinkling of the twelve poles that support the canopy above the Virgin. In his chapter entitled *Sevillian Acoustic*, Ramón Cué describes the silence more poetically:

Be quiet, and you will hear the sputtering of the candles carried by the passing members of the brotherhood, all chanting with their tongues of light; and you will hear the dripping of wax, gentle and luminous, upon the streets.

And so you will be ready to hear the music of the palio of the Virgin. An angelic symphony! Sevillian carillon! The creaking of its silver poles; the tinkling of the “bambalinas”; the sound of the buzzing hive of wax that weeps knelt before the Virgin; and the carnation that doubles up wilted in the heat. (Cué 2006, 84)

REFERENCES

- Burgos, Antonio.** 2004. *Folklore of the brotherhoods of Seville* (Folklore de las cofradías de Sevilla). Seville: Universidad de Sevilla
- Chion, Michel.** 1994. *Audio-Vision. Sound on Screen*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Cué, Ramón.** 2006. *Cómo llora Sevilla*. Seville: Rosalibros
- Robles, Francisco and Roldán, Manuel Jesús and Torres, Álvaro.** 2012. *The History of the Semana Santa of Seville* (La Historia de la Semana Santa Sevillana). Spain: Editorial Jirones de Azul
- Truax, Barry.** 2001. *Acoustic Communication*. Westport/London: Ablex Publishing