

The conservatory debated from a critical pedagogy perspective

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Abstract

Spanish Conservatories of Music are educational institutions where, for the most part, the culture of Modernity is upheld and an aesthetic musical paradigm is enshrined. In this paper, therefore, it was important to reflect, firstly, on the teaching practices they implement and which have remained faithful to Positivist assertions, in the face of the different educational laws that have been passed. To this end, we carried out an analysis of the opinions of 20 students on a university Master's course which is centred on contemporary artistic practices and where theories sourced from Critical Pedagogy occupy an important space. With the data drawn from these students – all of them Conservatory graduates and a significant number now teachers – we used interpretative phenomenological analysis techniques and the results show this group's openness towards methodologies and practices hitherto unknown to them. They highlight, moreover, the importance of offering opportunities to awaken a critical approach in students, whereby they can choose what type of teacher they wish to be, and which methodologies they wish to adopt, rather than merely reproducing in an uncritical fashion the teaching style in which they themselves were taught.

Keywords

Conservatory, critical pedagogy, repertoire, teaching methodologies

Introduction

The main objective of this study has been to investigate the openness of a group of Conservatory graduates, now studying a university Master's degree, towards a way of understanding education which was completely alien to them. To be precise, they were introduced to approaches taken from Critical Pedagogy, and through their words – acquired via a written questionnaire – I reflect on the way in which they understand music, their interest in adopting a form of teaching that is democratic in its methodology and content, and I reveal their opinion regarding theoretical and methodological perspectives which are in tune with the new educational trends.

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The characteristics of Spanish Conservatories mean that these students' reflections hold particular relevance. After all, while Conservatory graduates obtain a qualification (equivalent to a university degree) which allows them to teach – the professional path that the majority take – their Study Plans contain few subjects related to Pedagogy and, moreover, these are included in a specific module which instrumentalists tend not to take. One particular student may major in one musical instrument (the most chosen option) or take a non-instrumental music degree, such as composition, orchestration, musicology or pedagogy. Thus a graduate in a musical instrument may have received no pedagogical training even though their future work will foreseeably involve teaching the instrument in which they graduated. Through the bibliographical references found in the text and the students' commentaries, I intend to prove that in Spain these Centres remain largely rooted to pedagogical positivism and have been scarcely touched by Postmodernism, let alone by the theories of Critical Pedagogy.

On modernity, postmodernity and critical theory

The belief in reason as the sole source of knowledge characterised the philosophical and intellectual activity of what we know as Modernity. From the Modernist viewpoint, observation and experimentation were the preferred means of understanding reality and this resulted in the establishing of a teaching method based on the positivist paradigm (or pedagogical positivism) whereby the teacher takes the lead role, with the student a mere receiver who must learn what they are taught without questioning and receives no motivation to generate their own knowledge. This model is based on the memorising of knowledge and it uses a closed curriculum which is predetermined in all its details and considers evaluation as a summative process centred on a final product which must, above all, be quantifiable.

In the middle of the 20th century, the foundations on which Modernity were based began to crumble and some schools of thought started to use the term Postmodernity to refer to certain cultural manifestations which were emerging (Lyotard, 1987). According to this model, the work of the teacher must be to teach the pupil to think rather than to fill their head with facts (Morin, 1999). Moreover, it calls for a teaching practice that starts with self-reflection and gets students to develop a critical spirit, leaning on methodological pluralism and trying to avoid the balance shifting back towards the traditional lesson.

Postmodernity was not the only reaction brought about by Modernity. There originated in the Frankfurt School an alternative discourse to the traditional positivist theory which is now known as Critical Theory. Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas and most recently, Touraine, Giddens and Dubiel and even Freire, McLaren and Apple are some of the thinkers linked to this school (Breuing, 2011). Although there is not one single definition of Critical Theory, in general it is presented as a philosophical framework directed towards social change and political activism (McLaren, 1989).

Critical Pedagogy – the adoption of these theories by educators – started with the pedagogue Paulo Freire. In the 1960s, he established the principles of this school in considering education as: (1) a conversation in which pupils and teacher solve problems together; (2) a means of changing the way in which the world is perceived; (3) an empowering of the pupils; and (4) a transformation of the pupils and teachers. Yet it is also recognised as a means of exercising power and control (Abrahams, 2005). In general terms, Critical Pedagogy denounces the social inequalities which are a reflection of economic liberalism and are found in schools as a direct barrier to pedagogical positivism (Agger, 2006).

Although the postulates of Critical Pedagogy are not unknown in the general world of education, their presence in Music teaching and learning is much more scarce (Schmidt, 2005). Abrahams

(2005), Allsup and Westerlund (2012) Bates (2016), Jones (2007), Regelski (2004), and Schmidt (2005) are some of the authors who have studied the application of Critical Pedagogy in Music teaching, a line also followed by the MayDay Group and by the magazine which brings together its ideas, *Action, Criticism and Theory for Music Education* (ACT). Broadly speaking, Critical Pedagogy supports the view that music teaching and learning are a social and political construct; that a change in power relations must take place in the classroom through student empowerment; that the curriculum needs to be flexible and make use of the students' previous knowledge; and that music is a liberating force capable of transforming society (Abrahams, 2005).

With regards to Spanish Conservatories, the presence of postulates of this Pedagogy is, as far as I know, non-existent. As Laborda (2015) observes, 'a fairly high percentage of teachers continue using outdated teaching methods that are transmitted orally by the teachers, through practice' (p. 16).

A brief historical review of Spanish conservatories

It was at the beginning of the 19th century that attempts were first made to establish Conservatories in Spain, but not until the end of the Spanish Civil War (1939) was a commission formed which strove for the aesthetic direction of the different Centres, now unified under the standards of Francisco Franco's dictatorship (Delgado, 2006, p. 131). The first education acts to regulate the Conservatories (in 1942 and 1966) were laid down under the fascist dictatorship and were thus in tune with its ideology, with that emphasis on 'the resurgence of native culture and art and the shaping of a public appreciation with a solid spiritual and artistic formation' (Jefatura del Estado, 1966).

The next education acts arrived – with Spain now a democracy – in 1992 and 1999. These substituted, at least in theory, the less pedagogical approaches of the 1966 education act with others more befitting the new educational currents. They laid out objectives to accomplish in each course instead of specifying in advance the works to be performed; they highlighted the implementation of continuous evaluation as opposed to the rigid following of evaluation criteria; and they advocated functional learning rather than decontextualised content.

Yet the fact there was no provision of training for teachers who were already active, combined with the scarce relevance of the pedagogical subjects which were part of the Conservatories' higher studies, meant that there were few real changes to the style of teaching. Teachers largely continued giving their classes as they had done before, employing the methodologies used when they were students themselves (Torrado & Pozo, 2008).

The education act in place today was made in 2009 (Jefatura del Estado, 2009) and accords with the European Higher Education Area, an international and exclusive Higher Education association of 49 countries with distinct cultural, political and academic backgrounds. It emphasises the importance of flexibility in teaching and the renewal of methodologies, the possibility of conducting external practices, the mobility of students and teachers, and the promotion of life-long learning. Yet there remains a similar problem as previously: namely, that pedagogy has scant presence in the degree courses issued by Conservatories, and the teaching there remains mostly rooted in antiquated methodologies (Laborda, 2015). Studies by Bautista et al. (2010), Díez (2018), González (2017), Tripiana (2017), and Palau et al. (2019) all highlight the survival in Spanish Conservatories of methodologies linked to positivist pedagogy: the still-weighty significance of the lecture, the absence of continuous evaluation and the great importance given to correct interpretations, in the sense of staying faithful to the scores. Usually the Study Plans in different subjects consider no musical genres other than classical – and, if they are included, it is as optional subjects holding little weight in their academic training. Generally, the students educated in these Centres acquire a broad competence in the tradition of classical music – accepted as a superior musical genre – and this is achieved through the transmission of a very specific

repertoire of works. Moreover, despite having received an education preparing them to become professional musicians, almost all of them will work as conservatory teachers, either by teaching their musical instrument or the non-instrumental subject their degree is based on (Laborda, 2015).

Conservatories under discussion

To carry out this research, I have made use, on the one hand, of my vast experience gained across 17 academic years as a qualified Conservatory teacher; and on the other, of my role today as a university lecturer and co-ordinator and teacher of the official Master's course on which the study is centred.

Sample

This study presents the answers to a questionnaire completed by 20 students from the Master's course in *Investigación Estética y Educación: Artes, Música y Diseño* (Aesthetic Research and Education: Art, Music and Design) from the University of Jaen (Spain), all of whom take the module titled *Investigación y enseñanza del Lenguaje Musical en Conservatorios* (Research and teaching of musical language in Conservatories). The 60 ECTS credits for this course are distributed across an academic year, divided between the general module (30 credits); three other optional modules, from which each student must select one (12 credits); and the final Master's dissertation (18 credits). The general module – which is obligatory – comprises seven subjects centred around contemporary art and its role as a social transformer. Its contents encompass various disciplines and areas such as anthropology, psychology of art and social psychology, sociology and philosophy, and at the same time it promotes Artistic Research as a research methodology and research into the arts from an educational and social perspective.

The optional module Research and teaching of musical language in Conservatories is taught exclusively to graduates in these Centres and it comprises three subjects, with four credits for each. It is in one of these subjects, *Lenguaje musical. Concepciones y métodos* (Musical Language: Ideas and Methods), that the research was carried out. Its focus is on analysing the goals of the music teacher as regards contemporary culture and also highlighting the methodological contributions and novel perspectives encountered in Conservatory teaching. The theoretical content included pays special attention to theories and theorists linked to Critical Pedagogy (Freire, Giroux, McLaren), and to their application in musical education (Allsup, Abrahams, Bates and Regelski). An important subject activity are the debates carried out in class, with students discussing the viability of using these theories in the Conservatory.

The answers in the analysis come from 20 students (of a group of 21). There are 4 women and 16 men in the group, and their ages run from 25 to 30 (18 of them) and between 40 and 50 in the case of the other two. Owing to the difference in age, the students completed their Conservatory degree under different education acts: 18 of them under the current act from 2009, and the oldest two under the 1966 act. Regarding their professional and academic profile, the 20 students specialised in different instruments: guitar, percussion, violin, viola, piano, trombone, oboe, clarinet, flute, singing and horn.

An important point worth highlighting is that because Conservatory graduates require no other academic qualification to teach in these Centres, 12 of these Master's students were already working as teachers of their instrumental specialities at different Conservatories. Their professional experience was, for the main part, around 4 years in length with the exception of the two older students, who had been teaching for over 15 years. Eight of the Master's students had never worked at a Conservatorie.

Analysis and interpretation of the data

The information gathered was managed in a qualitative fashion, starting with inductive methods of grouping and categorising the data. A qualitative approach was chosen because the objective was to know the students' attitudes and experiences. The information was managed using interpretative phenomenological analysis techniques, a research method commonly used in educational contexts. As is known, these techniques serve to describe the interpretations that the participants bring to the themes in question, though without overlooking the constructive role the researchers also have to play when interpreting the data (Dale, 1973).

The answers, presented below in the form of a narrative, were obtained via a written questionnaire which the students completed anonymously to ensure they felt free to answer honestly, and which I received in person once the subject sessions had been completed. Because of this, many of the responses allude to content which had come up in classroom sessions and debates in the previous weeks. I distributed a questionnaire at the end of the lesson to the students. This was after they had been assessed so that the students would feel comfortable when adding their comments and not pressured to respond in a particular way.

The questions focused on three themes: evaluation, methodology and planning in Conservatories. Below I will present some of the results of the questionnaire and I will focus on the two blocks of content: teaching methodologies (the first four questions) and planning (the last three). In responding, the students had to draw on their own experiences as Conservatory students, which ranged between the 10 academic courses of those who had studied under the 1966 act and the 14 courses under the 2009 act. The answers I reflect on below come from the following questions, which touch on the themes dealt with during the sessions and which generated most interest among the group. They are as follows:

- Do you think teaching methodologies in Conservatories have changed over the years?
- Do you know teachers who stick to the traditional Conservatory teaching methodologies?
- Do you have to allow student autonomy in problem-solving or give the answers even before questions come up?
- In your work, have you used methodologies which differ from the normal? If so, which?
- Can the performance repertoire of a course be fixed before knowing the student? Explain your response.
- Do you think that the repertoire you elaborated as part of the subject, which included less common works (by female, non-Western and contemporary composers), could be used with your instrument?
- Do you think that broadening the repertoire to be played in each course, to include the prior knowledge and likes of the students, can benefit them in their education?

Results

On teaching methodologies

In a constructivist curriculum, as the current legislation for Conservatories demands (under the 2009 act), the teacher must act as a guide and encourage student autonomy (Torrado & Pozo, 2008). Many of the aspects which the current act highlights were present already in the 1999 one: the importance of having attractive and stimulating teaching; of applying a pedagogical approach in tune with the age of each student; of insisting that musical abilities were not reduced to a mere gymnastic drill; of promoting pupil autonomy; and of implementing continuous evaluation. Within the subject in which this research was undertaken *Musical Language: Ideas and Methods* we take

a theoretical approach towards different teaching methodologies. The methods found in pedagogical positivism, present in previous educational acts, are set against other, newer methodologies, and we discuss how valuable they are in the education of professional musicians.

According to comments made by the students, the development of autonomy and independent thought is not a priority for the majority of Conservatory teachers. Javier expresses himself very clearly in this respect:

as students we have experienced the difference that exists between knowledge which is imposed externally and knowledge which we acquire autonomously (. . .). When a student completes a process which leads them to solving a problem, they will always be able to recreate this procedure and will not forget what they have learned. (. . .) it is vital that the teacher stops once and for all being the centre of the system and becomes a simple guide who brings knowledge closer and broadens the vision of the pupils¹.

Learning cannot consist of a mere transfer of knowledge in which the student is a (passive) receiver of information, but rather the teacher must promote the student's role as a creator of knowledge (Freire, 2005). As Bruner (1996) highlighted, knowledge is not something which can be owned but instead something that arises when people come together to exchange ideas or analyse problems from different perspectives. Pedro goes even further in his reflections:

I have begun to question the idea that I had assumed of the performer as a mere transmitter of the values of the composer and their context; as if they were a kind of reproducer (. . .) We performers must lose the idea that we are spokespeople. What we are is artists, creators. And this creativity should be valued by the teacher.

It is via this notion of self-learning, generated by educating through reflection and dialogue, that we can produce more 'cultural capital' – understood as the well of knowledge, abilities, attitudes and representations – which the teacher transmits (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). But for this to happen, the teacher must reconsider their role in the process. This is what Rancière (1991) highlights when recalling an educational experience based on taking risks in teaching, moving away from what is known and surveying new possibilities. As Rancière affirms emphatically:

It is the explicator who needs the incapable and not the other way around; it is he who constitutes the incapable as such. To explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself (p. 6).

This is what Felipe is referring to when he says,

I think you have to persuade the students to come up with their own questions (. . .) I think that is the important thing, and that it's possible that the answers aren't the same as the teacher's but can be equally valid.

Because as Diego points out:

If the teacher always teaches from a masterly position without stirring questions and curiosity among the pupils, it will lead to their admiring the teacher and striving to do the same; it will also lead to an evident shortfall in their powers of reflection, self-criticism and confrontation.

Nico is of the same opinion that 'teaching which is autodidactic and among equals always enriches the process of learning'. If we wish to encourage student autonomy, it is necessary to

abandon the idea of the *maestro* who holds all the answers and whose interpretation is the model to imitate. Rosa reflects on this too: 'I had always thought that as a teacher I should anticipate the problems that come up and resolve them for the student'. She adds:

I now think that we musicians are not empty vessels that the teacher can fill with content (Morin?). In the last years of my degree I came across teachers who would tell me exactly how I should interpret a work and didn't consider my way of understanding it. It always bothered me but above all it made me doubt my ability (. . .) You have to listen to the student and make them believe in themselves, that they have something interesting to bring to the performance.

I hold the view, outlined by Rancière (1991), that it is important to minimise students' fear of committing errors and dislodge this deep-seated belief that the good teacher has the answers and never any doubts over how to act (Freire, 2005). This false certainty brings a danger since, as Dewey (1998) warned, it weakens both the ethics and the morals values. However, not all the students' reflections followed the same line: with the security provided by anonymity, Carlos aligns himself with a viewpoint that nobody defended in the discussions held on the subject:

I don't agree with what was discussed in class. The teacher has to offer answers before doubts arise. This is their job as a teacher (. . .) if they give the answers, they won't lose any time . . . As a teacher, you know what is best and this information facilitates the student's learning.

Opinions such as that expressed by Carlos correspond to the concept of the 'banking model of education' which Freire (2005) developed in his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: the assumption that it is the teacher who deposits content in ignorant pupils who are limited to receiving it passively. This seems to be what Felipe's words point us to when he observes that what is important for teachers is that they cover 'all the expected works and what they take into consideration is the percentage of right and wrong notes'. In one of her responses, Manuela points out a question that had been reflected upon in class previously regarding the lack of pedagogical training in Conservatory degrees, specifically for instrumentalists:

. . . when we begin to teach, what we do is repeat a pattern which has been taught to us. Without the existence of any specific pedagogic formation for instrumentalists, the first thing we do with a student in front of us is to repeat what we know how to do.

Here Manuela emphasises the students' assumed knowledge of the cultural arbitrary, which is then reproduced in teaching practice. The discourse which the teacher would articulate around music would be no more than an affirmation of the musical culture that they received as a student. Through these reflections, the students are showing that they are far from passive members and, when given the chance, they do not doubt to question and reinterpret the information received during their education (Apple, 2018). There are many examples of this non-conformist attitude.

For Lucas, 'methodology in conservatories is focused on the reproduction of the score and overlooks the development of skills such as improvisation'. Diego, one of the students with most teaching experience, says: 'I'm thinking about the importance of improvisation and especially about knowledge of other kinds of music and how all this can affect pupils' development as musicians'. Carmen and Juan consider the possibility of using teaching methodologies and tools they were unaware of a few months earlier; Juan even asks himself 'if I could carry out an approach to the instrument using discovery learning, without knowing what a musical note is, even playing a guitar that is tuned unconventionally'. Pedro indicates the benefits of such practices, of the freedom of not having to do it 'well', of allowing a margin for error and even prizing it and incorporating it as

a creative resource (something wholly foreign to Western classical music) are really interesting factors when it comes to tackling problems such as stage fright.

On the musical repertoire

Speaking generally, and notwithstanding the definition we adopt for the curriculum, this will include what society – the different societies – decides is of value and therefore worth passing to posterity. As Rorty observed in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Martin, 2002), to consider the curriculum as a mirror which reflects the reality around us is an epistemological fallacy, and a clear example of this is the exclusion of the knowledge generated by non-hegemonic groups. The curriculum responds to an ethnocentric episteme and certain knowledge is clearly legitimised by its use in schools.

With the Conservatory, the concept of Culture that is disseminated is that which is present in the musical repertoire to be performed in each academic year. To break this dynamic, in the subject sessions prior to their completion of the questionnaire, I encouraged the students to research a repertoire which, according to them, tend not to be played with their instrument and are not included in teaching guides, and which feature women and non-Western and contemporary musicians. The result of this research could be used to create the repertoire for a particular course on instrumental speciality. One of the questions related directly to this activity, and Diego says:

I am a violin teacher and I've been teaching since 1997. On the current musical repertoire in my Conservatory, all the recommended works are by male composers (. . .) and correspond to the canon of European tradition. I have to recognise that never, in all these courses, did anyone come up with a different scenario.

Miguel recognises that 'it's been a real surprise to discover all of this material (. . .) this can't carry on any longer. It makes no sense'. And Lucía adds that 'if I do a rough count of all the composers I've performed, I realise that it's always the same ones'.

Allsup and Westerlund (2012), Green (2003), McLaren (1989), and Väkevä and Westerlund (2007) are among the writers who have analysed the importance and repercussion of the selection of curricular content in education. This legitimisation of situations of exclusion and subordination – which arise seemingly unconsciously – forms part of what has been called the hidden curriculum in education; that is, the gathering of norms, customs, beliefs, language and symbols which become manifest in the structure and functioning of an institution (Apple, 2018).

Regarding the inclusion of works closer to the tastes of the students, Carlos says that 'in the first few years I never enjoyed picking up a new score in the conservatory. It was music that I didn't like and that seemed strange to me'. Lucía considers that what is most important, above all in the early years, is to 'live the music' and this can be achieved not only through the methodologies used by the teacher but also by the works performed. Rosa adds that

later there will be other factors that are important but in the first years you have to make them passionate about making music . . . to start out with music that is easy and known to them, and then progressively include works which become more complex.

Yet to talk of 'music that is easy and close to them' puts us on shaky ground where 'not everything is of value'. Pedro expresses this point clearly:

We shouldn't hesitate any longer. We have to get Bad Bunny, Rosalía, Ayax y Prok². We have to get this music, break it down, analyse it, look at it – ourselves and our class – with a critical eye. That is how to

form citizens who are equipped to criticise consumer music, democratic citizens . . . who don't just conform to what they are given. We will forge new forms of thinking and stop reproducing the system (at least to a certain point) and, eventually, we could play a part in a social transformation.

As their answers show, there is scant interest paid in the Conservatory to the existing tastes of the students. Teachers are not conscious that students learn many things among their peer group, by pure chance, and through observations they may make or listen to. We do not realise that teachers, the majority of the time, and inadvertently, obstruct such ways of learning. 'Pupils do most of their learning without, and often despite, their teachers' (Illich, 1971, p. 43). Luis remarks:

When I was 15 I'd play on my guitar these songs by rock groups that I knew by ear. It had nothing to do with what I was studying in the Conservatory but it made me felt a lot more emotions.

Discussion and conclusion

The non-conformist attitude that the students of this Master's demonstrated with their answers to the questionnaire provides a breath of fresh air among a group – namely, Spanish Conservatory graduates – which traditionally (1) leans firmly on positivist assertions, (2) is characterised by not questioning the discriminations which are perpetuated in their system of teaching, and (3) remains detached from methodological trends (González & Bautista, 2020).

If we wish students to develop a critical spirit, we should provide them with the mechanisms and also the opportunity to do this. Otherwise, we will probably carry on producing teachers who will not question the cultural arbitrary which they transmit nor the form in which they do it and who will reproduce an ideology, the hegemonic one, without even being conscious of doing so.

With their replies, these Master's students have referred to the need to build an anti-hegemonic discourse which may contribute to the transformation of society that Giroux (1983) spoke about. Yet this is only possible when the awareness awakens within educators of the existence of the hidden curriculum (Apple, 2018) both in terms of the choice of content and attitudes of teachers and the methodology employed in classes.

As Freire and Shor (2014) asserted, it is not enough to have a mere knowledge of methods and techniques, such as that seen in the teaching subjects covered by Spanish Conservatories, since that would then simply involve modifying some methodologies with others. To turn teachers into transformers (Freire, 2005), who are capable of establishing a different relationship with knowledge and society, it is necessary to have a profound reflection on the teaching practices implemented and the content transmitted in these Centres. Though the ultimate objective of Conservatories is to produce musicians, they should not limit themselves to pursuing 'a merely technical-scientific learning' since this approach always proves 'incomplete and fruitless' (Bauman, 2013, p. 76).

As Green (2003) stated, this is not a question of indoctrinating but rather of giving students the possibility of choosing what type of teacher they want to be and what type of methodologies they want to adopt, instead of reproducing (to use the meaning Bourdieu gave this term) in an unquestioning way the style in which they learned. To this end, teachers must face some preliminary questions: 'Who am I? Who are my students? What might they become? What might we become together?' (Abrahams, 2005, p. 9). However, there are certain beliefs, such as the ones Carlos holds in the questionnaire, which demonstrate that there is still a coexisting anachronistic view of what schooling ought to look like in conservatories – even among younger learners who have not yet started to work.

As outlined above, I am firmly convinced that critical pedagogy can be a catalyst for awakening students' consciences and fostering their desire to find in education the pathway for transforming

society, for converting the Conservatory into a space of social transformation in which there are questions asked of strongly assimilated practices and reflections offered on the different aspects crucial to life in a democracy. It is in this way that the education received in Conservatories will be able to contribute to the building of a more egalitarian society. As the participants in this study have highlighted, Conservatory graduates have the will and the ability to deal with all the changes that may be necessary. As Diego attests:

Regardless of the educational level we are speaking of, we have to keep in mind that, as well as instrumentalists, we are educators and, as such, we must generate in people the individual responsibility to see others as individuals in their own right too, empathy, the ability to generate critical opinions, as much of ourselves as of anyone else and any other aspect.

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Notes

1. Author's translation.
2. These are current singers and musicians performing Latin trap, rap and contemporary interpretations of flamenco music.

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