

**Story of a song: L'istoria d'una cancon  
L'aiga de la Dordonha – waters of the Dordogne  
(Peiraguda)**

« La vie est parfois extra-ordinaire... » (life is sometimes extraordinary....)

This was the opening of an email I received in September 2012. It was from the composer of the song *L'aiga de la Dordonha*, which has been a regular feature of the Oxford Trobadors concerts since their foundation in 1998. We had always wondered what the composers of the modern Occitan songs would think of our interpretations of their music. It was reassuring to receive such approval from the very source, one of the key performers and composers of the group Peireguda.

But that is not the most extraordinary part of the story. To explain that we need to revisit the Dordogne 34 years ago, around 1978, when I attended a concert of Peiraguda in the open air in the beautiful medieval city of Sarlat. It was sheer magic to hear this lively and talented group perform one hit after another to great acclaim from their audience. In addition to taking us down the Dordogne river, we were made to follow the frightening journey (*ai paur* – I'm afraid) of a man walking in the forest at night with all kinds of ghostly happenings; we were also regaled with a song about an old house (*la vielha maison*) that has now been edited to become the Occitan song about my own house in the Dordogne; and there was *Lo Leberon*, another clever composition about a werewolf. I bought the vinyl recording of their songs, took it home and started to learn how to interpret them. It was also an effective way to teach myself the language.

Four years later, after having worked up my own interpretations, I was revisiting my house and happened to notice posters in the town square in Ribérac advertising a soirée occitane by Radio Périgord. I decided to take my children to the evening. While waiting patiently in our seats for the event to begin, I was approached by one of the organisers with a surprise question: had I by any chance brought my guitar with me? Would I be willing to join the performers, to sing and discuss in Occitan and French?

I was amazed by this invitation. I had occasionally contributed a little (very little and rather hesitantly) to village soirées, but I had never contributed in such a way to a public broadcast performance. I had to think rapidly. Fortunately, I did have my guitar in my house 10 minutes' drive way. So, while the performance started I rushed there, rapidly tuned the guitar and then practised two possible songs while driving back to the town square. A local singer, Francis Gervaise, was already performing some of his own compositions, including his charming *Catissson* about a girl refusing her suitor. While listening I kept running through my head the words of the two songs I had prepared on the journey back. All too quickly, I was brought to the stage, sat down with my guitar and I then explained in French that I was going to sing my interpretation of *L'Aiga de la Dordonha*. I even encouraged the audience to feel free to join in the chorus. The floodlights were on, the square seemed distant with the audience distributed around it. But then I forgot the words! This is almost the worst moment for any performer. But I reasoned to myself that if I started singing

the words would come back – and so thankfully they did.

The evening continued with some banter about why I had learnt Occitan. Jean Roux, a professor of the language and a great scholar, introduced me. He had been responsible for me learning the language in the first place after a village farmer had put me in touch with him, and we joked about why I also needed to speak French. The explanation was that some of the villagers were not Occitan-speakers!

I was then asked to sing another song, perhaps *Immortela*, a famous song by the Pyrenees group Los de Nadau. I couldn't do that, so I offered another lovely Nadau composition: *Arron d'aimar* (after love). I remember explaining that with *L'aiga de la Dordonha*, which is in lengadocian and not so far from the local dialect Limousin, I had altered some of the words to be in Limousin (in which *camín* becomes *chamin*, *castels* becomes *chateus*), but that the songs of Nadau, which are in Gascon, would suffer if they were translated into another dialect.

At the end of the concert, I went straight back to my French house with the children, and apart from a brief discussion with Francis Gervaise, who said he liked my interpretation of *Arron d'aimar*, there was no time to talk to anyone else.

Now I come to the really extraordinary part of this story. In that email exchange during September, Jean Bonnefon, the composer of *l'aiga de la dordonha*, revealed that he was the presenter of the Radio Périgord programme all those years ago! He explained that he was stunned by the fact that I performed his song.

I now ask myself what would have happened if I had lingered a little longer after the 1982 soirée? Would we have spoken at length? Would my interaction with the language and its fantastic musical culture have been very different? Who knows? Instead, we will now see whether there is any way we could bring Peiraguda to the UK sometime in the future to perform with us.

Denis Noble, October 2012

After note: bringing Peiraguda to Oxford is exactly what happened in 2017.