CHAPTER 9

Choral Societies and Nationalist Mobilization in the Basque Country

The Orfeon Donostiarra

Carmen de las Cuevas Hevia

In Spain after 1874 there began a period of Restoration which provided some stability in the state government. At the same time, there was a consolidation of capitalism and its own social groups, while the working class developed in opposition to the capitalist class. Universal male suffrage was introduced in 1890, marking the culmination of an era of fruitful legislative work initiated in 1885, including also the Associations Law, which accommodated the choral societies.

The main social and political events occurred in the industrial regions of the Peninsula, including the beginning of the Basque and Catalan nationalist movements, which involved a large number of choral groups. Some of these choirs were promoted by the power structures as a cultural display of nationalist or regionalist mobilization. Sometimes these choirs took part in national and international choral competitions. Another type of choral society arose from the initiative of groups of workers belonging to various political parties or recreational associations. These choirs were more open and internationalist, and approached relationships with other groups in a social spirit of equality and fraternity.

Despite the different approaches behind the emergence of various choral groups, many of them set forth their non-political and non-religious profiles in their by-laws, which were not amended to maintain good relations with political and ecclesiastical representatives. The choral societies were the heirs of Catholic church choirs which had previously been responsible for providing music for the religious services of the various festivities.

The nationalist movement in the Basque Country involved a combination of elements. On the one hand, the Carlist wars resulted in a loss of economic privileges, followed by an explosion of industrialization and the resulting migrations. The population increased rapidly, generating in the Basque country a middle class which favored the development of a cultural movement to recover their national identity based on language, race, religion, and customs.

1 See Labajo (1987).
Specific manifestations of this movement included the Basque Floral Games organized by José Manterola through his magazine *Euskalerria*, with the help of the Regional Council of Gipuzkoa. In 1882 the organization announced as a novelty a musical event to promote the fostering of popular music, offering a special award for the best pot-pourri of Basque tunes. The press remarked that Basque choral competitions should be recognized for their ‘Soinu gogoangarriac’ in the same way that the ‘Ranz’ of the Swiss, the ‘Lieder’ of the Germans and the ‘Noëls’ of the French were characteristic expressions of the cultures of these nations.2

The port city of San Sebastián was essentially a commercial metropolis where social life was divided between a minority of wealthy individuals and a heterogeneous mass of intermediate layers of non-proletarian condition, with a large number of craftsmen and employed workers who differed from rural laborers.

**Cultural and Recreational Societies**

The new ruling class was particularly concerned with popular education; they wanted to be able to enjoy the culture previously reserved for the moneyed classes or socially distinguished, and share it with the large masses of workers who swelled the population of areas of industrial and economic development, as was happening elsewhere in Europe at this time. With this aim, they established schools and cultural and recreational societies to promote and provide cultural activities for the disadvantaged. Recreation centres were open during leisure hours to anyone who wished to participate, in accordance with the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The activities of these circles ranged from gatherings and discussions of items in the press to basic activities of instruction and literacy. They also established choral groups or brass bands to liven up meetings, or to perform outdoors at city festivals in squares and boulevards.

The city of San Sebastián pioneered the creation of popular societies for the main purpose of eating and singing.3 In these popular societies, or along with them, arose countless brass bands and choirs that enlivened and accompanied the most important festivals of the city: the *tamborrada*, the *candelaria*, and the carnival, as well as religious services.

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2 *El Urumea: Periódico no político* (San Sebastián, 5 June 1879), 1–2.

3 See Aguirre (1983) and Mugica Herzog (1996).