

The Metal Tenora

The tenora is most often made from jujube wood; some French makers have also used ebony wood in mass production. However, during my research I repeatedly came across the suggestion that metal tenoras existed and that one in particular had been played by a famous virtuoso—a different one depending on the account. However, over a year into my research, I was running out of museum exhibits to chase up and still had not found the metal tenora.

During my first tenora related research trip in April 2014, the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (Institute for Catalan Studies) in Barcelona fortuitously held a conference to present a new instrument 20 years in the making: the *barítona*. The *barítona* is a bass shawm developed by Joaquim Agulló i Batlle and a team of doctoral students and serves as the bass instrument in the Catalan shawm family with *tible* (treble) and *tenora* (tenor).¹

Introducing myself to the researchers after the talk, an older lady told me that her father had heard a metal tenora in Barcelona many years previously. I heard a similar anecdote in Girona too. She claimed that a famous musician played his new metal tenora in Barcelona around the turn of the century; the audience's reaction was one of dismay and anger. The sound of the instrument is said to have been terrible. This caused the musician to paint his tenora to look like wood in order to

fool the audience before his next performance. This time around, they appeared to find much pleasure in the sound of the instrument, further confirming to them that the metal tenora had been a dreadful idea.

The lady also claimed that the musician was Pep Ventura i Vaquer (1817-1875), the first "superstar" of the tenora. Finally, she also thought the instrument in question might be kept in a glass cabinet at the IEC. This curious anecdote intrigued me and I began looking for the mysterious metal tenora.

In December 2015, I travelled a third time to Catalonia to inspect tenora collections; seven collections and fifteen historical instruments later I had not found the metal tenora yet. The Girona History Museum was likely to be the last major collection I was to visit for this project. The visit was already a success after inspecting the first instrument, as I discovered that a tenora had been labelled *Catroi* when it was in fact an original *Toron* instrument! However, a particularly thin, black and quirky tenora caught my attention (Fig. 3).

It was in fact a metal tenora coated unevenly in black paint. The metal bell has a beautiful engraving of Josep Coll i Lligorra's (1893-1965) emblem; the museum's catalog states that the metal tenora was built in 1931. The *cobla* interest group *Associació Música per la Cobla* confirms that Coll built this in-

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Figure 1: Two tenoras by Puigdemívol belonging to Jordi Molina i Membrives. The instrument on the left is a good example of a contemporary tenora, the instrument on the right is a metal tenora. (Image copyright Jordi Molina; used with permission)

ABOUT THE TENORA

The tenora is a mechanised tenor shawm with a metal bell that is on average 86 cm long (Fig. 1). Its invention is attributed to Andreu Toron (1815-1886) of Perpignan in France in 1849, though research shows that the idea of a tenor shawm with keys was being developed by a number of instrument makers around the same time and place. From Perpignan, the tenora was introduced to the rest of Catalonia by Pep Ventura, its first virtuoso. Note that historically and culturally, Catalonia extends further than its current boundaries; Southern Catalonia is in Northern Spain while Northern Catalonia is in the Roussillon region of Southern France (Fig. 2). The tenora has a lyrical, if very loud, sound that is mostly used in *coblas*, outdoor orchestras which play the circular *sardana* dance.

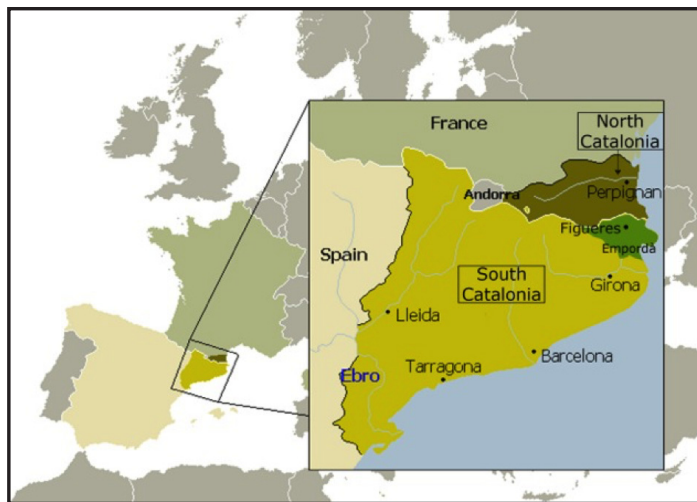


Figure 2: Map of Catalonia. The territory in yellow and green is in Spain, the territory in green is the Empordà where the *sardana* dance and *coblas* originated, the khaki territory is in France.

strument and played it until his retirement 26 years later. He won a national cobla competition in 1932 with Cobla Barcelona, and the juror Pau Casals lauded the metal tenora!² Coll himself describes his motivation for building the instrument in his seminal tenora and tible method book: “to achieve a more homogeneous sound, more brilliant and less nasal, as those in their deficient and rudimentary construction, have the sound of their three registers unbalanced...”³ Coll also worked on a second metal tenora prototype and a metal tible prototype, although the locations of these, if extant, are currently unknown.

The metal tenora has a number of original features that demonstrate Coll’s will to modernize the tenora, his solutions indeed address issues such as the intonation difficulties, the differences between registers and the weight of the instrument. In fact, it is extraordinarily light in comparison to its wooden counterparts, which are rather awkward and heavy, while retaining the tenora’s usual bore shape and length. Unfortunately, the instrument is in a fragile state and therefore unplayable; the tenons are missing string or cork, so the tenora cannot be lifted when assembled. As I could not hear the instrument being played, I will have to take the word of Pau Casals i Defilló with regards to the improved tone and intonation until further investigation. I was however interested to discover that Coll introduced a small but important further improvement: a rectan-



gular case to hold the long keys in place on the side of the instrument. The long keys are in fact a weakness on most historical tenoras; this is because the keys are dislocated or broken as players lay the instrument over their crossed legs or simply knock them off.

The metal tenora is a fantastic proof of Coll’s vision for the tenora, and it appears that fellow musicians much appreciated his prototype. However, it seems that audiences did not feel the same enthusiasm for the metal instrument. The uneven black paint on the instrument seems to confirm that Coll was indeed forced to hastily modify his tenora in order to please the crowds. I am therefore confident that this is the metal tenora that I heard about on my first research trip; however, it could not have been played by Pep Ventura who died over 60 years before its construction.

Josep Coll’s prototypes show the difficulties he faced trying to improve an instrument which has become a national symbol for Catalan music in its short 166-year history. While everything indicates that he improved on the traditional model, the public reaction was less than favorable;

presumably the use of metal for the body was not considered “traditional.” Further research on the metal tenora and the unfinished prototypes is likely to uncover some more of Coll’s visionary ideas. It must be mentioned that Catalonia’s foremost contemporary tenora soloist, Jordi Molina i Membrives, currently plays a metal tenora by Puigdel·lívols which is built on the maker’s standard tenora model (Fig. 1). It is used as a lighter and maybe visually more striking counterpart to the wooden original. Coll might not have convinced the crowds during his lifetime, but his legacy lives on.

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Notes

1. http://www.iec.cat/butlleti/pdf/107_butlleti_ptenora.pdf (in Catalan).
2. http://www.musicsperlacobla.cat/compositor.php?autor_id=170.
3. Josep Coll, *Mètode de Tenora I Tible* (Barcelona: Impremta Elzeviriana, 1933).

Figure 3: Josep Coll’s metal tenora, currently held at the Girona History Museum