

MUSIC AND COMIC. NARRATED MELODY

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Analysis of expressive values that music provides the author in his creative process, where personal experience defines his inspiration, creativity and the gestation of some of the characters. And finally, the influence of music on the narrative rhythm of some of the stories told by the author in his comics.

Key words: music, comic, accompaniment, narration, rhythm

We all have a career we would have liked to have developed but, due to lack of time or lack of talent, we have not been able to carry out. In my case, there are several, but leading them is undoubtedly together with cinema, music. Others are being a movie critic, philosopher, psychologist and medical examiner (yes, a forensic scientist). For many years I considered learning to play an instrument and even began, together with my brother, going to piano classes, but as many others, musical theory scared me and killed my desire for life. However, these classes did some good. My brother is today a composer and pianist.

I became discouraged with music as a career but I have never abandoned it as a passion, so it continues to be present in everything I write or draw. Besides, throughout my career as an illustrator and comic book author I have found many authors who have combined quite naturally both disciplines, some being very good in both. Pablo Auladell, Tha, Gerardo Sanz, Alicia Merelo, Lalo Kubala, DonRogelio, and many more.

It is no secret that part of my inspiration in narrating, is marked by the author Julio Cortázar, who, just like me, also had a passionate relationship with music. When I was twenty, reading *The Pursuer* blew my head, not so much because of the tribute to Charlie Parker and jazz, but because, as in *Hopscotch* and so many of his stories, the music behind it could be

perceived in each of the phrases, of the words chosen, both in prose as in the narrative rhythm. It was almost like divining what Cortázar was listening to when we wrote those stories. Since then I have not ceased asking myself, "how is it possible to make this perceivable within a story or a narration?" That internal musicality that Cortázar revealed to me in *The Pursuer* has bewildered me from that precise moment.

When I set myself to writing a script there are two premises that I immediately hang on the wall of my brain. The first is what Billy Wilder (another direct influence) stated, "Never bore". The second is "How would Cortázar have done it?". Every author has his models, pillars he would like to reach and that can become a veritable obsession. These models are always useful, even if only because they are unattainable, they are a never-ending incentive.

Any narration needs an inner rhythm, a logical harmony that makes reading easy and/or coherent. The narration must flow and nothing must interrupt that river. Learning when to accelerate and when to brake, when we have to let the reader fall into a cascade and when he needs to go up river. This is the most difficult thing to learn because often it makes us sacrifice, cut and trim parts we like and even love to favour narrative rhythm. I'm not talking about filling it with unjustified persecutions, action and special effects, which are the great evil of today's commercial cinema and also of part of the comics that are not *auteur* comics. I am talking about the flow and the interest of what is told.

Thanks to this passion for music I have learned to interiorise the rhythm. When I confront a project, depending on the subject and the rhythm I think that story needs, I take a type of music as a reference. Music that will accompany me during the time it takes to make that journey, which is usually several months. When I sit down to write that particular story, what I do first is play the music I have

chosen as a background and so my mind goes into automatic mode and I immediately enter the mindset I will need for working on this book. Writing a story, in my case, produces two curious situations (and I suppose quite common). The first is that my state of concentration is absolute. I know that what I am going to say has little or no scientific foundation but it serves me as a metaphor of what I want to tell. The creative part of my brain, the divergent one, the one devoted to art, poetry, begins to function in an obsessive manner, making the surrounding world completely disappear. People talk to me but I do not hear anything. It is necessary to penetrate the magic dome of the brain, and that is not easy. As I was saying, concentration is absolute. This state of “not hearing anything” has taken me years of training.

As I stated in the beginning, my brother studied piano, an instrument he had in the room next to mine. Those studies are hard and require a great number of hours of study and the upright pianos are not set for earphones, if you get my gist. The matter is I learned to study, read, draw and write with Chopin's nocturnes playing in the background a million times until he learnt them. It is also true that the piano is a pleasant instrument, I don't want to imagine what the family of the violinist goes through until Mr. Stradivarius gets it under control. The other curious situation is that I cannot devote more than four continuous hours to writing, since by the end of the day I am totally exhausted. Curiously, it is a state that I do not reach with any of the other disciplines I develop. When I draw I also concentrate a lot but I do not reach that *zen* state that I achieve with writing. Since I do not have many hours to devote to it, I try to enter that state as rapidly as possible and the chosen music helps me.

Music and the process

I will use the three graphic novels I have published to date with Cristina Durán to explain in detail the role music has in my creative process. The first, *Una posibilidad entre mil* (A Chance in a Thousand) is an autobiographical graphic novel where we tell of the birth of our daughter Laia, a girl who was born with serious health problems, and how we, the parents, lived the experience. The second one, *La máquina de Efrén* (Efrén's Machine) is the second part of the first one, and tells the long process to adopt Selamawit, our second daughter. And the last one up to now, *Cuando no sabes qué decir* (When You Don't Know What to Say) that speaks of cinema, jazz and friendships lost.

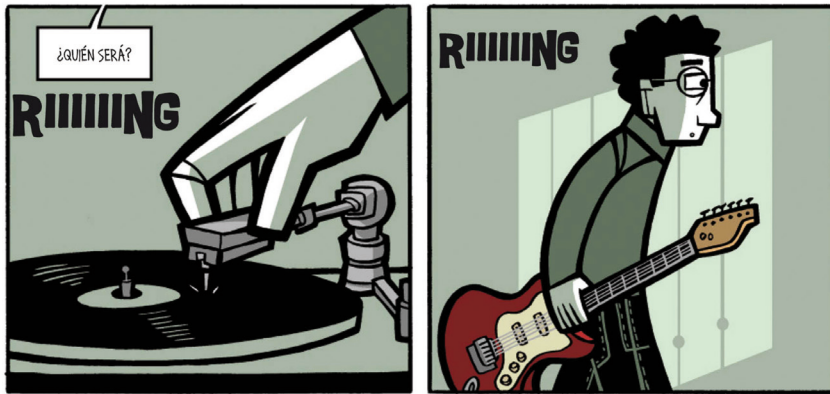
In the opening pages of each chapter of *Una posibilidad entre mil*, we decided to include quotations from those singer-songwriters whose songs were the back drop of the narration.

The choice of these singer-songwriters was determined because it was the type of music in which Cris-

tina and I coincided most. Apart from the fact that we grew together with these and other singer-songwriters and we thought it was important that they should appear, when we were seeing all that was happening with Laia some of the situations referred us to phrases of a song by Lluís Llach, or a phrase of Vinicius de Moraes or of Jore Drexler. To cite an example, to understand what I am talking about, there is a moment in which the doctor gives us a devastating piece of news on the future of our daughter. When leaving the doctor's office I commented with Cristina a phrase by Silvio Rodríguez that had come to mind when the doctor was giving us the news: “the most terrible thing is learnt rapidly and what is beautiful takes a lifetime”. She replied that she had been thinking precisely of that phrase. That is what I am referring to. Evidently, this quotation is in on the opening pages of one of the chapters.

In the case of *La máquina de Efrén*, for obvious reasons, the music that accompanied me was African. We brought a CD back from Ethiopia. It was a Cd Efrén gave us with the music that was playing at the time in Addis Abeba, a curious mix of hip-hop, reage and pop, with its own roots in the place. The rest of Africa, Ismael Lô, Amadou & Mariam, Cesaria Evora, Yossou n'Dour...

In this book, much longer than the previous one, I wanted to leave space for humour that I had not managed to include in *Una posibilidad entre mil*. One of the parts that I am most satisfied with the narrative, are some pages that take place in the square where we live and where I used to play with Laia (where I ended up playing with all the boys and girls in the square since I had to pay attention to my daughter). The scenes function as small sketches. These pages are thought out as if there was a fixed camera always in the same place (the background, obviously, is always the same) and the camera records situations that happen there. This gives the reading rhythm a feeling of repetition, the refrain of a song. Each time the reader reaches one of these parts, he immediately knows where he can relax and that he will be nearly able nearly to repeat the sonata. That is what I mean by the refrain. This has made me recall that also in *Una posibilidad entre mil* there is a very powerful moment in the reading that is also clearly inspired by the music at the time of translating into narration. In the beginning of the book, when I return to the hospital, the second morning after the birth, upon entering the room I find that the baby is not there, the cot is empty. Actually when I was living the situation, Cristina, in a fruitless effort to calm me, was telling me not to worry, that there were tests, that they would bring her back, that this, that the other, and I only remember that I did nothing but look at the empty cot. Every few minutes, as if I wanted to make sure it was true, I looked at the empty cot. When I wrote the script I thought that I had to translate it in such a way, as if a quiet melody were sounding in the background and occasionally a



Cuando no sabes qué decir,
LaGRUAestudio (p. 103).

potent sound would enter, percussion, an orchestra, something like that. In the beginning, in the first page, the empty cot “sounded” in five frames in a page of nine, that is, with great intensity. As these pages were passing, to reflect my state of mind that evidently was becoming calmer, the empty cot, the sound blows, diminished. That is, from five on a page, they went to three, two and then one, until the stopped “sounding”.

Narrative and rhythm

In *Cuando no sabes qué decir*, our third book I decided to consider the premise of the music from the beginning. As you will now see, in one way or another, music is present in all parts of the process: in the creation of characters, in the story and, of course, in the narrative rhythm.

Cuando no sabes qué decir is above all, a book of characters and they had to be very well defined from the beginning. For this I imagined them as if they were members of a jazz ensemble. Manu, the leading character is the piano, the foundation of the story, he is the one who directs and sets the beat, the one who takes our hand and leads us through a hundred and thirty pages. Roberto, intelligent, reserved, calculating and virtuoso, is the saxo; Tomás, the most unpredictable, the drummer, Paula, the most coherent, the bass; and Mainer, the only one capable of capturing the attention of the impenetrable Roberto, the voice. In the beginning they are a cohesive group that are getting to know each other; they are learning to play together. But, as in all groups, life will end up undoing it and any attempt to play together again shall, inevitably be a failure and a door that should have remained closed, that should never have been opened again. Or maybe not.

Continuing with the characters and with the constant and omnipresent relationship with the music, Tomás believes that because of a coincidence in date of birth, he has a magic connection, almost transmigratory, with Tom Waits. He is convinced that, when the singer dies, his soul will pass to him. We discover how Roberto is after a concert by Tete Montoliu and Mainer seduces Roberto showing her

talent as a singer in a church they have gone to visit. Mainer and Manu meet again years later in a record store. Roberto, like Gene Hackman in *The Conversation*, plays jazz records and accompanies them with the electric guitar. Manu has a car accident while listening to *Jockey Full of Bourbon*, precisely by Tom Waits... and so on, throughout the book.

This story is based on a tale I wrote a little after leaving the university, in which I tried to capture the atmosphere of the years I had just lived, my relationship with my classmates and our cultural outings to cinemas and concerts, many of them, not to say most, jazz. On the other hand, it was a story in which I wanted to speak of something as universal as friendships lost are. All of us have lived a similar situation in which, suddenly, without knowing why, a friendship we thought or felt was to last all our lives, one day, suddenly, is lost. It disappears from our lives. Life, through an accident with a dog, gives Manu the opportunity of being aware of why he lost that friendship and also the opportunity to reconsider what part of the blame of that loss is his.

I am telling all this here because I think it is necessary to place the reader in the story and the characters to be able to understand why the choice of jazz and the blend of the music and the narrative in this comic, although I have already given sufficient clues on it. The plot of *Cuando no sabes qué decir* is spun in a unstructured manner, with continuous leaps in time from past to present. If this were not enough, the characters, quite pedantic, spend all their time talking and commenting about films and music they have seen or heard, or relating anecdotes on cinema and music. Precisely to mark the internal rhythm of the narrative, of vital importance to me, I took inspiration, and it could not be otherwise, from jazz. But, how is this done? How is music as complex as jazz translated into a universe as intimate and silent as a comic? What would Cortázar have done?

When I posed the project to Cristina I told her I would like to work graphically in a determined way. The parts of every-day life of the characters had to have little detail. A table, some chairs, some coffees, as if it were a play, defining the place. There was no need for more. Lights and shadows would provide the necessary atmosphere. Besides, as I said, it speaks of several epochs in the lives of the characters and each epoch is defined by a color: the past, the time at university, the farthest in time, is defined by ochres and browns. The mid-term past in greens and the present in reds. This manner of composing the pages through colour served me in the first place to place the reader rapidly in time, secondly, it functioned like a melody and rhythmic base of the narrative's musicality; and thirdly, the pages which tell anecdotes of cinema or jazz receive a much richer graphic treatment. Some are done with classic techniques such as watercolour or gouache (in contrast

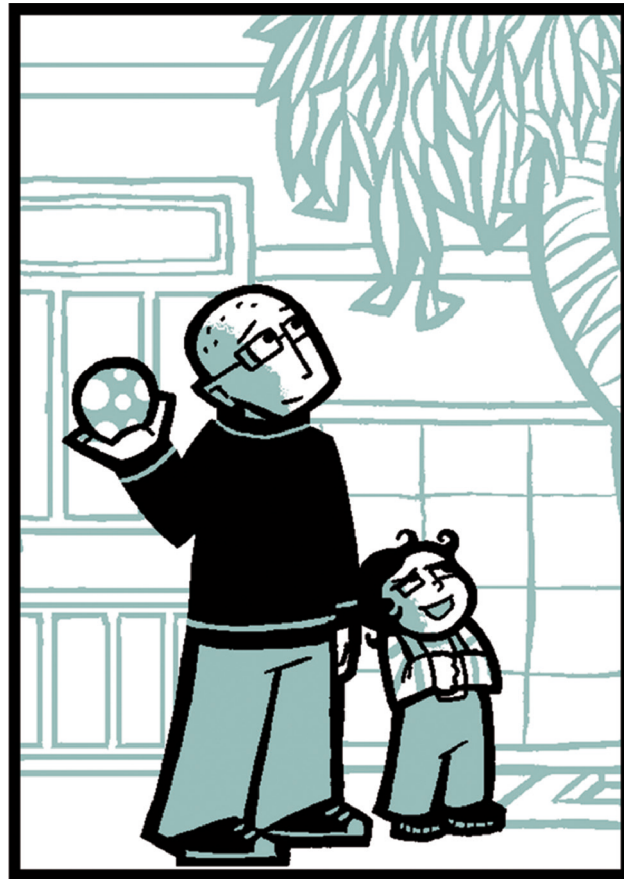
with the colour of the rest of the book which is done digitally). All have in common that are very, very rich in drawing and in details. This we did because on one hand we wanted to show, by opposition or contrast, its own grey and monotonous reality. However, for them the world that has true value is the one that cannot be reached but is always present: the glamorous world of the cinema and the concert stages. That is why it had to be infinitely richer than that graphic and chromatic level.

On the other hand, when I work with Cristina, as opposed to when I work with other authors, I do not give her the literary script but rather the completely finished story-board. In this case, in the pages I mentioned above, the ones belonging to the universe of anecdotes of cinema or jazz, I said I was going to give her those pages blank, only the texts floating on them, for her to do whatever she wished, to improvise, to decide if there was to be a full page drawing or if it should be divided in two or six frames. That, as in jazz, those were going to be her solos in which she would have to show her mastery of the instrument, her capacity to surprise with the drawing and composition, in the end, herself as a *virtuoso*. Cristina is an illustrator who likes details and who enjoys spending hours drawing. It is easy to imagine how difficult it was for her to graphically restrain herself in the sober parts and how much she enjoyed the rich parts. If you have any doubts I invite you to leaf through the book so you can understand what I tell you here.

All that I have explained, the use of music to concentrate on the work, the use of music to inspire me in the characters, in the story, and above all, in the narrative rhythm, serves me to mark precisely the premise I commented at the beginning: Never bore.

As a writer I try to have great respect for the reader, that unknown person, who has decided to spend a couple of hours of their life reading me and who, in no way can I bore or disappoint. I try that when reading is done, that couple of hours, should be worthwhile for him or her, because it has been fun, because it has been entertaining, because it has been moving or because they have learned something they did not know. As a reader, what I find a pity is when halfway through reading I feel the urge to throw the book against the wall because I am not interested in what happens or when I decide to abandon it because it really bores me. And as a spectator, I feel rage when halfway through the film I take sides with the bad guys and want the good ones to be murdered. But, that is a matter of construction of characters that we can leave for another occasion.

As you can see, although I did not choose it as a profession, music forms a necessary part of my work. Right now I am incapable of considering any script-writing without first thinking what music can accompany and inspire it. Music has finally, irremediably seeped, not only in my life, but also in my stories.



La máquina de Efrén, LaGRUAestudio (detalle p. 37).

Miguel Ángel Giner. BA in Fine Arts by the *Universitat Politècnica de València*, (Polytechnic University of Valencia), he is a writer, scriptwriter, comic book artist and illustrator. He has been telling stories even since he remembers, professionally since 1993, from the studio that he shares with Cristina Durán (LaGRUAestudio). *Una posibilidad entre mil*, *La máquina de Efrén*, *Cuando no sabes qué decir*, *Pillada por ti*, *Viñetas de vida*, *El siglo de oro valenciano*, drawn by Cristina Durán and Anna Dédalus, *El misterio de la mansión quemada*, drawn by Xulia Vicente and Núria Tamarit. He shares his passion for storytelling, very willingly, with his students from the Master in Design and Illustration (UPV) (Polytechnic University of Valencia), ESAT (Higher School of Art and Technology), and *L'Aula Oberta de la Universitat de València* (the Open Class of the University of Valencia) where he teaches Narrative. He is currently the President of the APIV (Professional Association of Illustrators of Valencia).
