

# Healing Songs and Music in Southern Italy: the Case of Tarantism

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ABSTRACT. Humans have always expressed themselves through songs and it is possible to witness practices of traditional singing almost everywhere and every time. The case that I am presenting in this article refers to the context of Southern Eastern Italy until the 1960s and the practice of singing and playing instruments as a form of healing towards people affected by tarantism, a peculiar culture-bound syndrome of that geographical area nowadays extinct. Tarantism takes its name from the spider called *tarantula*, which was said to sting mostly women around the end of June. Music and songs belonging to the traditional and wider genre of *pizzica* were used to treat them. Indeed, they could get rid of the venom of the spider by dancing with this music and these songs (even though the definitive healing could have been obtained only by the grace of Saint Paul). *Pizzica* is still sung, played and danced in Salento nowadays, although without its original healing function.

The aim of this article is, therefore, to explore some examples of *pizzica* as witnessed from ethnomusicologists and played nowadays, highlighting their social and cultural role in both healing and recreational contexts.

KEYWORDS: songs, music, healing, tarantism, heritage.

## INTRODUCTION

This article shows an analysis of healing songs and music related to tarantism, a cultural and historical phenomenon of the region of Salento in Southern Eastern Italy. Witnessed from the Middle Ages to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, tarantism was a culture-bound syndrome experienced after the alleged bite of a spider, called *taranta* or *tarantula*. Although the bite occurred once (generally during the individual's early adulthood), the bitten people, called *tarantati*<sup>1</sup>, often felt sick periodically and every summer, before being healed with the help of music and songs.

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1 People affected by tarantism, in Italian. I will also use in this text the variants *tarantato*, male singular, *tarantata*, female singular, and *tarantate*, female plural. Please note that the male variants can be used also to refer to both female and male objects and people, according to the rules of the Italian language.

There is an undoubted connection among the cultural phenomenon of tarantism, the songs, the music, and the cultural heritage and folklore of Salento. One of the reasons for this connection stands in the historical transformation of the elements of tarantism into heritage. In this regard, the research problem and purpose of this article is to understand the role and the significance of local music and songs as elements of the local heritage and cultural context, going through changes that occurred in recent history. In other words, how are songs and music linked with the identity, culture and heritage of Salento? And how has the function of those songs and music changed in time?

This research took place at first as part of the ethnographic fieldwork that I did in Salento in summer 2018 when I could develop a broad knowledge about tarantism and the local folklore. Starting from ethnography, I then adopted a more historical and analytical approach to the topic of healing songs and music, due to the focus on the transformation of a cultural phenomenon rather than a description of a certain context and area. Therefore, I decided not to be specific about my ethnographic experience and rather make a larger historical comparison with the previous work of scholars who had already addressed the topic, to reconstruct the evolution of the phenomenon from the existing framework of research.

The peculiar nature of tarantism and its connection with the local cultural context drove the interest of physicians and scholars towards the phenomenon since the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Thornedike 1882: 534). However, the most popular academic work about tarantism in Italy is the monographic book *The Land of Remorse*, written by the Italian ethnologist Ernesto De Martino (1908–1965) and published in 1961<sup>2</sup>. De Martino's work is a detailed overview of the phenomenon and the related research throughout centuries. Mostly studied by physicians, tarantism also caught the interest of anthropologists, folklorists, ethnologists and ethnomusicologists after the publication of *The Land of Remorse*. Nowadays, tarantism, healing music and songs are still significant topics of research among Italian ethnographers (Pizza 2015), despite the extinction of the syndrome. The cultural heritage of tarantism has indeed survived and has become strongly intertwined with the regional identity of Salento and its inhabitants.

## A DESCRIPTION OF TARANTISM

The definition of tarantism as a culture-bound syndrome qualifies it as a pathological condition, with a recognisable cause (the alleged bite of the *taranta*) and

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 2 In this article, I will refer to the original Italian publication (1961) and the English translation (2005) of De Martino's book by professor Dorothy Louise Zinn.

peculiar symptoms. The historian of medicine Jean Fogo Russell provided a detailed list of these symptoms, quoted below:

Those who were bitten were anguished and depressed, had dyspnoea in addition to cyanosis, syncope, weakened pulse, and hyperpyrexia. <...> Many complained of headache, vertigo, anxiety, palpitation, disorder of the stomach, thirst, heart pains, and fatigue. Some said their bones ached as if they were broken, and some said they were seized with lethargy. Sometimes the onset was sudden, and sometimes slow. The attacks varied, some victims were so morbidly excited that they could not sleep and would sing or laugh and dance continually. Others would leap into the air uttering wild cries or hurl themselves to the ground arching their bodies in grotesque convulsions. Many were dejected and would weep constantly as if pining away; a few had constant tremor, a number were drowsy, others were scarcely in possession of their senses, and some were completely mad; indeed, some even died (Russell 1979: 410–411).

A further symptom should be added to this list: the altered state of consciousness. Quoted by many scholars (Lapassade 2001; De Martino 2005; Nocera 2013), this state was often accompanied by mystic and religious hallucinations, with Saint Paul as the main interlocutor for the affected people. The role of Saint Paul was crucial since he used to communicate with the *tarantati* before conceding his grace during a final healing ritual. This ritual occurred every year on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June, in the chapel dedicated to the Saint in Galatina, a town in Salento whose citizens claimed to be immune from tarantism due to the will of Saint Paul (Caputo 1741). The grace did not always lead to definitive healing: people would often experience the symptoms every summer after the first bite (De Martino 2005).

Before obtaining the grace and after receiving the bite, each *tarantata* or *tarantato* should have come across the so-called “domestic therapy”, held in her or his private house for several days in June. During the domestic therapies, a *tarantata* or a *tarantato* used to dance with the accompaniment of tunes<sup>3</sup> played by musicians, whom the relatives of the affected person invited and paid for the occasion. Musicians used to play accordion, violin and drum and occasionally sing to stimulate the dance. According to the local belief, the frantic movements of this dance could help the *tarantata* or *tarantato* to get rid of the poison of the spider (ibid.: 37–40).

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 3 These tunes belonged to a specific genre of music, called *pizzica* (from the Italian verb *pizzicare*, to pinch), played also nowadays in Salento for recreational purposes. *Pizzica* is the local variant of another genre of music and dance called *tarantella*, named after *taranta*, and widespread in the whole Southern Italy. This has led some scholars to assume a larger diffusion of tarantism in the past (Inserra 2017: 7).

Although the state of illness of many people was real, scientists have never found and described the so-called *taranta*. Indeed, although the names *taranta* and *tarantula* inspired the scientific denomination of the real spider *Lycosa tarantula*, the local descriptions of the arachnid and the symptoms caused by its bite do not match with it. There is instead a closer similarity with the effect of the bite of another local spider, called *Latrodectus tredecimguttatus* (ibid.: 35), even though the rarity of this arthropod and its scarce aggressiveness towards humans do not explain at all why the phenomenon was so frequent and widespread (Bettini 1964).

Broadly speaking, many peculiar elements seem to question the idea that a spider or a similar creature could be responsible for the symptoms of the syndrome: above all, the strict seasonal occurrence of the syndrome and its unique healing methods. Therefore, the explanations for tarantism are different from the alleged bite of a spider and refer instead to the symbolism inherited within the cultural context of Salento for centuries. For example, the idea of biting (or pinching, to be more precise) is often linked to the sphere of sexuality and sexual frustration, since the bite of *taranta* usually involves genitals (as explained, for example, by Gilberto Camilla in Nocera 2013: 11). Pinching, at the same time, reminds of the classical Greek symbol of the *oïstros*, the stinger who has affected the mythical figure of Io (De Martino 2005). Greek mythology talks about spiders too, as shown in the tale of Arachne (Zazzaroni 2010). The connection between the spider, the bite, and these classical myths suggests a more ancient origin of the symbolism of tarantism than the Middle Ages.

Tarantism may have indeed originated during the first millennium before Christ, with the arrival of Greeks in Southern Italy or even the more ancient migration of the ancient people of Messapians to Salento. The scholar Maurizio Nocera suggests indeed that Greeks or Messapians gave birth to the phenomenon, to deal with the consequence of collective trauma (perhaps a war or the migration itself) (Nocera 2013: 27). Tarantism, according to Nocera, turned afterwards into a strategy to cope with something different, namely sexual frustration, and started to acquire a deeply ambiguous symbolism. The clearest expression of this ambiguity is certainly the figure of Saint Paul, whom some traditional songs describe as both a pincher and the final healer for the bitten people (De Martino 2005: 269–285). These songs will be discussed in the following section.

Despite being an extinct phenomenon nowadays, some elements related to the syndrome are still surviving as local forms of cultural heritage. Among those elements, music, dances and songs are nowadays still part of the common repertoire of the local community and keep a crucial role in the definition and promotion of the culture of Salento.

## HEALING SONGS IN SALENTO: THE ANALYSIS OF DIEGO CARPITELLA

Tarantism is widely known in the framework of Italian ethnology, due to the research of De Martino and his interdisciplinary team, composed of scholars with expertise in psychiatry, anthropology, and ethnomusicology (De Martino 2011). The team reached Salento in June 1959 and collected ethnographic data during their three weeks of residence in the region (De Giorgi 2007: 35). De Martino then used the data that he and his team had collected to write *The Land of Remorse*.

Some of the members of De Martino's team added few appendixes to his book, each one expounding on her or his topic of research. Among them, the ethnomusicologist Carpitella<sup>4</sup> analysed the ethnographic materials regarding the local music and songs while witnessing the domestic therapies of some female *tarantate* and interviewing informants in 1959.

Carpitella distinguished two phases of the therapies, based on the position of the *tarantata* (De Martino 2005: 287):

- 1) "On-the-floor" phase. During this phase, the *tarantata* used to lay on the floor of the room used for the therapy. There was no singing and musicians used to play only melodic instruments (violin, accordion), whereas the *tarantata* followed the melody moving slowly her head and her arms. Intensity and speed of music increased and, as the drummer started to play giving the rhythmic part to the melody, the second phase began.
  
- 2) Standing phase. Following the rhythmic instruments, the *tarantata* stood up and started dancing, moving in circles. She would occasionally get closer to the musicians to appreciate the sound of their instruments. In the meanwhile, the musicians could sing to support the instrumental melody and rhythm. The therapy ended when the affected person, tired of moving around, decided to rest, followed by the musicians who stopped playing and singing. If the affected person felt ready for the Saint's grace, she (or he) could decide not to dance anymore and wait for the final healing ritual on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June. However, the person might not feel enough healed, leading musicians to arrange a further session of the therapy.

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 4 Diego Carpitella (1924–1990), an Italian musician and ethnomusicologist, is often remembered for his activity of collection and archival storage of Italian folk songs during the 1950s. In the same decade, he collaborated with the American ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, interested in collecting folk songs from Italy, and De Martino, whom he followed in his fieldwork in Salento in 1959. Involved in academic teaching and writing, Carpitella was one of the most influential promoters of ethnomusicological studies in Italy. He also produced ethnographic documentaries, including *Meloterapia del tarantismo* (1960), made during the expedition with De Martino in Salento (Giannattasio 1991).

Carpitella reported musical notation and lyrics of some songs performed during the therapies. Technically speaking, he noticed “an obsessive rhythmic iteration (*ostinato*) with rhapsodic-type melodic variants; a variously accented isometric rhythm; a mostly tonal modal melodic ambitus, though sometimes revealing a melodic origin of a vocal character (diminished fifth, augmented fourth, tritone, etc.)” (ibid.: 299). Carpitella also recorded four keys, namely A major, D major, B minor and C minor (ibid.), in his opinion the only keys that could stimulate the dance.

These recurring patterns in the rhythm and the keys of the music, with corresponding patterns in the dance, were part of the so-called “dance-music modules” (De Martino 1961: 344), namely the socially acknowledged techniques and practices against the disease of tarantism. Carpitella noticed himself the recurrence of the musical patterns within these modules, postulating that these patterns were not casual but strictly related to the healing process. In this regard, the sound of the instruments and the voice of the musicians were powerful triggers for the dance of the affected people during the therapy. Carpitella analysed these dances too and recognised the correspondence between dance and music patterns even during the final healing ritual in Saint Paul’s chapel, where *tarantati* used to move and jump around without the accompaniment of instruments but following the same rhythmic patterns of the traditional healing music. On the other hand, Carpitella noticed how the lack of music impeded a structured and sequential dance as in the house therapy, confirming the link between music and dance in the healing process (ibid.: 348).

As an ethnomusicologist, Carpitella was interested in defining the distinct features of the traditional music of Salento. In this regard, he quoted Kirchner and Storace (ibid.: 348–351) as the first authors who transcribed the local healing music. However, Carpitella considered those historical sources quite scarce and not always relevant (ibid.: 345), leading him to a larger and more detailed activity of musical recording and transcription from healing therapies and interviews with informants. The informant Salvatora Marzo, from Nardò, was particularly helpful since she provided some examples of the healing songs, which Carpitella could transcribe in his chapter in *The Land of Remorse* even though he could not hear them directly during the house therapies (ibid.: 362).

I will report here the fragments<sup>5</sup> that Carpitella transcribed in the chapter, in the original dialect of Salento and with the English translation in brackets. The lyrics of these songs mentioned the spider bite and Saint Paul, whom musicians asked for the grace towards *tarantati* since the days of the domestic therapies:

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 5 Carpitella recorded all the fragments from Marzo, except for the last one, heard from the informant Michela Margiotta during the final healing ritual in Saint Paul’s chapel on June 29, 1959.

*Santu Paulu meu di Galatina / facitene la grazia stamattina / Santu Paulu meu de li tarante / facitene la grazia a tutte quante* (My Saint Paul of Galatina / do the grace this morning / my Saint Paul of the *tarante* / do the grace for everyone) (De Martino 2005: 307).

*Addò ti pizzicò la tarantella? / sotto la putia della 'unnella* (Where did the *taranta* bite you? / under the hem of my skirt) (ibid.).

*O Santu Paulu meu delle tarante / che pizzichi le caruse tutte quante / O Santu Paulu meu delle tarante / che pizzichi le caruse 'nmezze' all' anche / e le fai sante / O Santu Paulu meu de li scorpioni / che pizzichi i carusi int' a i balloni* (Oh my Saint Paul of the *tarante* / who stings all the girls / Oh my Saint Paul of the *tarante* / who stings the girls between the hips / and makes them holy / Oh my Saint Paul of the scorpions / who stings the boys in the pants) (ibid.).

*Santu Paulu meu de le tarante (x 3) / Fate la grazia a tutte quante* (My Saint Paul of the *tarante* / do the grace for everyone) (ibid.: 309).

From these words, Saint Paul emerged as a crucial figure with an ambivalent nature. Even though described and evoked as a healer, songs depict him as functionally identical to the damaging *taranta* spider, being both used to sting boys and girls in the genitals.

Sexuality is a crucial element in these songs. The image of animals and even Saint Paul pinching people on their genitals symbolises the connection between tarantism and sexuality. Some authors explored this connection too: Giorgio Baglivi (1828), Ernesto De Martino (2005) talking about his informant and *tarantata* Maria, Luigi Chiriatti (2011) and Maurizio Nocera (2013). All these scholars focused mainly on lack of sexual satisfaction of *tarantate* and *tarantati* and how dancing was used to cope with their sexual frustration. The bite on the genitals, described in the songs, is a metaphor for this frustration since it represents a pain that starts from the sexual organs and then affects the whole body.

Music, songs, dances, and sexuality are crucial and distinctive elements of tarantism, as Carpitella and De Martino showed in their research. Both have influenced contemporary scholars interested in recording and analysing musical and singing performances in Salento. Further and more recent research has been possible due to the functional ductility of local folk music, played not only for healing purposes.

HEALING AND NON-HEALING SONGS OF SALENTO:  
OTHER AND MORE RECENT EXAMPLES

Ethnomusicological research regarding tarantism has not stopped with Carpitella's recordings. Scholars have kept on studying local music and songs until recent times, giving relevant and interesting contributions. One of the most influential examples is Chiriatti, an ethnomusicologist from Salento who reported in his work *Morso d'amore* examples of traditional songs from Salento, collected throughout his long-term research since the 1970s (Chiriatti 2011: 31). The first example that he reported is a variant of the prayer to Saint Paul, described again as a pincher and a grace-giver at the same time:

*Santu Paulu miu de le tarante / pizzichi le caruse a mmienzu all'anche. / Santu Paulu miu de li scursuni / pizzichi li carusi a lli cunjuni. / Santu Paulu miu de Galatina / ci l'ha fare la grazia falla mprima. / Santu Paulu miu de Galatina / nu fare cu lucisca crai mmatina* (My Saint Paul of the *tarante* / you pinch girls between the legs. / My Saint Paul of the scorpions / you pinch boys in the testicles. / My Saint Paul of Galatina / if you want to give the grace, give it soon. / My Saint Paul of Galatina / give the grace before the new day starts) (ibid.: 156).

Other examples of healing songs reported in Chiriatti's book invite *tarantati* to dance and mention the origin and the function of the drum, a crucial instrument for the therapy that dictates the dance rhythm to the affected people:

*Lu tamburieddhu mia vine da Roma / ca me l'ha nduttu na napulitana / e lu Gigetto nostru ni lu sona / cu balla moi sta tabaccara* (My drum comes from Rome / a Neapolitan woman gave it to me / and our Gigetto<sup>6</sup> plays it for us / to make this tobacco worker dance) (ibid.: 163).

*Balla, balla beddha mia ca sai ballare / ca lu tou ballu de core non vene. / Tamburu, lu tamburieddhu miu vinne da Roma / cu rami o senza rami ca puru sona. <...> / Balla, balla beddha mia ca sai ballare / ca quistu è lu ballu de lu prima amore* (Dance, dance my beautiful [*tarantata*] / because your dance does not come from your heart. / Drum, my drum came from Rome / with or without branches, it plays. <...> / Dance, dance my beautiful [*tarantata*] / because your dance is the dance of the first love) (ibid.: 165–166).

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6 *Gigetto* is the name of the drummer who played during a therapy session that Chiriatti recorded. The *tarantata* is mentioned as a tobacco worker here, since working in tobacco plantations was a common job among people affected by tarantism.

Traditional music and songs of Salento, which belong to the genre of *pizzica*, do not only have healing purposes. In this regard, there are two subgenres of *pizzica*, which are not distinguishable by style, rhythm and melody and differ only by their function. More precisely, *pizzica tarantata* is intended exclusively for healing, whereas the other subgenre of *pizzica*, called *pizzica pizzica*, is instead played and danced for recreational purposes (De Giorgi 1999: 88). A further difference between the subgenres emerges from the lyrics of the songs. Lyrics of *pizzica pizzica* songs are often different from the healing songs that have been mentioned previously. Spiders, diseases and Saints are not usually part of those lyrics, while the theme of love and suffering is widely explored (Chiriatti 2011: 157–160, 167–168). Interestingly, the point of view is gender-framed in all *pizzica* songs since singers are usually male and either invite female *tarantate* to dance or express their feelings towards a woman. In both cases, these songs reveal a sexual subtext and express a form of erotic desire, coherently with the importance of sexuality within cultural symbolism of Salento and tarantism.

The existence of *pizzica pizzica* allowed traditional music and songs to survive the end of the syndrome of tarantism. Nowadays musicians still play, sing and dance *pizzica pizzica*, mostly during special events like patron Saints festivities or concerts, such as the *Night of the Taranta* (Inserra 2017). Organised every August since 1998, the *Night* consists of a concert in the town of Melpignano, in Salento. The *Night* is one of the biggest events in the region (Attanasi, Giordano 2011) and several musicians and singers from Italy take part in it every summer, re-arranging songs and instrumental tracks taken from the musical genre of *pizzica pizzica*.

The *Night* is a popular festival not only for artists and attendees but also for scholars interested in tarantism, *pizzica* and their contemporary transformations. The Italian anthropologist Giovanni Pizza has discussed this event as a form of revivalism, triggered by the increasing interest towards De Martino's work in the last thirty years (Pizza 2015: 68). *The Land of Remorse* has encouraged not only new studies about tarantism, but also new strategies of preservation and promotion of the old symbols and features of the phenomenon. Pizza interpreted the *Night of the Taranta* accordingly, as an event that aims to keep the cultural symbology and practices related to tarantism alive and re-defines them as valuable cultural heritage.

The same idea of revivalism of tarantism and *pizzica*, even though without a specific focus on the *Night*, was part of the research of scholars such as Elina Caroli (2009) and Jerri Daboo (2010). A more recent contribution to this framework comes from the Italian scholar Inconronata Inserra and her book about Southern Italian folk dances, published in 2017. Based on interviews with Italian musicians

and bibliographical sources, Inserra traced the revivalist process of development and institutionalisation of *pizzica* as cultural heritage in Italy and worldwide. According to her, revivalism consists of a re-discovery of an old cultural environment that was gradually disappearing within modernity. Music played a crucial role in this sense, due to local groups like *Nuovo Canzoniere del Salento* and *Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino* from the 1970s (Inserra 2017: 34) and a larger interest in the genre of *pizzica* after the 1990s (ibid.: 39–47). In this regard, Inserra mentions the *Night of the Taranta*, stating that “since the 1990s <...> the festival has contributed to popularizing *pizzica* both nationally and internationally, while also boosting tourism in the region [of Salento]” (ibid.: 40).

The process of revivalism has shown how Southern Italian music has changed its original healing functions. Both subgenres of *pizzica*, nowadays part of the heritage of Salento, are now playing a crucial role in the preservation and promotion of the cultural specificity of the region and the community (Noyes 2006, 2015; Hafstein 2018). In one word, this musical genre has faced a process of folklorism, namely re-use and transformation of folklore, adapted in modern times as a communal heritage (Bendix 1988). Besides being an expression of disease, suffering, love and sexual desire, songs and music in Salento are currently and mainly symbols of a strong regional identity.

## CONCLUSION

In *The Land of Remorse* De Martino foresaw the extinction of tarantism as he noticed that the symbolism and the ritual structure associated with the syndrome and the healing process had been losing their cultural relevance (De Martino 1961: 142). De Martino was right about the disappearance of the syndrome but underestimated the strength of the symbolic apparatus of tarantism, which could survive and maintain its importance despite significant transformations. Music and songs are eminent examples of this survivance and even success, as emerged from this analysis.

Originally intended for both healing and recreational purposes, *pizzica* nowadays is a musical genre that people play, sing and dance as a form of social entertainment. Often played outdoors and during public events, music in Salento is nowadays a crucial element of the folklife of the local population. Songs have always encouraged participation in this social and cultural environment, mostly exhorting people to dance and express their feelings and emotions through music and body movement. This communal aspect of *pizzica* is one of the reasons why traditional music in Salento has become a form of heritage and has been connected to its cultural identity (Bendix 2018).

The lyrics of the local folk songs depict symbols and images connected to the context and identity of Salento as the land of tarantism. Spiders, pinches, and Saint Paul are recurrent elements of these songs and show the influence and the painfulness of tarantism within the community. On the other hand, music has always worked as a powerful healing tool and songs often refer to the positive impact of music towards *tarantati* and people in general. Since tarantism is a syndrome associated with lack of love and sexual satisfaction, music stimulates dance, perhaps the most effective antidote against this kind of sufferance. People can express a wide range of emotions through dance, from anger and frustration to love and sexual desire, and can receive a benefit from this expression, whether they are *tarantati* or not. This is the reason why singing, playing, and dancing *pizzica* are still popular recreational activities nowadays, after the extinction of the syndrome of tarantism. Furthermore, the strong and evocative symbolism of tarantism survives through folk songs and music, making both crucial elements of the cultural identity of the region.

Despite the historical changes, music and songs of Salento have kept their undeniable social and cultural value. Hopefully, this value will be recognised in the future, helping the local community to preserve and promote their unique heritage and identity.

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## Gydomoji Pietų Italijos muzika ir dainos: tarantizmo atvejais

MICHELE TITA

*S a n t r a u k a*

Raktažodžiai: dainos, muzika, gydymas, tarantizmas, paveldas.

Straipsnyje aptariama tradicinė muzika ir dainos iš Salento regiono rytinėje Pietų Italijos dalyje. Tyrimas daugiausia remiasi spausdintais šaltiniais, kuriuos paskelbė etnomuzikologai bei kitų sričių mokslininkai, rinkę etnografinę medžiagą XX ir XXI amžiuje. Ši medžiaga apima liaudies dainų tekstus ir kai kuriuos techninius aspektus, susijusius su tradicine šio krašto muzika, taip pat kiek platesnę informaciją apie kultūrinį Salento regiono kontekstą. Darbo tikslas iš tiesų ir buvo susieti muziką ir dainas su vietos kultūriniu kontekstu, todėl mano dėmesį patraukė kultūriškai nulemtas tarantizmo sindromas, kuris iki pat XX a. antrosios pusės buvo labai dažnas Salento regione. Stengiausi išryškinti muzikos ir dainų vaidmenį gydančiam šio sindromo paveiktus asmenis.

Gydytojai ir tyrėjai paprastai tarantizmą aiškina kaip savotišką giluminės seksualinės frustracijos išraišką, tuo tarpu jo apimti žmonės (dažniausiai moterys) apibūdina savo būklę kaip neva atsiradusią įkandus vorui. Kad bent iš dalies pagytų nuo šio sindromo, tokie žmonės turėdavo šokti per ypatingus gydymo seansus, kuriuos rengdavo groti ir dainuoti samdomi muzikantai. Pasak šio krašto tikėjimų, visiško pagijimo būdavo tikimasi vėliau – sulaukus šv. Pauliaus malonės.

Straipsnyje aptariamos dainos, kurias muzikantai atlikdavo gydymo metu. Kadangi jos vietinių muzikantų būdavo perduodamos žodžiu, man teko kliautis dviejų etnomuzikologų – Diego Carpitellos ir Luigi'o Chiriatti – užrašytais tekstais. Kaip matyti iš šių užrašymų, Salente gydymui daugiausia būdavo pasitelkiamos dainos, aukštinančios šv. Paulių ir vaizduojančios fizines ligonių kančias bei seksualinę frustraciją.

Kai kurios iš šių dainų bei instrumentinės muzikos kūrinų galėjo būti atliekami ir kitokiame kontekste – tiesiog pramogai. Todėl, tarantizmo sindromui išnykus, ši muzika ir dainos tapo smagia liaudiškų Salento švenčių dalimi, o plačiąja prasme – kultūriniu šio krašto paveldu.

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