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**“TERESINA, YOU’VE PINCHED HER TO SLEEP...”:
A CASE STUDY EXPLORING THE SEMIOTIC ELEMENTS OF
THE HEALING RITUAL *PIZZICA* DANCE IN SALENTINE POLYPHONIC
SONG**

Salento, a cultural region in the deep south of Italy, boasts a rich musical heritage, and in particular, has experienced an explosive revival of folk dance culture in the several years (Tomatis, 2020). This is centred primarily around the *pizzica pizzica*, a repertory of folk dances that are rooted in trance-inducing healing rituals that were once widely practiced in the region, and now limited to *neopizzica* forms for tourist consumption and festival programming (Daboo, 2010). This ritual is one of the primary idioms of tarantism (*tarantismo*), named after the the *tarantola* spider, which is a impious term that refers to the ancient belief system which attests that our mental and physical afflictions are attributed to demonic energy that may take possession of the body and mind via the vessel of the wolf spider and its psychologically venomous bite. (De Martino, 1959). This term is also used to refer to the healing rituals and phenomena to remove this venom, engaging the afflicted to reach a state of trance via music and dance in order to cast out, quite literally, their demons - the ghost of the spider.

Since the 1990s, *pizzica* has experienced a local revival, which has created a wider folk revival of various Salentine musics that positions *pizzica* central as the musical protagonist. (Santoro, 2009). This results in other rich repertoires that are not directly related to this revival, such as polyphonic song, to be obscured in the periphery of musical life.

Salento also boasts a rich heritage of polyphonic singing, practiced in the past as part of the rituals of everyday life working in the fields by the *contadini*, as the musical manifestation of the socio-agrian cultural workspaces of the past. These songs, sung polyphonically and a capella in collective group settings in which instruments were not possible as the hands were busy with agricultural tasks, are regionally referred to as *canti alla stisa*, specifically in reference to the physical and musical dimensions of the song being “spread” across the socio-agrian space among different bodies and voices. (Morello, 2018).

For much of my time studying Salentine polyphony, I often overlooked the importance of tarantism, which is so central to Salentine musical heritage. The oversaturation of commercialized modern *pizzica* in touristic settings - with highly interpreted

and arranged forms that sometimes don't resemble traditional music -made me view *pizzica* as some kind of musical antonym of Salentine polyphony, and that studying polyphony obligates a inferred exigence to avoid the *pizzica* space and to find these peripheries where polyphony still exists. While I was certainly correct about this, it was also extreme of me to disregard the heritage of *tarantism*, as the afflicted Salentine women of the past were also almost certainly singers of polyphony working in the field.

Tarantism, as a phenomenon, has always been affirmed by Ernesto De Martino himself since his influential initiating study to quite likely be part of an extremely rich past culture of magical-religious expression that can only be known and accessed through the vestiges of what had remained of it (De Martino, 1963; De Martino 1959). This is because by the time De Martino went into the field, the tarantism phenomenon was at the end of its authentic lived expression, leaving gaps in our knowledge that can lead to theoretical speculation based on enigmatic components of tarantism that are present in other local traditions - such as polyphonic song.

In this paper, I investigate the possibility of Salentine tarantism being connected to Salentine polyphonic song. Firstly, by contextualizing certain semiotics that are present in Salentine polyphony, presenting some analysis by Italian scholars in relation to De Martino's own affirmations on southern Italian magic and ritual. Then, I will present a case study, presenting a polyphonic song by analyzing vocal technique, rhythm and references to the tarantism ritual in its text. Lastly, I will look at the concept of Salentine polyphony represented in movement, analyzing film footage from ethnographic work done between 1959 and 1978 that juxtaposes the semiotic analysis of this paper with the ritualistic movements of the *pizzica* healing dance.

"Iatromusica", a hypothesis based on Salento's magic-religious cultural expression

Iatromusica is the term occasionally found in analytical work on tarantism, referring to the semiotic, ritual, and magic-religious elements of the *pizzica* dance that provide the space for healing. Specifically, in the realm of *pizzica*, this term is a metonym for the music used as a principal medium to drive multi-elemental traditions that can incorporate movement, colour, and gesture to alleviate the physical and mental afflictions of the ill. More broadly, however, this term refers to the general phenomenology of healing with music as the medical instrument, which is a central component of *pizzica* but not exclusive to it. In addition, given the mosaic of Christian symbols and mystical elements that are central to the belief system and psycho-spiritual phenomenology of the tradition, *iatromusica* in its Salentine form is one of the most important examples of southern Italian syncretism,

blending religion, magic and ritual.

Considering that tarantism was born of ancient pagan-catholic practice in a region with a documented heritage of magic, it can also be speculated that a wider repertoire of *iatromusica* customs, also demonstrating syncretic cultural expression in which religious symbols replace or are avatarized as instruments of pre-Christian and magical cultural customs, could have existed beyond the *pizzica* ritual. (Lezzi, 2007).

For this reason, De Martino insisted on using a very particular and descriptive register in his Italian to describe magical culture in Italy, always making reference to this aspect of southern Italians' cultural expression with great frankness and admiration. Terms in De Martino's register include *magicoreligioso* (magical-religious); *demologia* ("demology," in reference to the study of folk culture); *demopsicologico* ("demopsychological," referencing the psychological space of carriers of folk culture); *pagano-cattolico* (pagan-catholic), *eziologia* (aetiology), and *magicità* (magicness) (De Martino, 1959).

An interesting hypothesis of the potential vastness of the body of Salentine *iatromusica*, and how much of it could have been lost to time before we had the resources to document these traditions properly, was presented in Luigi Lezzi's 2007 collection of accompanying notes for the the compilation of field recordings, "Le Cicale." This collection of recordings were almost exclusively of a capella polyphonic song collected in Salento likely in the 1970s, before detailed ethnographic notes became an integral part of Italian ethnomusicological practice, and therefore leaving voids of cultural context. The record, along with Lezzi's accompanying book of notes, was assembled with the idea of trying to deconstruct and decode these recordings that had very little information available, in order to understand their origin, cultural context, and relation to present-day Salentine musical culture. This contextualization looked at vocal technique, musical texture, linguistic dialects, and the particular contents of the song texts.

In Lezzi's notes, he refers to one specific recording being a potential remnant of a vaster, enigmatic repertoire of rituals and musics native to the Salento region that we can only speculate and hypothesize with the vestiges of these potential traditions apparent in old recordings and documents. This particular song, "Teresina," presented the notion of a potential *iatromusica* that could have contained the ritualistic and semiotic elements of tarantism that we have studied and analyzed in *pizzica*, but executed via polyphonic song rather than the dance-oriented exorcism ritual, with singers instead of musicians being the musical exorcists of a *tarantata*.

In particular, certain elements of the *pizzica* ritual can be portrayed by the musical and thematic components of the song that can indicate its role in an iatromusical setting, such as tarantismatic images invoked by the text; the use of

the voice to imitate the sounds of the *tarantate* in their ecstatic state, which is a unique feature not part of the widespread vocal repertoire; and the rhythm form, which unusually plays and oscillates between compound meter and free rhythm in a possible evocative reference to the ebbs of a *pizzica* ritual, which may have sections of frenetic rhythm and pause.

“Teresina, l’hai fatta bella...”: A Case Study

As mentioned, Lezzi noted that *Teresina* could be a potential vestige of non-pizzica iatromusical Salentine repertoire, related to the wider regional polyphonic song practice *canto alla stisa*, which was habitually sung in a very different context and agrarian space. Lezzi noted that this song contained the iatromusical elements of the tarantism ritual, in both its performative elements as well as thematic, suggestive text. In this case study, we will look at both. The song text illustrates the catatonic state of the *tarantata*, and the spider’s bite which brings her to this state, the “pizzica,” from which the dance ritual gets its name. Lezzi mentions in his notes that in some more ancient songs that directly paint elements of the pizzica ritual, the spirit of the spider that possesses the *tarantata*’s body can be directly spoken to in song by being addressed with a common Salentine woman’s name:

<i>Teresina, l’hai fatta bella</i> <i>L’hai pizzicata, l’ha ‘ddormentà</i> <i>La pizzicariella</i> <i>Te pizzacàu chiù sutta te lu</i> <i>scianùcchiu</i>	<i>Teresina, you’ve made her beautiful</i> <i>You’ve pinched [bitten] her and lulled her to sleep</i> <i>The pinched [bitten] one</i> <i>It pinched you underneath the knee...</i>
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In this song, the spider’s spirit is being addressed as Teresina, and so the singers are speaking directly to the spirit of possession.¹

Song form is also atypical for this song, in which there is an oscillation between metered and non-metered sections. Metered sections are always sung with text, speaking directly to the spider’s spirit, while unmetered sections speak to the afflicted, referencing where the spider’s bite occurred on the body.

The song form is as such: AABBC

A	Compound meter, words are sung and repeated, and don't ever varyate Repeated twice
B	Free rhythm, soloists improvise melismas over a drone, only with one term: (<i>la pizzicariella</i>) <i>Repeated twice</i>
C	A soloist sings the variation of the words, referencing the explicit action of the spider's bite Extended vocal technique with shrieks that evoke the voice of the tarantate Sung only once, to lead the song back to the top and repeat the song form

Lastly, there are tarantismatic nuances in the inflection and technique of the voices for these songs. The sections between the compound meter and free rhythm sections are quite evident with the extended or limited use of melisma - the free rhythm section focuses on the word *pizzicariella* ("bitten one!", now shifting focus from addressing the spider to the tarantata), with melismas and a supporting drone. The rhythmic sections focus more on text underlay, using a very slowed interpretation of the typical *pizzica* 12/8. In addition to this, as mentioned 1 This evokes to me a semiotic element in the Georgian ritual of healing *sabodisho*, in which the singers use text to speak directly to the spirit of possession in the afflicted's body, that is the cause of illness and strife. (Berman, 2009).

throughout this analysis, the soloists' voices implement shrieks that allude to the voice of the *taranta* mid-ritual, undoubtedly the imitation of the trance-state vocalization of a *tarantata* under the spider's possession. This is the peak of the song form, in which it ends and then repeats *da capo*.

It should be mentioned - considering that the regional revival movement is an important socio-musical context for any discussion on Salentine music - that this recording has also been studied by contemporary musicians in Salento, as a part of occasional polyphonic song repertoire shared in performance spaces. Interestingly, the singers who perform this repertoire (which is studied) place emphasis on certain aforementioned elements in this case study, elaborating upon their own tarantism-regulated nuances of the song, as well as adding verses that much more explicitly suggest the persona of the *tarantata*, for example:

<i>E me pizzacàu chiù sutta te la manu</i> <i>E te pizzacàu chiù sutta te lu scianùcchiu</i> <i>E te pizzacàu chiù sutta te la gunella</i>	<i>It pinched me under the hand It pinched me</i> <i>under the knee It pinched me under the skirt</i>
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Based on the following recording published online in 2015, from which this text was taken, we can also see the following elaborations that more explicitly suggested tarantismatic phenomenology, both musically and thematically:

Performative elements	Semiotic elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The cries that evoke the voices of mid-trance <i>tarantate</i> are more pronounced, reaching higher frequencies and lengths with each verse• Collective song with leaders that lead the ebbs and flows of the ritual; multiple leaders of the song that are interwoven together, with minimal gesture and eye contact but with and intent expression, similar to the type of communication between musicians in the tarantism ritual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Song text have added elements that continue to refer to the spider’s bite, also suggesting the sexual innuendos that are present in other folk songs (especially <i>pizzica</i> songs) regarding the <i>tarantate</i>• As the song progresses, the cries of the <i>tarantate</i> become more elevated as the text refers more places on the body where the spider bit the <i>tarantata</i>

Based on this analysis, there it can be suggested that the traditions of *pizzica* and Salentine polyphony may have not been so separated by milieu and cultural context, and that the presence of phenomenological elements in polyphony could infer *iatromusical* traditions being practiced outside of the *pizzica* ritual.

Polyphony of the body

While I spent time in Salento in the summer of 2024, I sought out Lezzi at his village home in the hinterland, to ask in-depth about what was meant by these speculations of a potential vaster repertoire of *iatromusica* that could have implicated Salentine polyphony in the realm of tarantism. From our lively exchange, Lezzi affirmed that these are only hypotheses based on mysteries and enigmas left behind via Salento’s rich but not fully-understood patrimony of magic of ritual. The semiotic elements of tarantism can be traced in other forms of folklore (such as the above case study of polyphonic song), but it is highly speculative and inconclusive in nature. In fact, this is one of the primary assertions of Ernesto de Martino in his writings,

affirming that our late arrival into documenting this heritage leaves us with important questions that we can only attempt to answer via the shadows and vestiges of folkloric culture we were still able to observe. Building on the analysis of the Martinian method, Fabio Dei and Antonio Fanelli (Dei, Fanelli, 2015) affirm that ongoing study can't be implemented with a traditional scientific method in anthropology, but a sensitive analysis in folk psychology, a pragmatic approach to studying ritual through the lens of Catholic-pagan syncretism, and with scientific esteem towards even the most remote gestures and culture expressions as anecdotes of patrimonial phenomenology.

During our lively exchange of ideas regarding the potential connection between polyphony and tarantism, the Capella di San Paolo in Galatina - the most revered and studied site held in sacred esteem within the cult of tarantism - emerged as part of this discourse. This is due to the fact the Capella in Galatina is the centre of this phenomenon, in which many components of the full ritual in its entire, unabridged form were documented on the Feast of Saint Paul on June 29², before the extinction of this tradition as an authentic ritual.

In my own preliminary foreway into analyzing Salentine polyphony within the framework of magic and iatromusical phenomenology, I was moved by the concept of the Cappella di San Paolo being a shrine of ancient tarantismatic expression, particularly on the Festa of June 29, without the presence of the traditional exorcists, that is, the musicians of pizzica repertoire. When asking Lezzi about the texture of polyphony in tarantismatic spaces, he cited the lamentations and wails of the *tarantate*, who experienced states of trances both collectively and individually which created frequencies and pitches that are individually produced to represent the multi-experiential anatomy of the Capella space. This then can semantically be argued to represent a type of vocal polyphonic texture that sonically represents collective yet individual simultaneous experiences of healing through ecstasy - that is, a truly *iatromusical* polyphonic phenomenon. In my own observations to Lezzi, it is an affirmation of the etymology *a capella*, an Italianism that entered our academic musicological register to refer to vocal music without the presence of instruments as a patrimonial vestige of the interdiction of instruments in² Ethnographic work was completed first by Ernesto Di Martino in his pioneering documentation of magic and ritual in 1959, which then influenced some in academia to follow suit until the ritual's extinction in the 1970s. ecclesiastic spaces so that they would not interrupt the mystical experience of prayer, strictly musically accessible only via the voice, and that the mystique of prayer and ecstasy is also a central part of Salentine pagan-catholic expression. In footage collected by De Martino in 1959, video footage of the Festa in Galatina in front of and inside the chapel, demonstrates Lezzi's ideas of polyphonic textures of the voice being represented by several vocal manifestations in simultaneous states of individual trance.

This brings me to reflect on Mikhail Bakhtin’s philosophical literary framework of polyphony, in which a narrative can create a multi-voiced texture in which there is a diversity of lived experiences which all have equal value to the narrative (Bakhtin, 1984). These women, experiencing crisis and deep mental and physical affliction, express their suffering through their bodies in tarantasmatic space. While tarantism as a ritual is prescribed as a folkloric style of exorcism in which one person, the *tarantata*, would be the protagonist, the collective tarantismatic experience at the Capella of San Paolo that happens at a specific time of the year provides a unique polyphonic texture of the body, in which several women become protagonists of equal vocal validity in the narrative of the ritual.

By interweaving the literary concept of narrative polyphony as an abstract mosaic of different lived experiences, or “voices,” which collectively creates a texture of depth, we may then utilize the multivocal soundscape of the Cappella di San Paolo (during the peak moments of tarantismatic ritual) as a paradigm that sonically represents the interwoven lived experiences of these women, expressed simultaneously in shared yet personal ecstatic states. The multivocal dimension of this space is then corroborated by the polyphonic texture of the body, in which ecstatic movement collectively externalized manifests this abstract polyphonic texture in physical space through the body. This means polyphony is expressed musically and physically, in which the *tarantata*’s bodies and voices become the simultaneous physical and musical polyphonic texture of the Capella.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of tarantism, explored in this paper focusing on the semiotic elements of the ancient Salentine *pizzica* ritual of healing by reaching trance via dance, can also be analyzed through the lens of other Salentine musics, such as the traditional polyphonic song repertoire of the region. This is because the phenomenon of tarantism consists of several components that interweave together to create its unique expression, which provides an analytic tool to identify elements of tarantism in non-tarantismatic musics. Some of these components were integral to the analysis of tarantism-specific motifs present in *pizzica* repertoire, which can also be traced to some suggestive yet evocative details in a particular example of Salentine polyphony analyzed in this paper. This includes the musical interaction with presence of spirits in which text is used to dialogue; rhythm, in which there is fluctuation between periods of freneticism and pause in relevance to the ebbs and flows of the afflicted’s ecstatic state; and the mid-ritual vocal expression of the *tarantata*, the possessed, in which the voice of the *tarantata* becomes extended technique as a part of the polyphonic texture. This was presented specifically with a case study, *Teresina*, a field recording that was part of a group of recordings of

Salentine polyphony collected in Salento's hinterland in the 1970s, then analyzed by folklorist Luigi Lezzi to try to deconstruct enigmas from the voids of information resulted in a lack of ethnographic notes and details that weren't a widespread standard practice in ethnographic fieldwork at the time. The recording of *Teresina* brought up the hypothesis of a widespread heritage of *iatromusica* - music designed for healing, of which we only now know of *pizzica* - in which polyphonic song could have had its own unique repertoire for this function in Salento. The suggestion of a Salentine polyphonic repertoire of *iatromusica* is corroborated by the provocative aforementioned tarantism elements that are present in this song.

In this paper, we also viewed the the concept of polyphony being analyzed with linguistic and sociological frameworks, originating from the ideas of philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, who utilized the concept of polyphony as a narrative device to present a story through multiple, equally important voices in which all the experiences weave to create a "polyphonically" narrative recounting. This can be a framework for analysis even with Lezzi's own inferences when I spoke with him, referencing the choreutic yet multi-protagonist ritual of the festa of San Paolo, in which several *tarantate* are central figures in the Capella space. The simultaneous vocalizations from these women's multiple experiences of ecstasy is an aural polyphonization of Bakhtin's narrative philosophy. This polyphony of voice can also be applied - within this broader philosophical context rather than strictly musicological - to the polyphony of body, in which these women's bodies are also expressive components that share space and create a polyphonic texture with movement, simultaneous states of trance creating a "multivoiced" corporeal dancescape, interweaving multiple tarantism experiences with both voice and body.

Building on Lezzi's hypothesis, the investigation of Salentine *iatromusica* beyond the realm of *pizzica*, and specifically in the realm of polyphonic song repertoire, is incomplete and speculative at this stage. But by extrapolating components of the tarantism phenomenon to create an analytic system, one can continue to investigate and explore hypotheses of the potential nexus between the polyphonic song and tarantism phenomenon of Salento.

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Video Examples

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“Donne e religione nel sud Italia - Il tarantismo” YouTube, uploaded by Homo Ridens, November 20, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mOCd-CAABT4>