

To Sing Across the Seas

Tiziana Rinaldi Castro (July 17, 2013)



Violinist, composer, co-founder of the legendary Italian Rock band PFM, and conductor, the Maestro Mauro Pagani brought l'Orchestra della Taranta ensemble from Salento to Le Poisson Rouge in New York. Two evenings of feverish folk-music with a peasant's dance, Pizzica, performed during the celebrations surrounding religious festivities or in weddings

Pizzica. It is a dance and a genre of music played in a fast paced rhythm of six eighths, with extraordinarily ancient roots and it has engendered the more famous [Tarantella](#) [2]. It is played and danced in the [Grecia Salentina region](#) [3], the Southern area of the [Apulia](#) [4] region of Italy, itself in the heel part of the peninsular boot.

It used to be a ritual exorcism, the remnant of rites and festivities of the seemingly long lost cult of [Dionysus](#) [5] brought to Southern Italy by the ancient Greeks 2300 years ago, and as such it is a true example of syncretism.



The latter is a word dear to the group of wonderful musicians, eight elements of the larger “Orchestra della [Notte Della Taranta](#) [6]” and [Mauro Pagani](#) [7], -musical director, arranger, and musician for the event- who this past Monday and Tuesday have brought to our beloved island an unforgettable sample of [Pizzica](#) [8]’s beauty, of its power and its poetry while tying to its rhythm sounds and melodies from throughout the Mediterranean and enriching its ancient strong language with at times an ironic take, at times a revealing intuition, while at others a matter of fact clarification.

Violinist, composer, co-founder of the legendary Italian Rock band [PFM](#) [9], and conductor, the Maestro Mauro Pagani has recently won the distinguished prize Il Ciak D’oro for the soundtrack to the movie “Siberian Education”, by [Gabriele Salvatores](#) [10], and has directed the 63rd edition of the Italian [Music Festival Sanremo](#) [11], a monumental task which he prepares to repeat next February. Presently in New York where he is completing the writing of both his latest novel and his CD, he is happy to have brought Pizzica to us.

“From 2007 to 2009, I have been the musical director and arranger for “La Notte Della Taranta”, an itinerant festival in the Salento region, which brings to the financially depressed area about 150.000 people each August, an uplifting event for the people of Apulia”.

But Mauro’s interest in Pizzica stems from afar.

“Since the end of the seventies I have been passionate about World Music. [Crêuza de Mă](#) [12], an album I have composed in 1984 in collaboration with the late Italian musician and singer [Fabrizio De André](#) [13], was in a way the first result of my research, the merging of different musical canons.

And that is eventually what got me interested in Pizzica, how the musicians were holding on to the traditional core of this music and dance and yet they were open to the dialogue with other cultures and their music, and how to weave new languages between them”.

Pizzica, literally “It bites”, refers to the bite of a small spider, the lycosa tarantula, a common one in the Grecia Salentina region.

The spider bit women while they worked in the field, maybe harvesting the tobacco, or the wheat in the heavy season of summer. The women fell into a mysterious melancholia, a state of stupor almost, leaving them unable to function, to be.

Doctors were useless and psychologists would be taboo in a peasants’ society, for the women weren't "crazy". A magical, mysterious curse had rather fallen upon them and had to be dispelled. What to do? True thaumaturgy was needed; a ritual exorcism had to take place. Yet the priest wasn't called here, the musicians were summoned instead. Only the healing music of the tambourine, the violin, and the accordion, in fact, would be able to cure the malaise of the woman.

In a pure instance of ritual exorcism, the tarantolata, the victim of the spider’s bite, would dance sometimes for days. The incessant, raving rhythmic music of the Pizzica would induce a state of trance that would help her dance. And the dance had a liberating effect, helping her to get rid of the spider’s poison and dispel thus the utter sadness that had taken over her so that she could return to herself.

This phenomenon was known as Tarantismo in Italy and was studied on the field in 1959 by anthropologist [Ernesto De Martino](#) [14] who wrote about it in a very important book: “The Land of Remorse: A study of Southern Italian Tarantism”. As it is suggested in the title of De Martino’s book remorse is key in his interpretation with respect to the reasons behind the malaise. As it was never proved that the spider could in fact poison anyone with its bite, it was proposed that the malaise was self “inflicted” as a means to express one’s secret fears, one’s repressed guilt, or one’s inability to cope with a future that couldn’t be averted, may that be an unwanted marriage, a life of utter poverty, or simply the realization that work was harder than expected and that it would only end



with death; ultimately one's inadequacy towards the expectations of a close knit society, bound by rigid moral codes, and especially unfriendly to women.

The phenomenon lasted until the end of the 70's and then declined until it pretty much disappeared, though at times still today, isolated cases of Tarantism are recorded.

As any mystical and, or initiation rituals, Pizzica was eventually canonized and throughout the centuries became part of society's mundane sphere. For centuries it served thus a dual function: it offered a ceremonial healing ground, holding space for the wounded psyche of women and it comforted the working class from hard work through the fast pace rhythm of its music and the stylized fight against the spider, as recreated in the dance with its light, graceful steps mimicking the stomping over the wretched small creature that caused the terrible malaise. At once, however, both in its therapeutic and its artistic form, Pizzica promoted respite in the psyche as well as in the spirit.

A peasants' dance, Pizzica was traditionally performed during the celebrations surrounding religious festivities or in weddings and other private celebrations. In the past 15 years, however, a revival of both dance and music on a much wider platform has taken place, involving a new generation of educated and eclectic musicians, who have approached the large canon of traditional music of Apulia re-elaborating it through fusion with other musical languages.

On stage with Mauro Pagani and the "Orchestra della notte della Taranta" that fusion is clear: blues, rock, and echoes from folk and traditional music from Portugal, Albania, Croatia, North Africa, and Greece. And one premonition of the tango yet to come from across the ocean, in the splendid theme of "Aremu Rindinedda", an old, old song of longing for one's own home far away, played on the accordion and sung by the phenomenal musician and singer Claudio Prima in Griko, the Grecian dialect still spoken in parts of the Apulian Region.

And what to say of the splendid interpretation of "Ferma Zitella"? A true honest blues in the hands of the musicians on stage and in the sultry voice of Enza Pagliara, who gave a poignant rendition of the heart breaking minor key song, telling the condition of loneliness in a society that used to look unsympathetically at unmarried women.

Worthy as well of a particular mention is "Tarantella del Gargano", another song of longing and sighing over feminine beauty and the grace of love. One of the most famous love poems of the tarantella canon in Italy, la "Tarantella del Gargano" is slower and more cadenced as in the tradition of Tarantella in that particular area of Apulia -the Gargano mountainous region-. It has been arranged and sung by many exceptional musicians along the years. Antonio Castrignanò's rendition of this masterpiece in the arrangement of Mauro Pagani was nothing less than breathtaking while lamenting in his high pitch voice the invincible forces of beauty and love.

All musicians were wonderful, the tambourine and tammorras of Carlo "canaglia" De Pascali have vibrated through the heart more than once throughout the concert and Stefania Morciano's voice has resonated splendidly in the many songs she sung both solo and in duet with powerful, generous Enza Pagliara. Gianluca Longo, with his mandola and guitar, Antonio Marra on his drums and Silvio Cantoro on the bass have encompassed and held tight the entire band with their mean, clean, and precise rhythmic section.

And Maestro Pagani on the violin, the piccolo, and the bouzouki has kept the thread of the narrative from the beginning to the end of the concert, listening to everyone carefully, and with each of his instruments dialoguing with all the others: emphasizing a voice with his bow, calling another with his wood-wind; provoking a chit chat with a tambourine with his strings, inviting the accordion for a promenade. And maintaining continuous contacts with the bass, the guitar, the mandola, the drums,



assuaging a dramatic musical moment, awakening the next, prolonging a respite from a surge of emotions: never once forgetting anyone on his instruments.

How beautiful it was, above all, to see people get up and dance on the floor, especially the young ones. The power of Pizzica and Tarantella is this: a bite of the “spirit spider” moving one into dancing with irresistible force. And as always it is deeply touching to realize how the music and the dance that for centuries have signified freedom and comfort for the people working in the fields continue to lift people everywhere, no matter where it is played.

Another pearl in itself was the ongoing project of one of the musicians, eclectic pianist, accordion, and singer Claudio Prima. As his countenance summoned the image of Odysseus as available to us through ancient Greek pottery, I called out to him: “Ulisse”, the Italian name for the Homeric legendary sailor King. The young Maestro wasn’t put off. He told me that he is a sailor by passion, in fact, and that he has a band named BandAdriatica, in Italy, with whom he sails along the Adriatic sea, looking for the music of the Mediterranean.

“We sail searching for a common thread in Mediterranean musicians. We are sailors on a sailing boat, looking for Salentina, Greek, Albanian, and Croatian music, the Adriatic Music. Our idea is that once there was only one music and then a kind of Big Bang generated all other music in the countries facing the Mediterranean. We dock in ports all over and look for musicians, whom like us, are searching for a new evolution in traditional music and we play with them”.

That Big Bang “Ulisse” is referring to must be migration, of course, the root of human evolution. How comforting the thought that once separated we cannot do much more but to return on our steps, sometimes centuries later. And in looking for one another, sing our song, hoping to be remembered, and thus recognized. Or the other way around.

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