



Dances with Spiders: Italian Roots Music, With Bite, Comes to North America

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By **George de Stefano**

The *pizzica tarantata*, a folk music born in the Salento peninsula of Italy's deep south, way down in the heel of the boot, certainly has a great back-story. This intensely rhythmic idiom, which has been likened to the blues and zydeco, originally was the music played in the spiritual healing rituals of impoverished peasants and laborers. Today the *pizzica* is an emblem of cultural identity for the people of Salento, a feature of the world music scene, and a generator of tourism and revenue for Italy's Puglia region, of which Salento is the southernmost part.

Every August since 1998, thousands of music fans have been heading to the Salento town of Melpignano for the annual [La Notte della Taranta](#), one of Europe's major festivals, and, along with [WOMAD](#), its leading world music gathering. La Notte della Taranta increasingly attracts non-Italian musicians, many of international renown, like Police drummer Stewart Copeland, who has directed the festival's house band and in 2007 released a live album he recorded at Melpignano. Guest artists at this year's event, which ended 27 August, included Ireland's the Chieftains, Turkish composer and multi-instrumentalist Mercan Dede, Malian kora virtuoso Ballaké Sissoko, and Spanish gypsy singer Diego El Cigala.

Now, North American audiences will get a chance to experience some of the excitement of La Notte della Taranta when one of its mainstay bands, [Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino](#) (CGS) makes its US and Canadian debut on an 11-city tour that opens 15 September at the New York Gypsy Festival and concludes October 8 at the National Geographic in Washington, DC. Other dates include Chicago (two days at the World Music Festival), Boston, Philadelphia, Toronto, and Quebec.

Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino - Official video

CGS, founded in 1975 by guitarist and mandolinist Daniele Durante, helped spearhead the revival of *pizzica*, which has moved beyond rigorously authentic recreations to fusions of this ancient folk music and contemporary sounds. It's not too much of a stretch to compare the band's aesthetic to Tinariwen, the Malian ensemble whose captivating "desert blues" is an electric guitar-driven fusion of traditional Tuareg music, rock and blues. CGS similarly builds its sound on a solid traditional foundation while absorbing influences from other musical cultures. On their most recent album, the excellent *Focu d'amore* (Love's Fire), jazz rhythms and harmonics, along with Middle Eastern, Balkan and Celtic flavors, meld seamlessly with the music's Salentine core. Rooted in a specific, geographically defined culture yet open to the world, CGS's *pizzica* is both timeless and forward-looking.

Some critics have called *pizzica* the blues of Salento because it is a (deceptively) simple form whose roots lie in rural poverty and oppression, in this case, that of the Salentine peasants and laborers. And just as the blues has a mythology involving magic (mojos, black cat bones, etc.) and singers selling their souls to the devil, *pizzica* has its own mythic folklore. *Pizzica* originated as the music of *tarantismo*, a cultural phenomenon peculiar to Salento that, according to researcher Giorgio Di Lecce, dates back to the sixth century. Its origins, scholars say, lie in ecstatic Dionysian worship rites.

Tarantismo employed music and dance in a symbolic ritual to cure peasants, mainly women, from maladies purportedly caused by the poisonous bite of the tarantula. (*Pizzica* derives from *pizzicare*, meaning to bite or sting.) The afflicted would dance, to the point of collapsing, to the frenetic rhythms of the *pizzica* songs played by a small group that included tamburello (frame drum), violin, chitarra battente (a large four- or five-string guitar indigenous to Southern Italy), and organetto (a type of accordion).

The spider's bite, however, was a metaphor for psychic conditions such as grief, anxiety and depression, as well as sexual frustration. The "spider's dance" was a culturally sanctioned way for impoverished and politically disenfranchised peasants to act out and exorcise their psychological conflicts. By the '70s, the practice of tarantismo had declined and nowadays it is virtually extinct. The *pizzica* "has acquired a new function, that is, to represent the cultural identity of Salento", according to ethnomusicologist Tullia Magrini.

Few bands have represented Salento and its culture as long and devotedly as Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino, whose name translates roughly as the Salentine Greek Songbook, "Grecanico" referring to the ancient Greek-derived language spoken in southern Puglia and parts of Calabria. In its three decade-plus history, CGS has recorded 16 albums and played countless shows in Salento and Italy, throughout Europe, and the Middle East. In 2007, Daniele Durante passed the leadership of CGS to his son, Mauro, who had joined the band at 14 as a percussionist and violinist. A conservatory-trained musician, Mauro Durante is a scholar of *pizzica* and its various techniques as well as a

virtuoso instrumentalist.

The pizzica revival began in the '70s, in the context of a larger movement among mainly young, university-educated and left-wing Italians to recover and reinterpret traditional music, particularly that of the rural south. The revivalists promoted understanding and appreciation of *la cultura popolare*—not pop culture in the mass market sense but the grassroots culture of the southern peasantry and laborers, as opposed to the hegemonic, so-called high culture of the upper classes.

The cultures of “subaltern”, marginalized groups like the peasantry, derided by the bourgeoisie and its intelligentsia, had acquired a layer of shame and stigma because they were associated with poverty and backwardness, and superstition. Even in Salento, the earliest attempts to revive pizzica were met with scorn and anger among urbanized descendants of peasants who heard in the music an unwelcome reminder of the bad old days. But today, several decades later, there are literally hundreds of groups playing pizzica, in both traditional and updated forms, not only in Puglia but also throughout Italy.

The story of the pizzica revival, then, is one of how a music associated with a healing ritual performed by poor, oppressed peasants—“slaves of the aristocrats”, according to Nandu Popu of the Salentine band Sud Sound System—was transformed into a proud assertion of cultural heritage and identity. It also is the story of how, as sociologist and critic Lee Robert Blackstone has observed, a folk art form “outside professional performance and assessment” found “its own niche among what has been categorized and marketed as world music”.

Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino, and other leading exponents of pizzica like Nidi D'Arac, [Officina Zoe](#), [Rione Junno](#); mandolinist [Mimmo Epifani](#), and composer-percussionist [Antonio Castrignanò](#), offer innovative approaches to the music. They're grounded in the traditional repertoire but they also incorporate elements external to the tradition—North African and other Mediterranean music, jazz, rock, reggae and dub—consistent with the general approach to traditional music employed by world music artists. (In Italy, this approach is known as *contaminazione* -- contamination, but in a positive sense of bringing “foreign” sounds, instruments, and musical concepts into a long-established local style.)

As Roberto Catalano and Enzo Fina, two musicians and scholars of *musica popolare* have noted, pizzica today functions as “antithesis to both art and commercial music”; it also represents a discourse between old and new, past and present. Musicologist Angeles Sancho-Velazquez similarly observes that keeping pizzica alive doesn't entail a simple repeating of what was “sedimented in the past” but rather bringing tradition to life by “means of a dialectic between sedimentation and innovation”.

In performance, pizzica is both wild and contained, like the original tarantismo ritual itself. At the center of a pizzica ensemble is the tamburello, whose deep, resounding beats drive the music. Other percussionists layer on more rhythm, usually in straight or accented 6/8 or 12/8 time, with guitar, violin, accordion, and sometimes brass and woodwinds in the mix. The singing in pizzica bands, particularly that of female vocalists, is suffused with the plaintive, sometimes strident monody typical of much southern Italian folk and folk-derived music.

When played by an expert ensemble like CGS, pizzica can exert a powerful, even overwhelming force; you can understand—no, *feel*—how its rhythms induced frenzied dancing and trance states. But the Salentine tradition also includes love and protest songs, as well as pointed social commentary. You can expect all this when Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino takes to the stage on their upcoming tour. No spiders will bite you, but you may find yourself swept up in the raging rhythms of the spider's dance.

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