

# Tarantism: Europe Has Its Own Healing Rituals

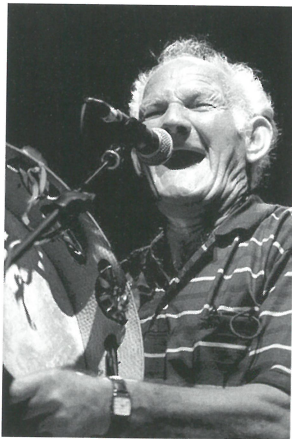
*Petr Dorůžka, Czech Republic*

The *pizzica* and *tarantella* musical genres fostered in southern Italy are generally explained as remedies against the effects of tarantula bite, the tarantula being a huge hairy spider. But are these spiders really poisonous? Isn't the bite only a substitute problem for some deeper cause? Are these rituals still practiced today, and what do the anthropologists think about them?

Rhythmic and powerful music that puts you into a trance-like state is not, contrary to the established idea, a privileged domain of faraway and exotic countries. Voodoo is practiced in Haiti, santería religion in Cuba, *condomblé* in Brazil, Morocco is famous for Gnawa rituals, and Siberia for its shamans. Through music, all of these phenomena manage to put their listeners into a trance-like state and cure them. While voodoo and shamanism are pre-Christian animistic religions, the other examples are identified as syncretic religions because they came to existence through connection of African spiritism with either Catholic belief, as happened in Brazil and Cuba, or with Islam, as happened with Moroccan Gnawas. Thanks to this adaptation, they have survived until today and drawn the attention of the West.

This lecture, however, is about how we do not have to go to Morocco or Haiti to find musical rituals. Only 40 years ago, we could encounter similar rituals in southern Italy. The ritual I have in mind is tarantism, a music therapy that cures the effects of tarantula bite. But as we will discover, the reality is different, as the spider has become only a substitute problem here.

For our music-oriented community, the important thing is that during those 40 years, in which the authentic ritual disappeared, tarantism has experienced revival. A boom of popularity is now taking place within



*Veteran musician  
Uccio Aloisi*



*Alessandro Coppola of the Nidi d'Arac band*

new communities in the south-Italian region of Salento, where even veterans are going through the revival. We can sometimes even hear about “neotarantism” developing here as a new social trend.

The Tarantella is better known to the world in its stylized and smoothed form as it is performed in Naples. The cruder model is pizzica, which is centered in the region of Salento. The disease and the treatment are called *tarantism*, and the patients, who were more often women than men, are called *tarantata*.

It was Alan Lomax, an American collector, whose work was crucial for surveying traditional Italian folk music in the twentieth century. Before the war, Lomax recorded Afro-American bluesmen, and after the war he made a series of recordings in Europe, out of which his recordings from Italy are considered among the most valuable. Diego Carpitella, an Italian music ethnologist, accompanied Lomax on his 1954 expedition. Five years later, Carpitella was part of a multi-disciplinary team led by Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino. During the three weeks in July 1959, he and his assistants interviewed more than 30 victims, who visited St. Paul’s chapel in Galatina. I say victims because St. Paul is, among other things, the patron of the stricken, and Sts. Paul and Peter’s day is at the end of July.

Two days before this day, De Martino learnt that a real healing ritual was about to take place in the neighborhood. Pretending to be a doctor from Rome, he managed to gain access to the patient Maria, a newly married young woman, and what he experienced “catapulted him to another planet.” Antonio Melechi, British physician and a writer, published excerpts from de Martino’s study:

“All pieces of furniture were taken out of the room to make the space for a four-player band (violin, accordion, guitar, tambourine) and the family. The ritual space was marked out on a big white bed sheet, on which the patient laid, smelling of ‘unwashed sex organs’ and holding a colorful handkerchief in her hand. The woman was crawling on the floor making rhythmical circles with her head, into which she was obviously



### *Maria*

pushed by the wild music. Even at calmer moments, when the rhythm slowed down and the patient's family approached her, the close interaction between Maria and the musicians, who seemed to control each of her moves, was evident."

"When the musicians were exhausted, the family put Maria to bed and asked her whether Saint Paul had already spoken to her. Maria gave out a series of shrieks, 'not too different from a dog's barking', which the family interpreted as a signal of blessing coming. Shortly before three o'clock she hinted towards the band to stop playing, went quickly to bed and looked at her family with a dazed expression. Saint Paul approached her. The musicians played the last tarantella section. Maria remained motionless. As soon as the music stopped, the tambourine player knelt down and began praying to Saint Paul."

This authentic video was recorded two years later.

Incidentally, two years earlier (that is, at the time of De Martino's expedition) the director of this film, Gianfranco Mingozzi, was an assistant director to Fellini when he was shooting *La Dolce Vita*.

The English physician Melechi adds to De Martino's research: "All life stories De Martino collected insinuate that tarantism created a



### *La terra del Rimorso*

subconscious zone into which secret wishes, unsatisfied hopes and untreated disease were projected. The excuse had nothing to do with the real cause. According to De Martino, the spider, the bite and Saint Paul were symbols of psychological drama, whose parallels may be found in many rituals leading to ecstasy and exorcism, including voodoo.” In his fundamental work about southern Italy, *La terra del Rimorso* (The Country of Qualms), De Martino, too, refers to parallels in African dance:

“Pizzica is a sensuous pagan dance whose pantomimic gestures, movements and stylized flirting provided the opportunity to ventilate emotions, which were forbidden by the catholic morals. What was socially unacceptable was projected to tarantism fits.” While in Africa sensuality was valued positively, in Catholic Italy it was valued negatively. This brought about what we might call a syncretic solution that in accords with similar practice in Brazil or Cuba. The church did not

manage to exterminate superstition, and thus at the beginning of the 18th century it incorporated the ritual into its liturgy and proclaimed that victims should pray to Saint Paul. In this case, expelling evil became a mixture of paganism and Christianity.

What were the symptoms of the disease, that is, tarantism? Lack of energy, loss of appetite, disinterest in life. Nausea, headaches, fits of laughter or crying spells, speech disorders, which supposedly reflected the individuality of the attacking spider. Musicians, called for the treatment, first checked the color and the bite area to adjust the form of their production to it. The crucial time was in summer when the women worked hard in the field and sometimes fell so deeply into depression that they were not able to work. The family then called for musicians to cure the sick tarantata.

Symptoms repeated themselves in the summer, often throughout the individual's entire life. In other words, during the year they accumulated the poison, and on Saint Paul's Day they needed to get rid of it. They needed to be restarted like a computer; they need to go through the purification ritual every year.

The roots of tarantism go down to Antiquity. They extend to Dionysian rituals and to the Homer's epic *The Odyssey*: when Sirens did not succeed with their singing because Odysseus sealed up his crewmen's ears with wax, they tried to seduce Odysseus visually by dancing and singing; this is how tarantella came to existence. The tradition of Dionysian rituals was followed by provocative "female dancing parades": from the 15th century onward, records exist about sexually frustrated women of lower class origin dancing savagely to the accompaniment of tambourines, excusing their behavior by saying that they had been bitten by a tarantula.

In 1610, Matteo Zaccolini wrote a 50-page manuscript, originally intended for the aristocratic house of Medici in Florence, but was, however, never printed because of its controversial nature. The study was called *Del ballo di quelli che' sana pizzicati dalla Tarantola per la*

*presenza degli Obbietti colorati, oltre il Suono* (“About dances of those who have been bitten by a tarantula, in relation to exposed colorful objects and sound”). If you studied rituals of the Moroccan Gnawas, you know that their ghosts differ in colors, sounds and the way of dancing.

But is tarantula poisonous at all? In 1693, the physician Bernardo Clarizio carried out an open experiment that proved tarantula bites were not poisonous to humans. Fifty years later, the *Della tarantola* study was published, in which the superstition was definitely impugned. However, it is wrong to blame everything on autosuggestion. There exists in Italy another, less noticeable spider, which is much more dangerous. It is the *Latrodectus tredecim guttatus*, or European black widow, the *malmignatte*.

Unlike the tarantula, which dwells in a hole in the ground and chases its prey, the black widow spins webs. Its bite may look insignificant at first, but the effects are much more serious than with tarantula. The poison, called alpha-latrotoxin, may severely disrupt one’s body balance: at the beginning the patients feel depressed, later they become confused and hyper-active, their thoracic diaphragm is partially paralyzed, they breath with difficulties, they are unable to stand because of the cramps and pain in their legs; this all very closely corresponds with the symptoms of tarantism. Most patients, however, eventually overcome the black widow bite.

How is this tradition manifested today? Professor Luigi A. Santoro, who teaches history of drama at Lecca University, explains in a documentary film about the present form of tarantism: “These phenomena will never disappear, they will be only concealed in the shade for a while. Tarantism is intertwined with community, that is, with people in a certain environment; it is related to survival, love, work, life, and death.”

The music inspired by spider rituals is a part of a broader movement. The music revival of the seventies inspired a social movement in the nineties, whose most visible aspect is its aversion to globalization. The

movement is sometimes called neotarantism, which includes both DJ parties and searching for spiritual alternatives. We can learn the philosophy of Tarantula Rubra project on its web site:

“Neotarantism expresses the need for different music, new relationships, and a dance leading to catharsis; the need to release ourselves from everyday duties and all possible forms of oppression. People have always expressed themselves through music and dancing. Neotarantism stands against globalization, cultural uniformity and devastation of cultural diversity.”

In February 2001, an international conference called “Tarantismo e neo Tarantismo” was held in Rome. Simultaneously, this tradition has been working its way into show business. Taranta appeared at Berlin discos. La Notte Della Taranta Ensemble, lead by a former member of The Police, performed the opening concert of this year’s [2006] Rudolstadt festival. This, of course, has caused mixed feelings within the Salento community. An email message coming from Italy says: “The ensemble was put together by an agency in northern Italy, which chose the star Stewart Copeland to sell the music better abroad. The whole of Salento watches with indignation, when realizing the power of money once again won over the power of music.”

Author’s Web site: <http://world.freemusic.cz>

**Video source:**

Giafranco Mingozzi: *La taranta*. ISBN 88-497-0139-X.