

Pizzica Paradise

Some of the most vibrant local music in Europe is to be found in Salento, southern Italy. **Elizabeth Kinder** (words) and **Ian Anderson** (pics) went in search of **Anna Cinzia Villani** and the ancient traditions of Puglia.

Anna Cinzia Villani



It was the brilliant traditional singer and dancer Anna Cinzia Villani's glorious new album *Fimmana, Mare E Focu* (Anima Mundi, FR348) arriving in Ian Anderson's post that did it. Not the videos of lithe women in long black dresses dancing pizzica pizzica – "the most sexy dancing possible whilst clothed from head to foot – and to folk music!" – nor the tales of trances and rampaging poisonous spiders out for a bite, nor the stories of tens of thousands of people packing the squares of Salento for steamy nights of riotous, even sensuous, folk raves.

No. It was the latest recording by South Italy's equivalent to Portugal's Mariza or Hungary's Márta Sebestyén that rebooted Anderson's long-standing love of the local high-energy roots music and prompted his call suggesting a research trip to Puglia.

"Something's afoot in southern Italy," he said, mentioning that as well as spending time with the inspirational, Audrey Hepburn-like Villani we'd also meet up with Alessandro Coppola, the leather-trousered lead singer of Nidi D'Arac who delivered a storming set at last year's Womad. He who if he played rock would be a rock god. Excellent...

So late one warm June evening we were met at the station in Lecce, way down south in the heel of Italy, by the beautiful Flaminia Vulcano, a dynamic young woman with bouncy black hair and a car. I didn't realise then the significance of the car, having no idea how many hundreds of kilometers we were to cover in it over the next four days. As our guide and translator she would introduce us to the closely-guarded music of the countryside, its secrets painstakingly unearthed over 15 years by Villani and Coppola.

It's this music from the villages, pizzica (a driving 6/8 or 12/8 rhythm, originally either clapped or pounded out on tambourines), work songs and *stornelli* (unaccompanied call and response) that's fuelling the current folk revival in southern Italy. This August 140,000 people packed into the tiny town of Melpignano (pop circ 2,000) south of Lecce, for the annual La Notte della Taranta, a night of celebration featuring the traditional music of Puglia – or music rooted in it at any rate – and this year played in part by an orchestra conducted by Goran Bregovic. Here, famously, pizzica dancing does not just feature the long black dress, but luscious women writhing around on stage clad only in impractical underwear (the skimpy sort you have to hand-wash, rather than boil).

"Pah", says Vulcano dismissively, that first night over a late dinner. "The festival is good for the region. But that dancing is not the real pizzica. It might as well be you and me doing it." The mind boggles. But it was a sentiment picked up by Anna Cinzia Villani when we met her in her village the next brilliantly blue-skied morning. "Tarantismo was a delicate matter, but now it's thought to be cool sexy women in white lingerie; pizzica tarantata on stage is like pole-dancing."

Villani knows what she's talking about, having thoroughly researched the proper way of both singing and dancing pizzica since she was inspired to make a career of it in the mid-'90s. She is one of the main people responsible for the dissemination of the correct techniques of the tradition that's now the beating heart of a thriving youth culture.

Tarantism – she explained as we drove for an hour or so along roads lined with olive groves and vineyards to the Adriatic coast – is the name given to the ceremony where music is used to draw out the poison delivered by the bite of a tarantula. The word pizzica means pinch: it describes the feeling of the bite. "Although of course," she adds, "the spider isn't real and so the bite is imaginary."

The victims were mainly women. Succumbing to the bite was their response to the oppression and suppression of a strictly machismo society. Life in the south of Italy was one of hardship and poverty. Girls didn't start going to school until the 1920s; women grew up working in the fields and abuse was rife. They had to put up and shut up. Constrained both by a polarised male mentality that perceived women as either virgins or whores and the suffocating dictates of the church, the 'bite' of the tarantula served as some form of release, of recognition without shame.

Although those affected were mostly women from poor social strata, the nobility and men were not immune. Victims would see a tarantula, feel they were bitten and fall into a trance. The local tarantismo practitioners would be called to clap or beat out a rhythm on tamburelli; the sufferer would writhe as the 'poison' was drawn out, the rhythm pounding on until she was roused from her trance.

Initially a pagan ceremony, the practice began in mediæval times, springing from the connection between spiders, scorpions, snakes and the gods which is very strong in this part of the world. "The church couldn't control it," says Villani, "so they said you had to pray to St Paul to heal you and they set aside one day a year where women could express their sickness. La Notte della Taranta."

The practice has died out. "Now if you're depressed," Vulcano shrugs, overtaking as we come up to a junction, "you go and see a psychiatrist."

We arrive in the picturesque town of Otranto to find, up a steep, narrow cobbled lane, the Aladdin's cave that is the Anima Mundi book and record shop. It's home to Anna Cinzia's label which as well as *Fimmana*, *Mare E Focu*, released her sparkling 2008 album of traditional songs *Ninnamorrella* and 2010's *Salento In Dub*, a modern take on the traditional form.

We're in the shop and suddenly the place fills with exquisite harmonies as Villani sings with her student, Anima Mundi's

Sabrina. We soon discover that spending any time with Villani is like playing a straight part in a musical. Wherever we go she and the people she's with burst into song. Villani is completely driven by her passion for pizzica. It was the dance with its intricate steps that initially captivated her, when as a teenager she saw it performed by some old ladies at a local feria. This inspired her love of the music and singing – and the research that's become her life's work.

This is not something she was brought up to. Her parents, children of farmers from small villages, made sure she had an education and went to Lecce university where she studied English and French. As a child, she grew up in small towns and villages and spoke mostly Italian at home. Her parents were keen to build a distance between her and the dialect spoken in the region, where each village has its own variation indicating how people tended to spend their entire lives in one place. Villani's grandparents' first language was their local dialect but to her parents this represented poverty and lack of education. The traditional music too – work songs rooted in the tough life eked out of the land – was more a matter for shame than celebration.

This attitude towards tradition was typical of her parents' generation. It was a story we were to hear over again from elderly singers and musicians: their children left the area and went to live in the north or abroad in search of work and urban sophistication. Now the next generation, with their growing eco-awareness and economic uncertainties, are returning south, lured by the possibilities of almost constant sun, seasonal steady winds and the benefits of wine, olives and eco-tourism. And as they return to the land of their grandparents they are finding their roots through music and embracing the pizzica, which provides an honesty and authenticity that anchors their re-discovered southern Italian identity. And so pizzica, the songs and the dance, have moved from being the expression of rustic poverty and arcane beliefs through shame and rejection to become the source of pride and identity in a vibrant southern Italian youth culture.

But as the music is taken up again, ironically the tradition is threatened. Its nuanced nasal vocal style is often loud, and it's the loud bit that's been taken on by the new singers, the subtleties of traditional delivery lost in the striving for increased decibels; the meaningful dance footsteps absent in the big show where the trance of the spider victim has become an eroticised parody on the festival stage.

Coppola and Villani are alive to these changes and work tirelessly to promote the true traditions, keen to pass them on in their different ways.

We are at dinner that second warm night, sitting outside at a long table under a bower of cherry and apricot trees with lights strung through them. Deep fried olives and wine and bread and dark peppery virgin olive oil arrive. This is Ristorante Mocambo, a place where musicians come to compose, and poets to write. Villani is at the other end of the table, singing; others join in with her. Coppola leans slightly across the table to be heard:

"Anna Cinzia is from the village, these songs are in her blood. They are her tradition. For me it's different, I am from the city, from Lecce, my background is urban, my influences were modern music from London, Paris and New York. Then in the early '90s I heard Manu Chao, Transglobal Underground, musicians that turned to their own roots and developed them in a modern way. I found a new perspective. I know my own roots, my grandparents lived in a village and I felt more connected to them than to my parents, but I started studying their traditions the same time as Anna Cinzia."

At that time, he says, he discovered during his course in anthropology at Rome University, that a lot of people were interested in studying the culture of Salento. This had an obvious social impact, reinvigorating local interest in the region's traditions. But he says, he "wanted to get to the essence of it, the soul of it, to communicate it using my own language." And so Alessandro's pop and rock sensibility informs his take on traditional music, chiming perfectly with the current spirit of

Alessandro Coppola (centre) and Nidi D'Arac at Womad 2011



Photo: Judith Burrows



Giovanna Stifani in the Stifani barbershop



Giovanni & Rocco Avantaggiato

the South. But though Nidi D'Arac are hugely popular here, the thing he most values is the approval he's received for his work from "the elderlies."

It is not an approval that's easily won, nor is the information easily obtained. As Villani explained. "In the country there are unspoken but understood conventions. I had to learn the correct way of approaching older people. It took a while to meet them. I'd been living in the city, and was shy of going into the villages. I wanted to know the technique which they knew, but they're not teachers, so I had to help them to teach me. And it was difficult trying to get the good stuff: people would present what they thought was good. They didn't think their tradition was interesting. They would not perform the songs I wanted to hear in public, they would only sing in private, they were ashamed. If they don't think it's good enough, why would it be interesting to anyone else?"

But Villani was persistent and as people realised her sincerity in wanting to both perform and teach their music they opened up to her. So Anna Cinzia has built up an extensive research archive, more successfully so far than any ethnomusicologist because of the trust she has gained within the communities.

The depth of that trust and the high esteem in which Villani is held throughout the South soon becomes clear. The second bright morning found us in a field in the countryside with two elderly couples. Antonio Costantini, Maria Assunta Chiriatti, Cosimino Chiriatti and Maria Luce Trove own the land now covered with corn and vegetables that used to be their tobacco farm. The women would work drying the leaves and the men would tend to the fields. They sang songs that would only be sung as they worked. And today, under the shade of an old pine, they sang them again, in the place the songs belong, their clear, strong voices belying their advanced years.

Both couples spoke the Griko dialect which, Villani tells me, they don't distinguish from Greek but is in fact a mixture of Latin and Greek, a legacy of the Byzantine empire which stretched across the region. (It is said that tarantism arrived from Greece in the 6th or 7th century AD.) So they sang songs of sadness from the Griko tradition, one about a father who goes to the Pope because he has to decide between two men whom his daughter shall marry. But not even God's representative on Earth can help him. "Hard luck",

says the Pope (roughly translated), "you've put in all the work bringing up your daughter, now someone else will reap the benefit."

Griko is an aural tradition which has existed without interruption for centuries, as I'd learnt at dinner the night before. Two brothers, Gianni and Rocco de Santis of the group Avleddha, serenaded us with Griko songs. The rhythms, like pizzica, were typically 6/8, but slower. They sang *moro loja*, songs from the tradition featuring minor chords performed at funerals where professional weepers were paid to cry.

Griko music has absorbed modernity, guitars and kit drums, whilst the poetic form of the lyrics allows for a double meaning when commenting on politics or everyday life, keeping the songs fresh and relevant. One serenade that the brothers sang so beautifully is now a favourite roared by the crowds on the football terraces.

Pizzica too, from its origins as a healing rhythmic ritual, acquired instruments other than the tambourine. The first person to use the violin in tarantism was Nardo's Luigi Stifani, as seen in Gianfranco Mingozzi's celebrated 1961 black & white short film *La Taranta* (see YouTube and DVD). Coppola introduced us to Stifani's student, Rino Inchingalo, an ethnomusicologist from Bologna University. Both he and Stifani's daughter Giovanna were waiting for us in Nardo at the Stifani museum – a narrow barbershop with instruments stuffed in the sinks and balanced on the old barber's chairs, whilst precariously perched monitors showed loops of Stifani's performances.

Stifani, like his father, was a barber. He also played the violin. The barbershop functioned as a men's club and there he would hear when the local women fell prey to the tarantula. After announcing that he could heal with his violin he became the go-to musician when the sickness arrived, securing himself valuable extra income.

Stifani performed his last tarantism ritual in 1972. Rino and Giovanna both accompanied the maestro on his later outings (both convinced that the spider was real). His way of playing, said Inchingalo, was "rough, dirty, from the heart". He only ever played violin for pizzica, where he'd carefully assess the rhythm and melody that would work on the victim. For other music he'd play banjo, mandolin or electric guitar – the latter in an all-purpose local dance band called The Darlings.

As Stifani realised that the tradition was dying out, with fewer and fewer people calling on his services, he notated songs in his own idiom. In a task that took five years of painstaking work, Inchingalo has transcribed these into standard notation. It was when the ritual work dried up that Stifani started to play pizzica tarantata music in public and the context changed.

Inchingalo spotted some musician friends in the street and went outside to join them. They launched into a sizzling pizzica performance with riotous abandon, and Villani danced and sang. A cheering crowd gathered. The party was on. No one took much notice when the police turned up to help the traffic get through. We left as night fell. It was time for the drive to the Ristorante Mocambo.

Another towering figure in local traditional music was Antonio 'Uccio' Aloisi (1928–2010) with whom Coppola had collaborated in Nidi D'Arac when Aloisi was in his 80s. Aloisi, a farmer turned professional musician, performed in a band which became legendary throughout Italy, fondly known at the 3 Uccios (Uccio is a dialect word for Antonio). We were to meet his accordion player Giovanni Avantaggiato on his farm the next day, who'd explain that Aloisi loved stornelli, the call and response work songs that were sung in the fields. Avantaggiato's son Rocco remembers that his father would go to work singing and Aloisi and the other men would take up the song as they joined the line of workers walking through the village to the fields. They'd return home singing and the song would end as one by one the men peeled off into their own front doors. The tradition died out as radio and TV became commonplace.

Tonight though, we've headed way down south to Galliano del Capo to meet another Aloisi band member, the virtuoso mandolin player Antonio Calsolaro, a quiet studious looking man, dressed in a sober grey shirt. Like Stifani, Calsolaro is the son of a barber musician. He studied music and trained as a classical guitarist, learning mandolin and violin from his father. Joining Aloisi's band inspired Calsolaro's passion for traditional music and this considerate man introduced a different way of accompanying the singers, weaving his improvised melodies behind their vocals, supporting, rather than playing all over them as was the norm. He too has built up a valuable research archive, recording 90-year-old musicians in the '60s and '70s and transcribing the music into standard notation.



Ngracalate with Anna Cinzia



Domenico, Alessandro and Antonio of Robba De Smuju

It was late when our conversation wound down. "Come to a rehearsal!" "What, now?" I was worried about dinner.

"Yes, now", he smiled. Villani, Coppola and Vulcano were thrilled. "This doesn't happen often," they said. So we drove for what seemed hours through the starlit night to what felt like the edge of the country and pulled up outside a house that looked like it was above a garage. Which it was, sort of. We walked in to find quite a few people sitting at huge trestle tables, drinking beer – Uccio Aloisi's old band, now known as Robba De Smuju. Cracking open more beer, they made us welcome. And as we sat down, two young women promptly produced, apparently from nowhere, dinner for 20 – the most fabulous lasagne ever. Then everyone, young, old and middle-aged, started to sing and play, belting out pizzica, stornelli and work songs with fiery virtuosity. There was guitar, mandolin, accordion and tambourines. The sound was pure joy – strong male and female voices soaring passionately above the music, their vibrant harmonies hanging in the air.

It all felt so fabulously secret – which wasn't entirely imaginary as I'd learnt earlier from a group of elderly ladies that songs are jealously guarded by the communities from which they come. People would not sing outside of their own village in case their songs were stolen and whilst melodies from village to village might be similar and songs may share the subject matter, the lyrics would differ.

Villani had taken us to Borgagna to meet some of Ngracalate, four elderly friends taking a risk and performing the songs of their childhood in public. Currently in demand on the festival circuit, their name is the dialect word for the sound made by frogs which are common in the area. The women – with Anna Cinzia's help – are, as they said "recuperating the repertoire of their traditional music".

Their a capella line-up is soprano, alto, tenor and bass, and as we sat in a hot backyard drinking iced coffee and shots of homemade firewater we were treated to a feast of singing and dancing. They produce an exhilarating sound – which can be heard at <http://youtu.be/q5M0HocX8PA> – which has resulted in a couple of album releases and gained them a local notoriety, along with a little jealousy in the village. They shrug. They don't mind, as their husbands – initially as surprised as they were that anyone would want to listen to them – are supportive and they're raising money to fund clean water projects in Africa.

As if this sunny, song-filled afternoon wasn't wonderful enough, Villani was keen that we should meet two other old women of particular importance to her. They did not want to be named and we were not to take pictures or make any recordings. They hadn't sung for five years, forbidden by a code which prohibits singing whilst in the prescribed period of mourning (which with advanced years in big families can be lengthily extended).

They refused to sing in their village, as nobody must hear them, and they would only be picked up after dark. So on our last night in Salento, after a mad three-hour drive tearing through the countryside trying to keep Villani's tail lights in view, we practically skidded off the narrow road onto a dirt track and pulled up in an orchard, a sweet house illuminated in our headlights: Anna Cinzia's parents' vacant place in the countryside. With the headlights off it was completely dark, aside from starlight and a crescent moon. The smell of the sea and the sound of the cicadas carried on the warm breeze. It was midnight, lights were

strung along the fig trees and we sat outside at a table soon laden with bottles of local wine and fresh mozzarella the size of a bowling ball, vats of soft ricotta, salad and figs from the trees.

When Anna Cinzia and the two women sang with such intensity and joy, such lovely melodies producing simple, gorgeous harmonies, we were uplifted – engulfed and resonating in beautiful sound. We'd reached the secret heart of southern Italy.

With many thanks to Flaminia Vulcano for her brilliant translating and heroic chauffeuring; to Anna Cinzia Villani for her singing, dancing and unstinting help, research and introductions, ensuring that we understood and got to hear the real thing. Thanks too, to Alessandro Coppola for the same and all the wonderful people who so generously shared their music with us.

www.annacinziaivillani.it

www.nididarac.com

Giovanni and Rocco Avantaggiato's beautiful working farm is a perfect B&B base for visitors to the region. www.masseriasantangelo.it

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