

Arts

La Notte della Taranta: Reviving the Tradition

Italy's biggest folk music festival changes direction by returning to its roots

La Notte della Taranta 2016, the festival's nineteenth edition, runs from August 8-27 in the Grecia Salentina of the Lecce. Although tarantismo has died out, its music not only has survived but thrives. Last year's edition drew the largest crowds ever, with more than 200,000 attending the festival's major show



Photo: Taranta Power, FoC's via flickr

by **George De Stefano** - 22 luglio 2016

La Notte della Taranta, founded in 1998 to celebrate the musical culture of Salento, the southern tip of the Puglia region, not only is Italy's biggest festival of traditional music; it's also one of Europe's major music events. Over three weeks in August, thousands of

local residents, as well as visitors from other parts of Italy, Europe, and beyond, take part in the festival's concerts and other cultural activities. Last year's edition drew the largest crowds ever, with more than 200,000 attending the Concertone, the festival's major concert held in the piazza near the former Convento degli Agostiniani in Melpignano.

La Notte della Taranta 2016, [the festival's nineteenth edition](#), runs from August 8-27, with events in a dozen or so towns and villages, mainly those of Grecia Salentina, an area in the Lecce province whose inhabitants trace their roots to ancient Greece. (As of this writing, the festival program has not been finalized.)

You could call La Notte della Taranta southern Italy's Coachella or Glastonbury, except comparisons to those major American and British pop festivals only go so far. La Notte, rather than being a commercial enterprise tied to the corporate music industry — all events, including the Concertone are free — focuses on cultural heritage: the traditional folk music of Salento, and particularly pizzica, the now world-famous style that originally was linked to the once-widespread *tarantismo* phenomenon. (Pizzica was played to cure the victims of *tarantismo*, a state of physical and emotional distress supposedly caused by the poisonous bite of a tarantula spider.) Although *tarantismo* has died out, its music not only has survived but thrives; according to the late musicologist Tullia Magrini, pizzica “has acquired a new function, that is, to represent the cultural identity of Salento.”

La Notte della Taranta was conceived to celebrate the unique culture of this part of southern Italy — its music and dance, and also its ancient Griko language. But the festival has been criticized, sometimes ferociously, for purportedly betraying, or at the very least watering down, Salentine culture. The [critics complain](#) that by inviting foreign pop and rock artists to perform at the Concertone, and by having only non-Salentine musical directors since its inception — the musical director of the 2015 edition was British rock guitarist Phil Manzanera — La Notte has become more of a world music event than one dedicated to indigenous music. They also argue that the festival has been more successful in promoting tourism than in preserving and valorizing “authentic” local culture. In other words, too much *contaminazione* (foreign influences) and not enough *tradizione*.

Advocates of *contaminazione*, however, accuse traditionalists of being “integralists” whose championing of authenticity has a conservative, even quasi-racist aspect. (Their critique is similar to other leftist arguments against cultural purity. The German theorist Theodor Adorno, for example, deplored what he considered reactionary folklorism, which was part of the cultural apparatus of fascism.) They applaud La Notte's openness to foreign musical styles and non-Salentine (and non-Italian) artists. But traditionalists fear that “contamination” of traditional popular cultural forms through the cultural hybridity typical of capitalist modernity can lead to their extinction, or at the least, dilute them to the point where they become little more than world music exotica.



Daniele Durante

The La Notte della Taranta Foundation, which organizes and produces the festival, apparently has listened to the traditionalists; its directors appointed two respected exponents of Salentine music, Daniele Durante and Luigi Chiriatti, to be artistic directors of this year's event. Durante, 62, a musician and professor of ethnomusicology at the Lecce Conservatory, has been a major figure in pizzica and Salentine culture for more than 40 years. In 1975, he co-founded the leading pizzica revivalist group Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino. (Under the leadership of his son Mauro, the second-generation version of the band has achieved international success.) In 1996, Durante organized the precursor to La Notte, a multi-site festival of traditional music that was held again the following year.

Luigi Chiriatti, 63, is a researcher who has published many works on *tarantismo* and traditional Salentine music and culture; he also was a member of the original Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino and of the pizzica revivalist bands Canzoniere di Terra d'Otranto and Aramirè. Chiriatti returns to La Notte after having resigned more than a decade ago from the Diego Carpitella Institute, the organization that originally established the festival, because he felt the Institute and the festival were neglecting traditional Salentine music and culture in favor of world music and *contaminazione*.

Durante will be responsible for organizing the Concertone and conducting the La Notte della Taranta orchestra, as well as collaborating with the 2016 concertmaster, Sicilian singer-songwriter Carmen Consoli. Chiriatti will handle the "itinerant" concerts, the smaller events held in towns and villages.

Critics of recent editions of La Notte have applauded the selection of Durante and Chiriatti. One [online publication](#) hailed it as a welcome "change of course in the artistic direction" and a return to the roots of the festival, which, despite its popularity, "was in danger of drifting after having become a festival known worldwide."

In a recent interview, Daniele Durante talked about his involvement with this year's La Notte, the festival's purpose and direction, and his pride in the success of the current edition of Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino.

Durante acknowledges that “there undoubtedly was in some of the editions of La Notte an imbalance that was to the detriment of local music, and this is one of the reasons why they [the La Notte foundation] entrusted me with the artistic direction. But we must not forget that the purpose of NDT [Notte della Taranta] is to bring together different spirits. Those who want to listen only to Salento music can do that, with the various groups and events that the festival offers.”

But, he says, audiences go to the Concertone with different expectations. He rejects the criticisms of those who “consciously or out of ignorance argue that the NDT has betrayed its origins.” From the first edition in 1998, the festival has been “a meeting of different styles and cultures.”

“It’s all about balancing the components,” he says. To avoid an imbalance between the local and the global, the festival organizers this year established a contractual clause requiring the artistic director and the concertmaster to work together to develop the program of the Concertone. This year’s concertmaster Carmen Consoli was selected before Durante was appointed artistic director, but he says she was an excellent choice and he is happy to collaborate with her. Consoli’s role “is to choose and arrange the songs that will be played” at the Concertone. “She is doing exactly what I would do in her place, learning to sing all the songs that will be performed, something I don’t think any other concertmaster has done.”

Consoli, who performed at the 2006 Concertone, told [an Italian magazine](#) that she, as an artist who has been involved with “traditional music, roots, and cultural identity,” has “always followed this festival from Catania with great admiration.” “We Sicilians regarded it with a healthy envy, hoping that this could happen in our own land. “

Durante celebrates the fact that his land attracts so many visitors from Italy, Europe, and elsewhere. La Notte della Taranta is a driving force in promoting tourism, but he notes that Salento offers hundreds of events, feasts dedicated to patron saints and other festivals, during the summer. The area’s natural beauty, its amenities, and public services also are selling points for tourists. Salento, he notes, is a peninsula surrounded by coastlines that rival those of any country bordering the Mediterranean, but with the added advantage of “an excellent network of roads, air and rail transportation, and ports” as well as “a health and hospital system that guarantees prompt intervention and treatment, in the event of accidents.” Tourists also appreciate “the feeling of being in an exotic place, wild and far from civilization, but with security at your fingertips. Then there’s the food, the friendliness of the people, the good prices and the music.”

Looking back four decades to the '70s and its pizzica and folk music revival movements, Durante offers a mixed assessment of their cultural and political impact. “If we limit the analysis only to Salento, the answer is undoubtedly positive. Seeing the dozens of musical groups operating in the area, one can assume that many manage to support themselves economically, wholly or partly. There is no doubt that if a region allows a class [of artists] to specialize, excellence and cultural ferment will follow. All this does not seem to be happening in the rest of Italy. I do not see ferment, or even young

people — the big names of traditional music are always the same, and I think that they are closing in on themselves, saying and re-saying the same things. The truth is that the movement of the 70's was born from a political impetus, as a vector of change. But the political leaders who emerged in those years have not kept faith with the promises they made, and the 'new arrivals' do not seem to me any better for young people, who are living with and absorbing the bitterness and disenchantment of their parents and grandparents. So far, they are not responding with any new movement.”

Durante wrote the lyrics for “No TAP,” a track from Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino’s latest album, *Quaranta*. The song denounces the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), a massive project to transport natural gas from Azerbaijan to Europe. In Puglia, community activists, as well as local and regional government, have opposed the TAP as damaging to the environment and area economies. “If the artist loses touch with real life, he loses the ability to communicate with people and to reflect,” Durante says. “Today, it’s the hip-hop movement that more than any other is in tune with popular culture, just because of its ability to be direct and rooted in reality. People believe that everything is useless, that everything is determined and controlled from the top, and then I put into verse and set to music their thoughts, setting them in front of their consciences and forcing them to accept the reality” of being “screwed” by the TAP.

Daniele Durante is thrilled by the success of today’s version of the band he founded and performed with in the ’70s. “When we started out with Canzoniere, no one could have imagined that the group would have had these developments, or that these ‘visionaries’ would have children who would carry out the work of the fathers.” In addition to Daniele’s son Mauro, the current band includes Emanuele Licci, a singer and instrumentalist whose father was an original member.

“Mauro,” says his father, “was born in a context in which he was able to seize the opportunities that have been offered to him, to reclaim our region’s musical greatness and to create — with hard work — the ‘magic.’ There are no formulas or secrets for being successful, you have to be visionary and nurture dreams ... and work with the hope that the magic clicks.”