



**TRANS 16 (2012)**  
**ARTÍCULOS/ ARTICLES**

## **Current Creativities in Multipart Singing Practice**

Ignazio Macchiarella (Università di Cagliari)

### **Resumen**

La difusión generalizada de instrumentos para la grabación de sonido ha cambiado y sigue cambiando radicalmente nuestro concepto de música induciéndonos a pensar en ella como un objeto. Afecta a todas las formas de hacer música en el mundo con diferentes consecuencias e impacto. Dentro de lo que todavía llamamos "música oral" (aunque sería mejor utilizar el concepto de Walter Ong de "oralidad secundaria", ya que una "oralidad pura" ya es sólo una abstracción teórica), un amplio rango de profundas transformaciones continuas implica tanto a las actuaciones musicales como a sus representaciones. Esto se aprecia particularmente en músicas orales a varias voces que, al coordinar acciones colectivas, muestran simbólicas y elaboradas formulaciones de creatividad musical conscientemente compartidas por los músicos. Este artículo aborda esta problemática a partir de una larga experiencia de investigación dialógica sobre una práctica de canto a varias voces en Santu Lussurgiu, un pueblo de Cerdeña.

### **Palabras clave**

Musica a varias voces. Cerdeña. Canto a varias voces en acordes. Oralidad secundaria. Creatividad. Etnomusicología dialógica.

**Fecha de recepción:** octubre 2010  
**Fecha de aceptación:** mayo 2011  
**Fecha de publicación:** septiembre 2011

### **Abstract**

The pervasive diffusion of instruments for sound recording and reproduction has radically changed (and is still continuously changing) our concept of music inducing us to think of music as a thing. It afflicts all the making music scenarios all over the world with different impacts and consequences. Within what we still call "oral music" - but it would be better to use the Walter Ong's concept of "secondary orality" since a real "pure orality" is only a theoretical abstraction – a very wide range of deep "in becoming" transformations concerns both the music performances and its conversational representations. It is particularly manifest within multipart music oral practices that, as coordinate collective actions, show symbolically elaborated formulations of music creativities consciously shared by the performers. This is what the paper deals with on the basis of a lengthy dialogical research experience on a multipart singing practice in a Sardinian village, Santu Lussurgiu.

### **Key words**

Multipart Music; Sardinia; Multipart Singing by chord; Secondary Orality; Creativity; Dialogical approach in ethnomusicology.

**Received:** October 2010  
**Acceptance Date:** May 2011  
**Release Date:** September 2011

Los artículos publicados en **TRANS-Revista Transcultural de Música** están (si no se indica lo contrario) bajo una licencia Reconocimiento-NoComercial-SinObraDerivada 2.5 España de Creative Commons. Puede copiarlos, distribuirlos y comunicarlos públicamente siempre que cite su autor y mencione en un lugar visible que ha sido tomado de TRANS agregando la dirección URL y/o un enlace a este sitio: [www.sibetrans.com/trans](http://www.sibetrans.com/trans). No utilice los contenidos de esta revista para fines comerciales y no haga con ellos obra derivada. La licencia completa se puede consultar en <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/es/deed.es>

All the materials in **TRANS-Transcultural Music Review** are published under a Creative Commons licence (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5) You can copy, distribute, and transmit the work, provided that you mention the author and the source of the material, either by adding the URL address of the article and/or a link to the webpage: [www.sibetrans.com/trans](http://www.sibetrans.com/trans). It is not allowed to use the contents of this journal for commercial purposes and you may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. You can check the complete licence agreement in the following link: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/es/deed.en>



## Current Creativities in Multipart Singing Practice

Ignazio Macchiarella (Università di Cagliari)

---

Continuity from the past is one of the main elements evoked when dealing with orally transmitted music practices. These are often identified with 'repertoires of musical pieces' supposed to be transmitted from 'generation to generation' within 'music cultures' that are frequently represented as idealized and 'out of time' scenarios. This idea is the basis for vexed and vague definitions, above all the one of "traditional music" that is often roughly represented as *corpora* of music pieces coming from the past through "mouth to ear" passages.<sup>1</sup> It nourishes various cultural and political processes and initiatives, including patrimonialization procedures that are rather 'fashionable' nowadays (see Macchiarella 2011). This point of view is clearly reinforced by the pervasive presence of instruments for recording and reproduction of sound, the mass media and musical industry that induce one to think "of music as a thing – an identifiable art object that can be owned by its creator through copyrights and purchased by consumers" (Turino 2008: 24)

Actually, within orally transmitted practices, the concept of 'music piece' is an oxymoron (or rather an evident paradox) developed on the basis of shared virtual planes, i.e. more or less definite mnemonic formulas. Oral musics are usually characterized by the uncertainty of the "adventure of performance", since when the first sound is produced nobody may foresee the concrete results that will come up (Lortat-Jacob 2011). Of course, the spreading of sound technologies has had (and increasingly still has) a strong impact on both the typologies of musicians and the music making scenarios, including the oral music ones. Actually the concept of "pure orality" is mainly a theoretical abstraction (Zumthor 1990), and it has been well established that it does not exist anywhere in the world. It means that "oral music" is however an 'idealized concept', and it would be more correct to use instead "secondary orality music", because of the anyhow relevant influence of the instrument of sound fixation: it is an underestimated and/or neglected aspect in much research on contemporary music making.

Contemporary "oral musicians" live their music practice in terms of deliberateness and self-

---

<sup>1</sup> There are dozens of different definitions of 'music tradition' dealing with the idea of "songs and tunes which have been performed over long periods", "coming from unknown authors", "mostly unchanged between generations of informal players", "usually without notation", and so forth. Actually, due to the ephemeral character of sounds, music cannot continue over time. It is the mechanism and the contextual scenarios of music making that pass through generations continuously renewing themselves: as a result of a sound production, the so-called traditional music – as well as almost all music – is always contemporaneity, being essentially the recording tools to 'preserve the unpreservable' (Turino 2008).

consciousness, the main characters of secondary orality (Ong 1992:136 ff). Often, beyond the contextual performance within their own cultural group - that means very competent listeners, who are able to judge the performance even in the smallest details-, almost all “oral musicians” exceed their tangible local audience, having other occasions to make music for other listeners more or less culturally far away – sometimes, through multimedia channels, also projecting their “own musics” to distant points of the virtual global village, and a mere glance at YouTube may be sufficient. The variability of the performance circumstances and goals has a relevant influence on “oral musicians” who are often non-professional specialists who are normally deeply influenced by the listeners' reactions, being able to adapt their knowledge and capabilities to different feedbacks. It stimulates a very large spectrum of creative mechanisms coming from music behaviours that vary roughly from interpretative nuances of true micro-sound elements, to the (re)elaboration of wide music materials springing into what they call “new oral music pieces”.

I shall deal with a very representative case I had the opportunity to analyze for many years with a peculiar perspective, that is the *cantu a cuncordu*, i.e. a multipart singing by chording practice in a Sardinian village, Santu Lussurgiu.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. A Dialogic Approach

In 2009 I published a monography on the *cantu a cuncordu* (a typology of orally transmitted multipart singing by chording- see below) that is practiced in Santu Lussurgiu (Macchiarella 2009). It is an essay conceived in a dialogic approach, i.e. on the basis of a long negotiation between a quartet of singers – *su Cuncordu 'e su Rosariu*, composed of Roberto Iriu (*cuntraltu*), Roberto Migheli (*oghe*), Mario Corona (*contra*) and Giovanni Ardu (*bass*) - and myself as a scholar. The work took more than three years and was carried out with the main goal of trying to let the local performers' direct point of view emerge within a context of active collaboration with my interpretation of the local music practice. The work was made possible in virtue of particular and unrepeatable conditions<sup>3</sup>: a long friendship (I first met the group in 1984 and during these years we had more or less frequent contact) and a special, almost recent, regular chance to see them,

---

<sup>2</sup> Located in Central-West Sardinia on the eastern slopes of Montiferru (in the province of Oristano) nowadays, Santu Lussurgiu has about 2600 inhabitants. It has a typical agricultural economy, plus some handicraft workshops. The village also has a specific scholastic tradition due to a school of Latin and Rhetoric founded by enlightened landowners around the middle of the 19th century, that was attended by youths from all over Sardinia (Antonio Gramsci was among these): see <http://www.comunesantulussurgiu.it/>.

<sup>3</sup> But, anyway: is not all our research the result of unique and unrepeatable conditions due to the continuous changing of the music practice we study? (cf. Camara de Landa 2004: 361ff).

since in 2004, I moved my workplace to Sardinia, setting up home in Santu Lussurgiu itself.

I knew that all the group members and many other singers from the village were particularly interested in ethnomusicological studies: many of them have read parts of current bibliography on Sardinia's music and have actively collaborated in specialist events – above all the 1991 symposium on “Liturgy and Para-liturgy in oral tradition” that was held in Santu Lussurgiu, organized by Giampaolo Mele and Pietro Sassu, with the participation of almost all the Italian ethnomusicologists and other scholars (anthropologists, liturgists etc.) who have had an important relevance in the history of the following Italian ethnomusicology (Sassu-Mele 1993; Giuriati 1995).

Inspired by the dialogical approaches suggested by Steven Feld (1987, 1990), I proposed to my friends to “write together” a book on their very attractive singing practice. At the beginning they were almost reticent because of their low educational level: not one of them has completed the middle school curriculum; they also do not know music notation. Anyway, trusting me they accepted my proposal, gradually becoming enthusiastic about the idea of taking part in the writing of a book on “their music”.

Through up and down periods, the work has developed in three main phases: firstly we discussed all the aspects of the music practice ideally to be dealt with in the book, recording all our discussions. During these meetings my role was essentially to stimulate the debate, proposing different themes, but when the discussion started I took part in it, proposing my personal external point of view – for instance about the relationship between singing and ritual, the diffusion of the performance practice in village life and so on – quite often we disagreed that sometimes also led to heated arguments. In other words, I did not provide them with a simple questionnaire and I was not an interviewer but I set myself as an interlocutor in the discussion, although a ‘special interlocutor’ because of my professional status. After several meetings, I transcribed the discussions, giving a copy of the text to each participant who would have read it privately; after a short while, we started our meetings again in order to read and discuss the first draft together, so as to approve it and negotiate a ‘compromise point’ when our opinions diverged. I recorded these new collective discussions again and on this basis I drew up a second draft of the book. Again, they were given a copy of this to read individually, followed by a collective reading/discussion and so forth. In the end, after goodness knows exactly how many collective meetings, we agreed we had “our book”, that is to say a final version entirely subscribed by all five discussants.

On the whole, the book has different levels of writings: the main part, in roman type, is constituted by the collective text we all agreed upon, pivoted on a large description of the *α*

*cuncordu* music practice within both the local religious and secular contexts of daily and festive times; below this, there is a series of footnotes, in italics, containing my comments as a scholar on different theoretical issues related to the main text, including the highlighting of some relevant points where our opinions significantly diverged. Then there is a chapter in the form of a written debate signed only by the four singers where they tell the history of their confraternity singer group: in actual fact, I wrote it, reporting their words without any interventions on my part except for normal adaptations for writing which they approved. Then the volume is supplemented by a short analytical essay written by me on the basic musical pattern and the main improvisational mechanisms; a glossary of technical words and expressions in the Sardinian language, which accompanies the musical practices written by all the five discussants, plus other documentary materials.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the book has a CD attached that is surprising for different reasons connected with the creativity topic.

When we began our book we agreed to attach a CD to it containing recordings of significant excerpts of the *a cuncordu* singing. I suggested an anthology of contextual recordings; they told me they would have preferred a studio recording, like the one they had made fifteen years before, realizing a CD edited by the ethnomusicologist Pietro Sassu and the local scholar Francesco Salis.<sup>5</sup> So I suggested a direct editing of their CD, commissioning a Sardinian recording studio directed by a friend of ours (Giovanni Carlini) for the technical aspects. I was not going to be present during the recording and editing phases and would only listen to the CD when it was ready for printing. Sometimes, during our meetings for the drafting of the book, they told me they were preparing something very particular, something “new” for the CD, trying to stimulate my curiosity.

After our agreement about the final version of the book, they gave me the master CD: besides a number of expected tracks, there were adaptations of new original texts to the usual musical devices as foreseen by the village practice and, above all, there were “the surprises” they were preparing, i.e. two “new religious songs”: an arrangement of the *Te Deum* (with a Latin text, based on a melodic version from the *Liber Usualis* they learned from the village priest’s interpretation)<sup>6</sup> and an elaboration of the *Gosos de Don Bosco*, which is an original intonation in the *a cuncordu* style of a text by a local poet devoted to Saint Giovanni Bosco.

The four singers were very proud of their disc, particularly about the innovations that it

---

<sup>4</sup> Some of these materials are also in a specific web space devoted to the book:

<http://musicaemusiche.org/?q=node/211>

<sup>5</sup> Salis- Sassu 1995: The CD was recorded in a village’s church.

<sup>6</sup> The incipit of this track is at <http://musicaemusiche.org/?q=node/211>

included. They told me they had taken special care in these innovations which they considered as a “milestone of their thirty-four years of music activity”: their purpose was to enlarge “their repertory” and at the same time to give “something new to the *a cuncordu* singing”, to the village’s musical practice and particularly to the younger singers.

They operated completely within the ‘current dimension’ of orality: starting from a melodic line, they elaborated the four part arrangement in the typical style of the *a cuncordu* song, recording their attempts and re-listening to them immediately, choosing little by little a “definitive version” which they finally recorded on the CD. Nevertheless, in their opinion, the innovations they proposed were in the “true wake” of the *cantu a cuncordu* custom. As they told me solemnly the “new songs” were “authentically traditional” because they had been created in the “authentic village’s *trazzu*”: “we have made them but they belong to the village!”.

## **2. A matter of *trazzu***

The *cantu a cuncordu* belongs to the so-called chordal multipart singings, which means it is an orally transmitted music practice pivoted on a simultaneous emission of three/four pitches whose reciprocal intervals are consciously controlled by singers, producing sonority of complete chords, often with the doubling of the lowest note.<sup>7</sup> Typically performed by men, it is a very “exclusive” typology of music making since it is normally performed within particular cultural contexts by specialized groups that have been trained through a peculiar *iter* of musical apprenticeship, including the acceptance of unwritten rules of social life settled by local customs (Lortat-Jacob 2006).

The word *cuncordu* (literally concord) defines a four-man group, while *cantu a cuncordu* (by extension “in harmony singing”) denotes the resulting singing. Widely practiced throughout Central-North Sardinia, recently revived by younger generations, the *a cuncordu* singing reveals a very meaningful variability according to the different uses of the villages where it is practiced (I cannot deal with this point here, but see Lortat-Jacob 1993; Macchiarella 2008; Macchiarella-Pilosu 2011). Altogether, the local *a cuncordu* practice is very articulated and particularly complex, including both religious and profane *pesadas*. This term literally means intonations; metonymically it defines what they call *cantu* or *cantigos*, more or less corresponding to song (see the end of this

---

<sup>7</sup> As known, this typology of music making is diffused in some mediterranean areas (mainly Sardinia, Sicily, Corsica) and otherwise : see Ahmedaja - Haid 2008 and Zemp 1996; See also the web sites: <http://www.mdw.ac.at/ive/emm/index.php?id=3>; <http://polyphony.ge/index.php?lng=eng> ; [www.multipartmusic.org](http://www.multipartmusic.org)

paper).

According to the village's customs, the *cantu a cuncordu* in Santu Lussurgiu is closely connected to secular confraternities; "traditional" associations among believers that play an important role within the social life of the villages, both in religious and secular realms.<sup>8</sup> Nowadays, there are four confraternities in the village. The most important of these is *Sa Cunfraria e su Rosariu* (i.e. the Our Lady of Rosary confraternity): founded in 1605, it has continued to operate without a break throughout the centuries, preserving a central role both in the transmission of multipart singing and in the organization of the Holy Week rituals.<sup>9</sup> The other three confraternities (*sa Cunfraria e Santa Rughe* - the Holy Cross confraternity, founded in 1587; *sa Cunfraria e sos Sette Dolores* - Our Lady of Sorrows, founded in 1735; *sa Cunfraria e su Carmine* - the Carmelite confraternity, founded in 1629) stopped their activities in around the 1960s -1980s, and have recently been revitalized by several young men under the guidance of older members of the *su Rosariu* confraternity who wished "to rebuild" the subdivision into four confraternities which is fixed – they say – by the *costumene 'e bidda* (village tradition).

There are approximately two hundred brothers, and more or less half of them are able to sing *a cuncordu*. Today, the *su Rosariu* and *sos Sette Dolores* confraternities have an official *cuncordu*, that means a permanent quartet entrusted with performing at every ritual ceremony of the society. These quartets also have a musical activity beyond the confraternity's boundary, and can choose to sing where and when they like, accepting invitations to hold concerts outside the village without asking for permission from their confraternity. The incomparably most important quartet is *su Cuncordu 'e su Rosariu* ; namely the group with whom I wrote my book. Active without a break since 1976, the quartet has unceasingly provided the multipart singing at the village's main annual rites, in particular during every Holy Week procession and ceremony. Known as the *grandi* in the double meaning of the word, since they are literally both elders, about 55 years old, and also regarded as "great men," emphasizing their fundamental contribution to the continuity of the practice. The quartet is the most highly considered by the villagers because of its constant and passionate engagement in *a cuncordu* practice, even during the 1970s-1980s when it had fallen "out of fashion", at risk of being lost. It is generally agreed that without this engagement,

---

<sup>8</sup> Like elsewhere in Catholic regions, beyond spiritual elements (that are strictly private) nowadays, the confraternities enjoy a very interesting revival as social associations thanks to the participation of many young people. Usually confraternities organize all the rites of the liturgical year and in particular the Holy Week ones. They also affect everyday public life, also having determinant weight in municipality politics. Almost always, the music practice is a relevant element of this revival: see Macchiarella 2010 for a view on the Sardinian outline.

<sup>9</sup> There are some historical sources confirming this, see Corona 2011.

the *a cuncordu* singing of today would be very different and “inauthentic” in Santu Lussurgiu, and almost all of today’s singers acknowledge that the group has given determinant contributions to the present *pesadas*’ patterns, elaborating their basic parameters. Furthermore, the *Cuncordu ‘e su Rosariu* has had (and still has) a very rich singing activity outside of the village, holding dozens of concerts annually all over the world, in all about five-hundred from 1984 till now, and participating in various “musical projects” including collaborating with celebrated Italian musicians like the jazz musician Paolo Fresu,<sup>10</sup> international world music artists from Sardinia and from other Mediterranean countries, and also with a baroque music ensemble and an experimental ensemble of “contemporary music” and “tape recording”.

Made up of younger singers, the *Sette Dolores* confraternal quartet has had a limited concert activity in Sardinia up till now; however it is extremely involved in the discourses on music practice, also including attempts to elaborate “new *a cuncordu* creations” (see below).<sup>11</sup>

Beyond the confraternity ambit, there is another permanent quartet, *su Cuncordu lussurzesu* (the *cuncordu* of Santu Lussurgiu) that performs approximately the same *pesadas* as the confraternal ones and is also engaged in their re-elaborations too. It has no role in the village paraliturgical rites, but rather only sings at concerts both in and outside of the village. It organizes concert events pivoted on multipart singing and is involved in the Sardinian folk music movement, also collaborating with some world music artists.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, outside both the confraternity and the permanent quartet activity, there are at least about one hundred singers more that are able to perform at least one of the four parts of the *cantu a cuncordu* given the right circumstances.

There are two main performative scenarios within village life. On the one hand, a long sequence of paraliturgical actions pivoted on Holy Week, culminating in the *incravamentu* and *iscravamentu* ceremonies, i.e. the holy re-enactment of the crucifixion and deposition of Christ, performed on Maundy Thursday and the Good Friday respectively inside the parish church.<sup>13</sup> During this period, the confraternities play a crucial role, taking part in the different processions. The *su Rosariu* brotherhood is responsible for the main para-liturgies in the principal church, the

---

<sup>10</sup> See: [http://www.fild.de/ufart/uf\\_pafr\\_e.html](http://www.fild.de/ufart/uf_pafr_e.html); [www.paolofresu.it](http://www.paolofresu.it) ; and Fresu 2010.

<sup>11</sup> This *cuncordu* has a very active presence on the web: see <http://www.myspace.com/sucuncorduesettedolores> and <http://it-it.facebook.com/people/Cuncordue-Sette-Dolores/100000776935198>

<sup>12</sup> See the official web site: <http://www.cuncordulussurzesu.it/index.php> .

<sup>13</sup> The Holy Week rites of Santu Lussurgiu are famous throughout Sardinia and they are advertised as a tourist attraction by the local municipality: every year, many tourists come to the village to attend these rites (<http://www.regione.sardegna.it/speciali/isolachedanza/en/>).



other ones have their own ceremonies in other churches. The *Cuncordu 'e su Rosariu* performs the multipart singing both within the processions and the main church ceremonies, whereas the other *cuncordu* accompany the other events. Pivoted on two *pesadas*, the *Miserere* (with Latin text) and the *Novena* (adopting a free translation in the Sardinian language of the *Stabat Mater*), the *cantu a cuncordu* symbolically qualify all the sacred times and spaces of the ritual cycle, beating the length of every ceremony and being at the very centre of the collective attention.

On the other hand, the Carnival feast is the other main performative scenario, offering very typical occasions for the singers who are not part of permanent quartets. Particularly, during the three central days (from Sunday to Shrove Tuesday), after *sa Carela e nanti* (literally, “the front running” — a very fast and daredevil horse race through the narrow village streets) all the cellars of the village are open, creating a semipublic space. Almost all the singers meet in the streets making informally different *compagnie di canto* (singing companies) who spend the night touring the cellars, offering performances of profane *pesadas*, above all, *istudiantines* (literally “student’s songs”), an open musical structure that could be adapted to various lyrical texts from Sardinian classical poetry. Within every *compagnia* the singers alternate to form “spontaneous” quartets, and the members of permanent groups (including those of the confraternities) perform in a relaxed manner with other singers from the village. As it is in Carnival spirit, both the cellar tours and the *a cuncordu* performances would suggest an idea of spontaneity and improvisation; actually, they are socially institutionalized spontaneity and improvisation since analyzing the tours, one observes recurring collective behaviours, while the composition of the quartets represent personal relationships that are supported or questioned during the performances: indeed these may reveal conflicting aspects.

Furthermore, during the year, there are other performative contexts both in the religious sphere (for instance solemn masses for the patron saints, for weddings, etc.: indeed all the five parts of the *Ordinarium Missae* are sung) and secular ambits (mainly the so called *spuntini*, literally snacks, but which are lengthy banquets held during collective festive gatherings). Besides, there is a special mixture between “sacred and profane” in the meeting that follows the last ceremony on Good Friday, in the sacristy of the main village church. Here there is a large meeting of almost all the members of the confraternities who are able to sing *a cuncordu*; they mix together in informal and spontaneous quartets, singing alternatively the religious *pesadas* until midnight and then adding the profane ones until dawn.

Of course, each *pesada* has a more or less definite contextual destination that – they say –

has been established by the *costumene 'e bidda*. In fact, they are not binding constricted rules but performing religious *pesadas* in profane circumstances and vice-versa is essentially avoided (and in some cases censored). However, there are textual travesty mechanisms that allow typical religious expression to be sung within secular spaces and times: namely, a textual disguise of the Holy Week *Stabat Mater pesada*, dealing with love themes. The same mechanism allows the singing of “religious versions” of the most characteristic profane pattern (the *istudiantina*) within sacred spaces like the sacristy, oratories, confraternity chapels (but not within church naves) and time (Holy Week). As a matter of fact, in music performance and generally in social life, sacred and profane are not opposite: they are not, as the church teaches, a dichotomy, but, highly interrelated, they are two sides of a unique shared cultural experience that musical practice symbolizes very efficaciously.

The singers usually maintain that religious *pesadas* are more important than the profane expressions: particularly, the two connected with the Holy Week paraliturgical rituals are considered an exclusive and reserved “music patrimony”, immediately symbolizing the “musical uniqueness” of the village, or better, what they call *su trazzu* (or *traggiu*).

Musically, Santu Lussurgiu’s *cantu a cuncordu* is rigorously sung in four parts that are called, from the highest: *cuntraltu*, *'oghe*, *contra* and *bassu*. One singer always performs the same part, the parts are never doubled. During the performance the singers stand still and in a circle where the *bassu* is in front of the *'oghe* and the *contra* on the left .

*oghe*  
*contra*            *cuntraltu*  
*bassu*

The whole performance may be subdivided into macro-unities I have called modules, clearly bounded by long rests. Every module begins with a long solo incipit (called *sa pesada* – i.e. the same word used to indicate the result of each performance) that is realized by the *oghe*, with the exception of *Miserere* and *Novena* whose entry is sung by the *bassu*. This soloist incipit ends with a precise note (called *su puntu*, i.e. the point) where the other parts enter producing an overlapping in the form of a chord, often in  $5/8$  position, sometimes in root position,<sup>14</sup> which is held or

---

<sup>14</sup> The  $5/8$  chordal position (namely with the fifth between *bassu* and *contra*, and the third between *oghe* and the highest voice, while the *oghe* sings the octave of the *bassu*’s note) is the usual overlapping in Sardinian multipart music

repeated. Then, according to the module's pattern, the parts move differently within very narrow ranges (these melodic movement are called *ziratas*), determining various overlappings that lead to a point where the part movements stop, producing a chord again, often corresponding to the initial one. Here is the summarized scheme of a module.

Beginning "a solo" voice	Chord overlapping (stop)	Movements of the parts (go)	Final Chord overlapping (stop)	Long rest
<i>pesada</i>	held and/or repeated	<i>Ziradas</i>	Usually held (sometimes repeated)	

The section "go" could be articulated in different subsections by means of short rests and with a large variety of *ziradas*. This performative mechanism has very large and surprising outcomes, above all in the "go" section, which are usually variable and unpredictable as usually happens in orally transmitted music. It cannot be interpreted as chord sequences because of the extreme variability of the "go" section (some academic musicians tried such a kind of analysis arriving at very odd results, even finding 9<sup>th</sup> chords, Neapolitan 6<sup>th</sup> chords!).

But the singers do not have our concept of chord, as the term does not exist in their articulated technical glossary. The chord overlapping springs from a device of coordinated actions and combined emissions that they represent horizontally and there are some words for it: each singer listens to the others in order to learn how to join and to fit within the combined emissions that he knows from previous experiences; it is a creative participation in a collective process, since at every music point the singer may choose from among different possibilities.

When it is performed in the scenario of a village gathering, variability is a typical feature of the *a cuncordu* practice, in that sort of paradoxical music space of orally transmitted practices that are both bounded and infinite. Variability concerns both the single part behaviour and the comprehensive vocal amalgam, being the result of two contemporary principles: the personalization of the single vocal emission and the representation of inter-individual relationships. Every singer aims to sign his performance by means of peculiar vocal elements (often minimal expressive nuances) and this kind of signature is recognized and discussed, appreciated or

---

whereas the root position  $\frac{3}{5}$  (with the third between *bassu* and *contra* and the octave relationship between *bassu* and *cuntraltu*) is very rarely found outside of Santu Lussurgiu's *a cuncordu* song.

criticized, by both the other singers and the specialized listeners:<sup>15</sup> so, according to both the context and the circumstance of the performance, every singer makes his concrete choices: even the sounds of the chord overlapping (“stop” section) may have different nuances coming from different intentionalities.

At the same time, the quality of music outcomes is the quality of personal relationships among the performers: when relations are good the sound is loud and resonant, aiming towards the maximum vocal fusion, as much as it is possible to control this aspect; otherwise, in the cases of personal contrasts or challenges, any single singer realizes more or less conscious sound ‘micro-adjustments’ in order to defy/provoke another singer or other singers. These adjustments (for instance, anticipations, retardations, appoggiaturas) might aim to embarrass the other(s) singer(s) or to stimulate him/them to give his/their best: all this is consciously discussed by the singers including audible musical consequences.

Furthermore, within the music practice there are “open forms” i.e. in module mechanisms where one can find different and unpredictable combinations of music materials in every performance and “close forms” with planned and unchangeable sequences of music materials. The open forms concern the profane sphere: like other orally transmitted music practices, they show a kind of modular mechanism based on the juxtaposition of modules (see before), i.e. pre-assembled combinations of “stop and go” music materials associated to single lines of the text or a minor segment of a text line: during the performance the singers may modify the sequence of the combination among the modules and/or propose repetitions of single modules, determining different performance lengths. This is a complex improvisatory mechanism usually led by the *boghe* part which is particularly exalted in the *Istudiantina pesadas* (Macchiarella 2009: 214 ff). Vice versa, the close forms are connected with the religious sphere due to the required consequentiality of the sacred text, so that the variation of performance length is limited, depending on the dynamics of the vocal parts.

At the basis of the whole music practice I have roughly described here, there is the key concept of *trazzu* (or *traggiu*) concerning both the technical aspects and the shared meanings and values of the sounds. Actually, the *trazzu* belongs to a very complex typology of concepts, partially indefinable, connected with music practices orally transmitted. Firstly it indicates shared oral memories of “musical outline”, i.e. both the movements of the parts and their combinations. Then,

---

<sup>15</sup> The same mechanism is in other analogous music practices: it is often called *sa critica* (the criticism) see Lortat-Jacob (1996: 163 ff).

*trazzu* concerns performative styles, both the individual singing styles and the comprehensive style of the different (permanent or not) quartets, their relative amalgam during the performative acts. Every *cuncordu* quartet has its own *trazzu* just like every singer has his own. In this sense, *trazzu* concerns a large and unlimited range of parameters like timbres, rhythm,<sup>16</sup> choice of profane texts and their “poetic interpretations”, and so forth. At another level, *trazzu* refers to the music practice globally considered as an exclusive peculiarity of the village, and strictly connected to the assumed uniqueness of its “way of life”. It is a crucial point of contemporary representation of Sardinian cultural identity, since Sardinian people generally represent their island as a continent and every village as a “small nation”.<sup>17</sup> The supposed uniqueness of the village’s social life and micro-culture is an important value for the consciousness of Santu Lussurgiu’s inhabitants as well as for all Sardinians at large: it is continuously evoked in everyday speech, being the core of the identity construction processes of many peoples (Angioni et al, 2007). It is naturally synthesized by adages like *Si nche jumpas sas lacanas de bidde ti nche agatas in terra furistera* (if you leave your village boundaries you’ll be in a foreign land) etc.

In such kinds of speech, making music usually has a crucial relevance (along with both the language’s peculiarities and the cooking) so that the *trazzu* idea is often metaphorically recalled as one of the main emblems of local differentiation.<sup>18</sup> Like any emblem, the *trazzu* does not have a univocal definition: it is not a matter of evidence but an ideal cultural projection. In other words, the *trazzu* is not a list of identifiable music traits: it is a pretext to discuss the musical practice and through it, the people involved and their place and relationships within the social life of the village.

Every village has its own speeches about its *trazzu*, that means about its peculiar elaboration of its own sense of micro-identity, although not all its inhabitants are involved in such a

---

<sup>16</sup> Like other multipart singing by chording, the *cantu a cuncordu* is in the so called ‘free’ rhythm – i.e. a rhythm without the proportionality of the values - and the durations of sounds depending on coordinate vocal emissions of the four singers.

<sup>17</sup> *Sardegna quasi un continente* (Sardinia, almost a continent) is a very used formula which has been underlined by the Island’s intelligentsia since the Sixties, within autonomist political movements (also with the contribution of cultural anthropologists like Michelangelo Pira). Inter alia, it was the title of a series of extremely renowned documentaries by Marcello Serra (<http://www.sardegnaigitallibrary.it/index.php?xsl=626&id=66832> ). Nowadays, the phrase is a sort of motto of many tourist advertisements, including the official ones of the Regional Government (see <http://www.regione.sardegna.it/j/v/25?c=3692&s=118512&t=1&v=2> – verified October 10, 2011). Of course, this idea of continent is common in the representations by other islanders.

<sup>18</sup> According to Bernard Lortat-Jacob in the Sardinian culture, the ‘exotic’ begins in the next village: «Each village has its musicians, and if not its own music, at any rate a style of performing which is its own (...) The community spirit still plays an important part in the making of Sardinian music and each village, anxious to assert its identity, appears to resist individually any form of assimilation. This music undoubtedly owes its great richness to this dynamism working in the sense of a differentiation continually renewed within the genres and forms fixed by tradition» (Lortat-Jacob 1992: 19).

discourse: of course, in every village there are people who have no interest in music practices! That is why the singers do not like it very much when other singers perform the music of their villages: «how could outsiders adequately perform our songs if they don't know our village life?» is more or less literally the rhetorical question asked by the singers of Santu Lussurgiu - as well as those from any other village - when they know that “their *pesadas*” have been performed elsewhere: quite heated arguments are normally developed when singers from different villages consider music analogies and similarities between the singing practices of their respective villages, which happens quite often (see Macchiarella 2009/b).

### 3. Continuous Creativities

Let us go back to the book and the ‘surprising’ attached CD I have dealt with before. As a rule, during our ‘collective writing’, discussing the *cantu a cuncordu* was for my friends, discussing the singers who perform (or have performed) it. In the pages of our book, almost every performative element was linked to a single singer or to a *cuncordu*: for instance, the profane *pesada* called *Itte bella* was attributed to a famous singer who would “introduce it” in the Seventies; a *zirada* of the first module of the *Miserere* was ascribed to a great brother-singer who would have elaborated it in the Sixties; an arrangement between a module and a distich was so frequently proposed by a boghe-singer that people believed he had invented it when he returned after conscription, in the Fifties and so forth. Far from any idea of impersonalized or anonymous music (a mythic and romantic image ordinarily linked to what is called “traditional music”), my singer-friends thought of their musical practice as a manifestation of clearly identified individualities that are evoked in one way or another by means of the real performance. Behind the “old singers” they have known, they believe there were other unknown ones who “surely gave their contributions” and right back to “the origin of their trazzu” which they attribute to the meeting between the village’s *mannos* (ancestors) and the Franciscan monks who arrived from far away in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Corona 2011). Beyond these discourses about the origins (that are actually indefinable and not dateable just like any orally transmitted music practice) they always expressed the conviction of a continuous transformation of their music practice according to the choice of the people who have performed it throughout the generations.

In this sort of mapping of paternity, Giovanni, Mario, Antonio and Roberto assume a relevant space for themselves within the recent history of the *cantu a cuncordu* : in particular, they claim the elaboration of all the Mass parts on the basis of a previous rough version they

remembered from an “old organist” who played by ear; the re-construction of the most complex profane *pesada* (*s’Ottava Triste*) whose structure they learnt from some “older singers” who were not able to sing it “without interruptions”;<sup>19</sup> the arrangement of the part of the contra in the *vocione*, i.e. the long *cadenza*-module at the end of the *Miserere*, and so forth. Furthermore, they claim a general simplification of the *ziradas* in religious *pesadas* from the vocal “artificialities” they presume were added in the Seventies by a “virtuoso quartet” of singers, believing that the solemnity of religious *cantigos* require a *boghe lissia* parts, i.e. without relevant ornamentation.

As is easy to imagine, other village singers express different opinions and ascriptions: according to someone, my friends “have confused memories” (a toned down phrase said to me a few times ) and the same elements would have been elaborated by different persons – including the Mass. Others partially confirmed the information reported in the book, supplementing it. Some young brother-singers claimed to have elaborated personal versions of the Mass based on the model proposed by my friends, while the young *boghe* of the *Santa Rughe* confraternity adopted a different *pesada* (soloist beginning) of the *Kyrie* that was derived from a recording (it seems) dating back years before the foundation of *su Cuncordu e su Rosariu*, and so on. All in all, after the book release, several singers felt the need to communicate their point of view to me (maybe hoping in another future book...), while other young singers organized a collection of all the recording sources of the *canto a cuncordu* before the Seventies.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, there is not ‘an official truth’ because the *cantigos* of Santu Lussurgiu are not musical pieces or objects, so there are no authors in the common sense of the word, a sense which is radically distant from the sphere of orally transmitted music. There are different opinions, shared by the group, of what we might define ‘music actors’ of the village (both singers and competent listeners) which are continuously under discussion and thus in transformation, being part of the «personal participation in the performative generation of meaning that is music» (Cook 2003: 211).

Beyond their contents, all these matters give a clear idea of the quality of Santu Lussurgiu’s present musical scenario, a peculiar scenario that of course is not unique, since I know of other analogous scenarios with different contents in other Sardinian and Corsica villages. It is broadly representative of the contemporary processes of orally transmitted making music: processes that, inter alia, are pivoted on peculiar uses of recording.

---

<sup>19</sup> See <http://musicaemusiche.org/?q=node/227>

<sup>20</sup> Of course, the reactions to my book are an issue on which I am still working; otherwise I have promised my help in the initiative of “collection of old recordings” in order to publish a CD with the more representative excerpts to be edited by the same young singers: we have agreed that I shall write the preface of the booklet.

In fact, continuous reference to the “old recordings” works like an enrichment of both the discussion and the music practice. The vitality and the wideness of the local music scenario avoid phenomena of standardization that are otherwise common. I know some of them, i.e. local very poor multipart practices that are simply a repetition/reproduction of recordings from about thirty years ago. But in Santu Lussurgiu both singers and competent listeners question even the evidence of the recordings while their continuous listening determines detailed knowledge of the performance nuances (otherwise impossible to own) which are creatively used both in the discourses on *cantu a cuncordu* and in the concrete music practice. In a sort of imaginary link with the past singers, this knowledge is quoted and debated, assuming the randomness of the sound sources. I often heard phrases like: “Yes, in this recording someone sung this *zirada*, but I know he preferred another one that unluckily is not recorded”.

On the other hand, the recordings are an obvious tool for a technical improvement of the singing, mainly in a dynamic perspective: the aim is not to get standard versions to reproduce but to have detailed feedback on different performative choices to enlarge their consciousness about what is possible to realize with the virtual musical oral device they shared. And so on.

Within this scenario, the *Te Deum* and the *Gosos de don Bosco*, as well as the other innovations included in the CD attached to our book work like virtual additional stimula for the singing practice: they are not “new songs” in the sense we usually give to the expression (i.e. a fixed sequence of notes), but musical suggestions for new personalization processes according to what they feel is like their *trazzu*, whose paternity is well clear and stated. *Su Cuncordu ‘e su Rosariu* did not register “the songs” with the SIAE (Italian Society of Authors) for copyright or other similar operations: “our wish – as I was more or less literally told both by Roberto, who mainly worked on the *Te Deum*, and by Mario who promoted the *Gosos* - is that the other singers seize them recognizing that they come from us, as it has been with the Mass; they are part of our contribution to the *cantu a cuncordu* for which we wish to be remembered by the next generations. They are our *pesadas* but they are actually our village’s heritage”.<sup>21</sup>

Of course a simple music analysis could immediately demonstrate the analogies and differences between these two *pesadas* and the other consolidated ones, starting from the confirmation of the module mechanisms – although both *Te Deum* and *Gosos de don Bosco* are

---

<sup>21</sup> Several times I was asked about the question of author’s rights by some village singers: in particular, they wanted to know if they could do something to safeguard their music: but these exchanges were always addressed outside the village, with the (impossible) wish of stopping outside singers from performing it, or subordinately, to protect it crediting royalties to the whole community.



closed forms. But what really counts is what they will do with them, or better, if there will be different personalizations and how they will be.

Inter alia, there is a significant episode: during last year's Lent, within a ritual ceremony, the *Cuncordu of Sette Dolores* performed an unknown version of the *Stabat Mater*. It came from an arrangement that an old music teacher originally from Santu Lussurgiu (although he has been living away for about forty years) wrote on a score at the request of the village priest. Underneath the score, the teacher wrote that it is the *fedelissima trascrizione* (truest transcription) of the *Stabat Mater* sung in the village around the 1950's. Since the singers are not able to read the score, the teacher made a midi-file with *finale* software, recording the four voices separately and giving the files to the priest on a pen drive. To please the priest, the singers learnt and performed this *Stabat Mater*, but they were not totally convinced about it; it was actually a *una tantum* performance which has never been repeated till today because, as all the singers told me, it seems too far from the village's *trazzu* (actually in the eyes of a *cantu a cuncordu* singer, there are some strange elements, beginning with the regular 6/8 rhythm that the *Sette Dolores* quartet tried to dilate as much as possible in their up till now unique contextual performance). On the other hand, using the recorder (as I described before in the case of the *Te Deum*), the same quartet has elaborated an *a cuncordu* arrangement of a very popular tune in Sardinia (*Non potho riposare*) that they include in their contribution for the village music practice according to the same dynamics of the older group of Su Rosariu.

#### 4. Manifold Scenarios, Musical Processes

The living music scenario I have dealt with concerns the music practice inside the village – that means about several hundred people, including some women who according to local custom, do not perform *a cuncordu* but take part in the discussions about it.<sup>22</sup> But the *cantu a cuncordu* has other performative contexts outside the village's boundaries, in the form of concert on stages all over Sardinia, and beyond the sea, in what Sardinians call the Continent, including without distinction Italy and the whole of Europe. These recent contexts are almost restricted to the few singers who are members of stable quartets (within or outside the confraternities), at present, three or four groups who have a different intensity of external activities as mentioned before. For

---

<sup>22</sup> The same thing is found in the other Sardinian villages where there is orally transmitted multipart singing by chord: of course, women may sing *a cuncordu* and there are some attempts in such a direction which are greatly contested – there are no in-depth studies on this subject.

these new contexts, the singers of Santu Lussurgiu perform different version of their *pesadas* according to the specific circumstances and their feelings about the listeners. I have observed many of these concerts surveying very different music outcomes. Of course, the concert versions of the *pesadas* are almost standardized, lacking mostly of the unpredictability and the expressive nuances which characterize the village performances: in fact they say “We simplify our singing because outside listeners could not understand and appreciate the details of our *cuncordu*”. But in some particular events (for instance concerts in famous theatres like the *Fenice* in Venice, the *Bellini* in Catania, the *Opera* in Paris) they had both a special sound quality and “surprising elements” due to peculiar intentionalities. This is a result of an essential ductility which is one of the main features of oral musicians, clearly exalted by multipart specialists which needs specific future in-depth study.

Beyond its specific features, the scenario of *cantu a cuncordu* in Santu Lussurgiu is a very representative manifestation of the contemporaneity of a music making pivoted on an oral (i.e. secondary orality) mechanism. A mechanism that is not a simple heritage of the past, but a current music practice which satisfies the needs of a human group elaborating collectively shared meanings: thus it differs from the one of the past (including the recent past that we possibly came across directly in our research experiences thirty-forty years ago) and has to be essentially interpreted in its current terms. Broadly speaking, a deep dialogical analysis, including different conceptualizations of a living oral music scenario might offer relevant suggestions to the performative dimension of music, and on the essential potential character implied in music expression that is often neglected due to the prevalence of thinking music in terms of object (or worse in terms of work), a dimension that exalts the idea of music as in essence a process rather than a product.

---

## REFERENCES

Ahmedaja Ardian - Haid Gerlinde, eds. 2008. *European voices I. Multipart singing in the Balkans and in the Mediterranean*. Vienna: Böhlau Verlag.

Angioni, Giulio, et al. 2007. *Sardegna. Seminario sull'identità*. Cagliari: Cluec.

Cámara de Landa, Enrique. 2004. *Etnomusicología*. Madrid : Iccmu.

Cook, Nicholas. 2003. *Music as Performance*, in *The Cultural Study of Music*, ed. by Martin Clayton et. Al, London: Routledge.

Corona, Mario. 2011. *Sa Cunfraria 'e Su Rosariu de Santu Lussurzu. Memorie e fonti storiche*. Santu Lussurgiu:

Feld, Steven. 1987. "Dialogic Editing: Interpreting How Kaluli Read Sound and Sentiment", *Cultural Anthropology*, 2/2: 190-210.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1990. *Sound and Sentiment. Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*, University of Pennsylvania Press

Fresu, Paolo. 2010. *La musica dentro*. Milano: Feltrinelli.

Giuriati, Giovanni. 1995. "Italian Ethnomusicology". *Yearbook for Traditional Music*. 27:104-131

Lortat Jacob, Bernard. 1993. "En accord. Polyphonies de Sardaigne: quatre voix qui n'en font qu'une". *Cahiers de Musique Traditionnelles*, 6 : 69-86.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1992. *Polyphonies de Sardaigne*. booklet of Cd Le chant du Monde LDX 274 760.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1996. *Canti di Passione*. Lucca: Lim.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2011. *Singing in company*. Ardian Ahmedaja (ed.) *European Voices II. Cultural Listening and Local Discourse in Multipart Singing Traditions in Europe*. Vienna: Böhlau.

Macchiarella, Ignazio. 2008. *Harmonizing in the Islands: Overview of the multipart singing by chording in Sardinia, Corsica, and Sicily*, in Ahmedaja -Haid, eds. 2008.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2009. *Cantare a cuncordu. Uno studio a più voci*. Udine: Nota.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2009/b. *Il canto a tenore e la costruzione di identità locali: una ricerca ad Oliena (Nuoro)*, in Philip V. Bohlman e Marcello Sorce Keller edss. *Musical Anthropology in Mediterranean Cultures. Interpretation, Performance, Identità*, Bologna: Clueb 37-47.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2010, *Pratiques musicales dans les confréries de Sardaigne*, in *Les confréries Corse. Une Société idéale en Méditerranée*, Arène : Albiana : 334-349.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2011, *Sauvegarder l'oralité ? Le cas du canto a tenore*. in Chiara Bortolotto (sous la direction de) *Le patrimoine culturel immatériel. Enjeux d'une nouvelle catégorie*, Paris : Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, pp. 167-186.

Macchiarella-Pilosu 2011. *Technical Terms in Sardinian Multipart Singing by Chording*. Ardian Ahmedaja (ed.) *European Voices II. Cultural Listening and Local Discourse in Multipart Singing Traditions in Europe*. Vienna: Böhlau, pp. 143-153.

Ong, Walter. 1982. *Orality and literacy the technologizing of the word*. London and New York : Methuen.

Turino, Thomas. 2008. *Music as Social life. The Politics of Participation*. Chicago: The University

Chicago Press.

Sassu Pietro– Mele Giampaolo, eds. 1993. *Liturgia e paraliturgia nella tradizione orale*. Cagliari: Universitas.

Salis Francesco - Sassu Pietro. 1995. *Sardegna: confraternita delle voci, Santu Lussurgiu*. Udine: Nota 2.18.

Zemp, Hugo. 1996. *Voices Of The World: An Anthology Of Vocal Expression*. Paris: Le Chant Du Monde – CMX 3741010-11-12.

Zumthor, Paul. 1990. *Oral Poetry: an Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

---

### **Ignazio Macchiarella**

Born in Palermo, is assistant professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of Cagliari (Sardinia). His main interests are: Multipart Singing; Analysis of Oral Music Patterns; Music and Ritual; Music as Performance. He carried out fieldwork in Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica and elsewhere. He has published books, essays, and articles in specialized journals in Italian, English, French, Spanish and German (see [www.musicaemusiche.org](http://www.musicaemusiche.org)). He is member of the board of SG on Multipart Music of the ICTM ([www.multipartmusic.org](http://www.multipartmusic.org)).

---

### **Cita recomendada**

Macchiarella, Ignazio. 2012. "Current Creativities in Multipart Singing Practice". *TRANS-Revista Transcultural de Música/Transcultural Music Review* 16 [Fecha de consulta: dd/mm/aa]