Discovering the Ancient Voice of Monreale

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A journey to discover the Monreale pipes in Sicily. The story and the people behind the disappearing instrument and centuries old tradition

This past April I booked a flight to Palermo, Sicily. Palermo is an unfamiliar part of the island for me as most of my time in Sicily is spent on the Eastern half around Catania where my relatives live. I booked the flight to Palermo with really no local contacts for this trip, just a hotel reservation in the cheapest place I could find near Monreale, Sicily.

I intended to stay in Sicily for about four weeks. Most of my trip would be near Catania so that I could stay comfortably with my cousins in the little cabin in their vineyard and then eat my meals with family in town. With my little rental Fiat 500, I had the freedom to spend all my time making field

recordings around the island with the help of several Sicilian friends who are just as passionate about preserving and documenting the rapidly disappearing folk music of the island. But this particular trip was special, as I had something important to do before arriving at my relatives - something I was forcing myself to deal with at the very beginning of the trip for fear that I might not have the courage to go there once in the comfort of my family.

And so I flew into Palermo instead of Catania this trip, my reason being a very rare bag piping tradition only found in the city of Monreale, outside Palermo. A giant bagpipe, with pipes nearly 2 meters long, ornately carved representing the mixture of Arabic, Byzantine and Norman cultures that have left their mark on that city. Deeply pitched like church organs and tuned to the minor key they are accompanied by an arabesque style of singing that is unique to this island, this culture and this instrument. With just a handful of elderly players and singers left, and under-documented, I knew that this might be my only chance to make field recordings, and if things went right, purchase one of these extremely rare instruments so that I could learn the tradition myself. After all, my great grandmother was from a nearby town so I felt a familiar tie to this culture and heritage, despite no longer having any living relatives in the area. I was setting my sights very high and my Italian friends who understand this world of rare music thought my chances of success were minimal at best.

Upon picking up my rental car at the airport, jet lagged and fueled with adrenaline I made my way towards my hotel located in the mountains above Palermo. My GPS was failing me, and I was being sent up steep winding mountain roads. I was driving in circles totally disoriented until I finally flagged down another motorist and asked for directions to the hotel. The kind stranger drove me there and let me follow in my little Fiat. The hotel was way up on the mountain, isolated and several miles outside of Monreale. I showed up at the hotel exhausted and disheveled.

What exactly was I doing? I knew no one in this area, had no local contacts, just a couple names of some elderly pipers whom I had heard of and hoped were still alive. I came here with the crazed idea that I would just go around town talking to people like an investigative journalist trying to track down players. It wasn't totally out of the realm of possibility. I'd done it before in other regions of Italy with other instruments and traditions. But here I really felt out off the beaten path, far from any family or friends who could aid me in my quest, and I had no leads.

Documenting Italian folk music traditions is certainly a niche pursuit. With really no roadmap for how one is to proceed, I continually set my own goals and challenges. Generally I put my energy into documenting and learning traditions that are on the precipice of extinction with the rationale that I'd better hurry up and do the work while the tradition still lives. Over the years as I have gained more confidence as a field recorder, investigator, and player of traditional Italian music, I have set my sights higher, seeking out more obscure and rare cultural practices to document and learn. The giant zampogna from Monreale, Sicily with its dark minor key tuning and arabesque singing style was really the pinnacle in terms of what a field recorder of rare Italian bagpipes might hope to fully document and immerse oneself in. It was my white whale so to speak. The rarest most inaccessible and undocumented of all the traditions. Call me Ishmael!

Entering the hotel outside Monreale, it was obvious I was the only guest at this somewhat rundown establishment. A small, family run enterprise, the staff was friendly to this strange young American. Not knowing how to explain my reasoning for showing up alone I began to blab about my quest to find this rare bagpipe native to their region. Instead of looking at me like I was totally crazy they happily told me that one of the family owners of the hotel was the nephew of one of the last players of this instrument, Benedetto Ferraro, one of the two names I had written down and taken with my for my search! Fate was on my side and I was quickly introduced to the nephew who scheduled a meeting with Benedetto for the next morning.

I spent several days with Benedetto Ferraro in April of 2012. I established credibility with him by bringing my smaller Sicilian bagpipe from eastern Sicily with me and playing it for him during our first encounter. Endeared by the enthusiastic American who already had a grasp of traditional Sicilian music, Benedetto opened up his world for me and shared much of his knowledge of Monreale piping. I was in the presence of a living museum, a vessel of institutional cultural knowledge.

We spent hours together in his basement making cane double reeds, tuning the bagpipe, prepping the instrument for playing, all the while him telling me stories and anecdotes about the tradition as I enthusiastically filmed and took notes. This was an odd thing for him to be doing in April, as this instrument is traditionally only played in December leading up to Christmas. He was doing me a massive favor. He arranged for his friend, who also plays and sings to the instrument, to come over and make a recording session. They always play in pairs taking turns with one playing while the other sings. We recorded much of Benedetto's traditional repertoire.

What stood out most to me with my time with Benedetto was his passion and love for this music. He was aware that he was the last of an arcane tradition and I could sense a sort of sadness and nostalgia as he recounted the folklore and cultural importance that his family played in this once integral part of Sicilian life. Yet he was always animated, and being in his presence I felt intimately connected to this culture and ethnicity. He was a conduit of ancestors, bringing their story into the 21st century, refusing to be lost to modernity and mediocrity. He would repeatedly laugh and proclaim: "This music was invented by the Arabs!" His approach to this instrument was graced with poeticism and patience. And I distinctly remember him discretely telling me that sometimes he would spend such time making the reeds and tuning the instrument getting it to sound just perfect and balanced, that it would sound so beautiful to him that he would cry.

The Monreale pipes are family heirlooms and coveted by those that have them. Benedetto had two pipes. He said these specific pipes were over 200 years old and told me stories about the individual instruments and the names of his ancestors that had played them. They are passed down, continually repaired, bearing the hand of different wood turners over time. He decided to sell one of his pipes to me as I was young and passionate and his son was not interested in taking up the tradition as had been done for generations in his family. I was very fortunate and humbled to have the opportunity to obtain this instrument, and with the knowledge and experience gained from spending time with Benedetto I am in the process of making reeds and restoring the instrument to playing condition so that I may begin to learn to play it, and perhaps eventually return to Sicily to partake in the piping Christmas tradition with what little remains.

David Marker is director of
"Zampogna: The Soul of Southern Italy"

Links
[1] http://newsite.iitaly.org/files/monreale-sicily-benedetto-ferraro-bernardo-carrozza-zampogna-di-monreale