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POLYPHONIC TRADITIONS IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD¹

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Abstract

Number of carriers of most ancient layers of European polyphonic traditions, apart from their own history and traditional culture, show links to the peoples of classical times. Similarly, their languages show even older possible linguistic roots. This is the case, among others, for Svans and other regions of Georgia, for Farsheroti and Epirotas in Balkans, and for the Sardinians: all these peoples are known for their rich traditions of vocal polyphony. Polyphonic practices prior to Classic World are credited by “triple” instruments (launeddas) from the Sardinian folklore in times of Roma foundation. We have identified a new source about this instrument, which fills the huge gap of 1500 years between the first and second known representations of the instrument. The earliest known launedda comes from Ittiry (8th C. BC). The second appears 1000 years later, found source is drawn from Francesco di Ficoroni. The next source comes from 600 years later, from the Pict monks of Ireland and Scotland (9th C. AD), being the last of all known sources (all together 14), an illustration from Cantigas de Santa Maria (13th C.). After this moment, the instrument disappears again from the registers until today. There are no historical literary references to launeddas.

Keywords: *Polyphony, organology, musicology, Ancient Greece and Rome, archaeology, Cultural heritage.*

The existence of countless choirs and festivals in classical cities, along with concert halls, musical circuits, and the number of polyphonic instruments all around the ancient Roman Empire is also taken into account. As a result of a new wider approach based on ethnomusicological materials and the perspectives of both comparative and historical musicology, we are proposing to include Greeks and Romans in the family of people who practiced vocal polyphony.

Introduction: Over the ruins of Greece

The problem of polyphony in the ancient civilizations received scarce scholarly attention, apart from few important exceptions [1]. Greco-roman world is an important case, as an example of advanced cultures: this culture flourished for more than millennia around Mediterranea, and affected virtually all the Europe and large oriental territories. They accomplished technical, scientific and artistic achievements not surpassed until more than 1000 years after the so-called paganism was defeated. However, despite many achievements in arts and science, there is a common belief (starting from Camerata Bardi times) that Greko-Roman peoples did not practice polyphony.

The old paradigm of the origin of polyphony suggests that polyphony is a cultural invention. The alternative model of the origin of polyphony belongs to Jordania, who criticized the existing

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model of the origins of polyphony from monophony, and collected plenty of evidence of gradual disappearance of polyphony [2].

Apologists of the old paradigm often refer to a certain Ancient “lost music”, *reportedly melodic*, very expressive, and capable of altering the mind of a listener. These ideas are based, on one hand, on Greek sources discussing the influence of various modes, and on the other hand, on the aesthetic ideas of some Renaissance intellectual circles. However, these views were already myths in the times when Plato, Aristotle, and others were writing about them. 4th-century BC anonymous literary fragment shows that they reflected only non-professional opinions on the musical art, in a very similar way as still is happening in our days [3].

A similar text from Filodemo de Gadara (110-40 BC) shows the same discussions was still going on centuries later, and that the topic on the powers of music was already questioned by musicians from these times in the same way as we do today on the ideas and presumptions of Camerata and their followers [4]. The author accuses those who try to distinguish the particular *ethos* of melodies, asserting that they do not know how to sing nor play correctedly, and that they “fell into extasis and compare the tunes to natural objects” [5].

Faced this situation, I started systematic search of all available visual examples and literary references to poli- or multi-phonic instruments from the Classical World some eight years ago. I was classifying the available evidence in a chronological order, putting them out in a series of publications. Series of 12 papers (6 published, 6 in print) appeared, and a recently defended *Cum laude* Doctoral Thesis at UPV summarized the results of my research. Apart from preparation of papers, I devoted special sessions and conference presentations to each of these topics. In total, there are 70 video-recorded presentations freely accessible to public via the Youtube Channel “Manuel Lafarga”.

Musicology mostly ignored the existence of thousands of choirs and great number of festivals, as well as the presence of lutes, double *dissimilar* auloi, bagpipes, and even organs, which became the municipal instrument during the glorious centuries of Roman Empire [6]. We gathered a rich collection of around 300 literary and iconographical sources, apart from hundreds of references to festivals, choirs, and concert halls, referring to *professional* vocal practices.

At the last stage of our patient and methodic work, a new exciting source was found: the most revered Roman antiquarian from period of Enlightenment, came out after three centuries of silence with a new evidence, supporting the notion of polyphony in Roman music. He had painted and described in detail a wind instrument with three tubes, carved on the cover of a sarcophagus to the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine the Great [7].

His book was a target of a two-decade long polemic, which took part in the Holy Office. After the debate, the book fell into oblivion until we found it again more than 300 years later. We found it — Sherlock *dixit* — *because we were looking for it*.

Lost sarcophagi and musicians who disappear

In 1702, Francesco di Ficoroni (1664-1747), the most knowledgeable antiquarian in Rome during the first half of 18th-century, draw the reliefs over a recovered sarcophagus from the multiple excavations in the city. One of the eight carved Eros was playing on a triple pipe (known today as *launedda*) [8]: he had published his drawing seven years later in a reply to Benedictine Bernard de Montfaucon (1655-1741), who included, at the end of his own philological treatise, a brief and hurried review from Filippo Della Torre (1657-1717), his friend and recently ordinated bishop. There was drawing of the same relief, but instead of triple *launedda*, it showed a musician playing a single curved horn [9].



1 Ficoroni 1709, p. 57 detail

In his book, the Italian antiquarian accused the French ecclesiastic of “inattentibilitá” — *lit.* “absence of credibility” —, so Ficoroni received reprobation from many scholars, some of them writing *libelos* against him, and taking part in the debate the Sacred Congregation of Index (Inquisition) in 1714 [10]. Ficoroni was the target of scandal lasting for almost two decades: yet in 1723, Filippo Bonanni (1638-1723) came back to the polemic proposing that the number of tubes were two, however it was not possible to see this clearly due to the way they were joined. His quoting shows that bishop ‘s drawing was incorrect, and that it was not a *curved horn* in anycase [11].

In a curious way, in the verbal description offered by the scholar monk and his friend the Bishop, which was accompanied by his own drawing, it was precisely this musician that was omitted, mentioning only seven Eros. In the later edition (1711) the drawing was omitted altogether, and one more musician disappeared in the verbal description, now naming only six Eros. And still, 23 years later, after one and half decades of public polemics and Bonanni ‘s observation, the drawing was again included in the English edition of 1725, this time corrected and revised by Montfaucon himself, but now with the same *double-altered* verbal description of 1711.

The sarcophagus was brought [12] to Vatican Library next year to Inquisition intervention, in 1715 (we cannot find the precise date), along with the funerary remains contained in a burned asbestos tissue as was the custom, leaving there under custody by providence of Giovanni Francesco Albani (1649-1721), then with the 243rd Pope, Clemente XI, and still it was there seemingly more than a century later, in 1820.

Until our publication [13], this source (with missing musician) has not been mentioned in the musical or historical literature. It was only used to question the source without any confirmation from the original, that of which we have no information from more than 200 years [14]. We are currently waiting for the Vatican authorization to check *in situ* our conjectures. According to Ficoroni, the sarcophagus was carved in the previous century before Constantine, in 3rd century AD.

Barbagia: At the doors of Rome

Cicero (106-43 BC) gave the name to more mountainous interior region of Sardinia, where the Roman presence was nominal. He named it “Barbagia” — *lit.* “those who do not speak our language”, with ethimological root from “stutterer”. They were known to Romans also with the expression *latrones mastrucati* — “thieves with a rough garment in wool”. It is the most historically and culturally isolated territory in Italy, and also one of the less populated regions of Europe. Isolation contributed to the preservation of their traditions, languages and folklore much better than other Mediterranean islands.

Sardinian polyphonic singing style is widely known today, and in 2005 it received an international recognition from the UNESCO [15]. Four part polyphonic singing among shepherds is known with the name *a tenore*. Harmony is based mainly on a major triad over the tonic, the higher voices move in a narrow range of the interval third, using nasal and tense timbre, and there are frequent secondal dissonances arising from the melodic motion against the static triads. Specific nonsense syllables are frequently used for a better resounding effect.

In Northern part of the island male singers practice a type of religious polyphony in four parts accompanying the Catholic rites. All voices belong the same name except the highest — *falzittu* (this part is not performed in “falsetto”), and the chants contain non-prepared modulations, relatively free meter and rhythm, and very ornamented melodies [16].

There is no polyphonic singing in the South of Sardinia [17], and the famous triple pipes or *launeddas*, the symbol *par excellence* of their cultural traditions, appear in the central region. Today there are eight different styles of instrumental polyphony, with characteristic sound and repertory, inside collective practices called *cunsertus*, which may include some or all of them playing in any tonality in the range of the interval fifth.

The most widespread technique consists of long variations over a few melodies, where a single song might last for more than an hour [18]. It is not so difficult to imagine the same performative practices present among the ancient populations of Sardinia and Mediterranean, including Greeks and Romans.

Many centuries before Christian times, the singing traditions were most likely flourishing in Sardinia during the so called *Nuragic* culture (from *nuraghe*, circular towers), which lasted from the 18th-century BC to the 2nd century AD. Among the few Nuragic objects that come from later Roman times, when the best days of this culture were already behind, are the collection of figurines [19], and among them are figures of two musicians, being one of them of particular interest for our discussion.



2 Drawing based on a Statue of musician playing a Launeddas from Nuragic civilization, Bronze Era. 8th-7th century BC. National Arqueological Museum of Cagliari Sardinia, Italy (author's drawing).

This figurine, discovered in Ittiri, is dated around 8th-century BC. It depicts a musician playing *launeddas* [20]. Apart from this famous specimen, there is no other available evidence for a long 1.500 years, when the images of the instrument appear again on reliefs of Christian crosses of the pict monks, in Scotland and North Ireland, around 10th-century AD [21]. However, the above

mentioned finding from Ficoroni allows us to assert the presence of *launeddas* in the Classical World before the time of Constantine.

We can not know for sure whether inhabitants of *Nuragic* culture practiced instrumental or vocal polyphony, but the presence of the polyphonic instrument makes this suggestion more plausible [22]. In absence of more data it can be conjectured that (1) the polyphonic blown instrument had its origin in pre-Roman Sardinia, and (2) its presence in Northern Europe during the Middle Ages might be related to Roman commercial routs and/or Sardinian legionaries who established themselves in Britain during Imperial times [23]. Both possibilities add circumstantial evidence to the existence of *launeddas* and polyphony in the Classical World.



3 Graphic reconstruction of a nuragic village with settlement, ca. 1600 B.C. Kenny Arne Lang Antonsen (2014)

Sardinian language is the closest surviving language to ancient Latin. In addition, their dialects also contain paleo-sardinian, or nuragic, substrate (in the form of toponyms and microtoponyms), possibly related to the idioms of other ancient European people of Indoeuropean or even pre-Indoeuropean origins: etruscans, illirians, proto-basques and other pre-iberian peoples of Spain [24]. This is particularly the case in the central region of the island, in Barbagia and eastern Ogliastra [25].

Balkan People. Greece and Epir ‘s heritage

Most of archaic traditions of vocal polyphony in Europe are consolidated around mountains and islands, in geographically isolated regions where their inaccessibility has allowed the preservation of many archaic features [26]. Peasants and shepherds from rural communities with strong social ties are the primary keepers of vocal polyphonic traditions.

We have no reason to believe that singing traditions of central Sardinian shepherds, or other peoples from mountainous regions, like people of Nuragic cultures, Epirotes from Greece, Farsehroti from Romania, Svans from Georgia, would be radically different in their habits and culture (e.g. in singing) in comparison of their ancestors. We may recall, that Renaissance, Enlightenment, Romantic, and even contemporary features of Aromanian peasants (from Romania) are not so different from those written many centuries ago by classic authors [27].

Similar to Balkan type of polyphony can be found in the adjacent to Greece territories, in Corsica, Croatia, Illyria, Epirus, Chameria, Macedonia, Thracia, Dalmatia, Colchis, Iberia and other continental provinces. Singing style from these territories today show an improvised polyphony over a pedal drone or on a background of repeated ostinato formulas, with specific harmonies, most importantly *dissonances*. Origins of such practices goes beyond the Middle Ages, with some of them (like Epir and Georgian song) having pre-hellenic roots.

Epir song has several characteristics: vertical coordination of parts is based on dissonant 2nd intervals, drone is the predominant type of polyphony, and singing is mainly associated with outdoor activities. The leading (middle in range) voice introduces the melody, then melody is taken and ornamented by a second soloist, and further developed by a yodelling third solosit.

The rest of singers sustain the drone, the tonal center for all improvisation. Loud and direct vocal style, vibratos and tremors, staggered breathings, cries, whimpers, yodelling, gutural stops or sob effects, all affect both resonance and timbre, and are frequent in Balkan folklore. All of these elements are common techniques among peoples who practice diphonic singing [28] from ancient times, and are recorded also in some classical sources [29].

Epir tribes occupied the northeast coasts of Hellenic and Illyrian territories, and were not completely integred in the Greek world: Thucydides and Strabo describe them as barbarian, unlike other classic authors — Herodotus, Dionisius of Halicarnassus, Pausanias, Eutropius. The only tribe recognised as Greeks was that of *Aeacidae*, members of Molossian royalty who claimed to be descendants of Achilles [30].

The name of “Epirus” proceeds from Greek *Epeiros*, it means “mainland” by opposition to the coasts of opposited Corfu island, and it is thought that evolved from the Indoeuropean *-apero* (“coast”). The extant languages in Albania and Northern Greece are the only survivals of the ancient Illyrian tongues (and possibly Thracians as well). Strabo mentions Epirotas being bilingual, and some of their current linguistic features are closely related to ancient Macedonian language [31]. Albanian language proceed from non-Greek Indoeuropean branch containing around 2000 simple terms, and also a high number of compounds directly derived from actually extinct tongues using toponyms, eponyms, hydronims, and so on [32].

The *farsheroti* people migrated to Romania from the second half of the 18th-century. They originally were shepherds from Pindus mountains in Epirus. They constitute a distinct group among the *Aromanians*, with particular linguistic features. These people claim today that it is very difficult for them to sing *a solo* or in homophony [33]. Their chants are always sung by two choirs in antiphone, almost all of them in 3-parts, consisting of two melodies against a drone, and are built in a such way that it is impossible to sing them except in ensemble. The *pinderi* and the *gramusteni*, who also came from the same regions in Epirus, perform a simpler chant where the many singers sing the principal line in unison or heterophony, some of them singing second voice, usually a drone. Vertical coordination of parts is accomplished in both styles through dissonant intervals [34].

Caucasian People. Georgia: A non-monophonic land

To start with, Georgia is a very mountainous country. Caucasus is a magnificent arch of more than 1000 Km of highest mountains in Europe, connecting two seas. It was famous in classical times as the site of Prometheus’ martyrdom. Presence of mountains and geographic isolation created some of the biggest linguistic density of our planet. Arabs knew the Caucasus Range as “the mountain of languages” [35].

Several major peoples live here, including Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Georgians, belonging to Turkic, Indoeuropean, and Kartvelian (pre-Indoeuropean) languages. Armenian and Azerbaijanian traditional music is based on monophonic vocal tradtions. Georgians and several North Caucasian peoples vocal music is polyphonic.

Georgian traditional music comprises of 15 interrelated regional traditions. Georgians never sing in unison, and local musicologists had been long claiming that monophonic songs are always sung by soloists [36]. There are more than 60 specific terms to point the names and functions of different components of polyphonic texture [37], and the songs are not usually built around the main melody but are based on short motives that can be identical from one song to another. There

are songs that have their own characteristic melody, but many of the most complex songs are not built around the principal theme.

Ancient Iberia and Colchis were active territories in classical times, and they most probably were musically distinctive already from 4th-century BC to 4th-century AD. Most of Georgian authors from Javakhishvili to Tsurtsunia [38] assert that the polyphonic character of Georgian chant was defined by the existence of pre-Christian polyphonic traditions.

Georgian traditional polyphony existed long before Georgia officially become a Christian country [39]. Iberia was in fact the second country in the world to become Christian in 337. Originally rejected by the new religion, the ancient polyphony was accepted in Christian liturgy at least in 10th – 11th-centuries. Apart from Christian hymns being translated into Georgian, experts were putting additional parts to the melody to make the “alien Greek sound closer to Georgian” [40].

Georgian scale systems were not understood until it was found out that these scales were based on tetrachords and pentachords, systems which were common in ancient Greece and East. In the eastern Georgia we can find a complex mixture of different scale systems, tetrachordal above the tonal centre, and pentachordal lower the tonal center.

The most ancient and most isolated European people are the *Svanetians* from north-west Georgia. At 2100 metres in altitude, Ushguli is the highest continuously inhabited European village, left in isolation during the half of the year. Their culture, including traditional polyphony, is going back to pre-Christian and even pre-Roman times. Svans have egalitarian society where all families are considered equal, without belonging to the so-called “noblemen”. All their songs are in three parts except a few genres which are sung only by individual women. Most of Svan songs are circular dances beginning in a slow tempo and speeding up to the end, performed in a narrow melodic range, usually within the interval fourth or fifth. Dissonances assume a special role, and *ostinato* melodic patterns are dominating.

Unlike other Georgian regions, Svanetian men as women sing and dance together. Most of the songs are performed in antiphonal choirs, sometimes choirs competing in volume and stamina. They speak Svan language, and use plenty of nonsense syllables in their songs. Some of their toponyms and mythological names have no correspondence to any of the words from Georgian languages, however have direct links to the written sources from the dead languages like Sumerian from ancient Mesopotamia [41].

Corollary: Warrior Barbarian chants

Finally, let me mention a few written sources that provide additional material about the presence of collective vocal practice in the classical world. Most of them describe singing during military sessions. Xenophon (431-354 BC) has written about characteristic dancing and singing among south-west Georgian tribe Mosiniks: “After they had formed their lines one of them led off, and the rest after him, every man of them, fell into a rhythmic march and song, and passing through the battalions and through the quarters of the Greeks they went straight on against the enemy, toward a stronghold which seemed to be especially assailable” [42].

Tacitus (58-117 AD) wrote about war chants (probably polyphonic) from Alans: “A peculiar kind of verses is also current among them, by the recital of which, termed ‘barding’, they stimulate their courage; while the sound itself serves as an augury of the event of the impending combat. For, according to the nature of the cry proceeding from the line, terror is inspired or felt: nor does it seem so much an articulate song, as the wild chorus of valor. A harsh, piercing note, and a broken roar, are the favorite tones; which they render more full and sonorous by applying their mouths to their shields ...” (p. 15) [43].

Tacitus again wrote now about Hispania: “They received this harangue with alacrity, and testified their applause after the barbarian manner, with songs, and yells, and dissonant shouts. And now the several divisions were in motion, the glittering of arms was beheld, while the most daring and impetuous were hurrying to the front, and the line of battle was forming; ...” (p. 124) [44].

Tacitus wrote also about Picts in Scotland: “The German auxiliaries, with their savage war-songs, and, according to the custom of their country, waving their shields over their shoulders, while their bodies were exposed, advancing with impetuous fury; ...” (p. 468) [45].

These sources have direct allusions to an ancient mode of singing, the use of high and low range sounds, and dissonances. More than seven centuries after Xenophon, Julian the Apostate (330-63 AD) is still speaking in the same terms: “Indeed I have observed that even the barbarians across the Rhine sing savage songs composed in language not unlike the croaking of harsh-voiced birds, and that they delight in such songs” [46].

To conclude, let me say, that from comparative musicological data, and from historical musicology *stricto sensu*, along with our own findings, we are proposing to include Greeks and Romans as full members of the wide family of people, carriers of the traditions of vocal polyphony.

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