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A SYMPHONY OF SOUNDS.
COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH IN ACCETTURA (BASILICATA)
BEFORE AND AFTER COVID-19*

ABSTRACT

Questo articolo si focalizza sugli aspetti musicali e sonori del festival del *Maggio*, un rito annuale che si svolge ad Accettura, nel sud Italia. Dopo una breve introduzione al festival, l'indagine si sviluppa in ordine cronologico. La *soundscape composition* di Steven Feld e l'etnofonia di Nicola Scaldaferrì, realizzate durante il primo decennio del 2000, esaminano il festival da un punto di vista uditivo; mentre durante la pandemia di COVID-19, la collaborazione tra interlocutori locali e ricercatori ha reso possibile il progetto multimediale *Il Maggio del Silenzio* e la realizzazione di un archivio online su Accettura. Infine, la ricerca nel periodo post-COVID-19 sottolinea il ruolo fondamentale delle donne nel festival anche grazie a strategie sperimentali di registrazione.

PAROLE CHIAVE suono, festa del *Maggio*, Accettura, collaborazione, registrazione

SUMMARY

This article focuses on the musical and sonic aspects of the *Maggio* festival, a ritual that takes place yearly in the village of Accettura, southern Italy. Following a concise general introduction to the festival, we proceed to discuss our fieldwork and output on the *Maggio* in chronological order. We begin by describing the soundscape composition of Steven Feld and the 'ethnophony' of Nicola Scaldaferrì, realized during the first decade of the 2000s, which examine the festival from a 'point of listening'. In 2020 and 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we detail a new kind of collaboration between local interlocutors and researchers which resulted in the multimedia project *Il Maggio del Silenzio* as well as the construction of an online archive on Accettura. Lastly, the last two years of research in the post-COVID-19 period underscore the fundamental role of women in the festival through various experimental recording strategies.

KEYWORDS Sound, *Maggio* festival, Accettura, collaboration, recording



1. Introduction

IN this article, we focus on the recurring springtime festival known as the *Maggio*. This ritual celebration takes place in Accettura, a village located in the region of Basilicata, Southern Italy. In particular, we consider the fundamental importance of sound and music to the unfolding of the ritual. Sonic and musical aspects will be investigated from a participant-observatory perspective involving an intense collaboration between us, the ethnographers, and the local community and organizers of the festival. As we argue, the months of COVID-19 represented a joint turning point for the development of the festival as well as our ethnographic research.

Accettura, in the province of Matera, Basilicata, is a village of approximately 2,000 inhabitants. The *Maggio* of Accettura has been an important theme in Italian ethnographic studies since the 1960s, thanks to the seminal research of Giovanni Battista Bronzini.¹

The *Maggio* features a complex tangle of religious and secular elements mediated through sound and music. The festival happens in celebration of St. Julian, patron saint of the village; the festivity's ritual core lies in the union of two trees cut down yearly in the surrounding forest: a large turkey oak (*Quercus cerris*), whose felled trunk is called 'maggio', and a holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) called 'cima' (the top). The resulting union of the trees, which we describe below, is also called 'maggio,' and gives the name to the entire festival.

The festival unfolds as a constant alternation and overlap of secular and religious events, each of which is charged with historical and symbolic implications. The entire resident population of Accettura, as well as emigrated village natives who travel home for the occasion, are involved in the *Maggio* over the course of several weeks. The climax is reached in the four days between the Saturday and the Tuesday of Pentecost, fifty days after Easter; this four-day period generally falls any time between the beginning of May and the beginning of June. During the four-day climax of the festival, an oak (which has been cut down on Ascension thursday, about ten days earlier) is dragged from the forest to the village by dozens of oxen. Another tree, the holly, is cut down in a different forest and also brought to the village; the holly will then be secured on top of the oak trunk to form a towering new 'being', the *Maggio*, a composite, elongated tree erected in the square known as *largo San Vito* (Figure 1). The new 'being' in *largo San Vito* will then be theatrically climbed as part of the celebrations. At the same time, the worship of St. Julian unfolds with intense moments of prayer, processions, religious singing, as well as devotional dances. The days of the festival are accompanied almost uninterruptedly by sound and musical performances, including instrumental music, songs and dances. The ritual, in all of its complex articulations, sails upon the waves of a veritable river of sound.

* Nicola Scaldaferrri wrote paragraphs nos. 1, 2 and 3; Shan Du nos. 4, 5 and 6.

1. BRONZINI, *Accettura*; ID., *Il «Maggio» di Accettura*, film.

An official sonorization is programmed and performed by musical ensembles such as marching wind bands and religious choirs, acting in synergy with the official calendar of the festival. Such is the importance of music that professional instrumental ensembles are brought in from the neighboring region of Apulia in order to play uninterruptedly and paper over any moments of silence. These musical ensembles are known as of *bassa musica* (low music), formed of winds and percussion; their role is crucial especially during the moments when greater physical effort is required, such as the people of Accettura's transporting and climbing of the trees. At the same time, visitors coming to the village to attend the festival bring their own musical instruments such as *organetto*, *tamburello*, *zampogna* (diatonic accordions, frame drums, bagpipes), and join in with the local musicians in spontaneous jam sessions. These long sessions often take place among people who have not previously met and only come together for the occasion to form a temporary community of performers. This form of participation is typical of other festivals of the region, especially some religious pilgrimages connected with Marian cults, such as the black *Madonna di Viggiano* and the *Madonna di Pollino*, during which pilgrims carry out a demonstration of sonic devotion through singing and instrumental music.²

Amateur musicians as well as professional wind ensembles accompany all phases of the ritual and blend in with the bellowing of the oxen, human vociferation, and the noises of machines and chainsaws, generating a thick and unique soundscape. The result is a true symphony of sounds, where sound itself has a crucial function in regulating the unfolding of the different moments of the festival.³

There are, of course, other Italian festivals that center the celebration of trees and feature music prominently. Aside from other analogous, smaller events in Basilicata, it is worth mentioning the 'Ntinna festival,⁴ taking place in Martone, in the region of Calabria, similar in some ways to the *Maggio* festival; or the *pagliara* festival of Fossalto, in the region of Molise, where a man covered in leaves and branches wanders the streets followed by a singer and a *zampogna* (bagpipes).⁵ However, the *Maggio* of Accettura seems to be unique in its extensive and intensive presence of sound and musical performances.

Despite the importance of sound and music in the festival, the long tradition of scholarship on the *Maggio*, which started with the pioneering research by Bronzini in the 1960s, considered the event, first and foremost, from a visual perspective. Specifically, scholars have been largely preoccupied with the repertoire of gestures and ritual actions, and the attending symbolism of the 'marriage of the trees', immortalized by the scores of photographers, filmmakers and visual artists who have been attending the festival for decades.⁶ The festival's historical background, with its religious and secular strat-

2. FERRARINI, *Sonic devotion*.

3. SCALDAFERRI – FELD, eds., *When the Trees Resound*.

4. CANNATÀ, *A Ntinna*.

5. AGAMENNONE – LOMBARDI, cur., *Musica tradizionale del Molise*.

6. VAJA, *The Faces of the 'Maggio'*.



Figure 1. Final phases of lifting the *Maggio* in Accettura. Photo by Lorenzo Ferrarini (2005)

ifications, has also been the object of research. In fact, observations on trees festival date back to James Frazer, who references to the tradition practice of the *maibaum*, present in multiple countries. Research on the historical significance of the *Maggio* in Accettura and its ties to local identity values was also carried out by Bronzini as well as other anthropologists who followed in his footsteps. All these topics have found their way into the rich scholarly narrative of the festival.⁷ Yet the sonic component of the *Maggio* and its function has long been overlooked. To recall a wry observation by Roberto Leydi, certain ethnographies almost relay a sense of ‘deafness’, so intent are their authors on painstakingly describing worlds where absolute silence appears to reign.⁸ In the case of the *Maggio* of Accettura, such ethnographic silence is indeed deafening.

7. MIRIZZI, *I riti arborei in Italia*.

8. LEYDI, *L'altra musica*, p. 119.

2. A Sonic and Collaborative Turn

A significant change in the study of this festival occurred in 2000, thanks to the research carried out by Nicola Scaldaferrri, at first individually, and then with the participation of Steven Feld as well as a further team of collaborative researchers. Since 2005, research on the *Maggio* has continued at LEAV, the Laboratory of Audiovisual Ethnography established at the University of Milan that same year.

Feld's involvement, beside his crucial contribution during fieldwork, brought to the foreground the theoretical perspective of acoustemology and the importance of the auditory experience of sound as a true form of knowledge.⁹ Feld's insight opened up a new perspective on the scholarship on sound and musical performances in this region.¹⁰ Feld's direct involvement in the Accettura project followed on from his previous collaboration with Scaldaferrri in Basilicata, when Feld joined Scaldaferrri in studying carnival rituals involving cowbells, a relevant topic in Feld's research at the time.¹¹ The result of Scaldaferrri and Feld's work in Basilicata was published in the CD book *Santi, animali e suoni* (Saints, Animals and Sounds),¹² which offered a new way of presenting ethnographic research by combining a soundscape composition with a sequence of photographs and short essays written by specialists in the field offering background information, reflections, and analyses. The role that – in traditional ethnography – had usually been performed by the written text, was here reversed, entrusting the narrative directly to recorded sound and its counterpoint of photographic images, with the text providing additional information.

For the work in Accettura, the ethnographers went a step further, and integrated the above methods of research presentation with a more dialogical and collaborative approach. This approach led to the composition of an interdisciplinary team, which included two photographers, Stefano Vaja and Lorenzo Ferrarini, and a group of collaborators concentrated on the various typologies of the sounds and musical performances of the festival. Crucially, the research team was joined by Don Giuseppe Filardi, parish priest of Accettura, therefore an actor-director of primary importance of the delicate equilibrium of the festival, where the intense religious devotion for St. Julian is strongly tied to secular practices. Don Filardi is a historian and researcher, author of several books on local history with a special focus on the *Maggio* celebration.¹³

The research team was active during the days of the festival in the year 2005 – working in synergy on various aspects of listening, observation, and participation. Scaldaferrri was also very active as performer of the *zampogna*, using his musical skills (already known among the locals) as a way of doing

9. FELD, *Acoustemology*; ID., *Acoustemology: Four Lectures*.

10. SCALDAFERRI – FELD, eds., *When the Trees Resound*; FERRARINI – SCALDAFERRI, *Sonic Ethnography*.

11. FELD, *The Time of Bells; Skyros Carnival*.

12. SCALDAFERRI, cur., *Santi animali e suoni*.

13. FILARDI, *Appunti per la storia di Accettura*.

participant research directly through music and sound.¹⁴

The final result of this research, once again, completely entrusted the narration to sounds and images, and was actualized, first and foremost, in the production of two complementary soundtracks included in two separate CDs.¹⁵ The first CD contained a soundscape composition realized by Feld, and the second CD offered a ‘documentation’ of musical practices within the traditional context of Accettura, curated by Scaldaferrì. A dialogical essay discussed the various implications of the fieldwork also in relation to previous research experiences. Alongside all this were published two parallel photographic essays, by Ferrarini and Vaja, focusing on various moments of the festival, comprising narrative sequences in color as well as documentary photos in black and white. The audiovisual part was complemented by a collection of short essays, each of which brought specific elements into focus: the photographic investigations, historical aspects, and ethnographic research. Indeed, the collection included an essay by Fernando Mirizzi, a student of Bronzini, who traced back the history of scholarship on *Maggio*. The publication came out in Italian¹⁶ and was translated into English for a second, expanded edition in 2019, featuring conversations with members of the local community that illustrated the local reception of this research.

The soundscape featured in the first CD was composed by Feld in a studio setting, using materials recorded during the festival with DSM microphones; as is known, these microphones are usually positioned on the head, close to the ears. The head itself constitutes an essential tool for capturing sound. The expression ‘to record with one’s body’ is therefore not a metaphor; it reflects an actual operative procedure that entails an active participation during the time of the ritual. This participant ‘point of listening’, captured during live recording, was subsequently re-worked in postproduction with techniques similar to those of electroacoustic composition. Feld’s memory of the experience and participation in the event had, of course, an important role in the strategies for selecting and editing the materials. Yet, despite originating from Feld’s individual and personal experience of listening and participating, the soundscape composition also reflects the entire research team’s experience of the field, as evidenced by Scaldaferrì’s musical interactions – on the *zampogna* – with local musicians, and particularly local singers (Figure 2).

The soundscape composition, filtered through Feld’s experience, retraces the moments of greatest sonic interest in the festival, and involves real compositional choices (see [Audio 1](#) for an example). It is therefore a piece that we can listen to like a ‘symphony’, in which sonic events are placed in temporal and spatial relationships, articulated through points of tension and release, and are organized according to criteria that are often eminently poetic and creative; these are, of course, the very things we have come to expect from Feld since the CD *Voices of the Rainforest* related to his fieldwork on the Kaluli people in Papua New Guinea.

14. FELD-BRENNEIS, *Doing Anthropology in Sound*; SCALDAFERRI, *Doing Research in Sound*.

15. SCALDAFERRI – FELD, eds., *When the Trees Resound*.

16. SCALDAFERRI – FELD, cur., *I suoni dell’albero*.



Figure 2. Nicola Scaldaferrri accompanying a singer with the *zampogna*, and Steven Feld recording with DSM microphones during the *Maggio* festival. Photo by Lorenzo Ferrarini (2005)

Listening to – as opposed to merely observing – the festival of Accettura proves to be extremely important for analyzing the *Maggio*, and ends up revealing situations that are in part overlooked by previous research. Moments usually considered secondary by traditional scholarly ethnography on the *Maggio* acquire unexpected relevance when considered from the perspective of the ear rather than of the eye; in fact, the point of listening leads our attention toward subtler behaviours whose meanings ought to receive further attention. Listening – sometimes even more than observation – is capable of generating a new analysis of the *Maggio*, and reveals aspects that would otherwise be lost or considered secondary. As such, listening establishes itself as a concrete instrument of investigation and reflection. This in turn invites us to reflect upon the limits of ‘observation’, which, in our shared language and imagination, often risks standing in for ‘knowledge’ writ large.

The choice of materials presented by Scaldaferrri in the second CD include a collection of materials supplementing the soundscape composition, offering an analytic-systematic cross-section of the musical practices of the *Maggio*, and situating the *Maggio* within the more general framework of the musical practices of Accettura. Whereas the soundscape composition retraces a personal experience of listening and participating in a specific edition of the festival, the second CD draws from an enormous amount of sound material relating to many different times and places (see [Audio 2](#) for an example, recorded in a different year). The results creates a counterbalance to the individ-

ual experience offered by Feld, presenting a collective tableau of the musical practices of Accettura, among which the *Maggio* has come to establish itself as a focal point in the lives of locals, as well as emigrants who return annually just for the festival.

For the second CD, recordings were chosen from various collections of materials: the recordings of the *Maggio* of 2005, made by the team of collaborators working at the same time as Feld but with different perspectives; Scaldaferrì's rich sound archive on Accettura, which includes recordings from various editions of the *Maggio*, as well as from other local festivals and musical practices (including traditional music, folkloric ensembles, and the activities of the local recording studios and record production); and the sound archive of Don Filardi, which consists of recordings made in Accettura starting from 1983, and features interviews on religious traditions and vocal materials by those who emigrated to the USA.

The aim of the second CD was to create a collection animated by a strong narrative sweep, capable of illustrating key topics through sound and music. It was important, for one, to examine in depth some of the musical repertoires related to the festival yet not present in Feld's soundscape composition. Other topics centered around musical practices related to other local festivities and rituals, particularly the eve of San Antonio Abate on 17th of January, the first day of carnival. Further interest is provided by musical hybridization performed mainly by youth bands and folkloric ensembles, both of whom found new expressive paths through traditional materials, often by utilizing modern instruments such as synthesizers and working in the recording studio; finally, the second CD featured the recorded voices of elderly people—many of whom had long passed away—recorded both in Accettura, but and on other side of the Atlantic, in the community of Accettura emigrants now based in New Jersey. This helps us to understand the temporal depth of these rites, but also the intensity with which they are maintained by emigrant communities, and so contribute to creating a sense of belonging to the community of origin despite the great physical distance.

Whereas the soundscape composition, with its individual and analytical approach, ends up contributing new ideas about the event of the *Maggio*, not just on the aesthetic but also on the cognitive plane, the second CD is an attempt to create an 'ethnophony' – in place of 'ethnography', here both intended in the strict literal sense of the term – in which, through listening, one may understand aspects, stratifications and connections, diachronic as well as synchronic, of the event at the heart of the investigation.

Both CDs, therefore, offer – despite their different methodologies and purposes – something quite different from recorded sound's traditional ethnographic function as a supporting 'document', a documentary 'attachment' to the written narrative. Instead, we meant these recorded sounds to gain a degree of autonomy from the fieldwork investigation and its subsequent representation, and for them to provide an aesthetic and cognitive experience to the listener.

3. A Time of Silence

In 2020, limitations introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of the *Maggio* celebrations for St. Julian, the main days of which would have been Sunday 31 May through to Tuesday 2 June. Strong limitations were also upheld the following year, in 2021. Only by 2022 did the festival begin to return to what it had been before the COVID-19 lockdown, even if the hiatus left significant traces.

The cancellation of the festival during the years of COVID-19 was an unprecedented event in the history of Accettura, and a major trauma for the local community. In fact, the historical record for the festival – which spans the two centuries prior to 2020 – shows that this was the first time the festival has ever been cancelled. This means that the festival took place even during the years of the two World Wars and through the Spanish flu epidemic of the twentieth century. In the archive of the municipality of Accettura, there are the authorizations for the cutting of trees for the celebration of the festival relating to those critical years; although oral tradition recalls that the celebration was of a subdued character, especially during the world wars, when many women had taken over the tasks of their male relatives at the front.

In 2020 only the liturgical celebrations took place as usual, with the presence, inside the church, of a very few faithful – all strictly *Accetturesi* – in compliance with social distancing rules, while the majority of people followed the religious function via social media. Live broadcasts on Facebook allowed the rest of the population to follow the liturgical celebrations, thanks to the initiative of Don Filardi and Biagio Labbate, who managed to maintain, in this way, a sense of community during a difficult moment.

On the main day of the canceled 2020 festival there were some gestures and symbols related to the event: the statue of St. Julian was brought to the entrance of the church; some children dressed in votive clothes; *zeppole*, traditional rings of fried dough, were prepared by family women and distributed in church; a small statue of St. Julian and a miniature tree were placed, almost surreptitiously, in *largo San Vito*, the symbolic place where the two trees are usually erected (Figure 3). All other aspects of the celebration were absent, and a surreal and deafening silence reigned in the empty streets. The silence and lack of music allowed locals and ethnographers alike to reflect on, understand and finally become conscious of the importance of sound and musical performances in creating the sense and identity of the whole community.

During the month of April 2020, a multi-voiced reflection on the pandemic and the missed *Maggio* emerged from this moment of standstill. This happened through telephone conversations between Nicola Scaldaferrì, the priest Don Giuseppe Filardi, and Biagio Labbate; Labbate is a musician and media expert, and one of the managers of the social media accounts and promotional website of Accettura. Later we would involve in the team also Valentina Trivigno, an anthropology graduate and social worker.

Together, we thought about how the fieldwork project on the *Maggio* could also take advantage of the intensified use of social media, which in those



Figure 3. A miniature *Maggio* and a small statue of St. Julian placed in *largo San Vito*, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo by Nicola Scaldaferrì (2020)

months had proven to be of great importance for maintaining connections between people.

We planned on consulting people involved in the organization of the festival, the *Accetturesi* who were used to participating in person in various ways, and the emigrants who lived abroad and would usually come back to Italy and Accettura for the festival. We also consulted people who play key institutional and cultural roles in the area (such as the bishop and the manager of local tourist office), who could share their insights on the huge implications that the absence of such an event as the *Maggio* entailed on a religious, civil, and administrative level. Lastly, we called on scholars, artists, photographers, filmmakers associated with the festival over the years: people who, far from being simple external observers, had become an active part of the ritual.

In the days before and immediately following the missed celebration, all these people were invited to give their impressions on the ‘absent’ and ‘silent’ *Maggio*, mainly through filmed conversations; these conversations were either filmed and recorded in person in Accettura (where we followed the protocols for the containment of COVID-19) or remotely through video-calls. Some participants opted to submit written texts in which they actively resisted purely nostalgic reminiscences or a sharing a mere sense of disappointment, in favor of providing testimonies of a constructive nature. The proposal aroused enthusiasm and a great many responses and so generated further levels of reflection and analysis.

When the time came to organize and share – through publication – the very rich materials and dialogues that had emerged from the 2020 reflections, the project took the name of *Maggio del Silenzio* (The *Maggio* of Silence); this expression conjured the feeling shared by the people of Accettura, especially their new awareness that the lack of the sound, and of the entire musical and ceremonial apparatus was at the core of the feeling of emptiness evoked by the missed festival. The publication of the materials related to the project *Il Maggio del Silenzio* took place on a bespoke website launched on 27 January 2021. On this date, the Catholic church observes the anniversary of the death of St. Julian, and in Accettura there is a small celebration. The project entitled *Il Maggio del Silenzio* constituted the first stage towards the creation of a multimedia archive on Accettura, called AMA (Archivio Multimediale Accettura), which is still in progress, and where existing and future documentation will be made accessible in the future.¹⁷

4. After Silence: New Strategies and Perspectives

Following the two-year hiatus of the *Maggio* festival in 2020 and 2021, a team of researchers returned back to Accettura in 2022 and 2023 to participate in the resumption of the *Maggio* and develop an updated, post-lockdown perspective to previous fieldwork on the festival.

During the two field trips of 2022 and 2023, our aim was to deepen the understanding gained in previous years of research on a number of specific issues. First, we wished to focus on the sonic and musical expressions of the Accettura community; second, we hoped to study the remarkable, and still largely unexplored, involvement of women in the festivities, the understanding of which is essential for a full account of the *Maggio*. The adjective ‘multipart’ played a pivotal role in this research, taking on, during our fieldtrips, a variety of meanings which went beyond its use in musical discourse.¹⁸ On the one hand, we used ‘multipart’ to denote the intricate auditory landscape created during the festival, comprising diverse musical performances and ambient sounds intermingled with the activities surrounding the *Maggio* celebrations. On the other hand, ‘multipart’ is also the adjective that best describes our collaborative approach, with different roles played by different researchers, and the multiple forms of collaboration established between researchers and local actors. Recording equipment served as the analytical tool for examining the festival from such a multiplicity of angles.

In 2022 the research team included three researchers from the University of Milan, working along LEAV (Laboratory of Audiovisual Ethnography): Nicola Scaldaferrì, Giovanni Cestino, and Shan Du. The main reason for returning to Accettura in that year was to attend the first full resumption of the festival since the cancellations of 2020 and 2021. Neither the locals nor

17. <https://archivioaccettura.it/>.

18. MACCHIARELLA, ed., *Multipart Music*.

the researchers were certain that the event would be successfully carried out, given the collective trauma of the two-year hiatus. The aim of the researchers was to take part to the first edition of the festival in the post-COVID period, meanwhile exploring the possibility of creating new projects based on a multimedia approach.

The team's objectives gradually clarified with the unfolding of the festival, which turned out to be very successful. Thanks to the collective effort of all involved, events proceeded smoothly, without encountering any significant problems in relation to the pandemic. Based on various experimental recordings made during the days of the festival, an idea for an audiovisual installation began to take shape. This idea will be further discussed in the following section.

In 2023, an expanded team with selected equipment, returned to Accettura. The three researchers from the previous year were joined by Lorenzo Ferrarini and Alexandra D'Onofrio from the University of Manchester, Juliet Glazer from the University of Pennsylvania; and by three students from the University of Milan: Elisabetta Forlani, Laura and Matteo Cavallazzi.

The researchers, who until now had mainly worked on the *Maggio* using sound recordings and photos, aimed to extend their fieldwork practices by creating a multichannel audiovisual installation – to be projected on multiple screens – that amplifies and reiterates the centrality of the sound element in the narration.

The idea for the installation was developed mainly by Lorenzo Ferrarini in close discussion with Nicola Scaldaferrri and Steven Feld; the latter also stayed in touch and consulted with the rest of the research team, and so kept an influential role despite not being directly present in the field.

Work on the installation, which is still on-going, also generated moments of interest beyond the days of the festival. Some members of the team returned to Accettura twice more, in different moments, to gather more footage and sound recordings; Lorenzo Ferrarini, returned in August 2023, and Shan Du in January 2024, both accompanied by Nicola Scaldaferrri.

We will now focus on some recording strategies employed during the festivals of 2022 and 2023. The aim is to trace and explain the ways in which our experimental recording practices produced new perspectives on the festival.

During the fieldwork of 2022, we employed specific recording setups to capture the multi-layered soundscapes of the festival, each tailored to a particular context.¹⁹ In *largo San Vito*, where we were filming the activities around the trees being erected and subsequently climbed, we employed a four-channel set of Sonic Studios DSM microphones 4CS/H model, mounted on a dummy head (Figure 4) and connected to an Edirol R4 four-channel recorder. This allowed us to record all surrounding sounds, particularly during tense moments such as the lifting of the trees from the ground. DSM 69/H headphone-like stereo microphones were used in a different configuration in the final day of the festival: during the procession with the statue of St. Julian

19. See <https://archivioaccettura.it/archivio/dopo-il-silenzio-il-maggio-2022/>.

and large marching wind ensemble, Cestino combined the DSM stereo set with a GoPro 10 camera fastened to his forehead. Combining, therefore, the point of view with the point of listening, he recorded a soundwalk that captures the acoustic environment generated by the procession's movement and the resonance of the wind band in the streets of the village. This same solution had already been used by Cestino twice; first in Vienna, when he performed the soundwalk of the city center designed by R. Murray Schafer in the World Soundscape Project's *European Sound Diary*;²⁰ and then again in Matera, Italy, where he captured his own experience of Yuval Avital's massive sonic parade *Urla* (2019) unwinding across the historical *Sassi* district.²¹

The DSM and GoPro functioned, in this case, as extensions of the researchers' bodies, enabling directional and spatial sound recording coupled with a first-person perspective, thus providing the audience with a subjective viewing/listening point.

A third experimental setup involved the integration of a GoPro camera with an external microphone to investigate the multipart performance of the singer and local bagpipes, the *zampogna*, again played by Scaldaferrri, who continued to deepen his role as a collaborative researcher through his active musical participation. Songs *a zampogna* – on the bagpipes – are characterized by their semi-improvised and spontaneous nature, and are frequently performed during the festival, particularly during the transportation of the trees by the oxen. Singers, spanning different generations, engage in emotional performances specifically during the rests taken by the oxen. The *zampogna* provides support for multiple singers who gather around the player, taking turns to intone short pairs of verses. Technically, the singers sing 'near the *zampogna*', directing their voices and songs towards the instrument and the player.²²

In 2022, in addition to filming this practice from a listener's perspective using a Sony AX 33 camera, we explored *zampogna* songs from the instrument's 'viewpoint'.

A GoPro camera was affixed to the wooden block of the *zampogna*, positioned slightly below eye level, to emulate the perspective of the *zampogna* itself (Figure 5). As a result, the frame exhibited characteristics of a chest-shot and low-angle shot. The chest shot captured the singers' gestures, while the low angle shot highlighted the intense emotions conveyed through their singing ([Video 1](#)). These visual aspects illuminated the skill of singing 'near the *zampogna*' and unveiled the profound connection between the singer, the player, and the instrument, further accentuated by improvised sung text. Additionally, the framing seamlessly adjusted with the player's bodily movements, reflecting his unconscious corporeal response to the musical environment.

20. SCHAFER, *European Sound Diary*, pp. 83-85.

21. <http://www.yuvalavital.com/urla-massive-sonic-work-n-6>.

22. SCALDAFERRI, *Doing Research in Sound*.

During the 2023 festival, we replaced the GoPro camera with an Insta360 X3 action camera so as to examine the same process of music-making from a more versatile perspective. The Insta camera was used in exactly the same way as the GoPro had been used the previous year. Its spherical framing and 360-degree view captured, in the 2023 footage, the entirety of the event's context, going beyond multipart musical performances to highlight the spatial dynamics of *zampogna* singing, the interactions among listeners happening during the performance, and the intense laboring of the oxen. Consequently, the 360-degree camera served as an analytical tool capable of shaping a new mode of storytelling (Figure 6).

On the one hand, the researchers and their activities, integral to the event, were explicitly showcased in front of the camera. The approach of «using the *zampogna* player to influence the unfolding of the festival for the benefit of the researchers»²³ was clearly communicated and documented. Surprisingly, the presence of the 360-degree camera did not disrupt the singers' performance; their singing unfolded spontaneously and emotionally, much like it did when captured by traditional cameras. However, some videomakers and photographers present at the event attempted to remove themselves from the camera's field of view so as to avoid being captured in the shots.

On the other hand, the Insta camera's resulting 360-degree digital images allowed viewers to gain multiple, shifting points of view on the performance. The relationship between the researchers and the viewers was therefore altered. The video became more than a mere 'documentation' of the event, because it required viewers to actively engage and interact with it – navigating the digital footage with a cursor – in order to construct a personalized perspective.

In terms of sound recording, the *zampogna* singing was captured simultaneously by a lavalier microphone (DPA 6061) attached to the instrument, as well as an ambisonic microphone (Rode NT-SF1), strategically positioned a few meters from the instrument. The selection of these two microphones was planned to analyze distinct aspects of sound production: the lavalier microphone isolated the performance from ambient noise, focusing solely on the vocal and instrumental sound, while the ambisonic microphone captured both the music-making and the surrounding environment, providing a comprehensive representation of the multi-layered sound produced during that specific moment of the festival.

5. Other Perspective on the *Maggio*: The Participation of Women

The active presence of women during the *Maggio* festival, although long remarked upon by researchers, has not been systematically studied in previous research. Women play a fundamental role in at least two aspects of the festival,

23. FERRARINI – SCALDAFERRI, *Sonic Ethnography*, p. 31.



Figure 4. Dummy head with 4 channel DSM microphone placed in *largo S. Vito* during the erection of the *Maggio*. Photo by Giovanni Cestino (2022)



Figure 5. GoPro camera mounted on the *zampogna*. Photo by Giovanni Cestino (2022)



Figure 6. Still image from Insta 360-degree camera mounted on the *zampogna*: the wood, the singers, and the oxen dragging the trees. Selfie by Nicola Scaldaferrì (2023)

both of which are the result of intense collective all-female work: the crafting of multi-layered wax candle arrangements (known as *cente*), undertaken by individual families, and the cooking and distribution of food, managed by the women of the festival committee.

5.1 *The Centa*

The tradition of offering heavy objects made with wax candles to the local saint is widespread in southern Italy, although the specific name for this object may vary from region to region, and even from village to village (*cente*, *cinti*, *scigli* are among the most common ones). The most intense public moment regarding the *cente* concerns their presence at the religious processions, where they are carried by women on their heads. *Cente* are always accompanied by musical instruments, such as the *zampogna* and *organetto*; during stops in the processions, the instruments play, and the women usually dance the *tarantella* while balancing a heavy *centa* on their head. Ethnographies on the region have tended to present the *centa* mostly as a votive object, often an integral component of the devotional *tarantella* dance performed during religious procession. However, there has been a lack of ethnographic examinations of *centa* from a female researcher's standpoint, and our research in Accettura in 2022 and 2023 has begun to address this gap. For two consecutive years, Du actively participated in and documented the *centa* construction process in two distinct families. Additionally, in 2023, she investigated the collaborative food preparation efforts of women using a multimedia approach. In the subsequent part of this section, we delve into the women's cooperative efforts by providing a concise ethnographical description of both aforementioned activities (*cente* and food preparation/distribution), thereby adding a new layer to the existing literature on the *Maggio* festival. Furthermore, we will again examine the specific recording setup in connection with participant observation method so as to analyze the role of technology in ethnographic storytelling.

The *centa* holds significant symbolic value as a personal expression of devotion. It is crafted by the devotee as an offering to St. Julian upon the fulfilment of a vow. Typically constructed on a wooden stand, either square or round, the *centa* is adorned with white wax candles, each measuring 45 cm in length and weighing 100 grams. Various colorful decorations are incorporated, such as fake or fresh flowers and embroidered ribbons that encircle the layers of the *centa*. Of particular importance is a holy card depicting St. Julian. While the selection of ribbon colors is largely based on individual preference, hues reminiscent of St. Julian's attire – red, green, and gold – are commonly favored. At the top of the *centa* sits a bouquet comprising an odd number of flowers, often 7 or 9.

The dimensions of individual *cente* may vary, with an average weight of approximately 15 kilograms. According to local sources, *cente* weighing over 20 kilograms are also present in the region. Notably, during processions, young

girls participate by carrying smaller centas, emphasizing the transmission of this tradition across generations. While historically, centas were traditionally carried by virgins, contemporary practice sees participation open to individuals of all marital statuses and genders, encompassing both men and women from diverse age groups.

According to local belief, the fall of the *centa* during the procession is regarded as an ominous sign that brings bad luck to its owner. To prevent such incidents, specific skills are required to stabilize the candles and balance the *centa* on the head, and these skills are passed down through generations among the women of each family. Consequently, the construction of the *centa* typically involves three or four women from different generations, with collaborative efforts seen as a significant opportunity to transmit manual skills. The construction process typically spans around three hours and takes place in the devotee's home. This hands-on work fosters an intimate environment in which the religious dedication symbolized by the *centa* is shared among family members through the act of co-construction.

Although *centa* structures may appear similar, each family has its unique method of securely fastening candles together; this is crucial to ensuring stability during the lively *tarantella* dance. To carry the *centa* during the procession, a round piece of cloth is placed on the head to alleviate pressure. Each family requires at least three members, regardless of gender, to carry the *centa*: one in the middle, balancing it on their head, while two further people stand beside to assist and take turns in moving it. Given the *centa*'s peculiar religious significance, it's not uncommon for outsiders to ask the owner if they can assist in carrying it during the procession, thereby sharing in the devotion within a broader social context.

The highlight of women's devotional performance in the *Maggio* is the *tarantella* dance, where women energetically perform while balancing the heavy *centa* on their heads. As the procession moves through large spaces, women carrying the *centa* form circles and dance the *tarantella* accompanied by the *organetto*, or even by the wind band accompanying the procession. Some women even opt to walk and dance barefoot during the procession, a gesture expressing reverence to St. Julian.

However spectacular, these public performances come only at the conclusion of intense preparatory work in which specific skills are required, skills that are preserved and developed exclusively in the female sphere ([Video 2](#) and [Video 3](#)).

5.2 *The Sound of Frying*

Another lesser-known aspect of the *Maggio* festival is the food preparation, which is undertaken by the women of the *Comitato Feste* (festival committee); it occurs on a specific day in a semi-public space belonging to the *Comitato*. This food is then distributed to the festival participants at various intervals,

such as during breaks in the procession for St. Julian and during the transportation of the trees. Two kinds of traditional food are typically prepared: fried *baccalà* (salted fish) and *zeppole* (doughnuts). In 2023, the ‘cooking day’ took place on May 26th, the Friday before Pentecost. Approximately, one hundred kilograms of *baccalà* and sixty kilograms of *zeppole* were cooked by around twenty women.

The cooking commenced early in the morning in a temporary kitchen set up near *Largo San Vito*, where numerous men were already hard at work in preparing the tools for the transportation and lifting of the trees in the following days.

Several deep-frying pans on gas stoves were used simultaneously. The women, spanning different generations, worked in a manner akin to an assembly-line operation, with each assigned a specific task such as cutting, coating, frying, and plating. In the case of frying *zeppole*, additional experienced female cooks were involved as shaping the dough rings it requires advanced manual skills. Like *centa* construction, food preparation also provides a meaningful pedagogical occasion for younger participants. Various cooking tricks were shared and discussed during food preparation.

In the late afternoon, when the fried food had cooled sufficiently, it was divided into numerous portions and packed in small plastic boxes or bags. Over the following days, these portions were distributed to festival workers and participants, providing them not only with food but with a shared gustatory experience.

To document this intimate and intense work environment, Du actively engaged in the cooking while wearing the Insta 360 camera on her chest, activating only the front lens in this case (Figure 7 and [Video 4](#)). While frying, she recorded the food preparation from a subjective and immersive perspective. The researcher’s body thus became a medium for knowledge transmission, with the images shedding light not only on the subjects in front of the camera but also on the body behind it. Similar to the images captured by the GoPro camera placed on the *zampogna* player, in this case, the movement and framing angles reflected the researcher’s body language in response to the environment. Rather than creating reportage-like images, the recording underscored the researcher’s presence and interaction within the dynamic context, enabling viewers to grasp the event through an embodied experience rather than as mere information.

In addition to the action camera, two Panasonic S5 cameras were operated by Du and D’Onofrio, the other female researcher on the team, to examine the event from a third-person perspective. These images were combined with the sounds recorded by two on-camera hypercardioid microphones (Rode VideoMic NTG and Rycote HC15). With this setup, we aimed to suggest a synesthetic perception of the event, stimulating both vision and hearing, and even potentially evoking the sense of smell and taste associated with the frying experience. The importance of smell and taste as key senses for a complete understanding the *Maggio* festival in its completeness was discussed by

Antonio Trivigno, local photographer and a profound observer of the ritual, in a conversation with Scaldaferrri. Commenting on the use of sound and images that had been made with *When the Threes Resound* as a form of narration and restitution of the experience of the festival, Trivigno noted how taste and smell are senses strongly involved during the May festival which were still left out: «A further step might be that of also offering a dish of *maccheroni* [macaroni] or *baccalà* [salted cod] at your presentations!»²⁴

Although the images and the sound cannot provide a real experience of taste to the audience, as hoped by Trivigno, the attention we brought to recording the food preparation and distribution in 2023 was a response to his comment, and we hope that the combination of sight and hearing might provide, to audiences, a cognitive pathway to deepen their sensorial understanding of the *Maggio*.

Additionally, an ambisonic microphone (Rode NT-SF1) was strategically positioned in a corner of the kitchen to record the multi-layered environmental sound and its rich nuances. Aside from the continuous dialectical chatter, several sounds composed the ‘symphony’ of the cooking process. The counterpoint of snipping scissors, the sizzle of frying fish, the subtle crackle of frying dough, and the clatter of utensils all made audible the dedication and hard work of the women in the kitchen.

6. Conclusions

Over two decades of research, various aspects of the *Maggio* of Accettura are continuously examined through the medium of evolving technologies that enable researchers to delve deeper into this multifaceted festival, particularly its sound and music components. This exploration has been made possible through the establishment of a close relationship fostered over years of collaborative dialogue with the local community. Amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, our research endeavored to address the needs of the community, offering support and solidarity during a time of trauma. Fieldwork conducted in the post-COVID era not only facilitated the revival of the festival but also provided opportunities for new recording strategies that expanded our understanding of previously unexplored aspects, such as the participation of women – a facet often overlooked in prior studies.

Our participant approach, which involved a close engagement with key moments of the festival such as the lively interactions of *zampogna* singing and immersive cooking experiences, underscored the cultural intimacy cultivated through relationships of mutual respect and trust. Furthermore, our researchers utilized their bodies, equipped with cameras, as analytical tools to better comprehend the role of multipart music and sound within the festival. This approach extended the application of the term ‘multipart’ beyond music

24. SCALDAFERRI – FELD, eds., *When the Trees Resound*, p. 100.



Figure 7. Insta 360-degree camera put on the chest. Selfie by Shan Du (2023)

alone, encompassing the different experiences of local participants across gender and age groups, as they immersed themselves in the festival atmosphere. Research on Accettura is ongoing, and future projects, such as the upcoming installation coordinated by Lorenzo Ferrarini, are poised to further expand the avenues for experimentation and storytelling.

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Audio 1. *The Maggio is raised and shot. Noises of ropes tensing during the raising of the tree. Zampogna songs. Voices. Shooting at the Maggio.* Soundscape composition by Steven Feld. Included in SCALDAFERRI – FELD, eds., *When the Trees Resound*, CD1, track 6, <https://youtu.be/jZNuBTA3cUY>.

Audio 2. *Scasciatammorr and tarantella at the arrival of the Cima to the village. Cimaioli and bassa musica of Accettura U fr(u)sc'.* Accettura (MT, Italy), May 30, 2004 (Pentecost Sunday) Recording by Nicola Scaldaferrri. Included in SCALDAFERRI – FELD, eds., *When the Trees Resound*, CD 2, track 4, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDw63qYjXCg>.

Video 1. *With the Eyes of the Zampogna.* Forest of Montepiano, Accettura (MT, Italy), June 5, 2022. Playing and video by Nicola Scaldaferrri, audio

by Giovanni Cestino, editing by Giovanni Cestino and Nicola Scaldaferrì 2022, <https://youtu.be/d3dMr97gSeQ>.

Video 2. *Making the Centa*. Accettura (MT, Italy), May 29, 2023. Camera, sound, and editing by Shan Du, <https://youtu.be/I-Ps4002hro>.

Video 3. *Dancing Devotion*. Accettura (MT, Italy), May 30, 2023. Camera, sound, and editing by Shan Du, <https://youtu.be/dWCyVk7aPKk>.

Video 4. *Sound of Frying*. Accettura (MT, Italy), May 26, 2023. Camera, sound, and editing by Shan Du, <https://youtu.be/rWb6jsmlAdI>.

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