



THE BAGPIPE IN ITALY



AN ORIGINAL ALBATROS-Italy Recording

(LAS 7343)

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If we take into consideration the actual diffusion and use of the bagpipe in Europe we can, and with considerable certainty, conclude that this presence is not only due to the continuity of a tradition, but is, above all the result of recent “revival” phenomenon: several ethnic and regional minorities have allotted a national or regional function to the bagpipe, thus renewing instrumental traditions otherwise doomed to oblivion. Two most recent examples are the revival of the Irish *uilleann* pipe and the *biniou* in Bretagne.

Actually, the bagpipe is too specialized an instrument to survive easily, even if it has resisted longer in folk culture than in so-called “cultivated” music: the presence of the drone and therefore the impossibility to modulate except to the dominant or the sub-dominant, the impossibility of any harmonic development also because of the drone, tuning difficulties, maintenance problems - all constitute reasons for the gradual decline of the bagpipe, which together with other drone instruments (like the hurdy-gurdy and various zither-type instruments) was the first among folk instruments to fall victim to the profoundly upsetting social-economic events which assailed Europe in the 18th century, and which provoked the disintegration of rural-traditional community life.

In many places the bagpipe has been replaced by more modern substitutes, and above all by the *organetto* (which also supplanted the *launeddas* to a large extent in Sardinia). It would be interesting to investigate the reasons why there has never been a widespread revival of the bagpipe in Italy (or for that matter, in the German-speaking countries, where the *Dudelsack* or *Sackpfeife* were once so popular), but still more pertinent is to

discover the how and why of the revivals which did take place where they did in Italy. There has been an association of the bagpipe with the Christmas holiday festivities, a fact that is actually and excellent economic incentive for the preservation of the statistics on hand. The writer believes that there may be as many as a thousand bagpipe and fife players throughout Southern Italy. But while the Christmas function of the bagpipe may be the primary reason for its survival in the South, this fact has, however, also contributed to the impoverishment of the bagpipe repertoire, which has literally been reduced to a single carol or *novena*, *Tu scen lidalle stelle*, and several pieces based on traditional dance tunes or songs.

On the basis of research findings (and it must not be excluded that further research may eventually reveal surprises that could contradict these facts) it does seem apparent that the bagpipe in Northern Italy, known as the *piva* and in use until some fifteen years ago, is now completely extinct. The following seem to confirm this notion. At Rava di Valtorta in the Val Brembana the writer met a family whose nickname was the “Pias”, because during his lifetime, their grandfather had been a locally well-known *piva* player. Several people in Brescia remember that during the holidays in the ‘30’s the chimney sweeps who came down from Vacaominca used to combine their alms seeking with playing the bagpipe and the fife. Finally - and this will be discussed more amply below - the last bagpipe player of a particular area located somewhere between Alexandria and Genova, Pacenza and Pavia, died in 1956 in Pradaglia, near Fabbrica Curone.

A broad panorama of the bagpipe in Italy is presented for the first time in this album, and contains: examples of the Southern bagpipe (*zampogna*), both as solo instrument and accompanying the oboe (*piffero*); the *piva* from Istria, the *launeddas* from Sardinia (that extraordinary clarinet which requires that the very cheeks of the player serve as air-sacks); the oboe (*piffero*) from the Liguian-Lombard Apennines; and finally, the *organetto* (a concertina-type instrument), in its function as a “competitor” and substitute for the bagpipe.

THE SOUTHERN BAGPIPE

The bagpipe of Southern Italy is a *cornamusa* with completely unique features, at least as regards Western Europe. It consists of a very large air-sack (made from a complete goat-skin); two chanters for the melody, and one or two pipes for drones (1) that are tuned in the dominant. All four pipes (because even in the case of a bagpipe having lodged into a single piece of wood in the form of a truncated cone, are inserted in the front part of the airsack. The divergent pipes have a slightly conical internal profile and terminate in the characteristic “bell” shape, very similar to the Medieval *corneous*, and which confers that unmistakable timbre so typical of the Italian bagpipe. The same type of reed is used for both the melody and the drone; usually they are double reeds, but in several areas (i.e., Sicily and Calabria) it seems that single reeds have recently been used to play the *novenas* at Christmas in the house, before the Holy Crèche. The Southern bagpipe is played either as a solo, melodic instrument or to accompany a type of oboe (the *ciarmello* or *piffero*). Quite often the tambourine (*tamburello*) is also included for dance songs. (Track #1)

As an instrument used to accompany dancing, the bagpipe now has a very dangerous competitor. The diatonically tuned *organetto*, practically identical to the *melodeon* (or *concertina*) in use in the British Isles, offers the advantages of being easier to learn, with the added feature of virtuoso possibilities, has perfect tuning (and therefore can play easily with other instruments). As a substitute for the bagpipe this is amply illustrated in Track #8. The *tarantella* which is played here should be compared to that played by the bagpipe and tambourine on the preceding track. During the mass religious pilgrimages which take place annually in Calabria, the bagpipe is slowly disappearing, while the number of concertinas continues to increase while taking over the repertoire, and, to a certain extent, even the style of the bagpipe they are slowly replacing. The Southern bagpipe is today present in the following Italian regions, in slightly varying models: Abruzzo, Molise, Lazio, Campania, Lucania, Calabria and Sicily (particularly in Eastern Sicily in the Provinces of Catania and Messina).

THE LAUNEDDAS

The *launeddas* of Southern Sardinia are not bagpipes in the true sense of the word, insofar as they have no air-sack, but the technique used to play this triple clarinet does put it into the same category as the bagpipe; by using the cheeks as airsack and a particular type of breathing circular, the *launeddas* player can obtain a continuous sound from his instrument, with drone and melody, exactly like that of a bagpipe.

Actually the *launeddas* is a typically Sardinian reed instrument, unique not only to the Mediterranean area, but to the world in general. It consists of three pipes with reeds, each a different length, and, of which the longest and the middle pipes (*tumbu* and *mancosa manna*) are held together by a pitch-soaked string, while the smallest (*mancosedda*) is free. The longest pipe serves as the pedal tone with one low, continuous note, while the other two play in antiphony. The instrument was once employed in the now-obsolete therapeutic rituals of the *theargia*, a type of Sardinian tarantism practiced as recently as fifteen years ago. Today tarantism can only be found on mainland Italy, in Salento (Lecce).

In Campidan, which is now one of the few places in Sardinia where the *launeddas* can still be found (once it was diffused throughout all of the island), there are still several virtuoso players and *launeddas* makers (at Cabras, Villaputzu, Maracalagonis, etc.) who also teach their art to several selected neophytes. The playing technique of this instrument is extremely difficult and requires a very long period of study and a more-than-common musical aptitude.

In a very detailed study of the instrument the Danish ethnomusicologist Fridolin Weis Bentzon has written that the *launeddas* belong to a very widespread group of double clarinets which according to archeological findings and Egyptian and Mesopotamian mural paintings, can be traced to as early as 3000 B.C. With their form remaining practically unchanged down to our own time, these instruments were diffused throughout Asia and Europe, where they then developed along different lines. In Europe their most

typical form was the *aulos* and the *tibia* of Classical times, after which they transformed for the most part into the *cornamusa*. Later they disappeared completely from “refined” music and are now found only in limited areas on their way towards extinction, and only for use in traditional and folk music. The *launeddas* is the most unusual member of this instrumental family, continues Bentzon and we are fortunate to have two iconographic images from the Middle Ages which give us a point of reference in our suppositions of their origin... (2) It is particularly significant that no other extant image or literary reference from these periods refer to any other instrument with three pipes; Egyptians, Phoenicians and Etruscans all appear to have had two-piped instruments, but this is insufficient evidence to establish the place of origin of the *launeddas*, which already had those characteristics which make it uniquely Sardinian, even in ancient times (3), Bentzon concludes.

It is important to note at this point, however, that despite the proven antiquity of this instrument, which has remained more or less unaltered in the 2500 years of its existence, there is no parallel proof regarding the music, which the *launeddas* plays today. The instrument undoubtedly evolved according to the changes in taste throughout the centuries adapting the major scale of the Western musical system. The greater part of the melodies played by the *launeddas* reveal, however, Medieval characteristics.

There are many different types of *launeddas*, variously tuned. Each is used for a different occasion according to individual “colour” and a more or less dark sound. The principle types (three of which are documented in this album) are as follows:

- a. *mediana e mediana pipia* (4)
- b. *fiorassu*
- c. *punta d’organo*
- d. *contrappuntu*

Track 2 is a tuning scheme for the four different *launeddas* types (bearing in mind however that this only serves to define the tuning of each type and does not indicate the precise pitch of each, insofar as there exist considerable differences in the *launeddas* “set” of each player; i.e., despite adherence to the tuning scheme, the various players tune their instruments without any precise uniformity). Illustrated below for each type is the drone emitted by the *tumbu*, and the notes of the *arrefinu*, the *mancosa* and the *mancosedda*. The *arrefinu* is that rectangular hole which is impressed in the wax and is the true “register” or pitch of the pipe.

THE ISTRIAN PIVA

The *piva* of the Veneto-Istrian community is an instrument, which is related to that bagpipe which with considerable local variations, is amply diffused in the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa. It is very similar to the *mih* used by the Croats in Istria and in the northern Adriatic islands. It is a very simply made bagpipe, consisting of a skin air-sack and two pipes equipped with a single reed (like the clarinet). These are quite short (18-20 cm. circa) and coupled, slightly divergent, and both with digital holes. The drone effect is obtained as with the *diple* (a double clarinet without an air-sack

found in several Balkan areas), i.e., by transferring the emission of the continuous notes from one pipe to the other, according to the needs (usually very elementary) of the melody. According to the following scheme, the two pipes have several notes in common. (track # 4)

According to the writer's knowledge the *piva* no longer survives except in the village of Gallesano, where it is still used to accompany dancing (the so-called *canto sotto le pive*). Up until the end of World War II the *piva* was actually quite widespread, and in the past there were many groups made up of several *pivas* and *zimballi* (tambourines). Today the *piva* is usually played together with one *tamburello* or *zimbalo*.

THE CORNAMUSA AND THE BOMBARDA OF THE LIGURIAN-LOMBARD APENNINES

Up until about 15 years ago the combination of bagpipe/*ciaramella* in Southern Italy and the *biniou/bombarde* of Bretagne had its equivalent in the Ligurian-Lombard Apennines. The *cornamusa* (or as known locally, the *musa*) disappeared with the death of its last player in 1956, but the *bombarda* (or *pinfero*) is still played, even by professionals, who are accompanied by the accordion (substituting the *cornamusa*). The *cornamusa* player was known as the *musetta* and the *pinfero* or fife player is called the *brisgiott*.

The repertoire, which includes a considerable variety of traditional dances (*monferrina*, *alessandrina*, *giga*, *corrent*, *piana*, *perigurdino*, and some more recent ones, like the *polka*, *mazurka* and *waltz*), also comprises "suites" of considerable importance which, although quite different from each other in context (for use during Carnival rites, for serenades, marriages, etc.), all have the same basic structure: one slow part, played in free form, that might also be sung in duet with the *piffero*, immediately followed by a quickly moving tempo, strictly instrumental, for dancing. The writer was told that the piece recorded here, entitled "Luigina:"(track 18) is used during the marriage service and precisely at the point during the marriage service and precisely at the point during the ceremony symbolizing the bride's departure from the parental home, and serves as a sort of *lamento*, followed by *gioia* (joy).

In describing the instruments it seems fit to mention that while the writer has seen various types of *pifferi*, at least enough of them to provide the elements for a full knowledge of the instrument, as far as the *cornamusa* is concerned it was necessary to restrict this study to the only example he was able to obtain, and this was without its air-sack and with only one chanter, one drone, and a pipe for air intake. The chanter is a bony conical, with seven front digital holes and no thumb-hole; a curious detail are two symmetrical holes for the little finger in the lower position (one of which is plugged with wax), in such a way so as to be used by a left-handed player or by someone who is self-taught and therefore, one who plays with an incorrect hand position. It has a double reed. The drone is in two pieces, assembled like a telescope, of myrtlewood, and has five holes, which if quickly plugged with wax or re-opened with a match-flame, make tuning variations possible. The drone has a single reed, and while being played rests in the crook of the left arm. Contrary to that of the *launeddas* and the drones of the *gaita* or of the Britannic

bagpipes, this single reed was cut from the inside outwards, similar to the drones of the *cabrettes* of Auvergne and the mouthpieces of various Oriental clarinets.

The *bombarda*, on the other hand, has more archaic features than the Southern *piffero*; the reed is not held between the lips (as for the oboe), but is inserted into the mouth while the closed lips serve as a circular support, exactly the method of playing required for the Oriental *zurna*. It has seven front digital holes and one thumbhole. It is cylindrical, usually ebony with a myrtle wood bell. It used to be made in Cantalupo (Tortona) and in Cicagna (near Chiavari). At the end of his performance the player usually cleaned his reed by passing a feather through it; the same feather that served to decorate the bell while he was playing.

Piana (track 17) is a very interesting instrumental piece from this same area. Pasquale Sala of Pareto (Fabbrica Curone) was unable to play the *piffero* because of his advanced age, so he volunteered to vocally illustrate his part in the dance repertoire. A comparison between this demonstration and the technique of the *canntaireachd* used by the Scots bagpipers (LA ZAMPOGNA, Vol. 1 Albatros VPA 8148) is immediately noticeable. The similarity lies particularly in the rhythm used for breathing and in the phrasing. The limited resources available for research prevent the possibility of determining whether this type of performance is (as in the case of the Scots bagpipers) more or less the authentic style of the local players.

Footnotes

1) Sometimes there is a fifth pipe, very short, but always mute. Bagpipe makers insist that this unusable pipe serves to “complete” the instrument. Actually it is the remainder of a very shrill, now-obsolete drone. In Southern Italy there are bagpipes used for accompaniment that have a very long left-hand chanter called the “trombone”.

2) One figure can be found among the illustrative miniatures in the Spanish manuscript of *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, made for King Alfonso el Sabio (13th century). It is not clear, however, whether the miniature is of a Sardinian player or whether the *launeddas* was then also a Spanish instrument. Another example is a small statue in the Cagliari (Sardinia) museum (dated from between 800 and 300 B.C.) depicting the player of a tripe-piped wind instrument.

3) F. Weis Bentzon, *Is Launeddas*, In *Ichnusa*, n. 45, 1961.

4) The difference between the *mediana* and the *mediana pipa* (or simply, *pipia*) is in the notes that can be played on the *mancosedda* (*tumbu* and *macosa* are equal, in fact). In these two types the *arrefinu* of the *mancosedda* is equal (in our example, the key of 6) but this is a sequence of the notes that follow (see ex. n. 3)

TRACKS

1. MELODIES
2. SALTARELLO

3. PASTORALE
4. CHRISTMAS CAROL
5. CASTRORGIO, YOU'RE BEAUTIFUL
6. CHRISTMAS CAROL
7. TARANTELLA
8. TARANTELLA
9. LITANY AND PASTORAL
10. DANCES
11. CHRISTMAS EVE PASTORAL
12. DANCE
13. ACCOMPANIMENT FOR THE PROCESSION
14. FURLANA
15. SONG WITH BAGPIPE
16. MONFERRINA
17. PIANA
18. WEDDING MUSIC

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