

# The Museo del Paesaggio Sonoro (Riva presso Chieri, Turin)

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Talking about the *Museo del Paesaggio Sonoro* (Museum of the Soundscape) on the pages of *Sound Ethnographies* has a particular meaning and a relevance which needs to be illustrated as an essential element of the whole presentation; to do this we must start from a first reflection on the choice of the term “paesaggio sonoro”, with which we decided to entitle the exhibition centre. This word, as Italian readers well know, has established itself as the usual translation of the English compound word *soundscape*, starting from the reception inside the national confines of the works of Raymond Murray Schafer, then of a distinctive observation of the sound manifestation as a central component of the natural universe and the contemporary inhabited world (Schafer 1977). This is a complex system which has defined a system method, modes of experimental technical survey, classification criteria and which, partly coming from the presupposition of environmental safeguard, has arrived at the identification as well as the design of reestablishment of an original sound order, and finally at itineraries of creative composition. This structure has been assimilated by the multi-faceted universe of the Italian musical culture, with selective adoptions and heterogeneous results. It has partly established roots, on the other hand, in some currents of research and experimentation which were launched a long time ago and were already entrenched in the last quarter of the last century.

However, to come back to our story, the road on which we were walking towards the establishment of the future museum was further distinct and critically detached from that ideal horizon and it assimilates the soundscape concept in a very peculiar form. Our thinking and actions were consistent in fact with a method of ethnomusicological field-work and sound ethnography on the basis of the historical foundations of folk music re-

search in Italy. As Cristina Ghirardini rightly wrote, «we were much more familiar with the complex and historically persistent diversities that Italian traditional music preserves (that we have learnt to appreciate thanks to Roberto Leydi), and with the different ways of shaping musical practice according to the relationship with a cultural environment» (Ghirardini *et al.* 2016: 8).

The twist of perspectives traced over time by a widespread research and the thick hermeneutical approach aimed at the study of sound and musical expressions as environmental, anthropological and sociohistorical facts, represented then the field on which the laboratory for our circumscribed research could be established.

This experience began at the end of 2004. It was developed along an axis set up between the University of Turin and the close local context of Riva presso Chieri, focusing its attention on the musical presence in the village of the Piedmontese plain and in its surrounding area. The crucial event which gave rise to the immediate starting of a collective project was the almost fortuitous encounter between Febo Guizzi (1947-2015), who was at the time Professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of Turin, and Domenico Torta, a musician, composer, teacher and researcher, living and working in the town and community since he was born. In a space of convergence between different spheres of application and in parallel with a direct and uninterrupted practice of the traditional music languages, Domenico Torta had gathered, during the previous three decades, an extraordinary collection of musical instruments and sound devices. Together with this rich deposit of material assets, he had rescued a perhaps even more significant archive of witness to their employment and functional meaning.

This human meeting and the sharing of that patrimony immediately generated a spontaneous understanding: the scientific research and the applied program of heritagisation conducted at the academic level by Guizzi, in continuity with the discipline history outlined earlier, found a full complementarity and parallelism in Torta's autonomous action, locally and intellectually rigorous. Guizzi himself remembered the beginning of an empathic cooperation and he sketched the composite personality of his partner and friend as follows:

When I met him for the first time it wasn't just like making a simple acquaintance. I had a feeling of recognition: at once I realized I had found again two old friends, Domenico Torta and Tasché.<sup>1</sup> Then it dawned on me that they are the same person. First, Domenico, the patient, hard-headed profound researcher who likes to explore inside himself, his family, the circle of his many precious friends, up to the horizon of his land and here he discovers a world full of sounds as big as the world of men; industrious, like a sagacious answer always is to human needs; thorough and competent in his doings and with the inspiration of the yearning; real like his ideas and abstract like the form of expert gestures, and out of all the things he has made, there is also, nothing less but a Museum. Then Tasché, the ironical hard-headed and volcanic musician-musicologist, who does not put a

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<sup>1</sup> *Tasché* is the family nickname of Domenico Torta.

lid on his passions indeed but lets them erupt freely. Inventor-creator-composer, he frees himself by way of a sharp and biting intellectual criticism, tempering his drives with irony and then remixing and showering them down over the old and the new.<sup>2</sup>

This climate of harmony and exchange motivated the immediate creation of a team of young students, we too participant in that meeting, and the start of a new research course, which shared, solidified, and increased the wealth of the previously collected knowledge. These experiences in turn led to the project for a first museum set-up which was strenuously established by the end of the following year, reinforcing and partly reorganising some forms of temporary exhibitions, which had been previously tested during musical performances.

Nevertheless, the work was just at the beginning; while the research complex was becoming more and more extensive in size, we had the opportunity to fulfil a dream that we had nurtured from the beginning, in other words the realisation of a permanent museum set-up. We got down to work and in 2011, on the occasion of the 150° Anniversary of Italian Unity, the museum was inaugurated with its new layout.

For the access space to the exhibition itinerary we chose a little toy instrument, named *parucia*, that is the skylark: a flute in reed, tied to a thin cord, which when whirled around produces the intermittent chirping of the bird. That instinctive decision turned out to be a successful one because later this object, with its simplicity, seemed to exceptionally define the symbolic entrance to the museum and to provide its essential interpretation key. The more recent ludic record of this instrument opens in fact a fundamental reflection on its previous magical and ritual role, noticed also in other far-away cultures, on the primitive connection between man and nature that is established through the sound channel, on the character of ancestrality which we can highlight in the deep observation of a great number of sound objects displayed in the museum.

Getting to the heart of the itinerary we are immersed in a sound and visual atmosphere which conjures up the Po valley of the twentieth century, to which the first room is devoted. A curtain of fog envelopes everything, while sounds and images emerge little by little from an age which was the extreme expression of an ancient world, seemingly eternal and immutable, and which saw modernity get ahead with vehemence.

Beyond the fog, two iconic objects, a harrow and a loom shined through, to symbolise the remote and essential organisation of the local community in *peisàn*, the peasants, and *tessiùr*, the weavers. There you can hear their voices and see their faces, in a scenery where auditory and visual stimuli responded to each other, and you can cross the threshold of a rich documentary archive with which the narrative outline is faithfully created and periodically recomposed.

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from the presentation test by Febo Guizzi of the disk *Sarè l'uss e buté fòra 'l gat!* [Shut the door and throw out the cat!], performed by Domenico Torta e I Musicanti di Riva presso Chieri (Torta 2007).

After the panoramic overview, the itinerary is developed in themed rooms, each of which comprises coherent spaces of deeper insight. The first of them is devoted to the relationship between man and the environment, with the ground, with the farm animals (among communication and use as building material), and with the vegetable kingdom.

One compartment is dedicated to ephemeral or spring musical instruments. Here, the world close to its essential nature, already introduced in the first room, acquires new significance. The exclusive focus on plant materials in the display underscores the primacy of the primordial relationship between man and the environment. Bark pieces, blades of grass, flower stems, fruit seeds become musical instruments from infancy, or, if you will, from the infancy of mankind, just as a sound gesture itself approximates a natural force and as such it would represent the means for a magical-ritual reconnection with a cosmic and superhuman reality.

A second area of the room is reserved for terracotta instruments, first of all globular flutes and ocarinas. This section highlights different kinds of production discovered in the area and examines the relation between the local presence and the spread of a wider practice; the display cases exhibit simpler sound objects, born from playing with clay that was discarded during the making of bricks, juxtaposed with more refined instruments.

Another section is devoted to a series of ludic and parodistic instruments, popularly employed in musical accompaniment. The centre of the thematic space is occupied by one of the most interesting instruments of the collection: the *torototela*. The name refers to a musical bow, the diffusion of which in the area of Northern Italy is attested by oral and written memory. The name denotes the instrument as well as the performer, often an itinerant street player. The historical sources concerning the *torototela* indicate that this instrument and musician already disappeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this regard the witness of the songwriter, scholar and politician Angelo Brofferio is particularly significant, because in his account of a personal resumption of that “mask” and respective instrument, reports their already definitive abandon. Contrary to this, the oral record proved the permanence of the instrument until recent time, in the Riva and Asti areas, in the festive use, from carnival to wedding rituals. The remarkable character of this piece lies in the resonator made from an inflated pig bladder, through the reuse of butchery scraps, also observable in other sound objects, particularly toy instruments.

The sound becomes also a communication vehicle between man and animal; an extraordinary example of that is the employment of everyday items as instruments of signalling towards bees during the swarming period, in a convergence of knowledge of animal behaviour, popular belief, empirical practice and construction of community codes.

Directly related to this theme, the second half of the room illustrates the calls practiced in the course of hunting. The exhibition space holds a vast collection of calling instruments, as well as an immersive installation. The connective track is represented by a path where in the twilight lights appear unexpectedly and sounds of birds chirping can be heard. The birds belong to species living in the region and they emerge from among

the branches. The reading of the subject of bird catching is included in a more general consideration on a rural background in which this practice played a role of shelter from the widespread conditions of misery. It underlines then the intensification of the senses, character and ingenuity in the overcoming of human faculties and in the shaping of matter to create technologically advanced sound devices.

The following chapter talks about man and community and opens with a focus on the signal value of sound and particularly on the messages of the bells in Western culture. On one side, there is the counterpart of the “anti-music” or *paramusique*, to mark the commemoration of the Passion and Death of Christ during Holy Week. In the middle of the room, the reproduction of the top of a bell tower enfolds the visitor in a space of metaphysical suggestion and offers the possibility to dabble in the ancient musical practice. In the middle of this circumscribed space, the bell tower keyboard is reproduced; it was once employed to perform the *baudetta*'s melodies, the pieces reserved for holidays in which the virtuoso skill of the player was showcased together with the ability to vary simple music themes, belonging to the official liturgical repertoire, as well as the dynamic space for the spreading of popular tunes. The areas near the installation display objects and documents related to the bell tradition, from building techniques to performance practices. The other section, dedicated to the ritual instruments employed during Holy Week in place of the merry sound of the bells, follows the material and oral tracks regarding the use of *strepitus* musical instruments, explores the allegorical meanings in the peculiar religious and cultural system and stimulates a reflection about a practice transcending that spatial and chronological presence.

From time to time the atmosphere of this space is suddenly animated by holiday sounds, the ceremonial music in honour of the Patron Saint, and the poems improvised on the processional float, traditionally converted into a stage. Down the hall an eighteenth-century cart stands out, which is used even today as part of the St Albans ancient festival, when it is pulled by a couple of dogs up to the medieval country chapel dedicated to him, in compliance with the hagiographic story. While the area is permeated by the soundscape of the feast, a beam of light illuminates on and off the only cart from which the voice of the *fine dicitore*, the refined reciter, recites the *stranòt*, folk rhymes invoking the Saint and honouring the local authorities, or issuing public condemnations of persons and behaviours.

Continuing the itinerary onwards, a walkway leads to the room devoted to the toy instruments, through the dream of the bike, transformed by sound into a motorcycle. This section houses a wide and representative collection of sound objects, directly received from the hands of their witnesses-creators, mindful of their own practice as children. Often created through the reuse of simple, everyday things, the modest nature of these instruments contains an immeasurable richness of physical and symbolic details. Indeed, each of these recall the opening matter about the complex sphere of use, of which the ludic purpose is nothing more than the point of arrival of a millennial itinerary.

From the children's games we move to the musical practice for the amusement of adults and to the practice of semi-professional musicians in the popular field. The space is magically enlivened by the ghosts coming from a musical afterworld, from a background of practices and languages, which is actually harvested from a still active testimonial depository. The thematic focus follows the tradition of the so-called *Musicanti*, namely the groups of wind instruments, and notably the *quintèt* (quintet), whose role was to enliven communal festivities. The ball, locally called *bal a corda* (the dance with the cord), was in the past the main occasion for recreation and socialising. Highly specialized musicians played their instruments in the centre of the dance floor. This expressive language, although linked with previous traditional practices, was born within the brass band sector, which acquired increasing relevance and diffusion from the early nineteenth century and became the preferred channel for the popularization of repertoires and codes of cultured music. The expert fusion of refined elements with lively folk material made the *quintèt* (and similar ensembles) a real testbed until the middle of the last century.

Some other sections develop around this central presence; they are dedicated to instrumental practices which participated in the same field of a creation of expressive codes: the violin, on the border between elitist adoption and folk channels of diffusion; the mandolin, between the soloist use as well as the ensemble one, derived from the orchestral model; the accordion in the various stages of evolution and incorporation of multiple languages and styles; mimic and parodic instruments such as the *froja* (a scraped and shaken idiophone imitating the shape and the hold of the violin), or the *cuse* (idiophonic mirilitons made with dried pumpkins), capable of reproducing, in a refined caricature, the dance music usually played by brass ensembles.

The following *transition room* travels through a twentieth century, different from the opening one, where the thrust towards the future prevails, by the different phases and techniques of reproduced and recorded music, along a way that is potentially projected to infinity. The display cases house objects, instruments, technological devices and play selected soundtracks to inspire multiple readings that embody the change.

Moving on and across the final *plastic room*, the present appears in a polychrome and synoptic tableau, but the attentive exam allows us to recognise the permanence of ancestral characters focused at the beginning, to close therefore the circle on the deep and everlasting roots of human sound-making. Indeed, the musical instruments and sound objects of standard and industrial manufacture emerge from a messy web which entrap them as waste and reconfirm the traits of a sound culture which seemed to be only the prerogative of remote history.

With the outlined panoramic view, we have showed that it is not simply a museum of musical instruments, it is not a common bundle of collector's items, but it is an organic complex of artefacts, sometimes even extremely humble and rudimentary, directly acquired from the hands of the builders and users. It clarifies also the open-

ing reasons of the appellative of Soundscape Museum, that is a space of representation of the intangible heritage of complex relationships between man and sound sphere, a cross section, although localised, on the building knowledge, the performing ability, the perceptual dimension, the meaning attribution and the sociocultural role of music. All these elements result so incorporeal and imperceptible, because they nearly always live in the thought, in the orality, in the imitation and manual ability and it is very difficult to fix them in writing, as we tried to do anyway. In this perspective the Museum, its narrative and semantic itinerary have represented a real challenge. Furthermore, the research itinerary through a narrow area – the centre of the world, in the ironical view of Domenico Torta – ensured that the dig descended to a depth so as to find essential and universal strata of sound expression, further than the superstructures of time, well beyond the territorial borders of a journey. Domenico Torta, this extraordinary and tireless figure, made it possible just within his continuous educational activity, thanks to which he began an action for the recovery of musical life, fighting against gradual abandon and general indifference. However, the involvement of young people, jointly with the old depositaries, led to a partial overcoming of the obstacle and strengthened a form of community cohesiveness.

Torta's musical activity – as we saw in the portrait by Guizzi – was divided into two different levels: the world of classical music, where a contemptuous attitude lasted towards the expression of forms considered to be as inferior, and the field of folk music, naturally assimilated as a family inheritance. There was also a connection with a musical custom often excluded from any cultural interest and overall despised beyond the village people. We are talking about the so-called *Liscio*, a ballroom dance music, which represented a degeneration, a decline, but also a direct filiation of previous forms and repertoires. These blends of traditional music, popular music and mannerist folklore, came from the adoption of the brass band instruments in the specialised practice for dance of the ensembles known as the *musicanti*, or *quintèt*. This form of expression, autochthonous (even if it is linked to a popular tradition along the whole Alpine area) was at the base of the creation of the group of *Musicanti di Riva presso Chieri*, initially committed to a service for community benefit, then a reintegration of a practice that is still recognisable and accepted, even though in crisis.

In this regard, I used many times the metaphor of a development of the museum on two levels, where the second is represented by this peculiar performing activity, the main method for enlivening the preserved heritage. In parallel to the museum's foundation indeed the group of *Musicanti* has partially left the initial "entertainment" role, to pursue a more developed theatrical project. With the performances, staged in the last fifteen years, the ensemble has established as its main objective, the return to the community of the immaterial heritage, thereby facing the described complexity and the related obstacles in verbal transfer. The result is a form of narration in music and about music, in which you spectate the reproductions and interpretations of weighty tableaux

of traditional musical life, by means of the stage rendition. Beyond the viewing of the end product, is extremely interesting to understand the backstage work, aimed at sounding out the bases of the original musical language, so as to generate experiments of stylistic and expressive borrowing and re-appropriation, mainly in the field of instrumental practice, that have never been tried before.

Inside the same workshop, a more recent and elaborate musical performance was created, once again by the lively mind of Domenico Torta. It is the play *Piccolo Popolo – Fievoli fiabole frivole*, the première of which was acted out at the Teatro Regio in Turin in 2015, with the main title *Paesaggi sonori*. The work consists of four very short musical fables for story teller, tubular bells, rakes, spoons, belt, beaten bottles, insufflated bottles... and the complicity of a string orchestra with a quartet of woodwinds and a funny percussionist. The performance sees again the Musicanti di Riva presso Chieri play, this time in a dialogue with the classical ensemble. The recourse to the double register is directed to achieve a harmony among instruments, languages, attitudes and styles; thus, the messages of each piece join together in a higher moral, « Music belongs to everyone and you can make it with everything »: a simple motto for complex reflections on the universal foundations and the cultural mobility of sound expression. Later the program also involved the school, which we saw as an experimentation field even since the pre-museum period. After a series of partial plays, they are planning to realise the whole performance with the young interpreters.

On the side of the museological development, a new important project is currently under way; it consists in a program of Content Management System and Linked Open Data system devoted to the digital cataloguing of musical instruments, which has been recently integrated with catalogue data, photos and high definition 3D models of the same instruments. This action has also made possible to incorporate the museum collection into the database of MIMO, Musical Instruments Museums Online.

At the level of ethnomusicological research, a study is now in progress on the *brando*, a musical form for dance, employed in the area during the traditional parties of the conscripts. Together with the exam of the sources and the fieldwork, a workshop has been launched for the purpose of analysis and appropriation of the specific expressive codes of this genre, closely linked to the comprehensive scope of the *bal a corda* dance music, previously outlined. This program is also committed to the consolidation of a practice that is still alive and the encouragement of a cultural revitalisation by the younger generation, also through targeted educational activities. The present experience once again confirms the convergence of views and the applied approach of the whole cultural journey.



**FIGURE 1.** Domenico Torta and his students with an informant, showing them the construction and functioning of a toy instrument (1980s).



**FIGURE 2.** Giuseppe Fasano, *Barba Pino* (1899-1989), on the *fruja*, with his nephew Domenico Torta on the diatonic accordion, during a spontaneous musical performance.



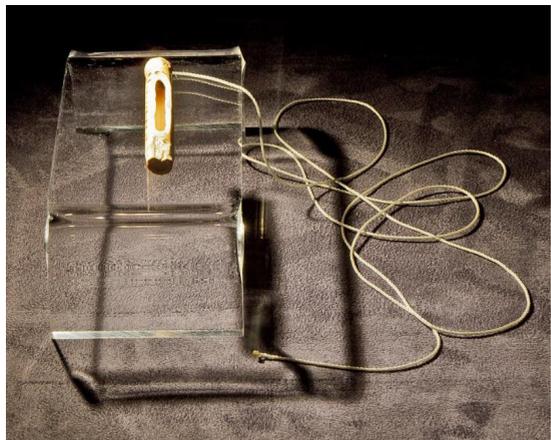
**FIGURE 3.** Domenico Torta, in front of the University of Turin, explaining his new musical work *Soundscape*s to Febo Guizzi.



**FIGURE 4.** Overall view of The Hunting Room, from the 2005 provisional display of the Museo del Paesaggio Sonoro.



FIGURE 5. A moment of the new research itinerary launched in 2004: the informant Guido Saracco, *Sarachèt* (1916-2010), shows the instrument called *torototela* to Domenico Torta and Guido Raschieri.



FIGURES 6-7. The access space to the museum itinerary: the introductory panel and the symbolic instrument of the *parucia*, i.e. the skylark.



FIGURE 8. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Room.



FIGURE 9. The room *Sound and Environment*.



FIGURE 10. The room dedicated to the *Musicant e sunadur*, the musicians and the players.





FIGURE 13. The *Musicanti di Riva presso Chieri* playing the rakes, with the Orchestra of the Royal Theatre of Turin, in the musical tale “The three rakes-musicians”, from *Paesaggi sonori, Piccolo Popolo – Fievoli Fiabole Frivole* (2015).



FIGURE 14. A group of students of the Oscar Levi middle school in Chieri, dancing the *brando*, during a cultural exchange program with the San Marco Music and Theatre Centre of Reggio Emilia (2018).



FIGURE 15. The “conscripti” of 2001 dancing the *brando* in the town square of Riva presso Chieri, accompanied by the musicians of the *Filarmonica rivese* (2019).

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