

# On the Jew's Harp in Sicily: A First Contribution

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## Abstract

The Jew's harp has become in Sicily a stereotypical symbol of local identity, almost an iconic sound-marker of the Island's traditional culture and music. In spite of this very rooted connection, the study of its history, construction, and use is still at a very early stage. This article attempts a first survey of available documentation, with the aim to present an overview of the construction, playing technique, and repertoire, pointing out several peculiar traits and features that suggest the possibility of identifying a specifically Sicilian tradition of construction and playing.

***Sullo scacciapensieri in Sicilia: un primo contributo.*** Lo scacciapensieri è considerato in Sicilia un simbolo emblematico dell'identità locale, quasi un'icona sonora della musica tradizionale siciliana. Nonostante questa connessione molto radicata, lo studio sistematico della sua storia, costruzione e uso nella cultura musicale siciliana, è ancora in una fase iniziale. Questo articolo avvia una prima indagine che, senza la pretesa di essere esaustiva, parte da una ricognizione della documentazione storica disponibile e mira a presentare una panoramica sulla costruzione, le tecniche esecutive e il repertorio dello strumento, evidenziando alcuni tratti e caratteristiche peculiari che suggeriscono la possibilità di identificare una tradizione specificamente siciliana.

## 1. Introduction

*Scacciapensieri* – literally “thoughts chaser” – is the most common Italian word to indicate the Jew's harp, also known in English as “trump” or “Jew's trump”.<sup>1</sup> This is

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article I will alternate the most common, though controversial, spelling “Jew's harp”,

the mouth-resonated musical instruments that in the Hornbostel-Sachs' organologic taxonomy belong to the category of plucked ideophones in a frame structure (see Class 121.2 in Hornbostel and Sachs 1914). The sound of the instrument is in fact produced by plucking with a finger the tip of the elastic tongue, which will then oscillate within the narrow gap crafted between the arms of the frame, creating a sonic vibration in a way that is essentially analogous to the operation of free reeds. This vibration is amplified and modulated by laying and firmly resting the instrument embouchure on the player's teeth (which act as a support and a sonic "bridge") and using the mouth, the oral cavity and the entire phonatory apparatus as a complex system of variable resonators. In this way the player becomes an integral part of the instrument, participating in an intimate and functional way in the very production of the sound. This peculiar sound producing mechanism has stimulated a debate among organologists regarding the correct placement of this class of instruments, and it has been argued that they could be placed among "interruptive aereophones or reeds" (see for instance Crane 1968: 66-69).

In Italy, the sound of *scacciapensieri* is often identified, in the general public perception, as the "voice of Sicily" *par excellence*, almost an iconic sound-marker of the Island's traditional culture and music. This deep-rooted connection may seem curious to the non-Italian readers, considering that Jew's harps are well known in the organological literature for their extremely wide and diverse geographical distribution (see for example: Sachs 1913 and 1917b; Schaeffner 1936; Picken 1957 and 1975; Baines 1961; Dournon-Tourelle and Wright 1978; Fox 1988; Tadagawa 2007).

Trumps are still used in large parts of Europe, where their appearance and vast diffusion is well-documented since the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Crane 2003a, Kolltveit 2006 and 2009, Wright 2015). In Italy their construction and use are nowadays mostly confined to southern regions (Campania, Calabria, Apulia) and the islands (Sardinia, Sicily), but until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century they were still commonly used also in central and northern regions of the Italian peninsula, where archaeological, iconographic and literary evidences of their presence dates back at least to the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Lovatto 1983, Guizzi 2002, and Crane 2003b).

With the notable exception of the mass production of the *ribeba* in Valsesia (Lovatto 2004, Lovatto and Zolt 2019), a systematic investigation of the presence of the Jew's harp in Italy, and of the local or regional music traditions that adopted it, has not been attempted yet (Guizzi 2002: 45-49). In Sicily, where this instrument has become a stereotypical symbol of local identity, the study of its history, construction and use is still at a very early stage. This article, while far from being exhaustive, aims to present overview of the construction, playing technique and repertoire of the Jew's harp in traditional Si-

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with the older English name "trump", to indicate the whole family of instruments without specific geographic or ethnographic characterization. For a comprehensive historical review and discussion on the different names used for this instrument in English, see Wright 2015.

cilian culture, pointing out several peculiar traits and features that suggest the possibility of identifying a specifically Sicilian tradition of construction and playing.

The peculiar feature of the Jew's harp that distinguishes it from other types of plucked ideophones – such as the African *sansa* (*'mbira*, *limba* etc.) and the European *carillon* or “musical box” – is that the lamella vibrates inside the narrow opening created between two parallel and sharp sides of a frame. The “turbulence” created in the air surrounding the frame by the oscillation of the lamella through this narrow gap generates a waveform rich in harmonic overtones, which are selectively reinforced to articulate melodies by modifying the shape and volume of the loosely coupled resonators formed by the player's oral and nasal cavities, by changing the position of the lips, tongue, cheeks, throat and diaphragm.

The outstanding variety of forms and shapes and materials in which Jew's harps are found throughout the world, and of the many different ways to activate the vibration of the lamella (including various techniques for plucking, striking, or pulling a string attached to the frame) can only be mentioned in the background of this report. The first attempt to approach a typology of such remarkable diversity in a world-wide perspective was made by Curt Sachs (1917a), distinguishing between *Rahmenmaultrommel* (“frame” ideoglot instruments proper to East Asia and Oceania), and *Bügelmaultrommel* (“bow shaped” heteroglot instruments, distributed in mainland Asia and Europe). Later investigations, carried out (among others) by André Schaeffner (1936) Laurence Picken (1957, 1975), Geneviève Dournon-Taurelle and John Wright (1978) and Leo Tadagawa (2007), have added a wealth of documentation, detail and complexity. They have also questioned the evolutionistic assumptions implied in Sachs' monographic study without, however, modifying the general outline of the widely accepted theory originally proposed a century ago by the German scholar, which suggests that Jew's harps might have first appeared in the “bamboo cultures” of South-east Asia or Polynesia in the form of ideoglot bamboo instruments, and subsequently spread westwards, translating first into the ideoglot metal type, and then into the heteroglot “bow-shaped” type that eventually arrived in Europe in the High Middle-Age.<sup>2</sup>

The musical and cultural relevance of Jew's harp instruments varies greatly within this vast distribution map, but some common and recurring traits can be found in literature, such as the use as voice-mask in rituals and courting practices, especially in South-East Asia (Hwei 1956, Wright 1984), as well as a connection to Shamanism in Central and Northern Asia (Emsheimer 1964; Hamayon 1990).

Regarding the presence of the instrument in Europe, the extensive Ph.D. research carried out by the Norwegian scholar Gjermund Kolltveit (2006), comparing 830 spec-

<sup>2</sup> A more complex typological analysis, with detailed distribution maps, is contained in the study of the Jew's harp specimens conserved in the Musée de l'homme in Paris (Dournon-Taurelle and Wright 1978). A more recent typological distribution map, proposed by Michael Wright in 2004, is available online: <<http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/images/vol2num2/large/sr4p52map1.jpg>>.

imens of Jew's harps found in European territory, has proven that «no reliable find predates 1200, while from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards the quantity of excavated objects suggests an expansion of an almost explosive character» (2009: 42). This conclusion is reinforced by a review of the iconographic evidence from the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century published by the late prof. Frederick Crane (2003a: 3-7). The recurring presence of makers' signature marks in the finds of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries proves that construction and distribution were already undertaken by specialized manufacturers (Kolltveit 2006: 14). From the 15<sup>th</sup> century, we find written customs documentation referring to the trade of large quantities of instruments originating in small pre-industrial production centers capable of manufacturing several thousands of instruments per year, and also exporting overseas to Africa and to North and South America. The most well-known production centers were located in Worcestershire, Great Britain (Dournon-Taurelle and Wright 1978: 107-09, Wright 2015), in the town of Molln in the Austrian Alps (Klier 1956: 72-80, Kolltveit 2006), and in Valsesia (mainly in the small village of Boccorio) in the Piedmont region of north-western Italy (Lovatto 1983 and 2004, Guizzi 2002: 45).

Also dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century are the earliest known specimens of Jew's harps found in Italy, excavated in Montereale Valcellina, Friuli (Grattoni d'Arcano 1987, Kolltveit 2006: 88, 255) and in Sarzana (Liguria), where an instrument was found in 2002 during excavations of Castello della Brina (Castle of the Brina) carried out by archeologists Marco Milanese and Monica Baldassarri (University of Pisa), in agreement with the Sovrintendenza ABAP of Liguria (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup>

Despite the very few archeological finds, iconographic and literary evidence shows that in Italy the instrument was already widespread in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the emergence of the word *scacciapensieri*,<sup>4</sup> as a generic term used to encompass all the regional names – including, *zanfornia*, *ribeba*, *trumpa*, *biobò*, *viabò*, *piombè*, *trunfa*, *tromma*, *tromma di li zingari*, *mariolu*, *marranzanu* etc (Lovatto 1983: 17-18, Guizzi 2002: 45, Crane 2003b: 30) – gradually replaced several previously circulated, less “illustrious” variants such as *spassapensiero* e *cacapensiero*.<sup>5</sup>

An interesting passage from Vincenzo Giustiniani's *Discorso sopra la Musica* (c. 1628, for a modern edition see Banti 1981) illustrates how in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century the instrument was already well-established, with different names, in various regions of central and northern Italy, and while clearly associated to the lower or marginal social classes, it was also used by cultivated musicians among the upper classes and the aristocracy:

<sup>3</sup> The study of metallic materials was entrusted to Simone del Greco, a member of the research group, whom I have to thank for calling my attention to this instrument and (yet unpublished) related research. The stratum where the instrument was found has been dated 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. a period when the castle was abandoned, and the ruins were used for shelter by shepherds.

<sup>4</sup> Appearing first in Lionardo Salviati, *Lo 'nfarinato* (1588) and in Giovannetto Solderini *Trattato degli animali domestici* (1597) (see Crane 2003b: 29).

<sup>5</sup> Found as early as 1510 in: Giovanni Filotea Achillini, *Epistole*, Bologna, 1510; Anton Francesco Doni, *La Zucca*, Venice, 1552; Tommaso Garzoni, *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo*, Venice, 1585 (see Crane 2003b: 30).





**FIGURE 1.** Jew's harp of the “Brina”, found in Sarzana (Liguria, Italy) during excavations of the Castle of the Brina. The instrument is now part of the collections of the MudeF – Museo delle Fortezze in Sarzana (photo: S. Del Greco).

Il sonare di Sanfornia, che in Roma si nomina con nome di mal odore et in Lombardia Viabò, non meritaria d'esser messo in campo, vedendosi per l'ordinario nelle bocche di gentaglia; ma essendo stata nobilitata dal sig. Ottaviano Vestrij, il quale la suonava con termini musicali e con giustezza nell'intonar delle note, non la tralascio. (Modern edition Banti 1981: 35)

The playing of *Sanfornia*, which in Rome is named with name of bad smell, and in Lombardy *Viabò*, would not deserve to be mentioned, it being seen for the ordinary in the mouths of *gentaglia* (rubble); but having been ennobled by Mr. Ottaviano Vestrij, who played it with musical expertise and with accuracy in the intonation of the notes, I do not omit it. [My translation]

What Giustiniani writes in his treatise is in fact problematic, and has already been interpreted as relating to bagpipes. The interpretation that relates it to Jew's harps is however strongly justified by several elements: *zanforna*, *sinfornia* and *zampogna* are spellings that have been documented as “current and official names” used in Valsesia for the instruments that were mass-produced and sold with the “vulgar” name of *ribeba* (Lovatto 1983: 17-18). “The name of bad smell” is very likely referred to the common spelling *cacapensieri*, diffused in central and northern Italy (see above). *Biabò*, *biobò* and *piombè* are among the local names documented for *scacciapensieri* in Lombardia, Toscana, Veneto (Pitrè 1870-71, Lovatto 1983), while we are not aware of similar names used to indicate aerophones with air reservoir, or other kind of instruments.

Nevertheless, we have evidences that in 17<sup>th</sup> century Tuscany the instrument was adopted as the symbol of the Accademia degli Spensierati (Carefree Academy), as we can see in the frontispiece of books and pamphlets, such as the *Lettioni* (Lectures) by



**FIGURE 2.** Frontispiece of the book *Lettioni di Girolamo Frassiani detto l'Ozioso. Da esso lette nell'Accademia degli Spensierati. Nel Principato del Signor Cavalier Vincentio Panciatichi*, printed in Florence (1606) by Simone Grenier & Iacopo Fabeni. The decoration includes two different Jew's harps and the motto of the Accademia degli Spensierati: *Vieni dietro a me e lascia dir la gente* (Come after me and let the people talk).

Girolamo Frassiani, printed in Florence in 1606 (Fig. 2), or in the frescos of ceiling of the West corridor of the Galleria degli Uffizi, painted between 1658 and 1679 (Fig. 3).<sup>6</sup>

Such multifaceted, sometimes contradictory social characterizations of the Jew's harp are in fact common in many other parts of Europe from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The instrument is in fact mentioned, albeit briefly, in most of the early European printed treatises on musical instruments usually being described as a ridiculous instrument of low social standing.<sup>7</sup> From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, it is often depicted in the hands of peasants, shepherds, jesters and travelling peddlers.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the instrument

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Mrs. Asako Ueda for permission to use this unpublished photo (Fig. 3), and to Leo Tadagawa for pointing out this valuable source and sharing the picture. The decoration of the ceiling of the West corridor of Uffizi took place between 1658 and 1679 on the initiative of Ferdinando II de Medici, with subjects linked to illustrious Florentine men. The painters who participated in the work were Cosimo Ulivelli, Angelo Gori, Jacopo Chiavistelli, and others.

<sup>7</sup> We find mentions and representations of Jew's harps in most of the early organological treatises, such as Sebastian Virdung *Musica getuscht* (1511), Michael Pretorius *De organographia* (1619), Marin Mersenne *Harmonie Universelle* (1635).

<sup>8</sup> For extensive iconographic, literary and historical accounts, see Boone 1972 and 1986, Fox 1988, Crane 2003a.

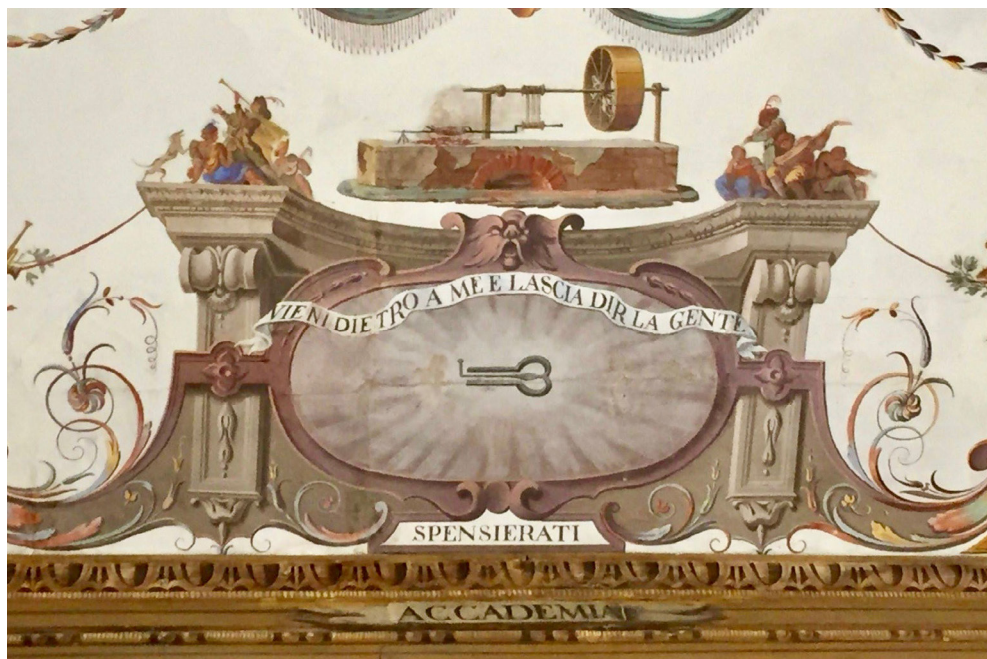


FIGURE 3. The Jew's harp as symbol of the Accademia degli Spensierati. Detail of a fresco from the ceiling of the West corridor of the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence (photo: A. Ueda).

also appears as a heraldic symbol of noble families,<sup>9</sup> and as an instrument of angels and cherubs.<sup>10</sup> Its presence and use have also been reported in socially “respectable” settings including, chamber music concerts in castles and courts, well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup>

In the southern part of Italy, and on the islands of Sardinia and Sicily, where the instrument is still used and built to this day, we have much less historical evidence available, and it is hard to trace the presence of the instrument in these regions prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, as noted by Febo Guizzi, in these areas the construction and use of the instrument appears to be following local traditions, seemingly independent from the large circulation of mass-produced Jew's harps (*ribeba*, *maultrommel*) coming from continental Europe (Guizzi 2002: 48). It is important to note that in Campania, Calabria, and Apulia the construction of the instrument was (and to some extent, still is) not the exclusive preserve of specialized artisans, but typically carried out by generic town artisans or wandering

<sup>9</sup> Such as the Trümpi family of Zurich, and D'Esch family of Metz (Crane 2003a: 3, 15-28; Kolltveit 2006: 101-103).

<sup>10</sup> See Boone 1986: 31; Crane 2003a: 29-30, 58; Kolltveit 2006: 112.

<sup>11</sup> In the anthology edited by Leonard Fox (1988), we find several accounts of the presence of Jew's harps in courts, and of concerts held by recognized virtuoso players in Austria and Germany from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Austrian composer Johann Georg Albrechtsberger (1736-1809) composed several chamber music concerts including Jew's harp (scored as *crembalum*) in ensemble with strings, *fortepiano*, and/or *mandora* (lute) around 1765.

blacksmiths, and its history seems to have been influenced in a decisive way in Southern Italy by the presence and activity of Romani gypsies, skillful makers and traders of metal objects and cookware, able to set up open-air street forges, and to this day active and recognized as blacksmiths, coppersmiths, and horse traders.

In Campania and Calabria, the local names of the Jew's harp (*tromma de li zingari*, *tromma zingara*) contain a direct reference to this strong relationship, confirmed also by visual depictions of *Zingari* (Gypsies) building Jew's harps with a portable forge and anvil in the streets of Naples in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> As suggested by Guizzi, the wandering Romani blacksmiths could have been the original bearers of the instrument and its construction techniques in the south of Italy, or rather the early "receivers" of these techniques thanks to their expertise in the working of metals and the distribution and trade of various goods and artifacts. In any case, it seems evident that they had a central role in helping to introduce the Jew's harp into local music traditions, and the subsequent adoption and adaptation of the instrument by local smiths and horse-shoers. (Guizzi 2002: 47-48)

It remains open to debate whether the importation of the Jew's harp in the south of Italy can be considered the extreme offshoot of the continental diffusion of this instrument carried out "directly" by the diaspora of nomadic populations originating in Rajasthan, or if the introduction took place through Mediterranean maritime trade (*ibidem*). In fact, both of these access routes (and others) may have been simultaneously active.

In Sicily the instrument is called with a lot of different names, among which the most common are *marranzanu*, *ngannalarruni*, and *mariolu* (107 terms – among basic names and variants – are given in Riolo 1981, see below).

## 2. Historical traces of the Jew's harp in Sicily

The earliest document that I have been able to find regarding the presence of the *scaccia-pensieri* in Sicily, is the mention of the terms *mariolu* and *malu larruni*, as musical instruments, in a manuscript vocabulary compiled in Palermo by Abbot Onofrio Malatesta (1665-1749): *La Crusca della Trinacria cioè Vocabolario Siciliano* (1695-1706), preserved in the Municipal Library of Palermo.

Mariolu    *farfanti, farabuttu, furbacchiuni, [...] furbu, larruni 'ngannaturi. It: Mariuolo [...]*

Mariolu    *tagghia urzi o burzi. It: Mariuolo, ladro che taglia le borse [...]*

Mariolu    *cioè quella treccia di capelli che portano le donne o li fanciulli verso le tempie [...]*  
*Metaf. pigliata da mariuolo, perché sì come il mariuolo ruba l'altrui così questa maledetta treccia ruba i cuori all'incauti amanti / Mariolu strum. Reg. Malu larruni.*

Mariolu    *rascal, rogue, clever, [...] smart, deceitful thief. It: Mariuolo. [...]*

Mariolu    *tagghia urzi o burzi. It: Mariuolo, thief who cuts the bags. [...]*

<sup>12</sup> See the *acquaforte* by F. Palizzi (Naples, 1857) published in Guizzi 2002: 50, fig. 32.

*Mariolu* that is that braid of hair that young women or boys wear to the temples [...] Metaf. seized by *mariuolo*, because as the *mariuolo* steals the others', so this damn braid steals the hearts to the incautious lovers. / *Mariolu* inst.[rument]. Reg. *Malu larruni*. [My translation]

Thanks to this source it is possible to infer that at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the instrument was already known in Sicily, and probably spread not only in the area of Palermo, considering the mention of the "local" variant *malu larruni*. The use of the pre-existing term *mariolu* seems to indicate that the commonplace association, later to prove persistent, with the world of social marginality, if not with the underworld *tout court*, was already well-defined. From the same source, however, we can see that the term *mariolu* also still maintained a significant assonance with the semantic sphere of ingenuity, wit, magic and seduction, and it is worth mentioning that more recently (and to this day) the word can be used also as an adjective, often with attractive resonances, meaning smart, clever, lively or seductive (see *Vocabolario Siciliano*, vol. 3: 648).

After Malatesta, we find mention of the *mariolu* (as an instrument) in many subsequent Sicilian-language dictionaries published in Palermo, including the most-referenced Pasqualino (5 volumes 1785-95) and Mortillaro (1844), but the first proper mention of its musical use that I have been able to find is in the first volume of *Canti popolari siciliani* (Sicilian Folk Songs), published by Giuseppe Pitrè in 1870-71, where the *mariolu* is mentioned (with the alternate name of *ngannalarruni*, quite similar to *mala larruni*) as instrument that in some towns and villages accompanies the singing of serenades, instead of the guitar used in the city of Palermo (Pitrè 1870-71: 34).<sup>13</sup>

The same author, a celebrated pioneer of Sicilian ethnography, in a volume entitled *Giuochi fanciulleschi siciliani* (Sicilian Children's Games), mentions more than 15 different local names of the Jew's harp, including the first known mention of the term *marranzanu*, nowadays the most widespread over the Island. Pitrè even adds some relevant ethnographic information, clearly showing how the Jew's harp is in Sicily a musical instrument used by adults as well as being a simple toy for children. It is worth quoting from this reference source more extensively:

*Lu Mariolu*. Strumento notissimo di ferro a forma di lira con una linguella o grilletto (*linguedda*) nel mezzo; e si suona appoggiandolo alla rastrelliera de' denti e facendo vibrare col polpastrello del pollice o dell'indice la linguella stessa. Ecco i sinonimi di questo strumento: in Piana de' Greci *Mariùah*, in Cefalù *Marrucchinu*, in Licata *Calarruni*, in Prizzi *Camarruni*, in Porto Empedocle *Cacamarruni*, in Cianciana *Ganganarruni*, in Riesi *Angularruni*, in Vittoria *Nningalarruni*, in Palma *Mangarruni* e *Marigarruni*, in Catania *Marauni*, in Piazza Armerina *Maurmarruni*, in Girgenti e qualche paese vicino *Malularruni*; in alcune parti del Messinese *Marranzuni*, in Castrogiovanni *Marranzanu*, in qualche altro sito *Tarantula*.

Tutti questi nomi fanno pensare a parecchie origini, non molto onorevoli per il *mariolu*,

<sup>13</sup> See paragraph 6 (*The repertoire*) for a full quote from Pitrè 1870-71.



oggi semplice passatempo di fanciulli e di giovani innamorati o spensierati. Evidentemente queste voci son composte di *ma*, o *mar*, o *mau*, o *malu*, *malo*, e *larruni*, ladrone. In alcune parlate siciliane la prima parola se non è onomatopeica del suono dello strumento stesso (*nninga-larruni*, ecc.), accenna di sicuro alla voce inganno (*ganga* = *manga* = *nnanga* = *'nganna-latruni*). Sicché lo strumento richiama a *malo-ladron* o ad *in-ganna-ladron* [...]. Sinonimi in tanta furberia di significato sono *marrancuni*, *marrucchinu*, *marranchinu* (furbo, ladro), *marranzuni*, *marranzanu* (furbo, tristo, mariuolo); e forse anche *malu-carnuni*, se questa voce si dee riguardare come accrescitiva di *mala-carni* che significa malvivente. Ma ciò che dà forza e luce a questi significati è la voce *mariolu*, con la quale è comunemente inteso lo strumento. È univoca tradizione de' nostri vecchi, che anticamente i ladri si servissero dello scacciapensieri, secondo alcuni per eludere la vigilanza della Giustizia, della ronda [...]; secondo altri, per assicurare i viandanti nelle campagne [...]; e secondo altri ancora, che sono i più, per intendersi i ladri tra loro da punti diversi. [...] È un fatto che il suono dello scacciapensieri nel silenzio della notte, in campagna, si ode, relativamente, a considerevole distanza; e non è improbabile che i mariuoli appiattati qua e là in una campagna si tenessero qualche volta o per qualche occasione reciprocamente avvertiti dell'appressarsi d'un viandante. Può ben darsi che un incontro particolare avvenuto in campagna, per opera di mariuoli e con l'aiuto dello scacciapensieri, abbia fatto nascere una storia o storiella in poesia, oggi obliterata, di cui probabilmente fanno parte i seguenti versi popolari che i fanciulli calabresi sogliono cantare quando suonano lo strumento [...]: *Zingara, zingara marioda / M'ha' robatu a ferriodu / E quannu vaju a la missa / Mittitilu ppe pettinissa*. (Pitrè 1883: 405-08)

The *Mariolu*. Very well-known iron instrument in the shape of a lyre with a tongue or trigger (*linguedda*) in the middle; and it is played by resting it on the teeth and by vibrating the tongue with the fingertip of the thumb or index finger. Here are the synonyms of this instrument: in Piana de' Greci [today Piana degli Albanesi] *Mariuah*, in Cefalù *Marrucchinu*, in Licata *Calarruni*, in Prizzi *Camarruni*, in Porto Empedocle *Cacamarruni*, in Cianciana *Ganganarruni*, in Riesi *Angularruni*, in Vittoria *Nningalarruni*, in Palma *Mangarruni* and *Marigarruni*, in Catania *Marauni*, in Piazza Armerina *Maurmarruni*, in Girgenti [today Agrigento] and some nearby towns *Malularruni*; in some parts of the Messinese *Marranzuni*, in Castrogiovanni *Marranzanu*, in some other places *Tarantula*. All these names make one think of several origins, not very honorable for the *mariolu*, today a simple pastime for children and young people in love or carefree. Evidently these voices are composed of *ma*, or *mar*, o *mau*, or *malu*, bad, and *larruni*, thief. [...] But what gives strength and light to these meanings is the word *mariolu*, with which the instrument is commonly understood.

It is a unanimous tradition of our elders that in ancient times the Jew's harp was used by thieves, according to some to evade the vigilance of Justice, of the patrol; according to others, to reassure travelers in the countryside [...]; and according to still others, who are the most, to send signals and understand each other among them thieves from different points. [...] It is a fact that the sound of the *scacciapensieri* in the silence of the night, in the country, can be heard at a considerable distance; and it is not unlikely that the *mariuoli*, hiding flat here and there in the countryside, would sometimes or for some occasion be held mutually warned of the approach of a traveler. It may well be that a particular encounter that took place in the country, by *mariuoli* and with the help of the Jew's harp, gave birth to a story or story in poetry, now obliterated, which probably includes the following popular verses that the Calabrian children use to sing when the instrument is

playing [...]: Gipsy, gypsy *marioda* / She stole my *ferraiodu* / And when I go to Mass / You use it as a comb. [My translation]

Besides a significant amount of speculation on the origin and etymology of the name(s)<sup>14</sup> and second-hand information on the «unequivocal beliefs of our grand-fathers», we remain with very little first-hand information on the musical use of the *scacciapensieri* in Sicily, of which we find mentions in Serafino Amabile Guastella (1876: LVIII) and Leopoldo Mastrigli (1891: 37), as one of the instruments used to accompany the *ciouvu* (or *chiovu*, lit. “spike”), a folk dance performed at the celebration for the *Madonna di Gulfi* (Virgin of Gulfi) and in wedding parties in the provinces of Siracusa and Ragusa.

We can assume that at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the instrument was still very widespread in Sicily, proven by the fact that the same Pitrè, in the *Catalogo illustrato della Mostra etnografica Siciliana* (Illustrated Catalogue of the Sicilian Ethnographic Exhibition), organized during the National Exhibition held in Palermo in 1891, doesn't need to indicate precisely the origins of exhibits five instruments: *mariola* or *ngannalarruna*, from Palermo, Sciacca etc. Pitrè, in the same *Catalogue*, observes that the *scacciapensieri* is the well known instrument, shaped as a lyra, that in Sicily takes more than fifty names (1892: 86).

The instruments exhibited on that occasion are now in the collection of the Museo Etnografico Siciliano Giuseppe Pitrè in Palermo, and are – to my knowledge – the earliest known datable examples of Sicilian Jew's harps (Figs. 4-6).

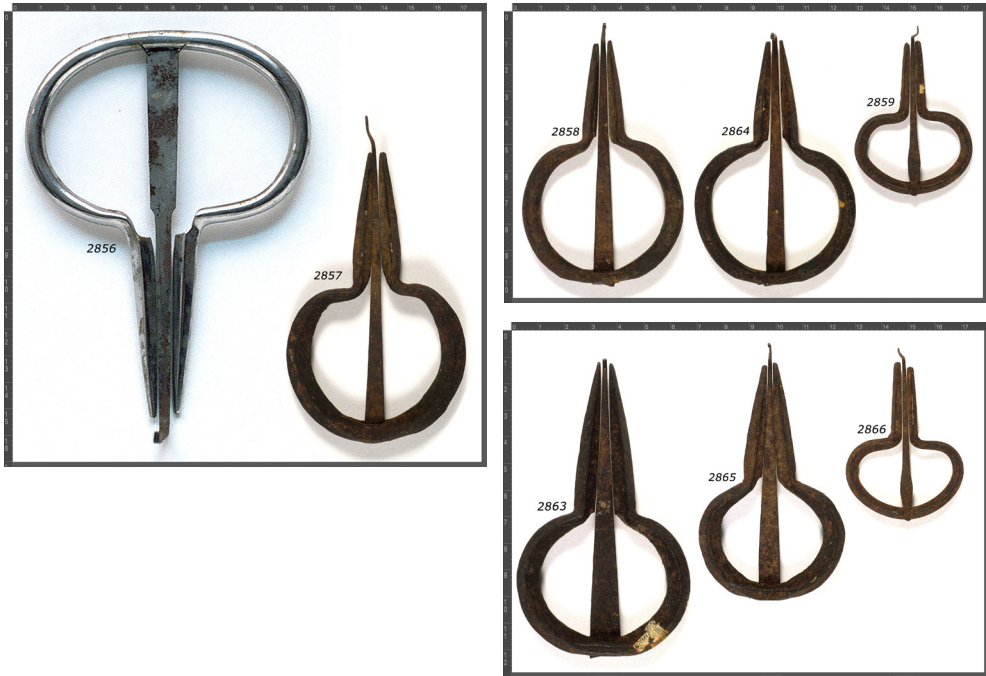
In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can witness a gradual fall in the widespread use of the instrument, which is described in 1941 by Mazzini as «un piccolo strumento musicale scomparso» (a little disappeared musical instrument). On the other hand, we know from later accounts<sup>15</sup> and from phonographic documentation (see below) that the instrument, while certainly becoming less frequent, remained continuously in use in the traditional music of rural towns and in the “popularesque” music of the cities, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

So it seems that during the last century, a somewhat paradoxical and multifaceted process took place: while the construction and performance traditions entered into a crisis, along with the progressive disappearance of blacksmith craftsmen building quality instruments, at the same time the *scacciapensieri* gradually became the symbol of a kind of “Sicilian-ness”, often ambiguous, heavy with contradictions and stereotypes. And this process was accompanied by the widespread diffusion of “toy” or “souvenir” instruments, aimed at the newly developing tourist market, promoted as *u veru marranzanu sicilianu* and built in large quantities by specialized workshops or small industries (see below). The traditional use remained widespread, though less frequent, all over the island, both in the rural inland among farmers, shepherds, cart drivers, sulfur miners, and

<sup>14</sup> My personal opinion (that is impossible to prove) is that we are faced with a typical example of “false etymology” (Guizzi 2002).

<sup>15</sup> See particularly: Naselli 1951, Nania 1953, Leydi and Guizzi 1983, Sarica 2004, Bonanzinga 2013.





**FIGURES 4-6.** Jew's harps preserved in the Museo Etnografico Siciliano Giuseppe Pitrè, Palermo (photo: S. Bonanzinga).

in urban centers among the working classes, gradually becoming an emblematic symbol of traditional Sicily, of an “ancient soul” nostalgically evoked in the final verses of the poem *Strada di Agrigentum*, written by the Sicilian Nobel Prize Salvatore Quasimodo:<sup>16</sup>

il marranzano tristemente vibra  
nella gola del carraio che risale  
il colle nitido di luna, lento  
tra il murmure d'ulivi saraceni.

the Jew's harp sadly vibrates / through the throat of the carter / as he slowly ascends the  
moon-lit hill / while murmuring of the Moorish olive trees. [My translation]

Regarding the remarkable number and variety of different names recorded for the instrument in Sicily, a specific investigation on the etymology and dialectal vocabulary conducted in 1979 by the linguist Salvatore Riolo has extended the field to as many as 107 different variations, largely ascribable to three main groups of variants regarded as

<sup>16</sup> The poem is included in the anthology *Nuove poesie* (New Poems) published in 1938 (Milano, Primi Piani).

prevalent in different areas of the island. This geographic distribution of the names is largely in accordance with what was reported by Pitrè and with the evidence systematically recorded and mapped in the monumental *Vocabolario Siciliano* (1977-2002), and can be mostly confirmed by personal observation.

1. *marranzanu* or *maranzanu* (*maranzuni*, *marauni*, *marruni*) is presently the most widespread name, formerly attested as proper to Catania and the central and eastern provinces (Messina, Siracusa, Enna and Caltanissetta);
2. *mariolu* (*mariulu*, *mariulu*) was used mostly in the western part of the island, in the provinces of Palermo and Trapani, but today is often substituted by *marranzanu*;
3. *ngannalarruni* or *nninghilarruni* (*malarruni*, *gannalarruni*, *nninchilarruni*, *nnannalarruni*, *catalarruni*, *mancalarruni*, *marigarruni*, *maumarruni*, *garigarruni*, *malucarnuni* etc.) still used in the southern provinces of Agrigento, Ragusa and, partly, Caltanissetta, together with *maranzanu* (Pitrè 1870-71, 1883, 1892; Leydi and Guizzi 1983, Riolo 1979: 570-78).

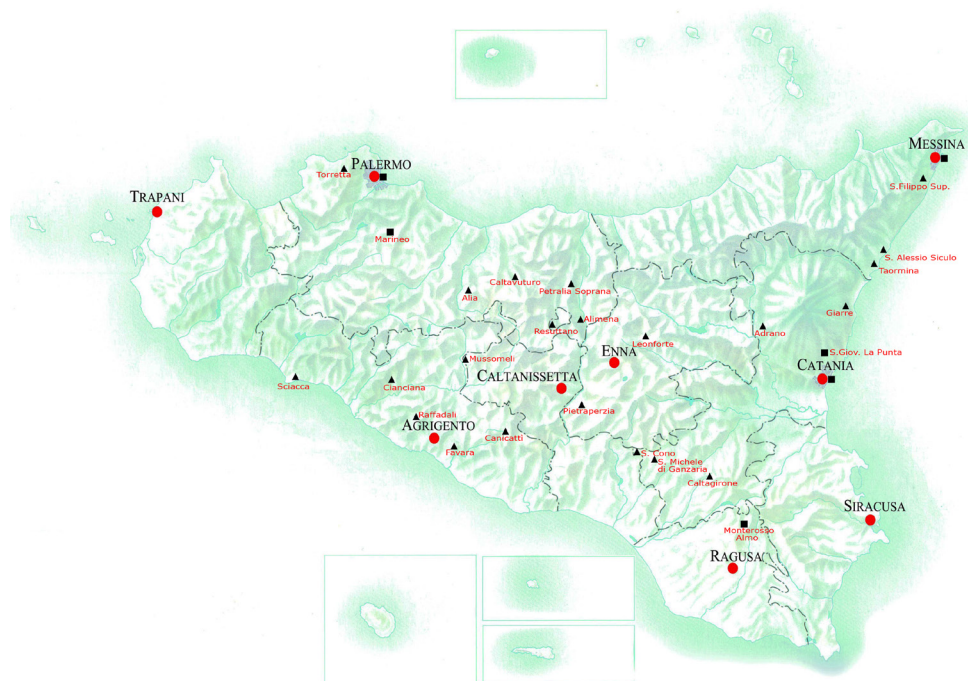
Despite the remarkable onomasiological variety recorded up to the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, my field research on the construction of the *scacciapensieri* in Sicily, carried out discontinuously since 1997, can confirm only very few variations of the name found in actual use, and that the single most used term to indicate Jew's harp in Sicily is nowadays *marranzanu*, often in the Italianized version *marranzano*.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the persisting variety of local names, however, our current research on the instruments collected in different parts of the island from different makers over the last 130 years has also pointed out a number of common or recurring features that concur with the widespread perception of a specifically "Sicilian" model of Jew's harp, suggesting the possibility to recognize in the regional production a process of typological fixation, which would seem to indicate also the relative antiquity of the local constructive tradition.

### 3. The construction of Jew's harp in Sicily

My still ongoing, discontinuous research on the Sicilian Jew's harp started in the summer of 1997 with the purely practical aim of acquiring a good-sounding, "concert-quality" *marranzanu*, to use in my part-time activity of amateur musician. Only later this specific aim became an independent research project, acknowledging the lack of available organological information on the Jew's harp in Sicily and the sharp contrast between the commonplace local stereotype of the instrument as being "typically Sicilian", and the extreme rarity (at the time) of surviving craftsmen able to build high-quality instruments.

<sup>17</sup> The italianized spelling *marranzano* is today widely used as a general term to indicate Sicilian Jew's harps and it seems to have taken the place of the older *mariolu*.



**FIGURE 7.** Map of the places where it was possible to certify the presence of Jew's harp makers in Sicily (1891-2019). With a little black square are pointed the places where makers are still active.

During the last two decades I have documented or witnessed the work of ten different makers, including five who are still active. Combining my field research with the evidence and information made available by fellow researchers,<sup>18</sup> with second-hand information gathered from the living memory of players, makers and other sources, and from existing instruments, I have compiled a provisional map of places where it was possible to certify the presence of manufacturers of Jew's harps in Sicily, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Fig. 7).<sup>19</sup>

I will now briefly present the work and the instruments of some of the makers that I have documented, to illustrate the main features of the instruments built in Sicily over

<sup>18</sup> I have to especially thank Sergio Bonanzinga, Giorgio Maltese, Domenico Staiti, and Fabio Tricomi for sharing the result of unpublished research on the matter. While acknowledging the important debts of gratitude and apprenticeship to my teachers and fellow-researchers, I assume full responsibility for all the shortcomings of the present article.

<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note that three of the presently active manufacturers have started (or re-started) to build such instruments only in recent years. In the early stages of this research, we had the unpleasant experience of tracking down at least ten more artisans, only to be told were recently deceased, or had ceased to work due to illness and old age. Of course the presently available list of makers is by no means exhaustive, and could certainly be greatly extended by a systematic field survey conducted in all the provinces of the island, for two of which (Trapani and Syracuse) I have no recorded maker in my database to date..



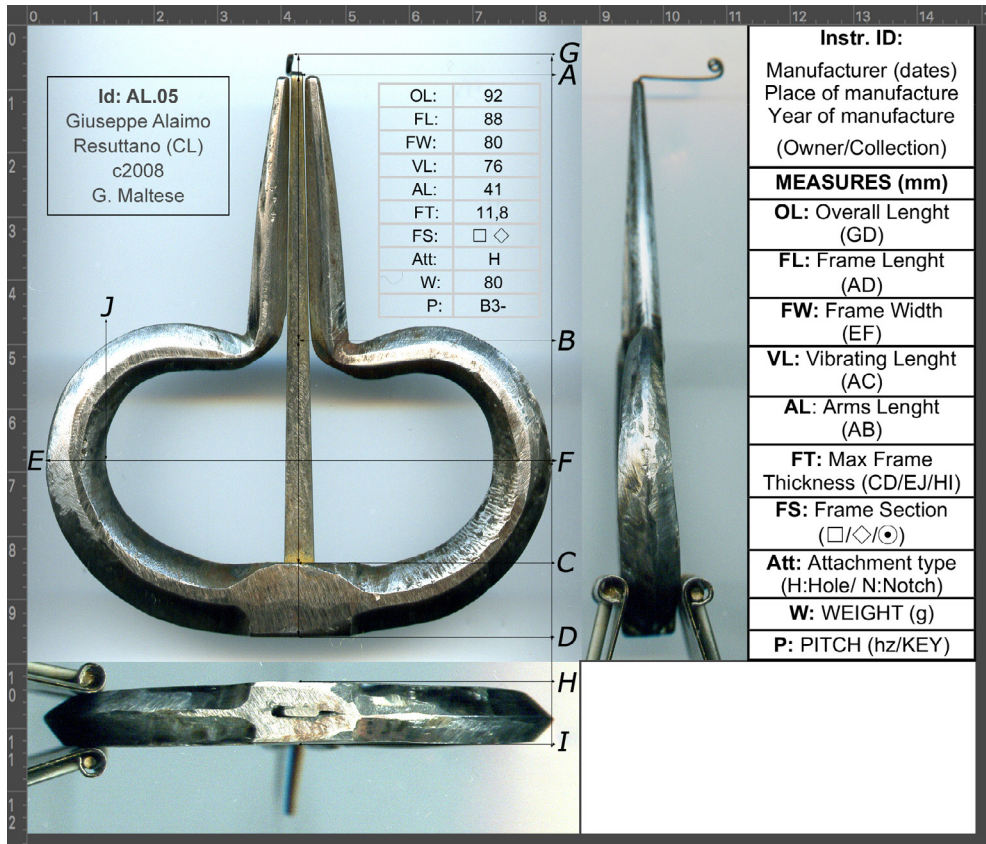
FIGURE 8. The maker Giuseppe Alaimo (1924-2014), blacksmith in Resuttano.

the span of the last 30 years, as well as the construction process and characteristics of the different kind of manufacturers that I have encountered.

Giuseppe Alaimo (1924-2014) from Resuttano (province of Caltanissetta) was the first blacksmith and Jew's harp maker that I encountered (Fig. 8), and this meeting<sup>20</sup> holds a crucial role in the birth and development my research. His workshop, in the garage of his house just outside the center of the village of Resuttano, in rural inland Sicily, was for several years the only reference point for high-quality "traditional Sicilian" instruments (Fig. 9), and as such was pointed out to me by the virtuoso *marranzanu* player Fabio Tricomi in 1997. *Zzu Pippinu* (Uncle Joe) Alaimo was recognized, in town and beyond, as a very good *mastru firraru*, an artisan craftsman skilled in the work at the forge, that included the manufacture of *marranzani* among the many other activities of the daily and seasonal work flows, originally dedicated mostly to the production

<sup>20</sup> For which I have to thank to this day my teacher and friend Fabio Tricomi, whose precious (and still mostly unpublished) research and collection, together with his outstanding expertise in performing the traditional repertoire, have been constant reference points for my own research.





**FIGURE 9.** Jew's harp made by G. Alaimo, ca. 2008 (Coll. Giorgio Maltese). With scheme of standard measurements and abbreviations used in the article (side rulers in centimeters).

and maintenance of metal tools and accessories for agricultural work, including hoes, sickles etc.

The entire process of construction was filmed in 1998 by Tricomi, whose unpublished video documentary shows all the steps involved in the manufacturing of a *mar-ranzanu*, comparing the work of five Sicilian blacksmiths filmed between 1993 and 1998 (a short excerpt is on [Video example 1](#)).<sup>21</sup>

I subsequently documented the work of Alaimo, and interviewed him on several occasions, including preparatory work for the realization of a full-length movie by film-maker Diego Panarello. In [Video example 2](#) we can see some excerpts of this in-

<sup>21</sup> Despite the poor state of conservation of the analogue images, this remains a fundamental document on the construction of the *scacciapensieri* in Sicily, and we thank the Author for the permission of reproducing an excerpt of it in this publication. Of the five makers documented by Tricomi, only Alaimo from Resuttano and Ignazio Verona from Catania (see below) were still active when I started actively documenting this tradition in 2005.



FIGURES 10-11. Instruments by Giuseppe Alaimo (Coll. Luca Recupero).

terview held in the spring of 2009, with relevant details on how he taught himself how to build the *marranzanu* by imitating an instrument made by the senior blacksmith Michele Restivo, without ever receiving any formal training. Giuseppe Alaimo, age 85 at the time of the interview, also recalled the emotions raised in him by the sound of the *marranzanu*, frequently used for serenades in his youth.

The instruments built by Alaimo (Figs. 9-11) consist of a wrought iron frame (*càscia*), at the center of which a flexible steel tongue is fixed, called *pinredda* or *linguèdda*. The frame is forged and shaped starting from a square section rod, so as to obtain two symmetrical segments of rhomboidal section that become thinner towards the ends, thus forming the "mouthpiece" of the instrument. At the center of the frame, and in its thickest part, the vibrating tongue is firmly attached so that it can vibrate in the narrow gap between the arms of the frame. The end portion of the *pinredda* is then bent and rolled up to create a key or trigger at the free end, which is used to activate the vibration of the lamella by the player's finger(s).

Both the *càscia* and the *pinredda* are hand-forged by hammering the glowing-hot iron on the anvil. The whole process requires great skill and precision from the *mastru firraru*, to ensure maximum elasticity and resistance of the tongue, and a minimum distance in the gap between the tongue and the frame, where the sound of the instrument is created. Special care was applied by Alaimo to the manufacture of the lamella, obtained by forging a piece of steel to the desired thickness, slowly tapering it from the thickest and widest part, where the tongue is attached to the frame, to become gradually thinner and slimmer towards the tip, that will finally be bent and rolled to create the activating key of the instrument. He never clearly revealed to me the exact type of steel used as prime material for his lamellas, except for affirming that in the past he obtained the best



FIGURE 12. The maker and virtuoso player Giacomo Tremoglie from Leonforte (photo: G. Fiumara).

results from used barber's razor blades, which were recycled when it was no longer possible to sharpen them.<sup>22</sup> Alaimo would finish the forge work on the *pinnedda* by applying a process of tempering in water, which allegedly was a crucial step in giving the desired resistance to the flexible and most delicate part of the instrument.

Special care was also necessary for the attachment of the *pinnedda* to the *càscia*. This was done by making a hole in the center of the frame, for the execution of which Alaimo had created a special tool designed to center the hole within the transversal section ([Video example 1](#)). The lamella would then be inserted through the (roughly rectangular) hole, and fixed in position by hammering upon the frame.

As we will see, this method of fixing the lamella through a hole in the frame, while almost unique in the context of the world Jew's harps, is an almost ubiquitous feature in Sicilian-made Jew's harps, and can be considered a decisive element towards the possible definition of the *marranzanu* as a regional type of *scacciapensieri*.

In figures 9 to 11 we can see a few examples of instruments made by Alaimo in the

<sup>22</sup> Personal interview with Giuseppe Alaimo, in Resuttano, on 26 April 2007.





**FIGURE 13.** Stock of instruments made by Giacomo Tremoglie, grouped by approximate key (column left to right from F3 do D#4) (Coll. Tricomi, coll. Recupero).

last years of his remarkably long life (concluded just one week before his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday), that will show clearly the specific individual style of his instruments compared to the production of other Sicilian makers ([Video example 2](#)).

Another very important maker in the recent history of the Jew's harp in Sicily is Giacomo Tremoglie (1917-1989) from Leonforte, in the province of Enna (Fig. 12), who besides his activity as a blacksmith and horseshoer was a very good *marranzanu* player ([Audio example 2](#)).<sup>23</sup>

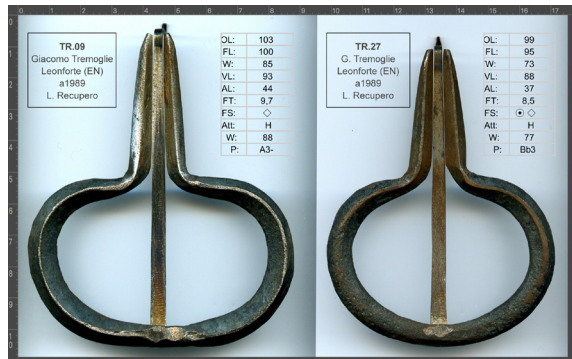
I never had the possibility to meet Giacomo Tremoglie, who unfortunately passed away in 1989 at age 72. I was however able to meet his son Mario several times between 2006 and 2007, and – together with Fabio Tricomi – had the chance to observe and roughly measure as many as 126 different instruments that had been in storage since the dismantling of the workshop following his father's passing, several years before our meeting (Fig. 13).

Giacomo Tremoglie used different types of iron as a starting point for the construction of the frame, sometimes recycling pieces of material from various sources, often using fragments of the so-called *tondino*, i.e. the round-section iron bars used in construction work. The oblique, rugged surface profile of such materials offered a sort of natural decoration to many of his *marranzani*. The instruments in figures 14 to 16 give an example of the wide diversity of features and detail that can be encountered within the production of this very prolific maker.

<sup>23</sup> Some photos with a brief text about Giacomo Tremoglie has been published by Giuseppe Fiumara with the title *Marranzanu: Voce di Sicilia* (see Fiumara 1988).



FIGURE 14. Decorated instrument built by Giacomo Tremoglie (Coll. Mario Tremoglie).



FIGURES 15-16. Instruments by Giacomo Tremoglie (Coll. Recupero).

A remarkable feature found on some of the *marranzani* made by Tremoglie, who was also a passionate performer on his own instruments, was the so called “tail”, i.e. the external part of the material used for the lamella, which protrudes beyond the base of the frame. Rather than removing it at the end of construction, as is usual, this was left in place and sometimes used as base of further decorations (Fig. 14).

Within the limits of the present contribution I cannot devote much space to the individual biographies of the makers (that we hope to present in more detail in further publications). In the case of Tremoglie, however, I shall mention the remarkable effort he spent in the promotion of the instrument in several different contexts, being also a



FIGURE 17. Detail of Ignazio Verona while making a Jew's harp in his workshop in Catania (photo: R. Purpura).

very good performer of the traditional *marranzanu* playing. For him the instrument was «a sort of “key”, able to unlock all doors»,<sup>24</sup> including that of the very popular radio show *La Corrida*, a competition between amateur artists presented by Corrado Mantoni. Tremoglie participated at the show – broadcast on national RAI Radio in December 1971 – playing a solo dance tune on the *marranzanu* and getting the main prize of that episode: 200.000 *lire* in golden coins ([Audio examples 2](#) and [3](#)).<sup>25</sup>

Turning to makers that are still active at present, we shall first mention the only one who was already documented in 1994 by Tricomi, the “young” blacksmith Ignazio Verona (b. 1952), whose forge workshop is in San Cristoforo, a popular neighborhood of Catania (Fig. 17). Despite the fact that he retained the surname of his mother, Ignazio Verona learned the craft of metalwork directly from his natural father Salvatore Laganà (c. 1925-1977), who in turn had learned from his own father Ignazio Laganà (c. 1900-c. 1965).<sup>26</sup>

The instruments of Verona (Fig. 18), normally using a round-section iron rod as

<sup>24</sup> Personal interview with Mario Tremoglie in Leonforte, 2 December 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Mario Tremoglie realized a live recording on cassette tape of that memorable performance in a theatre in Rome. Despite the low quality of the audio on the vintage support, we decided to include an excerpt of that recording as [Audio example 3](#). An extensive investigation on the archives of Italian Public Radio would probably unveil an official recording of this performance and, most likely, many other valuable documents for our research.

<sup>26</sup> Personal interview with Ignazio Verona in Catania, 12 March 2004.



FIGURE 18. Jew's harp made by Ignazio Verona (Coll. Recupero).

starting material to create the frame, resemble very closely the instruments of his father, that could still be found in the late '90s in the remainders of metal household suppliers near the fish market, or in the back drawers of historical souvenir shops near the Piazza Duomo of Catania. A remarkable difference is in the lamella (called *linguedda* or *pinned-da*), that was always forged in the case of Laganà, while Verona often uses a piece of so called “harmonic steel” (a flexible sheet-metal used for the springs mounted on metal doors and gates), that is simply cut to the desired shape and stone-filed to the desired thickness before being inserted to the frame through the characteristic hole, as already described for Alaimo and Tremoglie.

In the last decade we have also witnessed the emergence of “new” makers, probably reflecting an increasing demand for instruments in response to a movement of revival of the *marranzanu* by a younger generation of players.

Salvatore Petralia (b. 1947; Fig. 19) from the town of San Giovanni La Punta (near Catania), known as *Turi u miricanu* (*Turi*, short for Salvatore, the American), was trained as a blacksmith from a very young age in the workshop of Sebastiano Giuffrida (c. 1928-c. 1998). He recalls the master craftsman occasionally making *marranzani* in the evening, at the end of the day's work, when he was the only other person allowed into the workshop. He also recalls, similarly to Alaimo, how he had to learn by himself how to make one, *arrubbannucci u misteri* (stealing the craft) from the master, without any formalised training process. The instruments were made in small quantities, upon the occasional requests, usually from cart-drivers, shepherds and farmers of the surrounding area, on the foothills of Mount Etna.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Personal interview with Salvatore Petralia, in San Giovanni La Punta, 23 February 2015.





FIGURE 19. The maker Salvatore Petralia in his workshop in San Giovanni La Punta (photo: R. Purpura).

He had completely ceased to produce such instruments “for a long time”, when in 2009 he was asked to make one by the young player Giorgio Maltese. After some initial reluctance, he accepted the commission, and actually started a regular production of instruments again from 2010, creating specific tools of his own design to optimize the different steps of manufacture, and developing a quite distinct and individual style in the shape and decoration of the instruments.<sup>28</sup>

The *marranzani* made by *Turi u miricanu* (Fig. 20) often present a short “tail” beyond the attachment of the *pinnedda* or *pinneddu*. The frames are mostly built starting from square-section rods that are forged into a decreasing rhomboidal section and then sometimes twisted to obtain a rugged profile in the bow-shaped part of the instrument. He also produced a limited number of “special” instruments, with unique decorations added in the tail or in the lamella itself.

Another “new” maker is Carmelo Buscema (b. 1958), a blacksmith from Monterosso Almo, in province of Ragusa (Figs. 21-22), who made his first *marranzanu* around 2010, after initial stimulus and request from the tireless Giorgio Maltese, and has since then started a regular production. Having developed an interest in traditional Sicilian music, he is now also a good performer of traditional tunes on the *marranzanu*.

<sup>28</sup> It shall be noted that he never accepted to be filmed or simply observed during the construction work, and we respect his reluctance in showing the tools he developed for the construction.



FIGURE 20. Decorated instruments made by Salvatore Petralia (photo: R. Purpura).

He started his first prototypes imitating an instrument made by Giuseppe Alaimo, and later had the opportunity to visit him personally in Resuttano, and study his construction techniques. His instruments (Fig. 23) now clearly show a resemblance to the late master's model, and the manufacture follows the same steps,<sup>29</sup> though he also uses some very different techniques, and has created his own personally designed tools to optimize the construction process (Fig. 24).

It is interesting to note that Buscema has now almost ceased all other activities as a blacksmith, specialising his work towards the production of musical instruments. When we first met him in his workshop in 2012, he had put up a pyrographed wooden sign saying: *A Putia di lu Marranzanu Sicilianu* (The Shop of the Sicilian *Marranzanu*). And he more recently opened public pages on Facebook and Instagram entitled: *Dal ferro al suono. Carmelo Buscema costruttore di marranzani* (From iron to sound, Carmelo Buscema maker of *marranzani*), and uses intensively these social networks to promote his products and communicate with customers in Sicily and Abroad.

Another very recent addition to our list of makers is the young artisan Giuseppe La Rosa (b. 1990) living in San Nullo, in the countryside on the outskirts of Catania. He only started learning the craft of making Jew's harps in 2017, but has already built himself a very good reputation among the most experienced players. He does not come from a background in smithery and forge work, but rather in different handicrafts, such as traditional Indian pottery and the construction of wooden and cane flutes. Through direct contact with players (especially Turiddu Costa of Misterbianco) he has had the

<sup>29</sup> Personal interview and filming of the making procedure in Monterosso Almo, on 27 December 2014.

ON THE JEW'S HARP IN SICILY



**FIGURES 21-22.** The maker Carmelo Buscema in his workshop in Monterosso Almo (photo: R. Purpura).





**FIGURE 23.** Jew's harp made by Carmelo Buscema (photo: R. Purpura).



**FIGURE 24.** Tools made by Carmelo Buscema in order to realise Jew's harps.

opportunity to closely examine several instruments from different Sicilian and foreign makers, and started developing his own production techniques through a still ongoing process of experimentation and trial with several materials and prototypes. His instruments (Fig. 25) have many features that closely resemble those made by Salvatore



FIGURE 25. Decorated instruments made by Giuseppe La Rosa (property of the maker).

Petralia, including the markedly square or rectangular section of large parts of the frame, the tendency to leave a short tail on the instruments, and a method of decorating the frame by twisting the square or rhomboidal sections.

Through the work of Giuseppe La Rosa and Carmelo Buscema, we see the emergence of a “new” typology of makers who are no longer generic blacksmiths that would create instruments among many other things, but specialized artisan manufacturers who are primarily focused on the construction of Jew’s harps. This seems to be a recent development (reflecting the lack of demand for ordinary blacksmith workmanship), but in reality we cannot exclude the existence of such specialized makers in Sicily in the past.

Besides the village blacksmiths, who represent the largest group among the list of identified makers of *marranzanu* in Sicily, and a small amount of specialized artisans, I want to at least briefly mention other kinds of manufacturers who are presently active, or were so in the past, adding further shades of diversity to the complex presence of the Jew’s harp on the island.

We have been able to locate at least two manufacturers presently active in Sicily who are engaged in the large-scale production of *scacciapensieri*, mostly aimed at the tourist market and distributed ubiquitously in souvenir shops and stalls in the main cities and nearly all tourist destinations throughout the island. This category of makers can only be mentioned in passing in the context of the present article, but would certainly deserve further attention and study towards a complete social history of the Jew’s harp in Sicily, as they are responsible for the greatest number of instruments made in the region, and have probably had an important role in the creation of a recognized “standard” Sicilian model.

One very peculiar type of *mariolu* has been produced and commercialised in very large numbers at least since the 1980’s by the Garberino company of Palermo<sup>30</sup> (Fig. 26).

<sup>30</sup> The company is now run by Cosimo Garberino (b. 1972). He reports that the construction of *scacciapensieri* was started in the late 1960’s by his father Giuseppe (c. 1940-2001), who has been described as a skilled blacksmith who would produce a limited amount of instruments as a personal hobby. The idea of producing cast iron instruments is credited to Giuseppe Garberino. His son Cosimo started to support him at the age of 15,

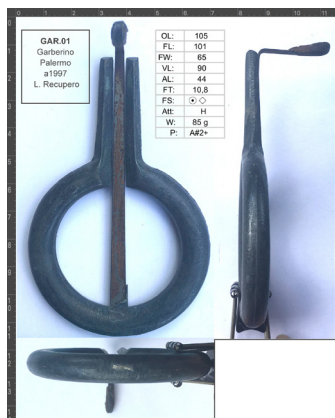


FIGURE 26. Jew's harp made by the Garberino factory in Palermo (Coll. Recupero).

This instrument, that is advertised as *marranzano siciliano*, is not made of wrought iron, but of cast iron, shaped into a mold. The section of the frame is circular along the whole “handle” of the instrument, becoming irregularly rhomboidal in the arms. The lamella is made out of sheet-metal steel spring, and inserted into the mold, probably before the frame is melted into shape. The main model, featuring a regular circle-shape of the handle, is produced in three different sizes, the largest one with dimensions corresponding to the most common instruments of the Sicilian blacksmiths. More recently, some different variations have been added to the catalogue, easily available online:<sup>31</sup> one type is very similar to the normal *marranzano grande*, but it features a stylized *Trinacria* (used as the symbol of Sicily since ancient times) cast at the base of the lamella, while another, more recent addition is an instrument that appears to be cast, but with a shape and features that bring it closer to the traditional forged *marranzanu* of the blacksmiths and artisans. It is relevant to note that the same manufacturer also produces a different type of *scacciapensieri*, that can be considered an imitation of the Austrian models (Fig. 29).<sup>32</sup>

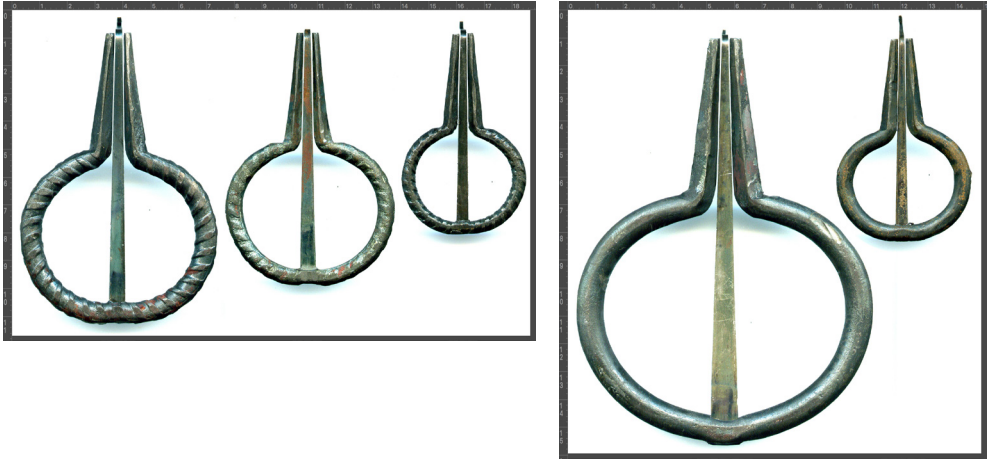
Another large-scale production center is called *La Forgia* (The Forge) in the village of Marineo, near Palermo. It was originally set up in the 1980's by Carmelo Giuè (b. 1969), as an evolution and development of the blacksmith workshop of his father Rosario (b. 1939). The core business of the company is now the production and sale of

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and soon developed the construction process to allow for a large-scale production of souvenirs. I contacted Mr. Cosimo Garberino several times via phone and email starting in 2015, but have not been able to visit the workshop, as the maker is reluctant to show us his tools and reveal private information regarding his making process.

<sup>31</sup> <<https://www.marranzano.eu/catalogo.html>>.

<sup>32</sup> The frame is made by bending a pre-produced steel bar of rhomboidal section (without any manual operation on the forge) and the tongue is fixed inside a sort of housing or notch (N) excavated in the center of the frame, where it is then locked in position through two small fins obtained from the edges of the notch itself. These instruments are normally enameled in bright colors, and their features are markedly different from the “Sicilian” model made by Garberino, and from the other instruments that we've been able to observe in our research, as discussed below.



FIGURES 27-28. Instruments made by Carmelo Giuè in Marineo, Palermo (Coll. Recupero).

*marranzani*, but they also produce miniature work tools (such as mattocks, pickaxes, scythes, hoes, hammers, pliers and tongs) intended as souvenirs or keychains, and real-size foldable pocket knives with horn handles.

What is remarkable about the activity of Carmelo Giuè is the adoption of large industrial machines, used in the production of truck suspensions, that have been modified and adapted to the production of Jew's harps. The instruments by Giuè are still forged and worked by hand, with a production process that largely corresponds to that of the artisan blacksmiths, but the use of electric machinery results in a considerable reduction of the amount of human energy needed for the construction, and creates the conditions for producing a large number of instruments in a relatively small amount of time.<sup>33</sup>

*La Forgia* of Marineo produces *marranzani* of different sizes (Fig. 27), including a very large one (Fig. 28), and has recently also been experimenting with new and diverse models. In the most common and widely distributed model, easy to find in most Sicilian souvenir shops, the frame is normally created starting from a round-section iron rod used in construction work, either with flat or rugged surface. The lamella is always cut out from pre-built plates of steel spring, and then stone-filed by a rotating electric grindstone. The attachment of the lamella is always through a hole in the center of the frame.

It is indeed possible that other large-scale manufacturers of *scacciapensieri* exist today or were active in Sicily in the past. One small factory producing brightly-coloured *scacciapensieri* of the Austrian type has been reported in the suburbs of the city of Messina

<sup>33</sup> Videos showing some passages of the production process, including some of the electric machines used, and other specially designed tools to optimize the productions process, are easily accessible online, posted by the same manufacturer on YouTube: <[https://youtu.be/c2VJZzI\\_mKl](https://youtu.be/c2VJZzI_mKl)>. In other videos posted in the same channel (<<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPpwEl6otfy1PwnklJ5C5wA>>), it is possible to view also other items produced by the company, and large stocks of instruments built and ready to distribute in wooden boxes housing 50 pieces each.





FIGURE 29. Toy or souvenir instruments from Messina (Coll. Recupero).

(Fig. 29), and another possible production center has been signalled in or around the small city of Giarre near Catania, but we don't have any additional reliable information to report regarding these or other producers. Many producers of instruments found in flea markets or antique shops will probably remain unknown or anonymous, just like the makers of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century specimens conserved in the Sicilian Ethnographic Museum of Palermo.

Among the various instruments by uncertain, unknown or anonymous makers found in Sicily, we shall consider at least some examples that display peculiar features, different from what has been reported above. The first of these is an instrument bought in an antique shop in the city of Randazzo, on the north side of Mount Etna (Fig. 30), which was described by the seller as being from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There is actually no reliable indication to confirm the date of production of this instrument, that appears to be forged in wrought iron, starting from a circular-section rod. It deserves to be mentioned here for its specific features, including the system of attachment of the forged lamella, (positioned inside a nick or notch cut out from the frame, and then fixed in position by hammering the side of the notch), and the shape of the bowed part of the frame, forged in a sort of triangular rather than circular profile. Several other instruments displaying similar features have been found over the years in various parts of Sicily<sup>34</sup> (Fig. 31), and it is interesting to note the extreme similarity with examples of *Trumma di zingari* collected in Calabria in 1909 by G. De Chiara, and conserved at the Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari (MNATP) in Rome.<sup>35</sup>

The "triangular" shape of the frame and the "notch" type of attachment of the lamella are both features that also connect these instruments to the *tromme de li zingari* that are still produced in Monteforte Irpino, Campania, by the Romani blacksmith Domenico

<sup>34</sup> I have to thank Giorgio Maltese for making these instruments available.

<sup>35</sup> See Simeoni and Tucci 1991: 145-146, instruments with inventory n. 14212 and 14213. See also the instrument depicted in Guizzi 2002: 47, fig. 31.



FIGURES 30-31. Jew's harps made by anonymous makers (Coll. Maltese).

Bevilaqua. Despite the fact that in our research we have never encountered, heard of, or found reference to any gypsy makers of Jew's harp in Sicily, the diffused presence of instruments with these features seem to suggest that such makers could have been active in the past, or that instruments of gypsy manufacture (possibly imported from Campania or Calabria) were in circulation in Sicily until the recent past. More research in this area would be needed to assess the possible role of the *zingari* in the diffusion of *scacciapensieri* in Sicily.

We are aware of at least one Sicilian maker, Giuseppe Cannavò, known as *Peppinu u Lanternaru* (deceased c. 2006), who produced instruments in Castelmola, province of Messina, with very similar features (Fig. 32), including the two key aspects of the system of fixing the lamella to the frame and the triangular shape of the frame.<sup>36</sup>

In the course of my research, I met also a small number of "occasional" makers, i.e. individuals who pursue different professions than blacksmith or artisan, and produce only a very limited number of instruments, primarily as a personal hobby or passion, mostly intended for personal use. In this group, I would like to at least mention Vincenzo Distefano (b. 1940) from Messina, electrician and former player of *marranzanu* in the folkloristic group I Canterini Peloritani, who created a limited series of special instruments that have also been used by his nephew Giuseppe "Pippo" Distefano (b. 1963), who followed his path in playing the *marranzanu*.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> He was the maker of the special and very large instruments custom-built for the player Giuseppe Giacca (Video example 3).

<sup>37</sup> He was very reluctant to sell instruments to anyone, having created only a couple of dozen in his whole "career" as a part-time maker. It was only after much bargaining and several visits that I convinced him to fix one of his broken ones, that he sold me at a relatively very high price.

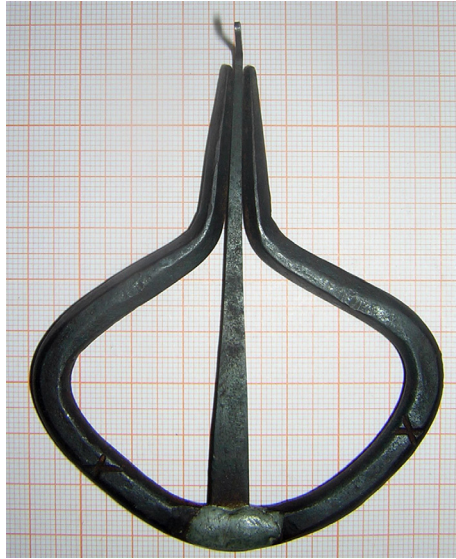


FIGURE 32. Jew's harp made by Giuseppe Cannavò from Castelmola (Coll. Vincenzo Distefano).

He experimented with peculiar innovations in the use of materials and in instrument design (Figs. 33 and 34), with the aim to solve or optimize specific performance issues, such as the tendency of the arms of the frame to get closer to each other, closing the air gap and causing the lamella to hit the frame and stopping the sound. He also devised a peculiar system of attaching the lamella to the frame, soldering it inside a hollow tube and thus allowing for the substitution of the lamella, which is prone to breaking after intensive use.

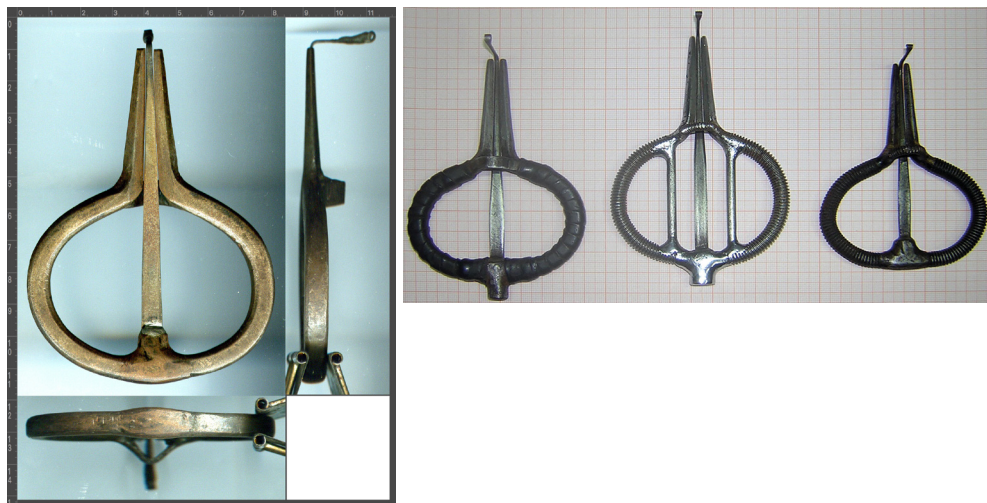
We can't examine in depth the instruments produced by Distefano and other occasional makers, which are nevertheless relevant to provide a survey of the construction of *scacciapensieri* in Sicily, as they demonstrate the important contribution of individual invention and experimentation.

This list of makers so far taken into account is by no means exhaustive, and could certainly be greatly extended by a systematic field research conducted in all the provinces of the Island. We can however outline a relevant sample of the different kind of manufacturers involved in the construction of Jew's harps in Sicily, nowadays and in the recent past, that we can subdivide in six groups:

1. *Urban blacksmiths*. This is by far the most well-represented group: that of the *mas-tru ferraru*, the metal craftsmen, skilled at the forge, that normally operate in indoors workshops, and would include the occasional or regular manufacture of Jew's harps among the many other activities of the daily and seasonal work flows.

2. *Specialised makers*. Skilled artisans that don't usually pursue the occupation of generic blacksmith, but concentrate their forge work on the production of (usually a limited amount of) high-quality musical instruments aimed at a specialized amateur





FIGURES 33-34. Jew's harps made by Vincenzo Distefano from Messina (Coll. Distefano).

market. This approach to the construction of such instruments is probably a newly emerging phenomenon in Sicily, but we can't exclude the presence of such makers in the past, for instance in the urban centers of Palermo and Catania.

3. *Large-quantity manufacturing centers, producing and distributing different models of instruments produced with semi-industrial processes.* At least two of these manufacturers are still active at present, able to output thousands of instruments per year, that are sold through external and internal marketing channels.

4. *"Occasional" makers.* This is a group that includes people of different backgrounds and main professions, who have occasionally produced a limited number of instruments, often created primarily for personal or familiar use.

5. *"Claimed" makers,* that have been reported (or presented themselves) as such, but in fact are (or were) actually just trading instruments gathered by other sources, after applying an active process of selection/fine tuning/decoration/fixing.

6. *Uncertain or unverified makers,* that we can identify and localize from second- or third-hand testimonies or from the evidence of surviving instruments, but without enough accompanying information that would allow grouping them in any of the above categories.

Such a typology allows to pointing out some general considerations in the perspective of further and more systematic researches.

First of all, we can easily realize that generic urban blacksmiths are by far the most represented manufacturers of Jew's harps in Sicily, and it seems very likely that they have been the main keepers of the craft of making *scacciapensieri* also during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Not every blacksmith or horseshoer is capable of producing these instruments (or willing to do so), and the special skills and ability needed to create good *marranzani*,

*mariola*, *ngannalarruna* are often a source of pride for the *mastru firraru* who actually devotes himself to the time-consuming artisanal production of such instruments.

The emergence of a restricted number of specialized makers devoted to the creation of high-quality instruments, and of small artisanal factories pursuing large-quantity production of standardized instruments for the souvenir market, seem to be more recent developments, reflecting the changing conditions of use and demand for such instruments over the last 50-60 years, but we can't exclude the presence of such makers in the past.

Another result that stands out from this first survey on the construction of *scacciapensieri* in Sicily is the complete absence from our records of any direct evidence regarding the activity in the region of gypsy or nomad blacksmiths as Jew's-harp makers, whilst they are widely documented and still active today in other southern regions of Italy, such as Calabria and Campania. From the indirect evidence of instruments collected through various sources (antique shops, chance finds, flea markets) we cannot however exclude that such makers have been active in Sicily in the past, and we seem to recognize a direct influence of the gypsy manufacture on the production of at least one identified Sicilian maker.

The survey revealed also a very wide diversity of instruments produced and used in Sicily, ranging from the standardized models produced in large quantity for the souvenir market, to the presence in Sicily of instruments imported from different origins (sometimes faithfully imitated by local manufacturers),<sup>38</sup> and including a large range of individual variations between the instruments of each different artisan maker, and even among the instruments built by the same maker, each one pursuing a very individual style, with a varying amount of personal research and experimentation, implied in the common practice of "stealing the craft", or simply learning by imitation, without any form of specific training process.

Within this remarkable variety, we can however point out the recurring presence of some specific common features and construction details that seem to justify the widespread perception of a specifically Sicilian "traditional" Jew's harp, even before this concept was used as a marketing tool for standardized instruments produced in large quantity for the souvenir market.

#### 4. Features of the Sicilian Jew's harp

To get a first impression of the above mentioned recurring features encountered among Sicilian-made Jew's harps, a good starting point is the observation of the 8 instruments kept in the Museo Etnografico Siciliano Giuseppe Pitre (MESGP) in Palermo<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Such as the mass-produced *Maultrommel* from Molln and *ribeba* from Valsesia, and possibly including other instruments arriving from England and Southern Italy.

<sup>39</sup> I have not been able to personally observe these instruments, that (to my knowledge) have not been exhibited in the last 20 years. I have to thank Sergio Bonanzinga for the private communication of the pictures and measurements of these specimens (partly published in Di Stefano, Giuliano, and Proto 2013: 124).

(Figs. 4-6) compared with the available information on the instruments gathered in different regions of Italy, conserved in the MNATP (Simeoni and Tucci 1991: 138-153)

Given the absence of specific information on the circumstances of acquisition of the 8 instruments in MEGP, we assume that they should include the 5 *mariola*, probably collected personally by Giuseppe Pitrè, originally displayed in the Mostra Etnografica that he curated for the National Exposition in Palermo of 1891-92 (Pitrè 1892: 85-86). We can observe at first glance that the instruments numbered 2858 and 2864 (Fig. 5) seem to be made from the “same hand”, as do the nn. 2863 and 2865 (Fig. 6). Despite the many different details and features among these two different makers, they still maintain a number of common traits that keep them close together with n. 2857 (Fig. 4), and clearly isolate them from the specimens that have inventory numbers 2856, 2859 and 2866. While the large instrument marked n. 2856 (Fig. 4) is distinguished by its very peculiar characteristics (and its origins remain unclear and enigmatic), the last two examples numbered 2859 (Fig. 5) and 2866 (Fig. 6) clearly follow the construction scheme of the inexpensive instruments produced in Austria and widely distributed worldwide. Whether they are original *Maultrommeln* imported from Molln, or local imitations that have been built in Sicily (see Fig. 29), they are testimony to the simultaneous presence in Sicily in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century of at least two clearly different models of *scacciapensieri*.<sup>40</sup> This coexistence is still present to this day, and in fact helps us to perceive and define the recurring features that contribute to the emergence of a specifically “Sicilian” type of Jew’s harp, distinguishing it from other models of *scacciapensieri* used in other parts of Italy and the World.

It is important to remark that most of the features that we are going to detail below (with one possible exception) cannot be considered exclusive to the proposed Sicilian model, and despite the large range of variation among the production of different makers, and even among the individual instruments handcrafted by every single manufacturer, the systematic concurrence of all – or most of – these traits, in the instruments observed from 1891 to the present, is what gives the perception of unity to a very diverse set of instruments that seem to correspond, to a greater or lesser extent, to an abstract “model”.

1. *Material used for the frames.* The Sicilian-made instruments that we have examined display frames mostly made of wrought iron, hand-forged at high temperature into the desired shape and thickness, usually starting from pre-shaped rods of square or round section that sometimes maintain their original features in the bowed part of the frame, and are hammered into an irregular rhomboidal section (sometimes only in the terminal ends) to create the sharp edges needed for the “arms” of the frame. In some cases the whole frame is shaped into a rhomboidal section, except for the central part where the lamella is attached.

<sup>40</sup> Just like the Austrian maultrommeln, the *ribebe* from Valsesia were unexpensive instruments easily available all over Europe and beyond and we can be quite certain that they were diffused also in Sicily, as proved by a clearly Valsesian instrument collected in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Joppolo Giancaxio, Agrigento, in the collection of the MNATP (Simeoni and Tucci 1991: 151).

We do have examples of the use of other materials for the frame (brass, stainless steel, threaded bar of galvanized iron) but these are clearly a small minority of instruments that stand out as exceptional in the production of Sicilian makers. One notable exception are the souvenir instruments built by the Garberino company in Palermo, using cast iron melted into a mold for the creation of the frames.

2. *Weight*. The Sicilian instruments are normally quite heavy: the examples that we had the chance to measure weigh on average between 70 and 80 grams. We don't have any examples below 50 g, while we have many exceptions exceeding 100 g ([Video example 3](#)).

3. *Dimensions and proportions*. Sicilian instruments are normally quite large and thick. The frame length (FL in our schematic measures) of the measured instruments is on average 90-100 mm, while the frame width (FW) is normally between 65 and 80 mm. The frame thickness (FT) is also a very relevant feature, averaging about 9 mm, never going below 7 mm and arriving up to 11-12 mm in some examples.

It should be noted that Jew's harps with similar outer dimensions (FL/FW) are reported for other parts of Italy (Simeoni and Tucci 1991) and Europe (Kolltveit 2006). The relatively high thickness of the frame (FT) is less common, but has parallels in instruments documented in the South of Italy (Simeoni and Tucci 1991), and England (Kolltveit 2004, Crane 2004), and also in the Indian *morchang* (Dournon-Taurelle and Wright 1978).

The bowed part of the frame creates a particularly large and thick "handle" or "grip", (Fig. 9: EF) normally with a round or oval profile, sometimes slightly flattened at the points where the two sides of the frame bend (Fig. 9: B) to create the parallel arms of the "mouthpiece" (Fig. 9: AB). The shape of the instrument changes from manufacturer to manufacturer, and even among instruments made by the same craftsman, variants are often encountered. Despite this complexity, weight and size and relative proportions are the first elements that allow us to define a specific Sicilian model of *scacciapensieri*, given that instruments with the same features are not common in the rest of the world.

These features are already clearly recognizable even in the oldest known specimens of Sicilian Jew's harps kept at MEGP (Figs. 4 and 5; Di Stefano, Giuliano, and Proto 2013: 124) and MNATP (Simeoni and Tucci 1991: 149-153).

4. *Attachment of the lamella*. The truly peculiar feature of most Sicilian handicraft instruments is the method of securing the tongue, which is inserted through a slit opened in the center of the frame at the beginning of the handcrafting process, and then fixed by hammering (Fig. 21). This method, practically unique in the world of Jew's harps,<sup>41</sup> is almost uniformly widespread in Sicily, and is a decisive trait to define the *marranzano* as a regional type of *scacciapensieri*, as already remarked above.

While the previously mentioned features are rather common with the gypsy-made instruments of Campania and Calabria (that are often similarly hand-forged, and quite heavy and large compared to most European instruments), the attachment of the lamel-

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<sup>41</sup> For a comprehensive review of attachment methods see Dournon-Taurelle and Wright 1978: 100.



la through a hole in the frame is the single element that justifies the possibility that the instrument was introduced to Sicily by a different route, or that once introduced from the mainland by gypsies, it took root, developing a local constructive tradition that has been spread and shared across the island.

We should, however, note that this feature is not universal among Sicilian-made instruments, some of which use the notch-type of attachment. Also, it is interesting to note that the attachment through the hole in the frame has some references in instruments documented to this day in Norway, and in late-medieval and Renaissance archaeological finds in Estonia, Scandinavia, England and the Netherlands, (Kolltveit 2004: 68-69), though in the Northern European examples the lamella is secured in position by the insertion of a “wedge”, rather than through hammering, like it is done uniquely in Sicily.

5. *Acoustic properties of the lamella.* Turning to aspects more closely related to sound production, it should be noted that the tongue of Sicilian handcrafted *marranzani* is normally forged, and flattened through manual work with hammer and anvil. In some cases, the lamella goes through a process of temper. In the large-scale production of Palermo and Marineo, the delicate and time-consuming forgery of the *pinredda* is replaced by the use of sheet metal steel spring, cut and filed to the desired shape and thickness. In all cases, the outcome is a lamella that is usually quite rigid or stiff: a feature that gives them a rather sharp fundamental note and a very bright timbre, as well as ensuring a high volume of sound emission.

A more systematic approach will be needed in future research to assess organically these key issues of pitch and tone, but in our experience with several makers and hundreds of instruments, we can generally affirm that the fundamental pitch of the Sicilian handcrafted instruments is usually rather high compared to most European examples.<sup>42</sup> Those that we have been able to measure are in a large majority between A3 and C4, with very rare examples below F3.<sup>43</sup>

As we will see later, in the section devoted to the traditional repertoire, these sound characteristics are clearly motivated by musical contexts in which the *marranzanu* was traditionally used, i.e. primarily those of the soloistic sonatas and of the accompaniment of the *canzuni* sung by peasants, shepherds, sulfur miners, and cart drivers: a good instrument must “be heard” even in an open field, and must be able to compete in volume with the voice of singers, in styles of traditional song characterized by a very acute and powerful sound emission ([Audio examples 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7](#)).

<sup>42</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that the younger makers, following requests coming from professional musicians, are now trying to create instruments predictably tuned to specific keys, which did not appear to be an issue that concerned the previous makers that we have been able to study or meet. Giuseppe La Rosa, in particular, is currently researching ways to obtain instruments that have a lower range, whilst retaining the typical features of the sicilian *marranzano* in terms of timbre and sound volume.

<sup>43</sup> In Fig. 13 it's possible to see the pitch distribution of over 110 instruments built before 1989 by Giacomo Tremoglie, grouped according to the nearest key ( $\pm 50$  cents) starting from F3 to D#4.

## 5. The performing technique

Each instrument basically produces a single sound vibration of fixed pitch, whose fundamental tone is determined by the oscillation speed of the *linguedda*. This sound is naturally rich in overtones or harmonic partials, i.e. components of the sound spectrum that are the exact multiples of the fundamental frequency. The experienced player, by modifying the size and shape of the oral cavity and resonators, can selectively amplify some of these harmonics, and therefore has at his/her disposal a melodic range within the scale of the natural overtones. The actual melodic range available is dependent on the coupling between the fundamental frequency of the instrument and the physical volume range of the mouth of the player, acting as resonator. In most cases, it is possible to clearly isolate and distinguish at least the overtones 4 to 8, that correspond to the notes of a major chord upon the fundamental (e. g.: C-E-G-Bb-C).

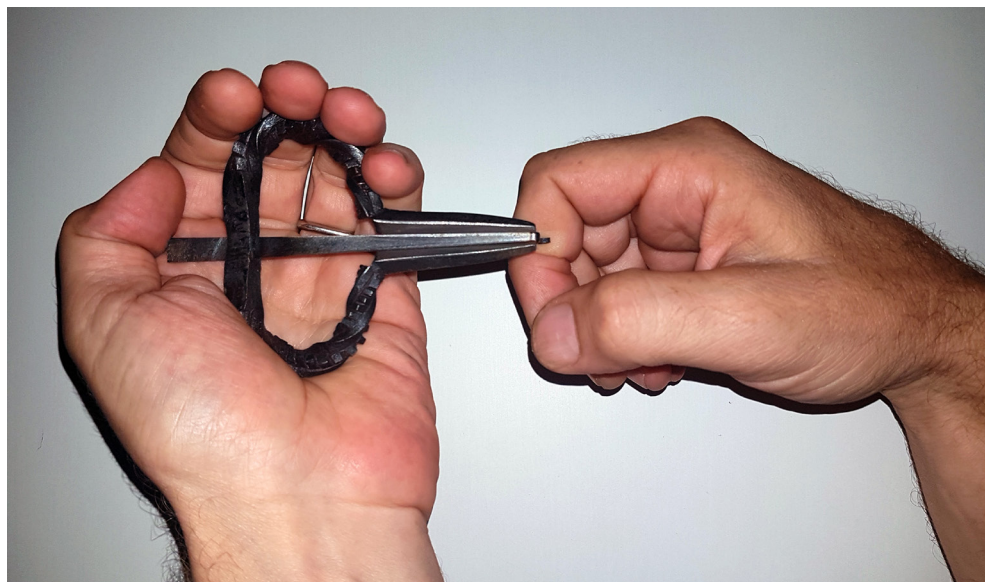
Taking advantage of breath control, superimposing air flows in inhalation or exhalation, the player can produce a great variety of further modulations, which can shape the intensity, the timbre and the dynamic profile of the single sound, and are a fundamental aid in rhythmic structuring, allowing the player to produce several distinct sounds from a single pluck of the instrument. Despite the presence of numerous variations and individual approaches, in the technique of the more expert players that we have recorded it is possible to recognize some recurrent traits, referable to a specialized use of the instrument, that seem to suggest the emergence of a “traditional” Sicilian technique, that shall be verified and defined by more extensive research.

The performance of Giuseppe “Pippo” Giacca (b. 1945) is a very good example of the combination of specific traits in the manner of holding and activating the instrument that are recurrent in the playing technique of Sicilian players ([Video examples 3 and 4](#)).

As we have seen, the Sicilian instruments are traditionally quite heavy, and have a wide grip or handle, such as to entirely occupy the palm of the player’s hand. The instrument can then be firmly held with the supporting hand (usually the left for right-handed players). This will be slightly arched in order to create a small resonance chamber (Fig. 35). Among the most common variants for the supporting hand, we encounter a sort of “C-shaped” position to hold the instrument, mainly through the pressure of thumb and index finger along the curved edge of the handle. This method is usually connected with less specialized performers, and is particularly useful if the instrument is smaller than the size of the hand (Figs. 12 and 39).

As for the plucking technique, we can point out the very frequent use of a peculiar position of the plucking hand, that seems to specifically characterize the style of the most experienced players.<sup>44</sup> The index finger of the plucking hand is bent into a “hook” and joins the thumb to form a sort of ring, for better support (Fig. 35). The hand is placed

<sup>44</sup> Of course this playing technique cannot be considered exclusive to Sicilian players, and it is curious to note that a similar technique is recurrently found in the traditions of the distant region of Yakutia, in the Sakha Republic (in the far East of the Russian Federation), where it is used by most expert players.



**FIGURE 35.** Holding the instrument: the most common or “traditional” position.

in an almost horizontal position, with the palm facing downwards, and is horizontally oscillated on the forearm which assumes a vertical or slightly oblique position, leaving the wrist joint relatively soft. This way the whole hand is involved in the movement that brings the inner side of the index to pluck the trigger at the height of the second phalanx. The pluck is traditionally performed only inwards and not outwards. A variant is to use the middle finger instead of the index finger to pluck the tongue, although the rest of the setting is “traditional” (Fig. 36).

This particular variation, used among others by the virtuoso players Pippo Distefano and his uncle Enzo Distefano (who is also the occasional manufacturer of a very limited series of instruments described above), is justified with the greater convenience of using the medium to pluck the tongue in both directions instead of only inwards, as usual. It is worth mentioning that the technique of “back-and-forth” plucking is documented for Sicily already by Alan Lomax and Diego Carpitella, specifically in the *Surfarara* recorded in Sommatino in the Summer of 1954 ([Audio example 4](#)).

Despite the relative simplicity of the instrument, the technique used can reach high levels of complexity in the interaction between the plucking, the movements of the mouth and the breath of the player. If the modulation through the modification of the size and shape of the oral cavity has its main effect on the melodic range obtainable from the instrument, the player’s breathing has a multiple function in the further amplification of the sound, in the timbral variation, and above all in the rhythmic structure, starting from the construction of the dynamic “profile” of the single sound.



**FIGURE 36.** Alternative plucking technique: the virtuoso player Pippo Di Stefano from Messina, plucking with middle finger.

The three components identified – plucking, breath, and modulation of the resonators – combine to create a great variety of sound formulas and technical expedients. Together with other interventions by the player, such as opening and closing the epiglottis, emission of guttural sounds associated with the sound of the instrument, they form a single and complex motion practice that is used by the players spontaneously, without any need to understand, at a rational level, the acoustic principles in function. An excellent example of this complexity can be considered the *Marranzanata* by Giuseppe Giuffrida, recorded by Roberto Leydi in Catania in 1956 ([Audio example 5](#), Fig. 37). The sonogram of the beginning of this piece allows to appreciate how the harmonic structure of the sound is modulated by the player in a dynamic way, thus creating a dance melody in 12/8 (*ballettu*).

## 6. The repertoire

A first survey conducted on archival recordings and ethnomusicological publications shows that up until the 1970s the use of *scacciapensieri* in Sicily was widespread through-



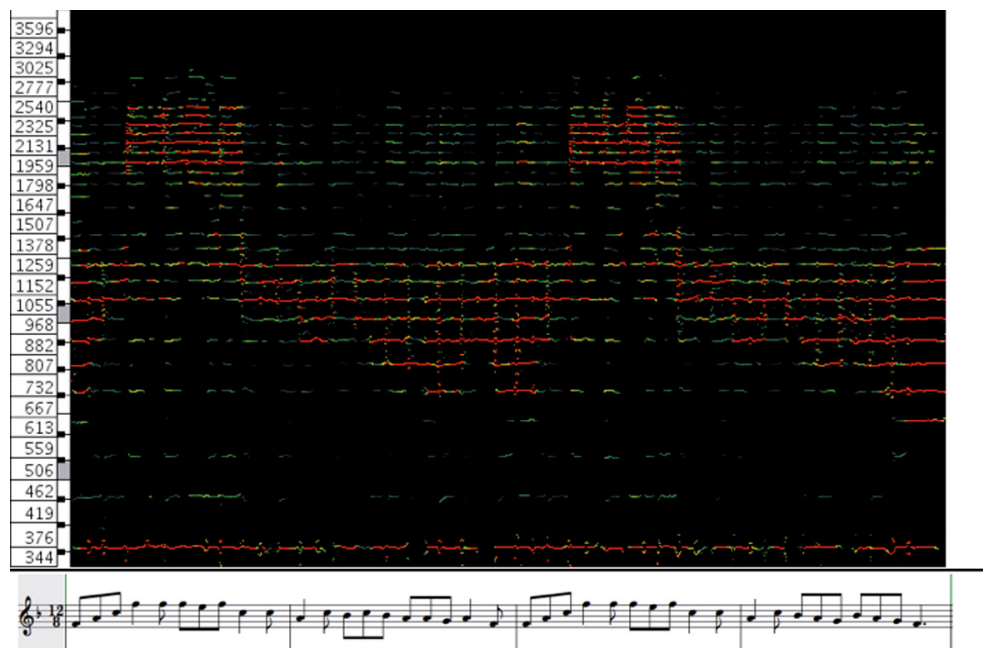


FIGURE 37. Sonogram and transcription of the incipit of the Marranzanata played by the virtuoso player Giuseppe Giuffrida from Catania ([Audio example 5](#)).

out the island and strongly linked to rural environments. In the ethnomusicological recordings we can distinguish five different kinds of Jew's harp performance: 1) solo sonatas; 2) accompaniment of solo male, or (rarely) female, songs; 3) accompaniment of songs with two alternating male voices; 4) instrumental sonatas within a broader instrumental band (which can include guitar, mandolin, cane flute, tambourine, friction drums etc.); 5) accompaniment, together with other instruments, of songs with male, female or mixed voices.

The evaluation of these sources makes it possible to affirm that until the last century the predominant musical function of Jew's harp in Sicilian traditional music was to accompany male soloist songs and, specifically, the traditional *canzuni*, in hendecasyllables with alternated rhymes, which constitute the most common Sicilian folk poetry form.

It is interesting to note that the very first sound document collected by commission of the older Italian sound archive – the Centro Nazionale di Studi sulla Musica Popolare (CNSMP) founded in Rome in 1948 by the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia together with the RAI (Italian Radio) – is in fact a Jew's harp tune recorded by director Giorgio Nataletti from the performance of the Sicilian player Turi Pandolfini.<sup>45</sup> During

<sup>45</sup> From 1989 the collection of CNSMP has become part of the Archivi di Etnomusicologia (Ethnomusicology Archives) of Accademia di Santa Cecilia (AESC), now available on their institutional website ([http://bibliomediateca.santacecilia.it/bibliomediateca/cms.view?munu\\_str=0\\_1\\_0\\_5&numDoc=21](http://bibliomediateca.santacecilia.it/bibliomediateca/cms.view?munu_str=0_1_0_5&numDoc=21)>).

the same session Nataletti recorded a very remarkable performance where Pandolfini singing and playing the Jew's harp at the same time: a unique example in Sicilian field research ([Audio example 1](#)).

Among the occasions associated with the performance of Jew's harp tunes, the practice of serenades stands out, as Giuseppe Pitrè already wrote in 1870-71, reporting a proverb that highlights the importance of the *mariolu* in that circumstance:

Comunissime [...] sono l'*Arii* o *Arietti*, parto d'ingegni mezzanamente istruiti o di quasi nessuna lettera, che si cantano con accompagnamento di chitarra quando si viene serenando o mattinando la bella, colla quale pochi saluti corsero solamente. In alcuni paesi il *mariolu* è lo strumento che le accompagna, onde molti sanno trarre suoni dolcissimi. Un proverbio dice: *Mariolu e viulinu / Ti diverti a lu matinu*. Ed il *mariuolo* serve d'accompagnamento alle arie e alle canzoni popolari. (Pitrè 1870-71: 34)

Very common [...] are the *Arii* or *Arietti*, borne of mid-educated or illiterate minds, which are sung with accompaniment of the guitar when one is serenading or "mattinating" his loved one, with whom few greetings only ran. In some villages the *mariolu* is the instrument that accompanies them, whence many can draw very sweet sounds. [...] A Sicilian proverb says: *Mariolu and violin / You have fun in the morning*. And the *mariuolo* is used as accompaniment to arias and folk songs. [My translation]

As far as we know, it was the musician Alberto Favara (1863-1923), a pioneer of Sicilian ethnomusicology, who provided the earliest transcription of Jew's harp tunes in his monumental *Corpus di musiche popolari siciliane* (Corpus of Sicilian Folk Music), that includes 1090 musical examples transcribed by ear around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The *mariolo* appears just one time in the very last musical transcription (1957/2: 582; Fig. 38).<sup>46</sup>

A popular belief still speaks of the presumed magical powers of an (imaginary) Jew's harp with a silver tongue, or even better with *càscia d'oru e pinnedda d'argentu* (golden frame and silver tongue), whose sound was said to have the power to cause abortion on pregnant women. Some of the older makers and players we met during our research have confirmed this belief, but invariably declaring that they have never seen or crafted a *pinnedda d'argentu*, affirming that the noble metal is not at all suitable for the construction of the tongue of the *marranzanu*.

One of the main points that can be deduced from the archive documentation and the ethnomusicological discography is the almost uniform association of songs with Jew's

The same collection is preserved by the RAI and is fully available online (<<http://www.teche.rai.it/archivio-del-folclore-italiano/>>).

<sup>46</sup> It is most unfortunate that this transcription gives us only the rhythmic patterns heard by the ethnomusicologist, who, I assume, did not meet any remarkable performers able to produce clearly recognizable melodies on this instrument during his research. This hypothesis seems confirmed by the brief note dedicated to the instrument by the editor Ottavio Tiby: «Also the Mariolo (or *marranzanu*, or *ngannalar-runì*, or many further different names), local descendent of the ancient and once illustrious *Scacciapensieri* (*Guimbarde*, *Maultrommel*, *Jew's harp*), is well known in its very modest possibilities and in the monotony of his buzz» (Tiby 1957: 84; my translation).

# MARIOLO

## 1090.

Caltanissetta  
ANGELO FONTANA

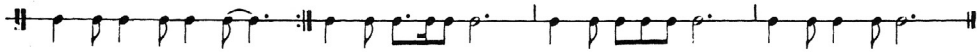


FIGURE 38. Transcription of Mariolo tune by Alberto Favara (Favara 1957/2: 582).

harp accompaniment with the world of peasants (*viddani*), sulfur miners (*surfarari*), cart drivers (*carritteri*) and, to a lesser extent, shepherds (*picurari*): all contiguous cultural environments to some extent, that shared numerous socio-cultural traits. The audio recordings carried out in the Summer of 1954 by Alan Lomax and Diego Carpitella include valuable examples of songs with Jew's harp accompaniment performed by *surfarari* and *carritteri*, respectively recorded in Sommatino (Agrigento) and Modica (Ragusa) (Lomax and Carpitella 2000: tracks 5 and 19; [Audio example 4](#)).

A fairly circumscribed but very significant and characterizing repertoire is that of the *sirbi* (or *sirbie*) of Resuttano (Caltanissetta): songs where two male soloists, accompanied by one Jew's harper performer, alternate singing in turns the couplets of two different songs ([Audio example 6](#)). This peculiar singing style, well known thanks to the research work carried out by Elsa Guggino (1974, 1975) and Ignazio Macchiarella (1993, 1995a, 1995b), have been documented by Antonino Uccello also in other villages of central Sicily, such as Pietraperzia, Barrafranca, and San Cataldo (unpublished recordings made in 1960 are preserved in the archives of Santa Cecilia and RAI in Rome).

The field recordings carried out by Uccello also testify the use of Jew's harp to accompany female solo chants ([Audio example 7](#)), while I didn't find any records, in archives, literature or discography, of Jew's harps performed by Sicilian women. The first known exception to the unwritten rule which assume the *marranzanu* as a male instrument is the well-known folk singer Rosa Balistreri, who was portrayed in the act of playing a *scacciapensieri* on the cover of her album *Canti di Sicilia* (Songs of Sicily), published posthumously in 2000 on compact disc and audio tape (Fig. 39).

The *marranzanata*, or *virtuoso* solo performance, is also very widespread, and in all likelihood it has always been part of the repertoire for this instrument which is particularly well-suited to a personal approach and to self-entertainment, as the Italian name *scacciapensieri* clearly underlines quite appropriately ([Audio examples 3](#) and [5](#); [Video example 3](#)). But the Sicilian instrument lends itself very often to accompany also other instruments, such as the frame drum for dance tunes ([Video example 4](#)), or mandolins and guitars for sonatas that were commonly used in Sicilian barber shops, an important setting for musical entertainment in Sicilian towns and cities throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



**FIGURE 39.** The folksinger Rosa Balistreri portrayed while playing a Jew's harp on the cover of the CD *Canti di Sicilia* (2000).

As early as the 1950s, researchers begin to find a notable presence of the *marranzanu* within instrumental groups formed specifically for performing in front of an audience, such as the urban *orchestrine* (little orchestras) and folk groups, often made up of artisans and specialized musicians linked to the world of “urban entertainment” ([Audio example 8](#)). In these areas, elements of traditional rural folklore are filtered, but rearranged to make them more suitable for the new contexts of fruition. With the progressive disintegration of traditional “music making” contexts, orchestras and folk groups have often become the sole outlet for an instrumental art characterized by a complex playing technique and by the great virtuosity of some performers such as the aforementioned Tremoglie from Leonforte and Giuffrida from Catania, but also Antonino Manfrè from Resuttano and others (Leydi 1970: track A/8; Bonanzinga 2004: track 6).

## 7. Some concluding remarks

In parallel to the rapid decline of the so called agro-pastoral civilization, during the last century the Sicilian *scacciapensieri* had gradually assumed an important role as a symbol of a specific kind of “Sicilian-ness” which was as much fashionable as it was ambiguous: a mixture of rural archaism, ignorance, and simplicity, seasoned with a widespread flavor of Mafia: not the real one, of murder and oppression, but the Mafia of movies, television, and cabaret, which everyone can simulate with a marked Sicilian accent, a crooked *coppola* cap, the *lupara* shotgun over the shoulder, and an awkward – and



most of the times clumsy – sound of Jew's harp. A crucial contribution to the national and international diffusion of this stereotype of the Sicilian *picciottu* (hoodlum) was made by movies like *Salvatore Giuliano* by Francesco Rosi (1961) and the trilogy of *The Godfather* by Francis Ford Coppola (1972, 1974, 1990). This process went along with the progressive disappearance of artisans and master craftsmen capable of – or willing to – manufacture good quality musical instruments, and the parallel inflation and mass distribution of serially produced instruments, available at low prices in all the stalls and souvenir-shops located near touristic attractions and archaeological sites. Towards the end of the Twentieth century, however, Sicily also witnessed the phenomenon of “new folk revival”, which on the one hand created the conditions for a selective survival of some traditional music heritage and, on the other, laid the foundations for a radical renewal of the modalities and occasions for using the *marranzano* together with other traditional musical instruments and repertoires.

In addition, there came the rising popularity of so called *world music*, the encounter and confrontation with other musical traditions in which Jew's harps are used in very different ways, and the discovery of an international community of enthusiasts and virtuosi of such instruments, who in 1998 founded the International Jew's Harp Society. All these elements seem to have determined, in the last two decades, an inversion in the perception and use of the *marranzano* in Sicily, which today is increasingly used in a variety of musical genres: from folk to cultivated music, including examples ranging from heavy metal to reggae, from blues and jazz to soundtracks and contemporary avant-garde. The recent release of the full-length movie entitled *The Strange sound of Happiness*, by Sicilian director Diego Panarello (financed through a coproduction involving Sicily, Italy, Germany, and Russia), narrates in an imaginary way the real story of the author's quest for *marranzano*, from his sun-drenched hometown of Augusta (province of Syracuse) to the faraway and frozen lands of Sakha-Yakutia, in Siberia.

This and many other examples seem to suggest that the *marranzanu*, *mariolu*, *ngan-nalarruni*, can acquire nowadays a new value within a virtuous process of “exchange” with other cultures, and is gradually becoming a positive and progressive symbol of Sicilian culture rather than a banner of a stereotypical identity linked to the Mafia and cultural backwardness.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> I wish to thank Anna Vio and Anthony Glass for reviewing and proof-reading my non-native English writing. My debt to Mr. Glass is much deeper than this, considering that he is the person responsible to my first infatuation with this instrument. Without our encounter in Amsterdam in late 1997, this article would have never been conceived. I also want to thank Alessandro Zolt for reviewing the article before publication, spotting a few minor mistakes and clarifying all references to the *ribeba* of Valsesia. My deepest gratitude goes to Sergio Bonanzinga, who originally invited me to write the article and spent long time reviewing and discussing the several versions. Of course all the remaining faults of the article (linguistic or otherwise) are clearly my own responsibility.

## Audio examples

**1. *Stidda lucenti ca non coddì mai* (Shining star that never sets).** [02:06]

*Canzuna* (love song) with Jew's harp. Sung and played by Turi Pandolfini. Recorded by Giorgio Nataletti in Rome, on 2 August 1948. Archivi di Etnomusicologia of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia (former CNSMP): Collection 001, Track 03. The performer, native of Siracusa, sings and plays the *marranzanu* alternatively and simultaneously, describing the song as sung by a *campagnolo* (peasant). This recording, together with a Jew's harp solo, and a song accompanied by *tamburello* (frame drum) belongs to the very first collection of the CNSMP, founded in 1948 (see footnote 45), demonstrating the relevance of the sicilian Jew's harp in the history of Italian ethnomusicology.

**2. *Sona marranzanu, sona* (Play Jew's harp, play).** [02:59]

Serenade with Jew's harp. Sung by Antonino Salpetro with Giacomo Tremoglie (Jew's harp). Recorded by Rino Rodilosso in Leonforte (Enna), on 22 February 1974. Published on a double 45rpm record edited by F. Buscemi and P. Pappalardo: *Folkstudio Leonforte / Sona marranzanu sona* (Disc 2, B side).

**3. *Tarantella*.** [02:12]

Instrumental dance for Jew's harp. Performed by Giacomo Tremoglie. Recorded on cassette tape by Mario Tremoglie in Rome, December 1971, during a live performance for the popular radio show *La Corrida*. Despite the poor audio quality of this document, the remarkable performance by Tremoglie is a very good example of the traditional style of Leonforte (Enna). The performance is also relevant with reference to the status of the Sicilian Jew's harp in the view of the mainstream Italian culture of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**4. *Mi scordu, mi scurdai, scurdatu sugnu* (I forget, I have forgotten, I am forgotten).** [02:56]

Song in the sulfur miners' style (*canzuna a la surfarara*) with Jew's harp. Sung by Rocco Meli with Elio Perconte (Jew's harp). Recorded by Alan Lomax and Diego Carpitella in Sommatino (Caltanissetta), on 6 July 1954. Original recording kept in the Alan Lomax Collection at the Library of Congress (Washington, USA); a digital copy is available in the Archive of the Centro Studi Alan Lomax (Museo Pasqualino, Palermo). A copy of the whole Lomax-Carpitella Italian recordings is retained at the Archivi di Etnomusicologia, Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Collection 024. This is a beautiful example of singing *a la surfarara*, the traditional style of the sulfur miners of Central Sicily. The Jew's harp accompaniment displays a remarkable virtuosity. The recording has been published on compact disc (see Lomax and Carpitella 2000: track 5), with a note by Sergio Bonanzinga in the booklet.

**5. *Marranzanata*.** [01:21]

Jew's harp solo. Performed by Giuseppe Giuffrida. Recorded by Roberto Leydi in Catania, on 28 December 1956. The recording has been published on 33 rpm disc (see Leydi 1970: track A/8). The virtuoso performer Giuseppe Giuffrida from Catania was very well reputed and has been recorded also by Lomax and Carpitella, and many others.

**6. *Sugnu vinutu di luntana via / A menzu di du muntagni n'arcu e un ponte* (I've Come a Long Way / Between Two Mountains a Bow and a Bridge).** [04:40]

Two intertwined love songs (*sirbi*) with Jew's harp. Performed by Epifanio Gallina and Gaetano Trombello (alternating voices) with Antonino Manfrè (Jew's harp). Recorded by Elsa

Guggino in Resuttano (Caltanissetta), on 5 January 1974. The recording has been published on 33 rpm disc (see Guggino 1974: track A/3). This is an example of the peculiar singing style called *sirbi* (or *sirbie*) in Central Sicily: two male singers, accompanied by a Jew's harp player, alternate the couplets of two different songs.

7. *Mi mannasti un cannistru di guai* (You Cause to Me a Basket Full of Troubles). [01:24] *Canzuna* (song) with Jew's harp. Sung by Giovanna Lupo (female voice) with Salvatore Sciarino (Jew's harp). Recorded by Antonino Uccello in Riesi (Caltanissetta), on 2 July 1960. Archivi di Etnomusicologia of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia (former CNSMP): Collection 054, Track 167. This is a rare example of female singer accompanied by Jew's harp, sung in the traditional peasant style of Central Sicily.

8. *Tarantella*. [00:49]

Instrumental dance for Jew's harp. Performed by anonymous players on Jew's harp with guitar, cane flute, and frame drum. Recorded by Antonino Uccello in Sciacca (Agrigento), on 18 April 1966. Archivi di Etnomusicologia of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia (former CNSMP): Collection 099, Track 93. This a typical example of dance tune performed by the traditional *orchestrine* – featuring Jew's harp together with other instruments – still quite common in restaurants and touristic locations all around in Sicily.

Video examples<sup>48</sup>

1. *Sicilian Jew's harp makers at work: procedure to create the slot in the frame*. [01:47]

Excerpt from *La costruzione dello scacciapensieri*, unpublished documentary VHS video by Fabio Tricomi (1998). The video includes images of five different Jew's harp makers from Sicily and one from India (Jaisalmer, Rajasthan). This excerpt shows the crucial phase of the creation of the slot in the frame by the following makers (in order of appearance): the brothers Michele and Giuseppe Guarneri (Pietraperzia, 1994); Ignazio Verona (Catania, 1998); Giuseppe Alaimo (Resuttano, 1998), Carmelo Forestieri (San Cono, 1994).

2. *Giuseppe Alaimo: blacksmith and Jew's harp maker in Resuttano*. [04:29]

Video shooting and editing by Diego Panarello, as research material for the film *The Strange Sound of Happiness* (2017). Field research by Luca Recupero, Resuttano (Caltanissetta), May 2009.

3. *Tarantella*. [01:03]

Performed by Giuseppe Giacca. Filmed by Sergio Bonanzinga in Piedimonte Etneo (Catania), on 3 July 2014. The video shows a remarkable performance of the virtuoso player Giuseppe (Pippo) Giacca, who plays an instrument exceptionally large and heavy custom-built for him by the maker Giuseppe Cannavò (*Peppinu u Lanternaru*).

4. *Tarantella*. [01:51]

Performed by Pippo Giacca (Jew's harp) and Giorgio Maltese (frame drum). Filmed by Sergio Bonanzinga in Linguaglossa (Catania), on 3 July 2014. The video shows an example of the very common instrumental pairing of Jew's harp and frame drum (*tammureddu*).

<sup>48</sup> I wish to thank Sergio Bonanzinga, Diego Panarello, and Fabio Tricomi for the permission to use the video recordings included in this selection.

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