

"We want to give a signal to our territory, to share our vision and set a new standard."

Super Taranta issues a Salentine manifesto

Mauro Durante and Antonio Castrignanó talk with George De Stefano about the changing world of southern Italian music.



Mauro Durante and Antonio Castrignanó, preeminent figures in Salentine music, have launched an exciting new project that celebrates their cultural heritage while taking it to a new level. Their brainchild, the Super Taranta Orchestra, is an ambitious ensemble whose 12 musicians and three dancers comprise many of the foremost artists in Salento's pizzica music and dance.

Durante, the leader of Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino (CGS), the Lecce-based, internationally renowned pizzica ensemble, and Castrignanó, a singer, percussionist, and composer who leads Taranta Sounds, first discussed forming Super Taranta in 2022. Together, they shaped the concept and form of the orchestra. Then, they spoke with the artists they wanted to involve and began rehearsals. All the members of CGS and most of Castrignanó's Taranta Sounds are part of Super Taranta.

But also on board are Enza Pagliara, a well-known singer and percussionist; Federico Laganà, a percussionist with the band Kalascima; and three dancers, Davide Monaco, an expert in the pizzica



scherma (a dance that mimics sword fencing), CGS's Silvia Perrone, and Moira Cappilli. The orchestra gave its first performance in the Salento town of Calimera in June 2023. In February 2024, it played a sold-out show at Alcatraz, a major venue in Milan.

Mauro Durante



Antonio Castrignanó

I contacted Durante and Castrignanó for an interview about Super Taranta. They decided that rather than answer my questions individually, they'd draft joint answers as a "sort of manifesto" since they envision the project as an expression of a movement rather than just a supergroup. By movement, they mean "all the musicians, singers, dancers, fans, professionals and amateurs who are part of the traditional music scene from Salento."

The two artists sought each other out because "we felt it was time to give a signal of union to our community and to give them voice, from below. A voice that can tell of the beauty, the oppression and the strength of our land. It's important that our

movement is represented by artists, researchers, and scholars, who are self-managed, without any political interference." The reference to politics raises an issue voiced by other southern Italian artists whose music doesn't have corporate backing but needs some institutional support. When elected officials provide *patrocino* (sponsorship) for an event or festival, they too often want control as the price of support.

The popularity of Salento's pizzica has transcended regional and national boundaries; CGS, in particular, has made it an international style, performing throughout Europe, North and South America, the Middle East, Japan, and Australia. Durante and Castrignanó formed Super Taranta at a time "when our music is at its historical peak in terms of numbers and relevance. But we believe that our movement needs different points of reference."



"Super Taranta has more than one meaning," they explain. "It's the celebration of the Taranta, its power, its legend. All of us in Super Taranta are united by the love and passion

for a music, a dance, a culture that today can be identified under the label Taranta. Also, the word ‘super,’ besides being an exaltation of the Taranta itself, refers to going beyond (*superare*) any geographical borders, and overcoming the narrow and closed folkloristic borders mainstream media often relegated it to.”

The project, say Durante and Castrignanó, responds to an urgent issue: the need to “take good care of what has been handed down to us from the past” and “to pass it on to the future generations.”

“Our music has been too often misused, leaving behind a conceptual void that poses a danger to our oral memory. This legacy might fall apart if the main focus becomes aping televised festivals or Italian mainstream pop. We want to give a signal to our territory, to share our vision and set a new standard.”

The allusion to televised festivals and mainstream pop reflects a common sentiment among the Salento music community that the major showcase of pizzica and other Salentine music, the annual La Notte Della Taranta, has lost its way. Since its founding in 1998 as a celebration of Salentine music and dance, La Notte has become Italy’s leading traditional music festival as well as one of Europe’s major festivals. After a series of concerts and other events in various Salentine towns, La Notte culminates in a grand finale, a “Concertone” held in the Salento town of Melpignano that typically attracts around 200,000 attendees. Millions of viewers in Italy and abroad watch the show via live broadcasts on Italian TV.



Enza Pagliara

The Concertone features a thirty-piece orchestra comprising many of Salento’s best musicians, singers, and dancers. Each year, the foundation that runs the festival selects a *maestro concertatore* (concertmaster), a musician who arranges and reinterprets classics of the Salentine tradition. The concertmaster is usually Italian, but others, such as British guitarist Phil Manzanera, jazz composer and keyboardist Joe Zawinul, and former Police drummer Stewart Copeland, have directed the orchestra. Each Concertone also presents singers from other parts of Italy and abroad.

Critics claim that the guest artists, who in recent years have included Italian pop stars il Volo, Diodato, Elodie, Mahmood, and Marco Mengoni, often have no connection to Salentine music and are selected because of their celebrity and crowd-drawing potential. They point to a lack of artistic vision and cultural discernment, some saying the Concertone, the festival's main event, has taken on a showbiz glitziness reminiscent of Italy’s Sanremo pop festival. Having seen recent editions on Italian TV, I’m inclined to agree, notwithstanding strong performances by some veteran Salento artists. La Notte’s critics also say that the televised Concertone's high media visibility promotes a skewed representation of Salento’s music that emphasizes entertainment over cultural heritage and the social messages in pizzica.

Antonio Castrignanó, in a 2023 interview in the [Guardian](#), claimed the Concertone, in recent years, has been structured to appeal to commercial TV audiences, which accounts for the presence of acts that have little to do with pizzica. “It obliges them to invite pop singers who went to Sanremo,” he said. “I don’t want to resemble Sanremo—otherwise, I’d have gone there myself.”

Super Taranta aims to celebrate Salentine musical



Rocco Nigro

culture in a project that is “unique, contemporary, and urgent.” But how to bring so many musicians together and coordinate such an ambitious project, since Durante and Castrignanó lead their own bands, both of which are often on the road? “It’s not easy. We all have many gigs and commitments, and it’s complicated to find dates when we are all free. But ‘want is power,’ and we are motivated by a strong belief in what we are doing.” It helps that both artists collaborate well. “We try to help each other with any side of the work, from management duties to more musical ones. We get along well and just follow our natural inclinations, letting the other do what he’s good at. It’s great to share any idea, melody, doubt or issue, especially when you complement each

other.”

The Orchestra’s *canzoniere* (songbook) comprises traditional Salento songs in new arrangements, new compositions written for Super Taranta, and also the best-known songs from the repertoires of CGS, Castrignanó, and Enza Pagliara. “In a three-hour show, we have the luxury of featuring five amazing singers [CGS’s Alessia Tondo, Giancarlo Paglialunga, and Emanuele Licci, Pagliara, and Castrignanò], the musicianship of everyone, and three wonderful dancers who are one with the band.” If not a full three-hour course, fans will get to sample at least some of the orchestra’s repertoire when it releases its debut album.

Super Taranta has played only a few shows, but the audience response has been “epic.” “People felt our shows were kind of historic. Thousands of people came to Calimera last year for our debut, and we sold out the Alcatraz in Milan in February with people coming from all over Italy! It’s incredible to feel this love, this enthusiasm. It’s proof we are on the right path.”

Photos: Valentina Viola Doria

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Antonio Castrignanó: [Babilonia](#)

Rachele Andrioli & Rocco Nigro: [Maletiempu](#)

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