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The Lira in Calabria. A Historical and Ethnomusicological State of the Art

The lira, a bowed string instrument, shares similarities with the rabab and rebec but has a distinct legacy, notably in Calabria, Southern Italy – the only region in Western Europe where it remains in regular use. Historically linked to Greek and Byzantine traditions, the lira is widespread in the Eastern Mediterranean, where it has adapted to different regional playing styles. This essay examines the Calabrian lira from three perspectives: its organological and historical development, its traditional construction techniques, and its role in rural society. The organological section traces the lira's ancient origins, its evolution through cultural exchanges and its unique place in Calabria. The construction analysis highlights local craftsmanship, aesthetic choices and the instrument's transformation during the twentieth-century folk revival. Ethnomusicological insights reveal its use in social and religious contexts, accompanying dances, pastoral songs and lamentations. This study underscores the lira as a cultural artefact, reflecting historical, social and individual dynamics. It argues for integrating ethnographic and organological approaches to better understand the lira's multifaceted cultural significance and its enduring role as a vessel of Calabrian identity and tradition.

Introduction (A. F.)

The lira is a musical instrument that shares characteristics with the rabab and the rebec, both in its construction and in its use. It has often been assumed to be of Greek or Byzantine heritage,[1] becoming in some cases even a symbol of Hellenic identity. Our contribution here aims at presenting the lira in a comprehensive way in order to provide a general overview of the characteristics and use of an instrument that, unlike the rabab and the rebec, is still quite widespread in several cultural and musical contexts in the Eastern Mediterranean. We will focus specifically on the lira as it is known in Calabria in Southern Italy, which is the only region in Western Europe where it has remained in regular use.

Our paper will be divided into three parts: in the first, by Amedeo Fera, we will present the instrument from an organological and historical perspective in order to deduce both the features common to the lira family and the regional differences that can be observed when comparing different versions of the same instrument. This section will also offer an historical overview of its origins and a survey of the instruments that the term lira came to designate in Europe during the Middle Ages and Early Modern period. Vincenzo Piazzetta is the author of the second section, which is specifically dedicated to the construction of the Calabrian lira. This section will also discuss the interaction between culturally transmitted elements and individual

1 See e.g. Farmer 2012.

choices in the traditional construction process. Finally, the third part, written by Gabriele Trimboli together with Amedeo Fera, is dedicated to the traditional use of the instrument in the rural society of Calabria as recorded by ethnomusicological research.

The lira. A geographical and historical survey (A. F.)

In her article on the lira in *Grove Music Online*, Margaret Downie Banks defines it as a "Short-necked fiddle of Greece".[2] Downie distinguishes between a pear-shaped instrument, found in the Greek islands and in the northern part of the mainland, and a bottle-shaped fiddle found at the border with Turkey, called the Pontiaki lyra (or Karadeniz kemençe in Turkish). Both have three strings and are carved from a single piece of wood, though these two variants also differ in a way that directly affects their playing technique. While the Pontiaki lyra has a fingerboard and the player's fingers push the strings against it, the pear-shaped variety is characterised by the absence of a fingerboard, implying that the player's left-hand technique involves the nails pushing the strings from the side rather than stopping them against a fingerboard. This same 'sideways' technique can be found in other instruments that are similar to the lira, such as the Indian sarangi and the Polish suka. From here on, we shall designate only the pear-shaped type as a lira.

Although its origins are clearly quite ancient, this instrument can be observed today in many variants that have been adapted to the playing style of the area in which they are used: in Istanbul, for example, we find the Politiki lyra (Klasik kemençe in Turkish), an instrument with a very short scale length and a vaulted profile that was adapted to the melodic style of the Turkish "ince saz" ensembles.[3] In Bulgaria we find the gadulka. Originally a folk fiddle, it was developed further in the twentieth century by adding resonant strings. The gadulka is now played in professional folk ensembles and orchestras, often in a virtuosic style.[4] In Crete, the lyre still has a central place in the musical culture of the island, and it was developed during the twentieth century by incorporating elements from the violin such as the scroll and the fingerboard (though it is fingered as in older models by pressing the strings from the side with one's fingernails).[5] More recently, thanks to the musician Ross Daly and the luthier Stelios Petrakis, a new kind of lyre with sympathetic strings has been developed and is now widespread among players in Crete and abroad.[6]

Finally, instruments that probably remained closer to the more archaic versions of the lira are found in the Balkans (kemane or cemane), in Croatia (ljierica), in Thrace (lyra) and in Calabria (lira). They are normally played in folk-revival contexts or rural environments. Calabria is the westernmost place in which this instrument is still played. With the exception of Calabria, we could label the lira's area of diffusion as 'Eastern-Mediterranean', roughly spreading from Western Turkey to the Dalmatian coast.

No clear accounts exist of how and when the instrument was developed. Its name is obviously linked to the lyra, that ancient, plucked instrument of Classical Antiquity in Greece and Rome. So it is possible that when the bow was introduced in Europe and the Middle-East, it was initially applied to the instruments that were at hand, resulting in bowed versions of them.

2 Downie Banks 2001.
3 Feldman 2001.
4 The Bulgarian radio folk orchestra, for example, includes a large number of Gadulka players. See CM n.d.
5 For a detailed discussion of the playing technique and the influence of the violin on the Cretan lira, see Magrini n.d.
6 See SdL 2022.

This is evident in the Scandinavian versions of the bowed lyre such as the Finnish jouhikko and the Estonian talharpa that still maintain the form of the plucked lyres used in Antiquity.[7]

The 'Mediterranean' interpretation of the bow suggests that its introduction changed the shape of the ancient instrument and its playing technique. The ancient lyre had probably already developed into a long-necked instrument or lute by the time the bow was introduced in the Mediterranean region in around the tenth century. The members of the lute family were in fact still designated by the terms "chelys" or "testudo" in Latin (which were also used for ancient, plucked lyres).[8] Chelys/testudo was used interchangeably to designate a bowed or a plucked instrument. This instrument's relationship with the ancient version of the lyre, which could explain the persistence of its name, lies in the body of the instrument, which was shaped like a bowl, recalling the mythological invention of the instrument by Hermes, using a tortoise shell.[9]

According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*,

> [t]he *rabāb* reached Europe by two routes. A pear-shaped variety was adopted in the Byzantine Empire in the 9th century as the lira, spreading westward and possibly giving rise to the medieval fiddle. A boat-shaped variety, still played in northern Africa, was introduced by the Arabs to Spain in the 11th century and was played alongside its newly developed European descendant, the rebec, until the 14th century.[10]

This general idea needs to be framed against the most recent research in the cultural history of the Mediterranean that emphasises the high degree of hybridisation and cultural exchange that existed among the different ethnic groups in this geographical area. As Dwight Reynolds observes,

> We must […] begin thinking in terms of 'complex genealogies' that examine historical documentation removed from the communitarian boundaries that have so often been forced – awkwardly and misguidedly – on the evidence.[11]

As already noted above, while the instrument known as the lira has been strongly associated with Hellenic culture since its earliest mentions in the Arabic treatises of the tenth century, it also has clear connections to the rabab and the rebec. Henry George Farmer in fact describes a 'Pear-Shaped Viol' in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* under the term 'rabab':

> The Pear-Shaped Viol. Probably, the earliest Arabic reference to this instrument is that made by Ibn Khurradādhbih (d. ca. 912) who, […] says that the Byzantines had a wooden instrument of five strings called the *lūra* which was identical with the *rabāb* of the Arabs […]. It was this form of the *rabāb*, probably, with which al-Fārābī (d. 950) deals (see Land, *Researches*, 130, 166). He gives full details of both the *accordatura* and scales. We know little about this instrument in Arabic-speaking lands after the 13th-14th centuries, until it is described by Niebuhr (i, 143; Tab. xxvi, D) in the 18th century, and even then it appears to have been favoured only by the Greek population. It had three strings. […] In Turkey, it appears to have been adopted from the Greeks, possibly in the 17th century, and with the *ʿūd* and *lawta* plays a prominent part in concert music to-day (Lavignac, 3015).[12]

7 See Nieminen 2007.
8 See Harwood 2001 and Anonymous 2001.
9 See for example *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, vv. 41–59.
10 Zelazko n.d.
11 Reynolds 2009, p. 97.
12 Farmer 2012.

We can perhaps consider the instruments known under the names lira, rabab and rebec as variations of the same idea that could assume specific connotations according to local and ethnic traditions. The earliest examples of rebec-type instruments in pictorial sources closely resemble what is now known as the lira, except for the fact that they are played in a *da braccio* position rather than between the legs. Works of art from the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Italy, Spain, France and England[13] show instruments that are equipped with three strings and a flat pegbox but seem not to have a fingerboard or a nut. At the same time, some depictions of the rabab (specifically those in the Cappella Palatina dating back to the twelfth century) share common elements with the lira, such as its pear-shaped body.

In this sense, Calabria in around the year 1000 would have been a veritable cultural melting pot: it was a Greek cultural stronghold situated between Sicily (which was dominated by the Arabs) and Campania (which was under Byzantine rule but still had a strong Lombardian footprint). Unfortunately, we do not have any account of the presence of this instrument in Calabria during that period, though we know that cultural exchange and even mixed marriages were quite frequent. As Gioacchino Strano writes:

> the coexistence between Christian and Islamic communities was usual in Reggio's diocese: alongside clashes, violences and prisoner exchanges there were also mixed marriages between Muslims and Christian women […].[14]

After the Normans conquered Southern Italy in 1060, they tried to unify these cultural tendencies within a single political entity. The Cappella Palatina in Palermo, already mentioned above, and the Patìrion abbey near Rossano in Calabria, are interesting examples of how the new rulers tried to create a synthesised artistic language by absorbing cultural traits from the ethnic groups already inhabiting their newly founded kingdom. The idea of elaborating a new form of artistic expression by absorbing such heterogeneous cultural elements indirectly confirms Reynolds's idea of "complex genealogies".

During the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, the terms "lyra" and "lira" that we find in European sources came to designate a wide family of musical instruments ranging from the lute (Tinctoris, *De Inventione et usu Musicae,* ca 1487) to bowed instruments such as the "lira da braccio", the "lirone" or "lyra viol", or the hurdy-gurdy (Virdung, *Musica getutscht,* 1511). A lyra is mentioned twice in a vernacular poem contained in an illuminated manuscript held at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana: the depictions offered show rebec-like instruments, seemingly without a fingerboard and with a flat pegbox (in one case), equipped with three to four strings.[15] A one-string, pear-shaped 'lyra' is also depicted in Martin Gerbert's *De cantu et musica sacra* (1774).[16]

Despite many differences in construction and style, the bowed instruments that were referred to as lyre seem to have had a common playing technique that involved the use of a drone note against a melody. This is basically how the lira is still played in the Balkans and in Calabria. The old Cretan lyre (liraki) was also played in that way, before the 'common' lyre (lyra koine) was

13 For a survey of these depictions see Plastino 1994, appendix A.

14 "[…] la coesistenza fra le comunità cristiane e islamiche era usuale nella diocesi di Reggio, in cui accanto agli scontri, alle violenze e agli scambi di prigionieri si assisteva anche a matrimoni misti fra musulmani e donne cristiane" (Strano 2020, p. 77). Translated into English by Amedeo Fera.

15 MS Urb. Lat. 899, fol. 59r and 64v. This manuscript was written in the second half of the 15th century as it contains an account of the wedding of Costanzo Sforza and Camilla d'Aragona in 1475.

16 Gerbert is here referring to a depiction contained in a lost mediaeval manuscript of the 9th century from St. Blasien, see Plastino 1994, p. 200, No. 19.

developed in the mid-twentieth century that is widespread today. The changes made to the instrument also brought about a new playing technique involving mainly single-string melodic playing.[17] The older instruments are normally tuned in fifths with a re-entrant tuning (e.g. *a'* – *d'* – *g'*), the middle string being used as a drone.[18]

It is not at all clear why the lira in the western part of the Mediterranean is found exclusively in Calabria. Analogies with similar instruments found in the Balkans and in Greece are so striking that it seems that the Calabrian instrument must in some way be connected to an Eastern tradition. To date, there are no traces of the lira, neither in pictorial nor textual sources, that can be interpreted unequivocally as proof of the presence of this instrument in Calabria in older times. We only know that this instrument was already in use there at the beginning of the twentieth century[19] and that it was present in a quite restricted part of the region, namely in two independent areas, both located roughly in the central, southern part of Calabria. The first of these areas, in the province of Vibo Valentia, is on the coast of the Poro peninsula; the second is the Locride sub-region in the south-eastern coastal area.

There are basically two prime hypotheses to explain the presence of this instrument in Italy. Goffredo Plastino thinks that the lira that has been preserved only in a small area of Calabria up until recent times is the same instrument that we find in many pictorial sources of the Middle Ages in Europe.[20] Ettore Castagna instead maintains that the instrument was imported from Greece by the refugees who arrived in Italy after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople and that it has subsequently been integrated into the local culture due to the strong Hellenic heritage of the Southern part of the region.[21] It is not at all easy to take a position in this debate, because there are no concrete sources for the existence of the lira in Calabria until recent times.

Construction features of Calabrian traditional instruments (V. P.)

In our opinion, analysing how a musical instrument is built should be a multidisciplinary task. A variety of elements can have an impact on the construction choices made by the luthier. More specifically, we can consider an instrument as a synthesis or materialisation of cultural, historical and social factors ranging from the aesthetics of its form to the sonic idea that directs the shaping of the instrument. Knowledge transmitted from one generation to the next and the personal choices of the instrument-maker also come together to define the specific characteristics of an instrument. The importance of all these cultural elements cannot be stressed enough, since instruments that have almost the same form can sound very different if they are set up differently. The rural society in which the lira originated and the aesthetic values that were shared in that particular cultural community do not exist anymore in Calabria. A luthier wanting to make the instrument today must confront the fact that the cultural context around it has changed completely.

We shall here attempt to analyse the construction features of the lira, more specifically in its original rural context, while being aware that the instrument has changed quite drastically over the last 40 years in terms of aesthetics and construction techniques. Following its revival in the

17 See Magrini n.d.

18 See e.g. Sarris et al. 2010, p. 102.

19 The oldest account of the presence of this instrument in Calabria is contained in a letter of the anthropologist Raffaele Corso dated 1911. This letter is cited at length in *LiC*-CD.

20 See Plastino 1994, appendix F (Strumenti), pp. 275ff.

21 Castagna 2016.

1980s and '90s, the instrument acquired a standardised shape and started to be built using current woodworking techniques. We shall subsequently compare it with similar instruments from the broader Mediterranean region to highlight the similarities and differences between them.

The following analysis is based on personal observations made of several instruments found during our ongoing field research in the so-called Locride sub-region in the south-western coastal area of Calabria.[22] To date, we have measured and drawn 16 instruments that were built between the 1850s and 1990s. The scholarly literature about the lira does not deal extensively with either its construction features or its organological characteristics.[23]

In its construction, the lira found in Calabria undoubtedly belongs to the same family of instruments found across the Eastern Mediterranean, being carved from a single piece of wood and generally pear-shaped with sound-holes that are typically circular or semi-circular. The absence of the fingerboard, and the fact that the neck and the body of the instrument are obtained from the same monoxyle trunk, makes these two elements less differentiated than might be the case, say, with a violin or a viol. The pegdisk is flat, with the three sagittal pegs inserted from behind; there is generally no nut. The Calabrian version of the lira, unlike the modern Cretan lyra or the modern Bulgarian gadulka, generally has two different string lengths, the middle string being longer than the other two. The strings normally have the same diameter and are fixed to a tailpiece. The bridge is quite flat, made of a thin piece of wood, and placed between the sound-holes. The soundpost is positioned through the sound-hole between the right end of the bridge and the bottom of the soundbox. The soundboard is flat and is glued to the instrument, often through a groove made on the body's contour. In many cases, the soundboard is slightly thinner towards the edges. In some cases, the soundboard is attached to the body without any groove on it. These are quite common elements among other kinds of lyre found in the Mediterranean.

The Calabrian instrument is nevertheless notable for specific elements that are found only in this geographical area. To begin with, the pegdisk is generally triangular. Although other forms have been observed, such as circular or rectangular, and while it has sometimes been sculpted with anthropomorphic figures, the triangle is by far the most common shape.[24]

This variability of forms alongside the recurrence of certain types and decorative motifs can be explained both by a desire to personalise the instrument on the part of the musician, depending on the carving ability of the instrument builder, and by the necessity to adhere to precise features as dictated by the cultural traditions of the instrument as acknowledged within a specific community. This tension between individualisation and an attachment to shared models is a general characteristic of the musical culture of Calabria. We can observe it, for example, in the musical phrasing of lira and zampogna players. Very often, their playing style can be recognised as belonging to specific families or villages, though at the same time each player demonstrates peculiarities depending on their individual taste. The same is true of their instruments. The liras in particular, since they have more often been built by the musicians themselves, reveal similarities within certain families or areas.[25] It is also possible to hypothesise the evolution of certain shapes within a specific area. If we compare the oldest instrument we know – which can be dated by genealogical means to around the second half of the eighteenth century – with an instrument from the same area built two centuries later, we will notice that the forms used

22 Locride means the rural area comprising the towns of Locri, Siderno and Gerace.

23 Some general considerations are contained in Plastino 1994 and in *LiC*-CD.

24 See Plastino 1994, Appendix B.

25 See *LiC*-CD, e.g. regarding the instruments of the cousins Pasquale Jervasi and Antonio Martino (ibid., p. 24) or the lire of various members of the Fragomeni family (ibid., pp. 22f.).

in the pegdisk changed over the time. The older shape is long and pointy and has bigger 'ears', i.e. the wooden protrusions at the base of the pegdisk. Over time, these 'ears' became smaller and changed their shape while the pegdisk got shorter (see Figs. 1–2).

Fig. 1 Lira found in Contrada Drusù (Siderno, presumably second half of the eighteenth century), olive (?) and fir, overall length 68 cm (Photo: Vincenzo Piazzetta).

Fig. 2 Lira by Giuseppe Fragomeni (Siderno, second half of the twentieth century), cherry, fir and beech wood, overall length 70 cm (Photo: Gabriele Trimboli).

Another characteristic element of the Calabrian instrument is the soundpost: it is the only case of a lyre in which this element is made of a segment of reed (*Arundo donax*). The soundpost is normally removed after the instrument has been played. In all other cases, this element is made of wood and it is not movable as is the case in the Calabrian lira.[26] The choice of reed as material, which has a lower density than wood, contributes to the characteristic timbre of the instrument. The tailpiece is made of leather and is fixed to a protrusion carved on the bottom part of the body.[27] In other traditions, the strings are attached to the instrument by means of a metal wire or fixed to a plaquette made of wood or bone. If we look inside the soundbox, we will notice certain things that differentiate the Calabrian instrument from its Mediterranean relatives. First, the junction between the body and the neck of the instrument has a 90° angle in Calabria, whereas it is rounded in other instruments such as the kemençe and the gadulka. Secondly, the internal part of the soundbox is usually flat, independent of the external profile of the instrument, which can be rounded.[28]

26 There are in fact a few examples of wooden soundposts in Calabria. See Plastino 1994, Appendix B, Fig. 20.
27 In some surviving instruments, the tailpiece is simply nailed to the bottom of the instrument.
28 Plastino 1993, p. 443.

Finally, there is the matter of the forms and woods used for the construction. As we have already mentioned, the lira was mostly a self-built instrument, making it difficult to define a standard model to which all other extant instruments can be referred. Nevertheless, these forms can be categorised into three main typologies: pear-shaped, bottle-shaped and arrow-shaped,[29] the first of these being the most common. The bottom of the soundbox can be either flat or vaulted.

The timbre of this kind of instrument is influenced very much by the choice of woods used in its construction. In Calabria, the most common woods used for the body were olive, elder, walnut, eucalyptus, cherry and cypress, though poplar and willow were also used, these being easier to carve. As for the construction techniques, we can deduce from oral accounts that the tools needed to build the lira were quite simple. It was normally carved out of a log cut in half, then its form was roughly shaped with the aid of a saw and/or a hatchet. The body was subsequently hewn out with a chisel and finally refined with glass, rasps or planes. The soundboard was normally made of spruce, but other woods were also used, such as pine, elder or even olive wood. Specific wood choices can be connected to local traditions.[30]

This aesthetic consciousness seems to have been lost after the culture of the lira in Calabria was revived at the end of the twentieth century. The sonic qualities of the most recent instruments seem to be more the result of a choice of the person who builds it, rather than the result of any interaction between personal taste and ability and the cultural models of a specific area or family.

In order to better explain this dynamic, we can refer to the case of another instrument. Unlike the lira, the *conflentana* bagpipe is still quite widespread in Calabria, allowing for it to be studied in field research. It is a particular kind of zampogna bagpipe that is used in a relatively small area of Central Calabria. Compared to other types of bagpipes that are extant in the region and are often built by semi-professional instrument-makers, the *conflentana* is a relatively easy-to-build instrument. It is characterised by the use of single reeds and was often made by shepherds who also decorated the pipes with their knives. Although this kind of instrument was relatively standardised, we can observe that there were two elements that changed according to the area in which the instrument was built. The first is the geometric pattern used for decoration, the second is the length of the reed. This last feature, despite being seemingly only a detail, drastically changes the timbre of the instrument. The same bagpipe will produce a quite different sound in terms of brightness and volume, depending on whether it is given a longer or a shorter reed. The preference for a particular kind of timbre is the result of a shared, local aesthetic and it is obviously impossible to understand these subtle yet important differences if the cultural context that produced them does not exist anymore.

We may conclude that referring to the larger musical context and interpreting its aesthetic values is crucial to understanding how a musical instrument is conceived and adapted to the needs of a particular community. The form that an instrument takes, even if it is very simple, is merely the most obvious aspect of a complex, multifaceted cultural understanding of musical objects that are made manifest through materials, techniques and constructive choices.

29 See also Plastino 1994, pp. 85–87, for aspects related to typology.

30 An olive soundboard was observed just once during my own field research on a *lira* made by Domenico Romeo.

The lira in Calabria, an ethnomusicological state of the art (A. F., G. T.)

The first organological description of the lira as a three-string folk fiddle in Calabria comes from Raffaele Corso, an ethnologist from Nicotera in Central Calabria. In 1911, Corso sent such an instrument – with an accompanying letter – to Lamberto Loria in Rome for the "Mostra di Etnografia Italiana".[31] Corso's lira, from the western, coastal part of the region, is still held by the Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari "Lamberto Loria". Apart from being mentioned in a brief article by Raffaele Lombardi Satriani in 1930 and in an article by Claudio Ahrens in 1978,[32] this instrument remained largely unknown until a group of young researchers started an ethnographic campaign in Calabria some 70 years after Corso's account in an endeavour to find the last local players of this instrument. This research group called itself "Cooperativa Raffaele Lombardi Satriani" (Coop. R.L.S.) and began its work in the western coastal area of Central Calabria that was the point of origin of the instruments described in the literature. They were initially unsuccessful because the lira was only played in that area until the first half of the twentieth century.

The research team found the instrument they sought in another part of the region instead: in the area between Siderno, Locri and Gioiosa Jonica, on the south-eastern coast. The lira was still being played there by a handful of old people in a rural environment, though only two of them still played it in public. The results of that research, the only collection of field recordings of the old lira players of Calabria that has been published,[33] is to date the sole account of the traditional playing style of the region. In 1994, Goffredo Plastino, one of the members of the Coop. R.L.S., published a monograph about the instrument entitled: *Lira. Uno strumento musicale tradizionale calabrese*, which is still the only work entirely dedicated to the tradition of the lira in Calabria. The ethnographic research conducted on this instrument provoked renewed interest in it, and it is now played by young people once more, though mostly in folk revival contexts.

The traditional playing style of the lira, generally speaking, employs the melodic-harmonic vocabulary common to other instruments used in Calabria such as the bagpipe and the diatonic accordion. It comprises varying short melodic modules traditionally called *passate*. The strings are played in couples (first/second or second/third) and the melodies are fingered mainly on the highest string and only occasionally on the middle string. The use of the second/third string is limited to cadences and is normally employed as a final tonic chord. These instruments have a quite limited range (about a sixth), and the melodic phrases are mainly developed within a major pentachord (e.g. *g* to *d'*; mixolydian in modal terms), whereas in the Eastern Mediterranean the pentachord is normally Dorian (*a* to *e'* with the *g* as a leading tone), though a Mixolydian pentachord is used for modulations. If we compare the Calabrian playing style with, say, the phrasing of the Thracian lyra, it seems that in Calabria elements from a more ancient modal tradition (such as the use of a pentachord and the drone) have been combined with a more recent tonal influence: the constant reiteration of the cadence using the dominant and the tonic can be in fact linked to a more tonal conception of the melodies.

31 See Plastino 1994, pp. 93–95.
32 Lombardi Satriani 1930 and Ahrens 1978.
33 *LiC*-CD.

The traditional use of the lira in the Locride subregion (G. T.)

In traditional rural society, the lira was either played unaccompanied (very often in domestic contexts) or together with other instruments (mainly on public occasions). The instruments that were used together with the lira were the *chitarra battente* (a guitar with no bass strings, characterised by its re-entrant tuning with a variable number of single or double strings), the *chitarra francese* (a 6-string guitar with steel strings), the mandolin, flutes or double flutes, frame drums (normally smaller compared to those used in other areas and not excessively loud), castanets and the so-called Jew's harp (*trumba d'i zingari* or *lira a vùcca* in Calabrian dialect). These instruments share the same volume range and were often played in small ensembles. More recently, the lira has been played with the *organetto a 8 bassi* and the *organetto a 4 bassi* (the 8-bass and 4-bass accordion) that have a lower volume compared to the *organetto a 2 bassi* that is otherwise commonly used in the area. The zampogna (bagpipe), the pipita (folk oboe) and percussion instruments such as bass and snare drums or cymbals are traditionally not played with the lira: this happens instead in Thrace, for example, where the lyre is normally played with the davul (bass/snare drum) and the gajde (bagpipe).

The lira was played in the same performing situations as other folk instruments in the same region. Generally speaking, it was played in relatively private contexts, leaving more public events such as open-air festivals to the bagpipes and the drum band (the so called *fanfarra* or *banda pilusa*). In the past, almost every celebration of public and private events involved lira players. The following list provides an overview of the social gatherings that normally involved the use of the lira:

- family celebrations such as serenades, weddings, christenings, birthdays or funerals;
- religious festivities like Christmas and Easter celebrations, festivals of the protector or patron saint;
- profane festivals like New Year's celebrations (groups of musicians would go from house to house to sing a greeting song called *Li boni festi*) or Carnival (traditionally, the lira accompanied the *farsa*, a folk comedy during which funny songs were sung);
- during work, especially in mills;
- informal celebrations such as the *schiticchiu*, a kind of snack made with friends or in taverns (*putihe*) where it was possible to drink wine;
- on the west coast of Calabria there are also accounts of the use of the lira to heal people affected by the *tarantolismo*, a kind of mental disorder that, according to folk medicine, was caused by a spider's bite.[34]

The best-known lira players of the area were Giuseppe Fragomeni (born in 1923) from Mirto di Siderno, nicknamed "U Fanarra", who often played in an ensemble together with Domenico Tropea (born in 1892, double flutes and voice), Nazzareno Parisi or Nicola Trichilo (*chitarra battente*) and a tambourine player; Pasquale Jervasi (born in 1910), nicknamed "Pascali d'a Cammarera"; and Antonio Martino (born in 1933) from Gioiosa Jonica. The last two were related and shared a similar playing style. The legendary player Francesco Trimboli (unknown date of birth, died in 1964), nicknamed "U Barilli", is remembered as having been the most virtuosic lira player of the area. His playing style was transmitted orally to Domenico Tropea, who sang his typical *passate*, i.e. melodic patterns, to the researchers.[35]

34 See De Martino 1960 on this subject. We find an early account of this practice in Kircher 1650, pp. 218–220.

35 These musicians were recorded by the "Coop. R.L.S." during their research. The recordings are published in *LiC*-CD.

The music played on the lira is almost the same as the other folk repertoire found in the same area. It included:

- *tarantelle* (dance music): probably the main form of instrumental music, characterised by its typical ternary rhythm. This specific rhythmic pattern has a direct influence on the bowing technique.
- *pastorali:* slow instrumental pieces that were often played during festivals for the patron saint or for the Madonna and to celebrate the birth of Christ at Christmas.
- *mottette or muzzètti*: songs dealing with *amuri, gelusìa, spartenza e sdegnu* (love, jealousy, departure and falling out of love), the main poetic genres of Calabrian folk poetry.
- *All'Aria* songs or *sonati a'longa*, i.e. open-air songs: generally love songs that were accompanied by the *lira.* This is considered the most archaic singing and playing style.
- 'begging' songs such as *Li boni festi:* greeting songs sung on New Year's Eve in exchange for food, wine or money.
- 'foreign' musical genres *(forìsi)* like polkas, waltzes and mazurkas that were played by the most virtuosic players.[36]
- *Lodi* for a deceased person: a slow narrative ballad that was sung during funerals. The text of these songs describes the virtues and flaws of the dead (*u bonu e u malu*).

The *Lodi* tradition was not registered by previous ethnomusicological research. I collected a memory of this custom in Marcinà, near Grotteria:

> […] when someone died it was customary to sing the *lodi* for them. Those *lodi*, you know what they were? It was all the deeds that the person had done, the good and the bad ones. When they died, they used to sing those kinds of songs back then […]. I remember that the procession was passing from that road over there. The road was not good, it was a dirt road. They stopped at some point, they put the coffin on the ground and they started to sing the *lodi*. I remember that the dead person was called Carabetta because *Loiciùni* [lira player Luigi Racco] started to cry out loud: 'Mr Domenico Carabetta! I want to sing the *lodi* with my lira for you because you have always been a good person to everyone!' And then he started to play his lira… it was almost like a tarantella, almost.[37]

Throughout the area, though mostly among old people, the proverb "Pari ca ndannu u ti sonanu a lira" is still used. It can be roughly translated as "it seems that someone must play the lira for you", referring to someone being very sad. Although in many places people do not know the origin of this saying, nevertheless it seems connected to the ritual use of the instrument in mourning and could be interpreted as a memory of the custom of playing the lira at funerals. The last event during which the lira was played for mourning happened in 2019. When Francesco Staltari, the last lira player of the old generation passed away, the family requested the present writer, who had been his pupil, to play his beloved instrument during the funeral mass.[38]

36 Plastino (1994, p. 112) names the legendary player Francesco Trimboli as one of the musicians able to play these 'exotic' music genres on his lira.

37 Account of Domenico Gennaro, nicknamed "U Banda", recorded in 2013 by Gabriele Trimboli, translated by the latter.

38 This special occasion was emotionally intense, as Staltari was far more than just a *lira* teacher to his *discepolo*.

Conclusions (A. F., V. P., G. T.)

An instrument like the lira condenses, in an apparently simple material object, an extremely diverse array of cultural practices, construction and playing techniques, sound aesthetics, social meanings and human relationships. As Eliot Bates puts it:

> I argue for taking objects, and particularly musical instruments, seriously […]. Much of the power, mystique, and allure of musical instruments, I argue, is inextricable from the myriad situations where instruments are entangled in webs of complex relationships – between humans and objects, between humans and humans, and between objects and other objects.[39]

The complex web of which Bates talks is generally neglected when it comes to interpreting a musical instrument. Too often, organology deals exclusively with forms, forgetting that those forms, as we have seen, are the result of a heterogeneous array of factors, reflecting cultural customs and individual choices that must be taken into consideration to get a full understanding of musical phenomena. Regarding specifically historical research on musical instruments, adopting an ethnomusicological perspective can enrich the interpretive tools of organology, not necessarily because traditional cultures are generally considered more conservative, but simply because they are living things and can offer an insight into how humans relate to musical objects and into the kind of meaning that these objects can acquire for them. Being conscious of these dynamics can lead us to a better interpretation of musical instruments and musical cultures that have since been lost. In this sense, instruments must be considered meaningful objects, not just tools used to produce sounds. Sue DeVale affirms how instruments might even contain the "essence of society and culture".[40] If we follow DeVale, we should not separate organological investigations from the larger musical and cultural context in which instruments have been used. At the same time, we should see them as mirroring essential cultural traits of the society that generated them and as the shared knowledge of a community.

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39 Bates 2012, p. 364.

40 DeVale 1990, p. 22, see also Bates 2012 p. 366.

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