

# Il tarantismo campano in una lettera di metà settecento

a cura di Mauro Gioielli

Una delle fonti musicali maggiormente utilizzate negli studi sul tarantismo è la tarantella campana inserita in chiusura d'una lettera di Stefano<sup>1</sup> Storace, che nel settembre 1753 fu pubblicata sul mensile inglese *The Gentleman's Magazine*.<sup>2</sup>

L'articolo-lettera apparve contemporaneamente anche in un altro periodico: *The London Magazine*,<sup>3</sup> ma senza la trascrizione musicale.<sup>4</sup> *The Gentleman* e *The London* erano pubblicazioni quasi gemelle, infatti contenevano più articoli identici.

Il titolo con cui è conosciuto il resoconto di Storace è *A genuine letter from an Italian Gentleman concerning the bite of the tarantula*; forse, però, sarebbe meglio considerare come giusta intitolazione quella che si legge nell'indice iniziale di entrambi i magazine, ossia *Bite of the tarantula cured*.

## La genuine letter di Storace

«SIR, according to your desire I send you an account of the effect the bite of a tarantula has upon the human body. I shall only give a distinct detail of all the circumstances that I have seen, having once been instrumental at the cure of a poor plow-man that was bit by that insect.

I'll not undertake to give you any account of the tarantula itself, being sure you are perfectly well acquainted with it, I shall only tell you what has happened in my country, at a small village, called *La Torre della Annunziata*, about ten miles from Naples, where I was at the time the affair I am going to relate happened.

It was in the month of October, a season of the year when all the students in Naples, that have any relations in the country, have leave to visit them. I was one of those that enjoyed the privilege of visiting the place of my nativity, and as I was then studying music in the college of Naples, generally (whenever I went into the country) brought my violin with me.

It happened one day that a poor man was

1 La lettera è firmata col nome di battesimo reso in inglese (Stephen).

2 S. STORACE, *Bite of the tarantula cured. A genuine letter from an Italian Gentleman concerning the bite of the tarantula*, «The Gentleman's Magazine», London, September 1753, pp. 433-434. Diego Carpitella, occupandosi della musica trascritta in chiusura dell'articolo di Storace, afferma 'sbadatamente' che essa fu raccolta «alla fine del '700» (D. CARPITELLA, *L'esorcismo coreutico-musicale del tarantismo*, in E. DE MARTINO, *La terra del rimorso. Contributo ad una storia religiosa del Sud*, Milano 1994 [1<sup>a</sup> ed. 1961], pp. 335-372: 352).

3 S. STORACE, *Bite of the Tarantula cured. A genuine letter from an Italian Gentleman concerning the bite of the tarantula*, «The London Magazine», Dublin, September 1753, pp. 483-485.

4 La lettera di Storace, priva della musica, è stata ristampata più volte, difatti la si può leggere in:  
– *A selection of curious articles from The Gentleman's Magazine*, 3 voll., London 1809, vol. II, pp. 410-412;  
– *Cabinet of curiosities natural, artificial and historical*, 2 voll., Hartford 1822, vol. II, pp. 318-321;  
– *The Manchester Iris. A literary and scientific miscellany*, n. 67, vol. II, May 10, 1823, pp. 151-152;  
– *The Edinburgh Journal of Medical Science*, n. 4, vol. II, October 1826, pp. 441-443 (qui la lettera è riprodotta a completamento d'una annotazione medica di Francisco Mazzolani).

*The Gentleman's Magazine :*

London Gazette  
Readers Town  
Craftsman  
D. Advertiser  
St James's  
Evening Post  
Morning Post  
General Evening Post  
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Illustrated with the draughts of three ancient bridges; *St. Thomas's* chapel on *London* bridge, and a coloured chart of the different governments in the *British* islands, engraved on copper. Also cuts, of a knife that had been swallowed, of the solar eclipse, and a song set to music.

By SYLVANUS URBAN, Gent.

LONDON: Printed by E. CAVE, at St John's Gate.

the hour of the hurt received: and they further assert, that if no one was to undertake to cure him, he would feel the effect of it every day at the same hour of the space of three or four hours, till it would throw him into such madness as to destroy him in about a month's time; some (they say) have lived three months after they have been bit; but the latter I cannot believe, because it never happens that any man is suffered to die by such distemper, the priest of the parish being obliged to play on the fiddle in order to cure them; and it has not been known in the memory of man, that any one is dead of it, but to proceed.

A poor man was taken ill in a street (as I said before) and as the priest was out of the way, several gentlemen begged of me to play for that poor fellow. I could not help going, without offending a number of friends; when I was there I saw a man stretched on the ground, who seemed as if he was just going to expire. The people at the sight of me cried out —play —play the tarantella: (which is a tune made use of on such occasions). It happened that I had never heard

taken ill in the street, and it was soon known to be the effect of the tarantula, because the country people have some undoubted signs to know it, and particularly (they say) that the tarantula bites on the tip or under lip of one's ear, because the tarantula bites one, when sleeping on the ground; and the wounded part becomes black, which happens three days after one is bit, exactly at

not play it. I asked what sort of tune it was? They answered, that it was a kind of jig; I tried several jigs, but to no purpose, for the man was as motionless as before. The people still called out for the *tarantella*. I told them I could not play it, but if any would sing it, I would learn it immediately; an old woman presented herself to me to do the

good office, who sung it in such an unintelligible sound of voice, that I could not form an idea of it; but another woman came, and helped me to learn it; which I did in about ten minutes time, being a short one: but you must observe that while I was a learning the tune, and, happened to feel the strain of the first two bars, the man began to move accordingly, and got up as quick as lightning, and seemed as if he had been awakened by some frightful vision, and wildly stared about, still moving every joint of his body; but as I had not as yet learned the whole tune, I left off playing, not thinking that it would have any effect on the man.

But the instant I left off playing, the man fell down, and cried out very loud, and distorted his face, legs, arms, and every other part of his body, scraped the earth with his hands, and was in such contortions, that clearly indicated him to be in miserable agonies. I was frightened out of my wits, and made all the haste I

could to learn the rest of the tune; which done, I played near him, I mean about four yards from him. The instant he heard me, he rose up as he did before, and danced as hard as any man could do; his dancing was very wild, he kept a perfect time in the dance, but had neither rules nor manner,

only jumped, and runned, too and from, made very comical postures, something like the Chinese dances we have sometimes seen on the stage, and otherwise every thing was very wild of what he did; he sweated all over, and then the people cried out *-faster -faster*, meaning that I should give a quicker motion to the tune, which I did so quick, that I could hardly keep up playing, and the man still danced in time. I was very

much fatigued, and though I had several persons behind me, some drying the sweat from my face, others blowing with a fan to keep me cool, (for it was about two o'clock in the afternoon) others distancing the people that they might not throng about me; and yet notwithstanding all this, I suffered a long patience to keep up such long time, for I played (without exaggeration) above two hours, without the least interval.

When the man had danced about an hour, the people gave him a naked sword, which he applied with the point

in the palm of his hands, and made the sword jump from one hand into the other, which sword he held in equilibrium, and he kept still dancing. The people knew he wanted a sword, because a little before he got it, he scratched his hands very hard, as if he would tear the flesh from them.

**The LONDON MAGAZINE:**



Or, GENTLEMAN'S *Monthly Intelligencer.*

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**MULTUM IN PARVO.**

DUBLIN: Printed for SARAH and JOHN EXSHAW at the *Eagle* on Cork-hill. Of whom may be had, complete Sets from May, 1741.

And are sold by Mr. A. Bury, in Drogheda; Mr. James Scott, in Killeenny; Mr. Joseph Malcom, in Coleraine; Mrs. Fillington, Mr. Sullivan, Mr. Cronin, and Mr. Phinias Barwell, in Cork; Mr. Hey, Mr. Mager, and Mr. Joy, in Belfast; Mr. Stephenson, in Newry; Mr. Dickie, in Armagh; Mr. Ferrar, in Limerick; and Mr. Ramley, in Waterford.



When he had well pricked his hands, he got hold of the sword by the handle, and pricked also the upper part of his feet, and in about five minutes time his hands and feet bled in great abundance. He continued to use the sword for about a quarter of an hour, sometimes pricking his hands, and sometimes his feet, with little or no intermission: arid then he threw it away, and kept on dancing.

When he was quite spent with fatigue, his motion began to grow slower, but the people begged of me to keep up the same time, and as he could not dance accordingly, he only moved his body and kept time; at last after two hours dancing, fell down quite motionless, and I gave over playing. The people took him up and carried him into a house, and put him into a large tub of tepid water, and a surgeon bled him; while he was bathing, he was let blood in both his hands and feet, and they took from him a great quantity of blood: after that they tied up the orifices, put him in a bed, and gave

him a cordial, which they forced down, because the man kept his teeth very close. About five minutes after, he sweated a great deal, and fell asleep, which he did for five or six hours, when he awakened, was perfectly well, only weak from the great loss of blood he had sustained, and four days after he was entirely recovered, for I saw him walking in the streets, and what is remarkable, that he hardly remembered any thing of what had happened to him; he never felt any other pains since, not any one does, except they are bit again by the tarantula.

This is what I know of the tarantula, which I hope will satisfy your curiosity, and as you are a great philosopher may philosophize as you please. I need not make any apology for my bad writing, you must excuse it, considering that it was only to obey your commands: if you have any other, you may dispose of

Sir, Your most humble servant,  
Stephen Storace».



Tarantella di Torre Annunziata, da *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 1753

Nelle stesse campagne Pestane, e specialmente nel luogo detto *Tempe di S. Paolo* trovasi un altro insetto chiamato *tarantola*: ha la figura, e la grandezza de' ragnateli di campagna, di varj colori; ma non ordisce tela, e comparisce nel tempo della messe. Se alcuno ne vien morso, subito resta compreso in tutto il corpo da veleno, che lo crucia con forti dolori senz'altro rimedio che di suoni e balli. Il Paziente dopo aver intesi suoni di varj stromenti, e varie sonate di ballo, finalmente si muove a ballare, con uno che più le dà al genio; si riscalda nel ballo, prorompendo in voci di allegrezza e quasi pazzia, e mostra tutto il suo piacere al ballo, non che alla persona prescelta: finalmente stancato si slancia tra le braccia di due persone all'uopo preparate in piedi; si addormenta subito: dorme poco; si risveglia sano senza nessun dolore, e senza niente ricordarsi di quanto gli è accaduto, menocchè del morso ricevuto. Suol durare il patimento due, e tre giornate, finchè l'istromento, la sonata, la persona non hanno incontrato il di lui piacere. Ho veduto tutto ciò avverato in una donna di anni cinquanta.

Notizie sul tarantismo nel salernitano.

Dal volume di Giuseppe Bamonte, *Antichità pestane*, Napoli 1819, pp. 4-5