

Ethnographic Approaches to Discographic Production in Sardinia, Italy

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The mediatization of music performance has received increasing attention over the last decades.¹ Studies conducted in different musical fields have shown how recording music is not just a way to fix and store sounds, but rather a process that shapes the music itself, affecting how music is conceived, produced, and consumed (Chanan 1995; Taylor 2001; Cook et al. 2009; Borio 2015). The technological mediatization of live music has been mainly investigated in popular music (Kealy 1979; Auslander 2008; Zagorski-Thomas 2014) and, more recently, in Western Art Music (Cook 2001; 2013; Rink 2002; 2005). Less attention has been devoted to traditional and world music,² partly because the recording of orally-transmitted traditional music has too often been intended as the transparent reflection of the performance, especially in the cases of field recordings aimed to capture a ritual or a public event. Recordings collected by ethnomusicologists, anthropologists and folklorists are usually referred to as ‘sound documents’, a term that seems to suggest a greater adherence to the live musical event, when compared, for example, with multi-track recordings that are the result of a long and complex post-production process used primarily in popular music.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss how, even within the domain of traditional music, the processes involved in the mediatization of a musical performance inevitably bring a certain degree of ‘opacity’ that depends both on the constraints of recording technologies and on the ‘performative project’ that shapes every recorded artifact (Bratus 2016). Fundamental for the analysis of the four case studies presented here were my eight years working as manager and sound engineer assistant in a Sardinian recording studio, together with my archival research on historical recordings (Casu and Lutz 2012; Lutz 2015). Drawing on my training as an ethnographer, I argue that an ethnographic approach to the recording studio can make these processes of mediatization more transparent, offering new methodological and theoretical perspectives to address the study of the technological mediatization of musical performance.

1 I use the term ‘mediatization’ instead of ‘mediation’ to place greater emphasis on the effects of media on social and cultural life. For an overview of how these two concepts are used in media studies see Couldry (2008).

2 The first research in this field focused on the ‘World Music’ industry and on non-Western popular music (Manuel 1991; 1993; Feld 1994; 1996).

Recordings of Sardinian folk music

Despite the overall slow development of the recording industry in Italy (Leydi 1996), the activity surrounding the recording of Sardinian folk music has been remarkably robust. Along with other Italian regional music, such as genres performed in the Neapolitan area and Sicily, Sardinian music has been widely documented on wax cylinders, 78rpms, records, reels and digital supports since the first decades of the 20th century.

The oldest recordings of Sardinian folk music are those made in 1918 by soldiers detained in German prison camps during the First World War (Macchiarella e Tamburini 2018). Beginning in 1922, the musician and musicologist Gavino Gabriel promoted the use of the gramophone both as a research tool and for educational purposes (Gabriel 1934; Facci 2018; Lutz 2018). To him we owe the first recordings of *cantu a chiterra* (songs accompanied by guitar) and of different genres of multipart male singing.

Between 1928-1959, 390 records were released for commercial purposes. During this time Italian branches of some of the most important international record labels, such as *Gramophone Company*, *Columbia*, and *Pathé*, began to include recordings of Sardinian musicians in their catalogues (Gualerzi 1982). By the 1960s, a large number of recordings had also been published by local record labels, first on 45 and 33 rpm records, then on cassettes and CDs. Today, the largest archive of Sardinian music has over 6000 recordings.³

Despite such a large corpus, until today no specific research on the mediatization of Sardinian folk music has ever been carried out. The oldest commercial records have been catalogued (Gualerzi 1982; Leydi 1997), and, more recently, specific research has been conducted on recordings from World War One (Macchiarella and Tamburini 2018), on some musical genres such as the *cantu a chiterra* (Angeli 2006), and on recording expeditions carried out in single villages after World War Two (Lutz 2015; Pilosu 2018).⁴ All these studies, however, have mainly focused on the music contained in the recordings, the musical protagonists, and the historical and social context in which the recordings were made. Only in a few cases has specific attention been paid to relations between musicians in the space of the studio, and to the engineers and audio equipment used to create these recordings. Indeed, even in the most recent recordings, no analyses exist which focus on the central importance of sound production in the process of mediatization.

Recording studio and ethnography: Methodological Approaches

Throughout this chapter, I define ‘recording studio’ in a broader, ethnographic sense that goes beyond the scope of the formal recording studio. We usually refer to the recording studio as a place specifically dedicated to the sound recording, mixing, and audio production of instrumental or vocal musical performances. A studio typically consists of two distinct areas: a live room designed to achieve optimal acoustic conditions and equipped with microphones, where musicians perform; and a control room, where sound engineers manage the recording and mixing process by means of specific equipment.

Most Sardinian traditional music was not recorded in a ‘real’ studio. This is for various reasons, both historical and economic. A large number of recordings feature live performances collected by ethnomusicologists during their fieldwork or are the result of low budget or DIY production where musicians or engineers could not afford the cost of a professional studio. Churches, parish halls, private houses, cellars, squares and streets are among the most common places temporarily turned into a live room. Only in rare cases was not recording in

³ This database can be consulted at www.archiviomariocervo.it, last access December 27, 2023.

⁴ The expeditions were promoted by the *Centro Nazionale di Studi di Musica Popolare* (CNSMP), which is the most important archive and national research institute for Italian folk music. Its foundation, dating back to 1948, is symbolically considered as the birth of Italian ethnomusicology.

a studio a voluntary aesthetic choice.⁵ For this reason, in the following pages I will use the term ‘recording studio’ to refer to any place where a recording subsequently published on a record was made.

Moreover, the way I use the term ‘ethnography’ must be clarified. In an article about ethnography of sounds, Serena Facci highlights how ethnomusicology has developed its own research methodology over time:

The field of ethno-anthropological investigation dedicated to sounds has generated an autonomous discipline, with its own scientific and academic status in many countries of the world. ‘Ethnomusicology’ is the most frequent term used to define it, but other definitions have preceded, followed and/or accompanied it [...]. These labels are a symptom of the evolution of methods and research targets that also intimately involved the ways in which field research has been carried out. (Facci 2010: 223, my translation).⁶

The plural form ‘ethnographic approaches’ in the title of this chapter not only underlines the growing methodological autonomy that ethnomusicology has achieved with respect to cultural anthropology, but also points out how ‘ethnography’ actually refers to a cluster and not just a single approach in investigatory research methods. The *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology* offers a general overview of the variety of techniques used for collecting data and acquiring information in the social sciences. They range from participant observation to behavioural observation, from person-centred and structured interviewing to discourse-centred methods, from visual anthropology to ethnography of online cultures and social survey methods (Bernard and Gravlee 2015).

Similarly, we see very little methodological homogeneity in ethnographic approaches as they are applied to the recording studio. They may vary according to the researcher’s goal, his/her background, and whether he/she had access to the studio at the time a given recording was made. As Petr Szczepanik states in an interview with Georgina Born on the use of ethnography in her research on media production:

She explained ethnography as a multi-layered methodology that oscillates between theoretical reflection and participant observation, between synchronic and diachronic perspectives, and between micro (production cultures and practices), meso (organizations) and macro (industries and policies) scales. (Szczepanik 2013: 100).

Some ethnographies on recording studios have also adopted collaborative and participative approaches, as well as using discourse-centred methods and behavioural observation (Porcello 1998; Meintjes 2003; Schloss 2004; Feld et al. 2004; Greene and Porcello 2005). However, the majority of these studies, mostly in the domain of mainstream popular music, are mainly (or exclusively) based on interviews completed after the recording itself.

My research on the mediatization of musical performance in Sardinian traditional music shares a common methodological framework that I would like to summarise before discussing the case studies. My aim is not to propose a general theory, but only to clarify the methodological approach I used to carry out my research.

Two main typologies of ethnography of recording studios can be distinguished. The *ethnography inside the studio* is when the ethnographer conducts his/her research being physically present inside the studio. In this type of ethnographic work, one or more phases of the recording process (pre-production, production or post-production) and one or more phases of the research (at least the data collection) occur at the same time. The researcher and the

5 One example of such a choice was the CD *S'amore 'e mama* by Tenores di Bitti, produced and recorded by Michael Brook, and released in 1995 with Real World Records, the label launched by Peter Gabriel in 1989. In the sleeve notes we read: «Recorded in Bitti, Sardinia, at different sites – churches, streets, canteens, bars, countryside, ‘nuraghe’ (an old circular stone building), and included the ambient noises of the locations – March 1995». These locations were not randomly chosen, since they are the main place where the multipart singing genre known as *cantu a tenore* is traditionally performed. It is clear that they were selected both for their acoustic properties and for the symbolic value.

6 Original version: «Il campo di indagine etnoantropologico dedicato ai suoni ha generato una disciplina autonoma, con un proprio statuto scientifico e accademico in molti paesi del mondo. Il termine più frequente per definirla è ‘etnomusicologia’, ma altre definizioni lo hanno preceduto, seguito e/o affiancato [...]. Queste etichette sono il sintomo di un’evoluzione di metodi e obiettivi che ha coinvolto intimamente anche i modi con cui sono state svolte le ricerche sul campo».

people involved with different roles in the recording (musicians, producers, sound engineers etc.) share the same time and place, so that the former has the opportunity to directly observe the behaviours of the latter. Discourse-centred, dialogical and collaborative approaches can be developed.

The second typology is the *ethnography about the studio*. This occurs when the researcher is not physically present during the recording process, or when he/she is not in the studio for specific research purposes. The focus of the research remains the same: the relations, behaviours and procedures that shape the workflow of the recording process, and how they affect the music outcome. But in this case the ethnographic work consists in reconstructing and analysing the experience the people who took part in the recording lived inside the studio. The ethnography about the studio is always a retrospective ethnography.

Three main methodological approaches can be used in the latter case. The first one is the interview. Person-centred interviews or structured interviews can be conducted, or focus groups can be convened, with the people who took part in the recording process so as to collect information about the aspects mentioned above. The second one is the autoethnographic approach, a term employed in reference to «autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation» (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 742).

Now recognised as one of the techniques for conducting research in the social sciences (Chang 2008; Jones, Adams, and Ellis 2016), autoethnography is considered an effective way to collect personal memory, self-observational and self-reflective data. As Leonardo Piasere pointed out:

There are cases, however, in which ethnographic reports are made without any proper ethnographic research, in the sense that the experience of life has 'become' ethnographic only after the author has been trained as an anthropologist. Here we are on the edge of ethnography, in that frontier place (in the sense of a nuanced field) where one can gradually slip from an experiential adventure to an adventure of ethnographic experience. In these cases, the experience was not, at the time when it occurred, an experiment of intentional experience, and a written account becomes a retrospective ethnography, an experiment of thought applied to one's memory of the events experienced (Piasere 2002: 49, my translation).⁷

Finally, information concerning the recording process and the studio experience can be collected from various other indirect sources such as written reports, notes and sketches, as well as by listening to the session tapes or the takes not included on the records, and by analysing the audio files or the music itself.

In the next pages I will present four different case studies all related to Sardinian music. The first three cases, which focus on historical recordings, are examples of ethnography about the studio, while the last is a case of ethnography in the recording studio.

Efisio Melis and the oldest recording of launeddas

Launeddas is the name of a triple clarinet that is widespread in southern Sardinia. It consists of one drone and two chanter of different lengths made of cane. Launeddas are not a single instrument, but more than ten different types of instruments (or *cuntzertus*) exist, each of which is identified by a specific name such as *mediana*, *fiaràssiu*, *puntu 'e òrganu*, *ispinellu* and more. The two chanter of every *cuntzertu* have a different melodic ambitus, set in all the instruments by a fragment of a major scale with the drone tone as finalis. Launeddas are

⁷ Original version: «Vi sono casi, però, in cui i resoconti etnografici avvengono senza una ricerca etnografica vera e propria, nel senso che l'esperienza di vita è 'diventata' etnografica solo dopo che l'autore ha avuto una formazione da antropologo. Siamo qui ai confini dell'etnografia, in quel luogo di frontiera, nel senso di ambito sfumato, in cui si può scivolare gradatamente da un'avventura esperienziale a un'avventura di esperienza etnografica. In questi casi, l'esperienza non era, al momento in cui si verificava, un esperimento di esperienza intenzionale e un resoconto scritto diventa un'etnografia retrospettiva, un esperimento di pensiero applicato alla propria memoria degli avvenimenti vissuti».

played with circular breathing, a technique that allows the musicians to produce uninterrupted sound for several tens of minutes. Since the 18th century launeddas players have been semi-professional male musicians, hired to accompany religious processions, mostly during patron saint festivals, and traditional dances.

Dance accompaniment is the most complex and fascinating part of the launeddas repertoire. Respecting a set of orally transmitted rules, the musicians combine tripartite musical phrases called *nodas*, each of which can be proposed in a basic form or one that is freely varied at the moment of performance (Bentzon 1969; Lutz 2012). Depending on the context, the launeddas player chooses the most appropriate *cuntzertu* and how to set the flow of the *nodas* in order to perform a uniquely personal dance accompaniment.

The oldest recordings of launeddas we have were made by Efisio Melis in 1930. He is still considered one of the greatest launeddas virtuosos and, in fact, the Danish scholar Andreas Bentzon described him as:

the most prominent figure among the launeddas players of this century, and now is already legendary for his jealous and violent temper and for his almost incredible musical and technical excellence. [...] he must unfold his gifts within the narrow limits of launeddas music, which he has also carried forward to the utmost limit of his possibilities. (Bentzon 1969: 46)

In the 1930s, Melis went to Milan to record two studio sessions: the first from 17 to 21 January 1930, and the second on 22 April 1937 (Figure 1). The records were released by 'La Voce del Padrone', the Italian division of the British label 'His Master's Voice', in a series of eight 78rpms.⁸ Melis's recording, the only one made during the first half of the 20th century, is an inspiring model (and in many cases a sort of cult object) for most contemporary launeddas



Figure 1. January 1930, Efisio Melis with the singer Gavino Delunas during the recording session in Milan. Source: Paolo Milano Archive (courtesy of Andrea Pisu).

⁸ The 1930 Melis recordings were remastered on the CD *Efisio Melis* (ed. by Marco Lutz), series 'A Launeddas. I maestri delle launeddas', vol. 1, Frorias, Decimomannu 2010.

A first analysis of the dance accompaniments recorded by Efisio Melis in 1930 was provided by Pietro Sassu, who states:

Generally speaking, the length of the pieces recorded here fall far short of what would be usual in live concerts, when the development of a piece would last fifteen to twenty minutes on average. The old 78's could only hold about three (25 cm) or five (30 cm) a side. However, Efisio Melis, with consummate skill, has managed to adapt to the short recording time by playing not just fragments of longer pieces, but perfect compositions, designed to fit the present time (Sassu 1994: 23).

This adaptation process highlighted by Sassu is a key issue for the analysis of the mediatization of music performance, a phenomenon that can be better understood by the distinction between a performative concept and a performative project as proposed by Alessandro Bratus (2016). Bratus borrows the notion of 'concept' from the design of products, areas in which this term does not only imply the creation of a prototype, but also defines its horizon of references, its possible use, and the contact with even remotely connected ideas and objects. The *performative concept* is internal to the text and consists of the invariant elements that can identify it, virtually containing the multiplicity of its renditions during the performance.⁹ The *performative project* sets out the different renditions. It does not usually have 'a single owner' but is rather the result of a conscious or unconscious process of negotiation that involves musicians, technicians, the audience and so on. In a recorded artefact, the performative project takes into account the fact that that particular performance will be transmitted in space and time by means of a recorded support (Bratus 2016: 111–12).

As noted by Sassu, although it was Melis's first time in a recording studio, he was able to adapt his performance to meet the technical limitations of the recording technologies of that period, particularly in terms of length. In front of the microphone, Melis reshapes the dance accompaniment in order to present, in the 3 mins available on a 78rpm disc, a sort of compendium of the most significant *nodas* for every *cuntzertu*.

The lack of time to properly develop a launeddas dance accompaniment was the main limitation on the earliest 78rpm disc records. In order to remedy this problem, when Efisio Melis came to Milan in 1937 to record a new session, he changed his performative project adopting a different strategy. On this second occasion Melis played for 3 minutes, then stopped in order to allow the technician to set the matrix for the B side of the disc and started again exactly from where the performance had been interrupted.

As shown in Figure 2, we are able to see this conscious recording choice also in the catalogue of 'La Voce del Padrone' (His Master's Voice): in the 1930 recording, Melis plays a different dance for the A and B sides. By contrast, in the 1937 recordings, a single, longer dance is divided in two parts, side A and side B.

9 Similar ideas can be found in the notions of *deep structure* proposed by Blacking (1971), the concept of *relevance* proposed by Arom (1991), and these of *script* (Cook 2001) and *song* (Moore 2012).



Figure 2. Records by Efisio Melis in 1938 'La Voce del Padrone' catalogue. The discs GW 216, 217 and 218, recorded in 1930, have a different dance accompaniment for each side; in the discs from GW 1410 to 1414, recorded in 1937, the same dance is divided between two sides.

The recording made by Efisio Melis in 1930 with the *cuntzertu* called *fioràssiu* can be compared with the one he made in 1959, playing the same instrument, recorded by the Danish ethnomusicologist Andreas Bentzon.¹⁰

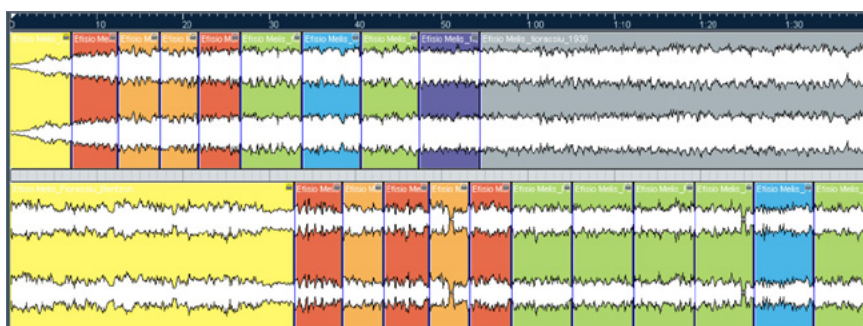


Figure 3. The first part of the *fioràssiu* dance played by Efisio Melis in 1930 (above) is compared with the same dance recorded by Bentzon in 1959 (below). According to a different performative project, in the second recording Melis played more variations for every musical phrase (*noda*).

As shown in Figure 3 and in the Video Example 1, without the length constraints imposed by the 78rpm, Efisio Melis, adapted his performance, playing more elaborate variations for each *noda*.

¹⁰ The 1959 recording is contained on the first of the three CDs included in the Italian edition of Bentzon 1969 (Bentzon 2010, CD1, track 17).

Link » Video Example 1

Comparing Efisio Melis *fiorassiu*

Gavino Gabriel and *I cinque aggesi*

Gavino Gabriel (1881-1980) was a Sardinian musician, musicologist, ethnographer, educator, writer and film director (Pasticci 2018). In the early 20th century, this polyhedric figure was also «one of the most tenacious supporters of the sound recording of folk songs, intended as a methodological rather than purely technical problem» (Carpitella 1973: 46, my translation). As he stated in 1934 at the Third National Conference on Art and Folklore:

The study of folk music is unrealisable without the phonograph, which records an essential element, vocal timbre. This study requires special attention dedicated to the mechanical means of recording, which have to translate and not betray the scholar's intentions (Gabriel 1936, 349 my translation).¹¹

Since the early 1920s, Gavino Gabriel's dream had been to create an Italian national phonographic institute (Gabriel 1934). It is mainly thanks to his efforts that the 'Discoteca di Stato' was finally established in 1928, and Gabriel became its first director from 1932 to 1934.¹²

We owe the first attempts to record Sardinian male multipart singing to Gavino Gabriel. According to Roberto Leydi, in 1929 he promoted the recording of a *cantu a tenore* quartet from the village of Dorgali published on a series of 78rpms released by the British label 'Edison Bell'.¹³ Unfortunately, the quality of these early recordings is so poor that Leydi described them as «practically unlistenable» (Leydi in Gualerzi 1982: 171).



Figure 4. Gavino Gabriel with *I cinque aggesi* in 1928. Source: Gavino Gabriel Archive, Tempio Pausania (thanks to Giuseppe Sotgiu).

11 Original version: «Lo studio, poi, della musica del popolo, inattuabile senza la fonografia che registra l'elemento essenziale altrimenti intrascrivibile qual è il timbro vocale: tale studio richiede una particolare attenzione dedicata al mezzo meccanico perché tanto come perfezione di congegno, quanto come sicurezza di maneggio, traduca e non tradisca le intenzioni dello studioso».

12 The *Discoteca di Stato* was officially established with the Royal Decree n. 2223 of 10 August 1928; in 2007 the name was changed to *Istituto Centrale per i Beni Sonori ed Audiovisivi* (Nation Institute of Sound and Audiovisual).

13 The series of five discs was titled *Cori sardi di Barbagia*. In 2007 some of the records were restored and published in the CD *Su tenore durgalesu de su 1929*.

Gabriel tried again in 1933 when he was Director of the 'Discoteca di Stato'. This time the group recorded was a vocal male quintet called *I cinque aggesi*, namely 'the five from Aggius' (the name of their village), who perform a genre of orally transmitted multipart singing called *tàsgia*.¹⁴ Gabriel and the singers from Aggius collaborated closely and over an extended period of time (Figure 4). Starting in the 1920s, the musicologist organised several of their concerts in various Italian cities (Milleddu 2018); the choir also took part in the opera *La Jura* he composed.¹⁵ As Gabriel pointed out, the recording was prepared with great care being paid to every detail:

Well, despite the assistance of a first-rate technician (unfortunately not Italian, because this profession is unknown in Italy) we had to struggle for two days to adequately 'move' in a proper way the five singers in front of the microphone so that their voices would retain all their harmonics and their particular timbres also on the recording, without mutual interference and without haloes veiling their position, flattening the stereophonic image. Despite this, the results – although considering how difficult it was to calibrate, within a range common to the five very different voices, the vibrations of the microphone with those of the sapphire pick-up – the results are not acoustically perfect, even though they are very reliable as folk music documents for any aesthetic or scientific analysis (Gabriel 1936: 347–48, my translation).¹⁶

The recordings of *I cinque aggesi* produced by Gabriel were published in 1933 in a box set of four 78rpms titled *Canti di Sardegna* and released by the Italian label 'Fono Roma' (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Label of one of the discs by *I cinque aggesi*.

14 For more information about the *a tàsgia* singing tradition from Aggius, see Lutz 2015.

15 The Opera *La Jura*, music and libretto by Gavino Gabriel, was first performed on 21 April 1928 at the Teatro Politeama Margherita in Cagliari, Italy (see Pasticci 2018).

16 Original version: «Pur giovandoci dell'assistenza tecnica di un incisore di prim'ordine (purtroppo non italiano, ch  in Italia si ignora questa professione) abbiamo dovuto faticare per due giorni a «spostare» adeguatamente dinanzi al microfono i cinque cantori perch  le voci conservassero anche nella riproduzione tutti i loro armonici e i loro timbri particolari, senza interferenze reciproche e senza aloni che ne velassero la posizione, appiattendo i rilievi stereofonici: e con tutto ci  i risultati – pur mirabili nei riguardi della difficolt  grandissima di calibrare entro una gamma comune alle cinque diversissime voci, le vibrazioni del microfono con quelle del vomerino (come vorremmo chiamare il pick-up di zaffiro) – con tutto ci  i risultati non sono acusticamente perfetti, anche se attendibilissimi come documenti della musica del popolo, per qualsivoglia esame estetico o scientifico».

Compared to other recordings of the same period, the sound quality is very good. This is because this recording is the result of a precise performance project negotiated at least between the engineer, the musicians and Gabriel as producer.¹⁷ The English technician had to set the recording devices to capture a music he had probably never heard before, putting his experience at the disposal of Gabriel's requests. The singers, who had never been in a studio before, not only had to adapt their performance in terms of length (also in this genre a performance usually lasts more than three minutes) but also had to change their mutual positions (still today in the *tàsgia* the singers sing in a tight circle). And finally, Gavino Gabriel had to direct both the technician and the musicians to get the sound he considered as the most appropriate.

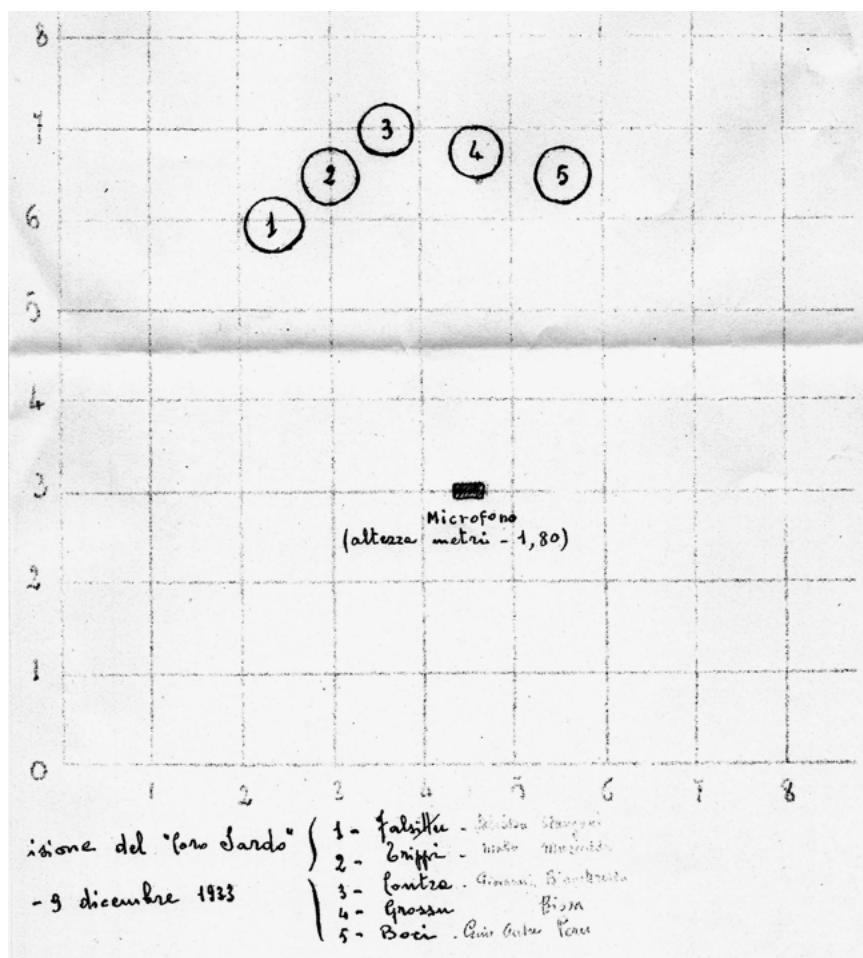


Figure 6. The sketch in which Gavino Gabriel drew the placement of the singers in the room for the recording of the discs *I cinque aggesi*, made on 9 December 1933. Source: Gavino Gabriel Archive, Tempio Pausania (thanks to Giuseppe Sotgiu).

If we consider the quality of the voices on the one hand and both the frequency response and the dynamic range of the stereophonic microphone on the other, Gabriel asked the singers to change from their usual positions. A sketch in which Gabriel noted down the positioning of the singers with respect to the microphone is kept in the 'Gabriel Archive' (Figure 6).¹⁸ On graph paper he drew the microphone in the centre, also noting its height from the floor (1.80 metres), and the mutual position of the singers, each of whom performs a different part. The

¹⁷ I proposed an analysis of this recording in a recent article on the technological mediation of the voice in Sardinian multipart singing (see Lutz 2023).

¹⁸ In 2005, I completed three months in the Gavino Gabriel Archive in the city of Tempio Pausania, thanks to a research fellowship with the Università di Cassino e del Lazio Meridionale, advised by Susanna Pasticcini.

legend at the bottom of the sheet shows that the soloist [*boci* (5)] is located on the right, and the four accompaniment voices clockwise from the highest to the lowest one [*falsittu* (1), *trippi* (2), *contra* (3), *grossu* (4)].

[Link » Audio Example 1](#)

Canti di Sardegna, *tasgia* by *I cinque aggesi*.

The Fonit Cetra album by *Gli Aggius*

Two *a tàsgia* choirs were active in Aggius in the 1960s, one led by Matteo Peru and the other by Salvatore Stangoni, known as *Il Galletto di Gallura* (The Little Rooster from Gallura).¹⁹ Stangoni's choir was politically deployed: in the village it was called 'The Choir of the Reds', and Stangoni's house was the local Communist Party headquarters (Figure 7). Due to its political militancy, from the mid-1960s onwards, the group was also involved in the national Folk Music Revival scene, whose diffusion in Italy was strongly fuelled by the political ideologies of the Left. With the name *Gli Aggius*, in 1966, Stangoni's quartet published an LP and a 45 rpm with 'I Dischi del Sole', a label born in the bosom of the Social Party, and in the same year they took part in the play *Ci ragiono e canto* written by the Nobel Prize for Literature recipient, Dario Fo.



Figure 7. Salvatore Stangoni (4th from the right) in front of the local Aggius headquarters for the Italian Communist Party. Photo: Andrea Suelzu

On 5 October 1972 *Gli Aggius* went to the studios of the 'Fonit Cetra' label to record the disc *La me' brunedda è bruna* (My sweet brunette is a brunette), which was published the following year (Figure 08). The LP is included in the 'Folk series', founded and directed by Giancarlo Governi, which releases the albums of some of the best-known Italian folk revival singers and groups such as Otello Profazio, Caterina Bueno, Rosa Balistreri, Il Canzoniere Internazionale, Maria Monti and the Duo di Pìadena.

¹⁹ Salvatore Stangoni (1902-1981) was the youngest singer of the *a tàsgia* group Gavino Gabriel recorded in 1933.



Figure 8. Cover of the album *La me' brunedda è bruna* by Gli Aggius.

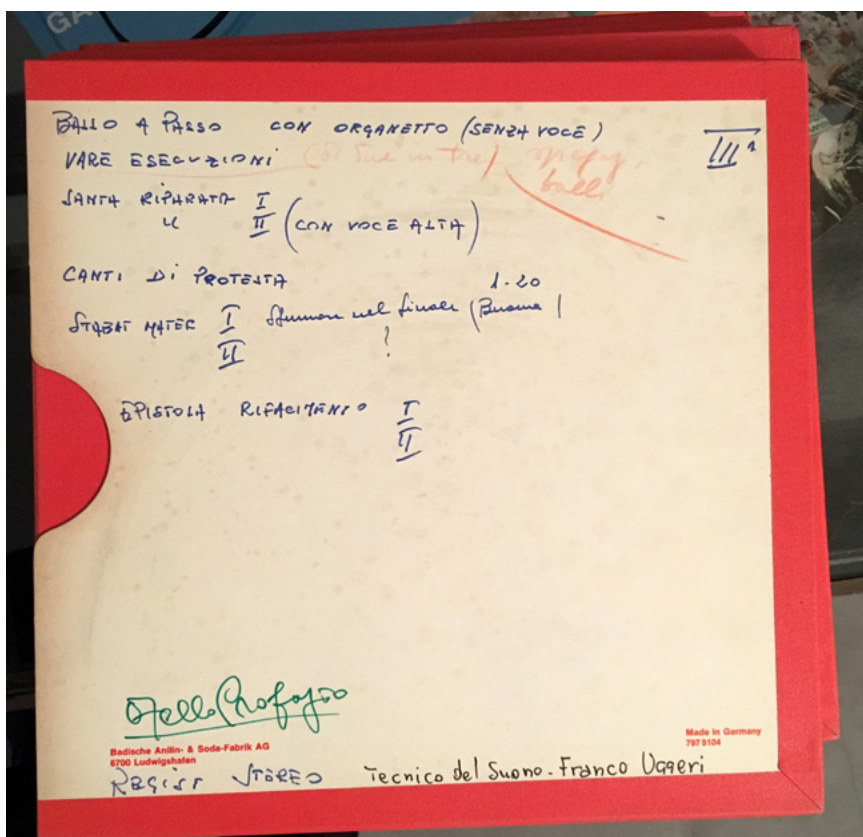


Figure 9. One of the five tapes containing the whole recording session for the disc, *La me' brunedda è bruna*.

A few years ago, during a solemn ceremony, the producers of the album Dario Toccaceli and Otello Profazio donated the five tapes containing the full recording session to the Aggius community (Figure 09). Listening to this raw material allowed me to reflect on the recording studio policies. Even in the least charged situations, producing a record is never a neutral operation: during the various stages, choices are made that direct, even politically, the meanings that the album will be able to convey and, at least in part, how it will be received by the audience. To understand the performative project that lies behind each recording artefact we must fully cognisant of various levels of political interaction. As Louise Meintjes states:

To talk of the politics of a recording studio, then, is to attend to two intersecting political planes. First, the micro-politics of studio interaction determine what sounds are recorded for commercial distribution. [...] Second, the micro-politics of studio interaction are a prism for the political dynamics of the historically specific moment and place. (Meintjes 2009: 86)

During the recording of *La me' brunedda è bruna*, before or after each take, the producers asked Stangoni to describe the songs they were about to perform. For each song, the singer indicated a title, translated the lyrics and explained its meaning, providing information about the occasions at which the song was usually performed. As in the previous LP published by 'I Dischi del Sole', some fragments of Stangoni's answers were included on the tracklist. Comparing these fragments with the full dialogues between Stangoni and the producers, as well as the songs recorded with the ones included on the track list, allows us to better understand the political purposes underlying the production of the album.

In *a tàsgia* singing, the phenomenon of 'travestimento' (musical transvestism) is very common. Here, it consists in replacing the Latin words of a religious song with a vernacular lyric to be sung as a secular song. In this way, a melody usually sung on a sacred occasion such as the Holy Week rituals can be performed for profane occasions.

Tape 1 starts with the secular versions of the Biblical psalm *Miserere*²⁰ and the hymn *Gloria Laus et honor*. The lyrics of this Psalm are replaced with some lines from the love poem *Amori a l'umbra d'un buscu* (Love in the shade of a forest) by the local lawyer and poet Michele Pisano (1857-1925). The lyrics of the hymn, by contrast, are replaced with the words of *Bedda, li mei 'iltù* (Beauty, my virtues) by the poet and *a tàsgia* singer from Aggius Salvatore Biosa (1891-1959).²¹ The following dialogue was captured on tape between the recording of the psalm and the hymn:

Producer:	Is this a lamentation?
Stangoni:	It's a lament song.
Producer:	I don't understand, is it a prayer?
Stangoni:	It is the <i>Miserere</i> : <i>Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam</i> . It is a prayer addressed to the dying Christ. 'Have mercy on me', as the <i>Miserere</i> says.
Producer:	And what about the other song?
Stangoni:	The other one is called the <i>Gloria</i> : <i>Gloria laus et honor</i> . It refers to people acclaiming Christ entering Jerusalem. We used to sing it on Palm Sunday. (Tape 1, min. 4:33)

Link » Audio Example 2

Dialogue between Salvatore Stangoni and the producer during the recording session for *La me' brunedda è bruna*.

Although Stangoni is perfectly aware of the differences between the two versions, he in fact considers them to be the same song. So, even when singing the versions with secular lyrics, he only describes the occasion on which the versions with Latin words are sung. The producers,

20 The *Miserere* is still sung during the Holy Wednesday and Friday rituals, while the *Gloria Laus et honor* is today performed for Palm Sunday.

21 The melody of the *Miserere* with secular words is track 1 of the LP (*E la bedda e un'agnula paria*), while the 'travestimento' of the *Gloria Laus et honor* can be heard on track 3 (*Bedda li mei 'iltu*).

mainly interested in representing folk music as a form of political contestation against the upper classes and less interested in the religious aspects of the music they were recording, decided not to include this recorded piece of dialogue in the album. But they tried to bring up this topic again during another recorded conversation:

Producer: Do protest songs exist in your repertoire?
 Stangoni: No
 Producer: Why?
 Stangoni: Because our poets were generally afraid of the boss. In a word: we had the mafia too. They were afraid to write protest songs against employers, who exploited workers.
 Producer: So, how did the farmers protest?
 Stangoni: They usually didn't protest, there was no reaction. But to be honest, sometimes they even used a rifle! (Tape 1, min. 7:21)

[Link » Audio example 3](#)

Dialogue about protest songs between Salvatore Stangoni and the producer during the recording session for *La me' brunedda è bruna*.

Since Stangoni's claims could not be published, the producers tried asking again during the recording of another tape so as to get a more suitable answer, which was then included on the album:

Stangoni: We have no protest songs because the poets were afraid of the boss. They were under their thumb! (LP *La me' brunedda è bruna*, track 12, min. 0:00)

Stangoni considered the phenomenon of the 'travestimento' as an important and strongly characteristic aspect of Aggius's musical tradition. Thus, he proposed to sing the two versions of a song that is usually performed in church on Good Friday. In this case, the Latin text comes from the fourth Letter to the Hebrews, while the lyrics of the profane version were drawn from a love poem in the Gallurese language composed by the 18th-century priest and poet Gavino Pes.²² Stangoni sung two lines of the religious version and then switched directly to the secular one. The producers asked the group to sing it one more time afterwards, and finally a version containing only the love lyric was included on the disc (Side A, track 10, *Di li musì in li monti*).

As it might seem from the latter example, Stangoni is not simply the victim of the producers' will. Their goals partly coincide and partly were negotiated during the recording session. It is interesting to note what happened during the recording of the track that opens the B side, entitled *Canto di protesta* (Protest song). This is how Stangoni described the song:

Stangoni: This is one of the few protest songs we know in our traditions:
Since we were born, we worked in the countryside / we poured blood and sweat / and our earnings went into the pockets of the wealthy exploiters.
 Producer: Can you tell us something more about this song?
 Stangoni: We worked in the countryside from morning to night, blood was spilled, and we weren't paid... they weren't paid. And the little money earned was all used to buy goods, so the rich continued to get rich and the poor always remained destitute. (Tape 3, min. 10:16)

[Link » Audio Example 4](#)

Presentation of *Canto di protesta* by Salvatore Stangoni during the recording session for *La me' brunedda è bruna*.

²² Gallurese is a language variant spoken in Aggius, which lies in the region of Gallura, northeastern Sardinia.

Six years later, during an interview with the journalist Gianni Novelli, Stangoni provides another version regarding the origin of the text:

When I was in Milan, Dario Fo told me: «Write Balori: We struggled to come to the world / suffered when we were children / suffered in the fields / suffered famine / then disease / and eventually death / and they send us to hell». When I finished writing he told me: «Now you have to translate it into your dialect and you must sing using whatever melody you want». I replied: «It's not simple! how can I do this?». He replied: «Salvatore, I know you will succeed». When I went to bed, I mulled it over. We took a church song and we replaced the Latin words, and we succeeded. We took the Miserere and we changed the words (Novelli 1978: 10).²³

The text of the protest song did not therefore come from the Aggius tradition, as Stangoni maintains in front of the microphone when asked by the producers. In fact, it was conceived by Dario Fo, and adapted and translated into the Gallurese language by Stangoni.²⁴

As Meintjes states, the recording studio's policies operate at different levels. In the case just presented, at the micro-political level we can find the negotiation between the producers and the musicians to define the tracks to be included on the album. The former tended to hide the relevance of the religious repertoire and to emphasise the presence of protest songs. Stangoni, who shares their same ideology, described as 'traditional', a text that clearly was not. At the same time, he also presents the Aggius repertoire as the result of a close relationship between sacred and profane songs. On a more general level, this micro-political level was nothing but the mirror of a wider phenomenon, that of the use of folk music as a tool to legitimise the battles carried out by the Italian Left of the 1960s and 1970s.

Giovanni Carlini and the *quintina* from Bosa

Giovanni Carlini is a highly experienced professional sound engineer based in Sardinia. In 1997 he founded the Live Studio, the studio where I also worked, a recording studio located in Cagliari where mainly jazz, popular and traditional Sardinian music is recorded.

In 2004 two groups of singers from the small town of Bosa commissioned Live Studio to produce their first CD, titled *Bosa nella musica: Boghes a traggiu* (Figure 10).²⁵ We set up our mobile studio in order to reach the place that the singers chose for the recording session: the 18th century Church of 'Santa Maria degli Angeli' (St. Mary of the Angels), located in Bosa, a place where they had been singing for many years. During the preliminary survey, the group leader showed me and Giovanni the locations where the singers were most comfortable, and according to the acoustics of the environment, Giovanni selected the most suitable spot for recording purposes, a small side chapel.

23 Original version: «Dario Fo, ad esempio, quando stavo a Milano, mi ha detto questo: 'Scrivi Balori: Abbiamo faticato a venire al mondo/ patito da bambini/ sofferto nei campi/ patito la carestia/ poi la malattia/ e alla fine la morte/ e ci mandano all'inferno'. Finito di scrivere mi ha detto: 'Adesso tu me lo traduci in dialetto e me lo devi cantare in un motivo, quello che vuoi tu'. Ed io ho detto: 'È una parola! come posso fare a far questo?'. Mi rispose: 'Salvatore, so che ce la puoi fare e ce la farai'. Io quando andavo a letto rimuginavo. Abbiamo ripensato ai canti di chiesa e abbiamo sostituito le parole dialettali al latino, ed alla fine ci siamo riusciti. Abbiamo ripreso il Miserere e gli abbiamo cambiato le parole.».

24 The song with this lyric was performed for the first time in the play *Ci ragiono e canto*. Although Stangoni's contribution was fundamental, the text is attributed exclusively to Dario Fo in the play's script (1977: 178).

25 In Bosa the local multipart singing tradition is called *a traggiu*; for more information see Milleddu, Oliva & Pisanu (2015).

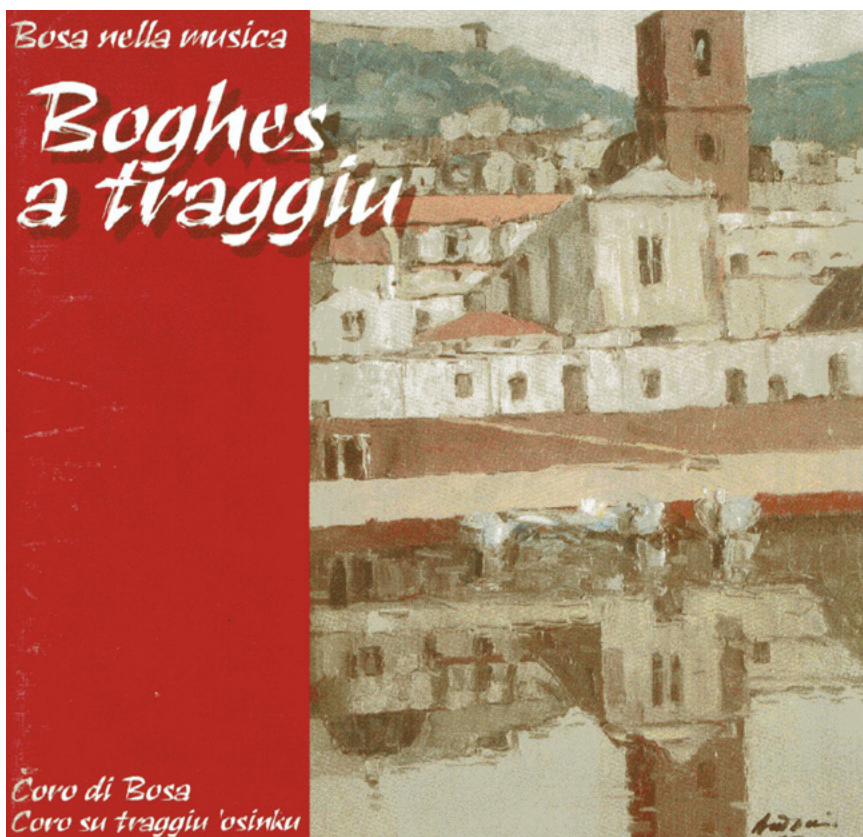


Figure 10. Cover of the disc, *Boghes a traggiu*, by Coro di Bosa and Coro su traggiu 'osinku.

The post-production was carried out in the Live Studio control room. The mixing process was also negotiated between the sound engineer and the musicians. Giovanni knew which sound parameters could be changed and which could not; he had full control of the devices that would allow these changes, and also had his own taste regarding the sound that a vocal quartet should have. The singers, too, had their own sound aesthetic, mainly expressed in terms of the balance between the parts and the timbre of the voices. At one point, Giovanni and the singers began to discuss the amalgam of sound. The latter were not completely satisfied, because there was no 'whistle', as they called it. I immediately understood that they were referring to the *quintina*.

The *quintina* is a very common acoustic phenomenon in the traditional multipart singing of Sardinia, described for the first time by Bernard Lortat-Jacob. It mainly concerns the colour of sound and is an important aspect in discussions between singers on the aesthetics of their music. As Lortat-Jacob states:

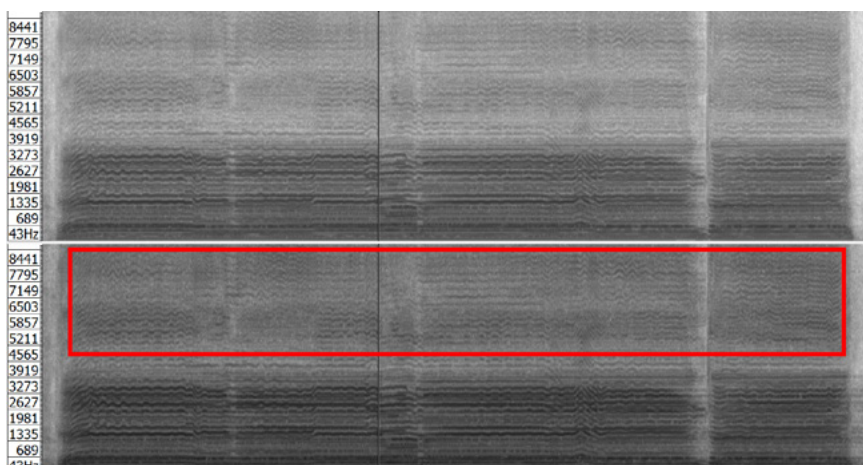
In their vocal practices [...] singers have a goal, and even, one could say, an aesthetic project that, at each performance is performed more or less well. [...] It is as if their attention, as much as their intention, was centred not on a broad spectrum, but on a much more restricted frequency band where suddenly, as they say themselves, the voices split making it possible to hear a fifth one: the *quintina*. The *quintina* is produced by the fusion of the overtones. It emerges from the perfect harmony of the singers (in every sense of the word) and their conjugated voices combine to make it fully audible (Lortat-Jacob 1993: 80–81, my translation).²⁶

26 Original version: «Dans leurs pratiques vocales [...] les chanteurs ont un but, et même, pourrait-on dire, un projet esthétique qui, à chaque exécution se réalise plus ou moins bien. [...] Tout se passe comme si leur attention, autant que leur intention, étaient centrées non pas sur un vaste spectre, mais sur une bande de fréquence beaucoup plus restreinte où soudain, comme ils le disent eux-même, les voix se dédoublent pour en faire apparaître une autre: la *quintina*. La *quintina* est produite par la fusion d'harmoniques dont les cycles concordent. Elle naît de l'accord parfait des chanteurs (dans tous les sens du terme) et leurs voix conjuguées concourent à la rendre pleinement audible.».

I used graphic representations I found in Lortat-Jacob's academic publications to explain to Giovanni the acoustic principles that generate the *quintina* (Lortat-Jacob 1993; 1996).

During the performance, the intonation of the voices was good and the *quintina* was clearly audible, but because of the room's acoustics it was much less present in the raw recording. So Giovanni started to equalise the tracks emphasising the frequencies in the high-mid band of the spectrum so that the *quintina* could be heard. Gradually, the singers became more comfortable with the possibilities the studio offered for processing the sound.

Listening to their conversations and observing how they interacted with Giovanni, it was clear to me that their goal was not to exactly reproduce the sound of their performance in the church. The singers had their own 'ideal sound' which, with Giovanni's help, they were trying to replicate. The reverberation, the timbre of the single voices (and of the entire quartet), and the location of their voices in the stereo mix were the aspects to which they paid most attention. We spent two days working on these details until we achieved a result that satisfied the singers. The difference between the raw recordings and the mixed track can be clearly perceived by comparing the files kept in the Live Studio archive with the tracks contained on the CD. Figure 11 shows the spectrograms of the pre- and post-mixing version of one of the songs (*A su nascher de Gesus*, tracks 17) where we can see how the intensity increases in the area of the mid-high frequencies, the area of the *quintina*.



Comparison between the spectrograms of the raw recording (above) and the post-produced track (below) of a fragment of the song 'A su nascher de Gesus', CD *Bogh'es a traggiu*, track 17.

[Link » Audio Example 5](#)

A su nascher de Gesus, premix version.

[Link » Audio Example 6](#)

A su nascher de Gesus, mixed and mastered version.

Conclusions

The invention of devices capable of fixing sound and the development of the record industry radically transformed the way we experience music, making all of us part of what Michael Chanan called 'record culture' (Chanan 1995). In this new culture, in which the musical performance can be separated from the moment of its listening, the recording studio - the place where a live performance is transformed into an object - plays a fundamental role. While everyone can listen to the result of the work carried out in the studio, few are granted access. What happens inside a studio affects our everyday life, but little is known about what happens inside.

The recording studio is a social space where music-oriented interaction happens. People with different roles, attitudes, skills and tasks collaborate, even with the support of various tools (musical instruments, microphone, recording devices) to produce a recorded artefact. To achieve this goal, musicians are asked to adopt behaviours that differ from those adopted on the other occasions in which they make music. Collective or individual performative projects lead the work in the studio. Just as for any group of people who collaborate to achieve a goal, micro-political interactions, negotiation and compromises must be taken into consideration to understand the production process. And as I argue in this article, this occurs not only in the field of popular music but also in traditional music recordings, both those made for commercial and also for research purposes.

Focusing on the dialogues, behaviours and interactions that take place in a recording studio can tell us more about how the music produced in that place is conceived and shaped. Ethnographic research tools, understood as a large family of investigation methods, can be useful for this purpose. Discourse-centred, dialogical and collaborative approaches, autoethnography, as well as an *a posteriori* reconstruction through various sources such as written reports, notes, sketches, cut takes, or the analysis of the recorded sounds themselves, are all tools the ethnographer of the recording studio may use to investigate the social dimension of the creative processes that happen in a place as mysterious and fascinating as it is fundamental in the life of a 21st-century *homo musicus*.²⁷

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²⁷ Thanks to Kristina Jacobsen for proofreading the article.

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