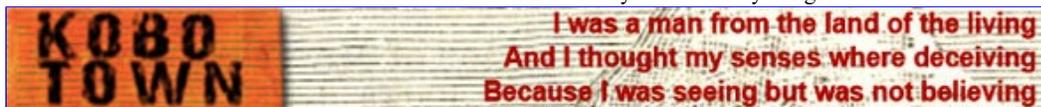


Kobo Town "reminds the listener of the vanity of all worldly things."



Antonio Castrignano

Babilonia

Ponderosa

Review by George De Stefano



BABILONIA
ANTONIO CASTRIGNANO

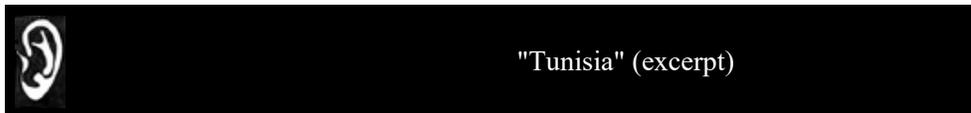
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In the ancient world, Babylon was a happening place. Founded some 4,000 years ago in Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers, it was a sprawling, multicultural metropolis where art, science, music, mathematics, astronomy, and literature flourished. There, King Hammurabi created one of the world's first written legal codes. (As the B-52s' Fred Schneider reminded us on "Mesopotamia," the band's homage to the ancient empire, "he laid down the law!") But for the Abrahamic faiths, Babylon represents worldliness and sensual excess, oppression, and evil. For Rastafarians, it's shorthand for Western capitalist society—"Babylon shitstem," as Peter Tosh put it.

That Babylon is not what Antonio Castrignano had in mind when he titled his latest release *Babilonia*. For Castrignano, a singer, percussionist, and composer from Salento, the southern part of Italy's Puglia region, the Mesopotamian capital is a

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musician Mercan Dede on ney and bendir; and Senegalese griot Badara Seck. The Italians are Neapolitan saxophonist and singer-songwriter Enzo Avitabile (who seems

to turn up on just about every Southern Italian album these days); Don Rico, from the Salentine reggae group Sud Sound System; Rocco Nigro, accordion; Luigi Marra, violin and vocals; Giuseppe Longo, mandola; Maurizio Pellizzari, electric and acoustic guitars; Giuseppe Spedicato, bass; Gianni Gelao, bouzouki, woodwinds, and zampogna (Italian bagpipes). Redi Hasa, an Albanian who relocated to Puglia and has become a stalwart of the Salento scene, plays cello on four tracks.

Born in Galatina in 1977, Castrignanò specializes in pizzica and other traditional local idioms. In 2006, he composed the soundtrack for "Nuovomondo," a film by the Roman director Emanuele Crialese; in 2010, he released his first solo album, *Mara la fatia*, followed by *Fomenta: Ilenu De Taranta*. In concept, composition, and performance, his recordings rank with the best of the new Salentine music, as distinctive and innovative as the Lecce-based and now internationally known Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino (CGS). Castrignanò also is a charismatic performer who commands the stage with virtuosity and kinetic energy. At the 2016 edition of La Notte della Taranta, the annual festival of Salentine music held in Melpignano, he reminded me of a Southern Italian Mick Jagger, dancing across the stage as he beat his tamburello and sang with abandon and precision.



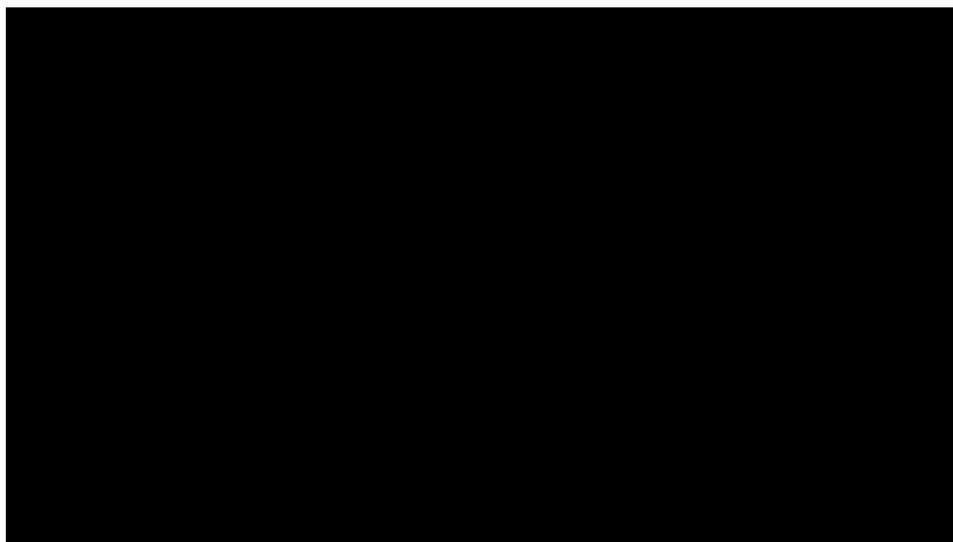
Like CGS, Castrignanò has created a personal style rooted in traditional Salentine music, and not only pizzica but also work songs and love ballads. He's been immersed in it since his childhood in Galatina, once a center of *tarantismo*. As most RootsWorld readers likely know, tarantismo was a kind of spirit possession, a psychic disturbance with physical symptoms that were attributed to poisonous spider bites. It affected mostly poor, rural girls and women, whose affliction was relieved by dancing to exhaustion to pizzica in long, intense therapeutic rituals. Tarantismo has died out, but its music not only survived but became emblematic of Salentine cultural identity and a "world music" presented at festivals and on concert stages.



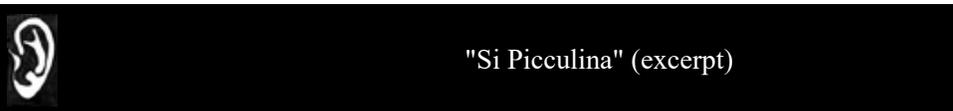
Salento's traditional music is Castrignanò's birthright, but he isn't interested in purist replications of the past. He says that *Babilonia* is not "traditional music from the past. It is traditional music from the future. It explores the issues and doubts of today with a language that is consciously aimed at the young." He calls it a modern record with "all new pieces ... new melodies, new stories and new rhythms, maybe borrowed from other places." The album's aesthetic—a core Salento sound augmented by *contaminazioni*, not a negative term but one that connotes borrowings from different musical cultures—isn't new. The presence of African, Turkish, Arab, Balkan, Portuguese, and Brazilian singers and instrumentalists to broaden the Salentine palette and create cross-cultural fusions is now a well-established practice. Solo artists and bands who have taken this route include CGS, Kalascima, Maria Mazzotta, Rachele Andrioli, Enza Pagliara, Anna Cinzia Villani, Mimmo Epifani, Mascarimiri, and Antonio Amato. *Mara la fatia* was firmly rooted in Castrignanò's

home turf, but *Fomenta: Ilenu de Taranta* connected Salento, the Balkans, and the Middle East. That album's version of "Core meu" (My Heart), one of the best-known entries in the Salentine songbook, starts as straight pizzica but then heads eastward with Macedonian violin and Turkish percussion.

If the approach isn't novel, what Castrignanò does with it is what makes his work so individual and exciting: his plaintive vocal style, mainly head tones and with a bleating quality reflecting rural roots; the power and dexterity of his percussion playing; the high quality of composition and arrangements; and the excellent musicians he selects to bring his vision alive. His songs are often narratives, and some have a cinematic quality, not surprising given his experience composing soundtracks. "La Ciuccia Nera" (The Black Donkey) from *Fomenta: Ilenu de Taranta*, is a story-song inspired by an abortive 1943 Federico Fellini film, "I Cavalieri del Deserto/Gli ultimi Tuareg." "Signora Madama," from *Mara La Fatia*, is a mini-movie in song, a satiric tale about a woman who leaves her peasant roots behind when she marries a rich man but returns to her village once a year to take part in a local festival.

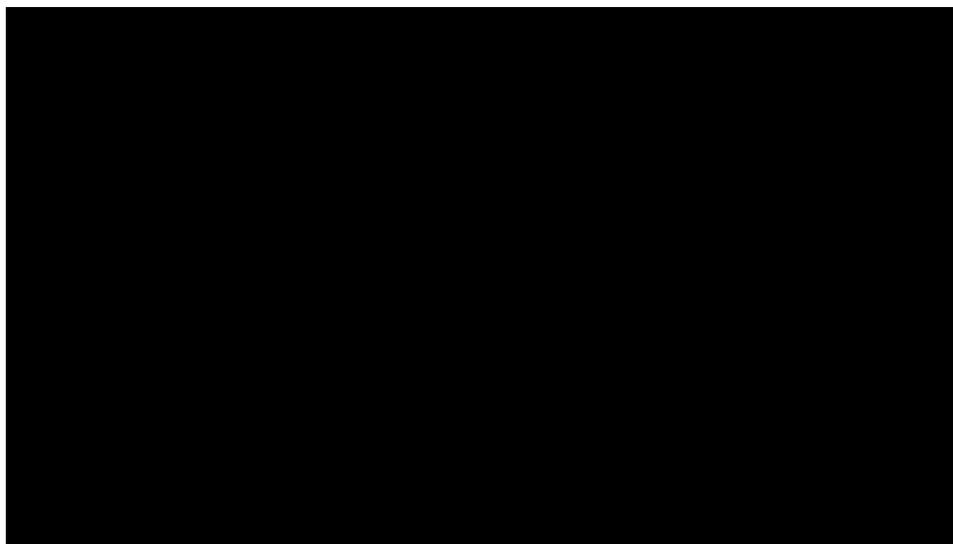


The lyrics on *Babilonia*, in Salentine dialect, are more allusive and impressionistic, except for "Masseria Boncuri," a protest by an African migrant farmworker against the oppressive conditions he endures in the fields. To cope, he closes his eyes and sees Africa. "Tunisia" evokes the sky, sea, and wind of that North African country on the Mediterranean that historically has been linked to Southern Italy and Sicily. "Babilonia" notes that whatever one's dominant language may be, dialect "is culture, roots, harmony, poetry and music." Salento is a major olive oil producer, but tree-killing Xylella bacteria have endangered its groves in recent years. Castrignanò composed "Oju" by imagining an olive tree telling its story: "Oju verde oju maru tocca te lu teni caru" (Green and bitter oil you must hold dear). The album's opener, "Taranta World," is set in the Salento of tarantismo; the singer exhorts 'Nnzina, "my beautiful girl," to "dance hard because the taranta is alive and not dead." The last track, "Pizzica Malincunia," returns to Salento and "la terra di rimorso." (The title of anthropologist Ernesto De Martino's famous study of tarantismo is a double-entendre: land of remorse and land of re-bitten). Dance the pizzica, Castrignanò sings, and chase away melancholy.



If the album's contaminazioni are a familiar aesthetic strategy, Castrignanò's claim that *Babilonia* is a modern rather than a strictly traditional work is on the mark. It is also his most accomplished and adventurous effort to date, which is saying a lot given the brilliance of his previous releases. He produced the record, and he says it

took him quite a while to get it right. His meticulousness paid off. The album has a density of sound, but it's light on its feet, never labored nor cluttered. It has continuities with *Mara la Fatia* and *Fomenta: Ileni de Taranta* but significantly departs from them. Castrignano's production employs electronic effects, layered vocal parts, synths, electric instruments, acoustic string and wind instruments, and percussion. Castrignano is the lead singer but this time he shares the vocals, with Marra, Seck, Jobarteh ("Si Picculina"), Avitabile ("Masseria Bonicuri") and Don Rico ("Nina"). All the players are first rate. Pellizzari's electric guitar is prominent throughout the record (especially effective on the exquisite "Si Picculina"), at times paired with Castrignano's electric mandola. Marra, on violin and vocals, is an MVP on five tracks. Nigro's dazzling accordion work enhances all seven selections on which he performs. The ruler of this imagined Babylon, il re Antonio, sings with his patented blend of soulfulness and astringency, and he's never sounded better.



"Taranta World" opens with Castrignano's vocal backed by strummed guitars and mandola, then a thunder of percussion breaks out, the rhythm shifts into high gear, and the dance begins, with tabla beats in tandem with tamburello. "Oju" has an orchestral richness built on electric guitar, synth, violin, bouzouki, cello, and electric mandola. The title track, as Castrignano says, brings together "language, culture, musical genres, past and present, tradition and experimentation." It features echoing, electronically altered voices calling and responding to Castrignano's lead vocal, Pellizzari's rhythm guitar, Sona Jobarteh's kora, and driving percussion. It's extraordinary. The upbeat "Menamó" repurposes a traditional Salentine piece with a bit of Greece, the Balkans (especially in the coda), and to these ears, a little bit of Cuba. "Masseria Bonicuri" deploys electric guitar, electric mandola, acoustic guitar, and, on the choruses, Avitabile's characteristic rasp to powerful effect. These times offer plenty of reasons not to be cheerful. But if "Pizzica Malincunia" doesn't get you up on your feet, it will lift your melancholic mood, at least for its four and a half minutes.



"Pizzica Malincunia" (excerpt)

Babilonia takes the listener on a voyage on which every stop offers pleasure, surprise, excitement, and often stunning beauty. It's Antonio Castrignano's masterpiece and a highwater mark in contemporary Salentine music.

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