

THE LAUNEDDAS: A TYPICAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENT-GAVINO MURGIA



Gavino Murgia, a multi-instrumentalist and composer from Nuoro, began studying music and alto saxophone at a very young age, playing with various musical groups and in theatrical performances. He has played with many of the the most important Italian and international ensembles. Currently he is interested in the sounds and sonorities of Sardinian music, and the typical instruments of his island, but in a modern musical context.

How do you describe launeddas to people who are unfamiliar with this musical instrument?

LAUNEDDAS are composed of three cylindrical rods obtained with river reeds tied with pitched string. The longest pipe, without holes, is called SU TUMBU, which acts as if it were a continuous bass.

The other two pipes, each equipped with four square holes with different positions and distances, depending on the instrument, are SA MANKOSA MANNA and SA MANKOSEDDA. The fifth hole, S'ARREFINU, emits a sort of other sound detached from the other holes and is free. Beeswax is spread on it in order to tune the instrument and perfect its intonation.

At the end of each of the three rods you can find SA CABITZINA, different in size and diameter, based on the type and tone.

How are sounds obtained?

SA MANKOSA MANNA is played with the left hand, and is linked to SU TUMBU. SA MANKOSEDDA is played with the right hand and is detached from the other two, but from the combination of the melodic pipes different CUNTZERTUS are obtained. Each Cuntzertus is distinguished from the other by the notes it can reach, thanks to the two reeds that create melody and harmony, SA MANKOSA and SA MANKOSEDDA (**examples of cuntzertus: SU PUNTU ORGANU, SU FIORASSIU, SA MEDIANA, SA MEDIANA A' PIPIA**), **notes that can be reached depending on the position of the hole and the distance from the next one.** Being built with natural elements, Launeddas are living objects: their intonation is affected by the temperature and is sensitive to the surrounding environment.

An indispensable condition for playing Launeddas is the use of the CIRCULAR BREATHING or CONTINUOUS BREATHING technique. The technique consists in the use, during the exhalation phase, of a reserve of air inside the cheeks, which is gradually expelled when the player inhales with his nose. In this way, an uninterrupted column of air is channeled into the instrument.

How old are the launeddas?

Launeddas are the oldest known polyphonic reed instruments. The existence of Launeddas has already been attested in the Nuragic times thanks to the discovery of the famous Italic bronze statuette dating back to the 6th / 7th century BC, found in Ittiri (SS) depicting a Launeddas player intent on playing his instrument. This instrument has always been linked to religious celebrations or to moments of secular feasts, that's why it carries out a strongly socializing function still nowadays.

What is certain is that there are strong affinities with tenor singing of which they use the same harmonic system; and since the voice was born before the instrument, it can be said that polyphony has existed in Sardinia for over 3000 years.

How important are launeddas today?

Today Launeddas remain vital in some parts of Campidano, Trexenta and Sarrabus, with schools and teachers who pass on their knowledge and oral skills to many young people.

The deepest study in the history of launeddas was carried out by the young Danish ethnomusicologist Andreas Bentzon, who toured Sardinia in the 1950s, systematically meeting and recording the most famous Launeddas players on the island.

How widespread are launeddas today?

Launeddas are still in constant evolution today, also thanks to the contamination and experimentation of young musicians.