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Shaping sacred spaces: the feast of St Agatha and the development of its urban rituality

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RESUM

En aquest article presentem un estudi preliminar sobre la presència i influència de rituals musicals durant el desenvolupament històric de la celebració de St Àgueda de Sicília.

L'objectiu de la nostra investigació és observar com la forma de la ciutat de Catània ha millorat i reorganitzat al llarg dels segles d'acord amb la configuració de la festa, que empra diversos tipus de pràctiques simbòliques i rituals -no exclusivament musicals- que giren entorn a la celebració del sant patró.

En tractar de respondre algunes preguntes sobre la reorganització de la festa en l'espai cerimonial (o *viceversa*) al llarg dels segles, aquest article representa el treball (etno)musicològic més actualitzat sobre el tema de la festa de St Àgueda de Catània, com una ciutat en el centre de la Mediterrània.

Paraules Clau: Espai cerimonial; performance festiva; rituals musicals; Illes Mediterrànies

RESUMEN

En este artículo presentamos un estudio preliminar sobre la presencia e influencia de rituales musicales durante el desarrollo histórico de la celebración festiva de St Ágata de Sicília.

El objetivo de nuestra investigación es observar cómo la forma de la ciudad de Catania se ha mejorado y reorganizado a lo largo de los siglos de acuerdo con la configuración de la fiesta, que emplea varios tipos de prácticas simbólicas y rituales -no exclusivamente musicales- que giran en torno a la celebración del santo patrón.

En tratar de responder algunas preguntas sobre la reorganización de la fiesta en el espacio ceremonial (o *viceversa*) a lo largo de los siglos, este artículo representa el trabajo (etno)musicológico más actualizado sobre el tema de la fiesta de St Ágata de Catania, como una ciudad en el centro del Mediterráneo.

Palabras Clave: Espacio cerimonial; performance festiva; rituales musicales; Islas Mediterráneas

ABSTRACT

In this paper we introduce a preliminary study on the presence and influence of musical ritualities over the historical development of the festive celebration of St Agatha of Sicily.

The aim of our enquiry is to observe how the form of the city of Catania has been improved and reorganized over the centuries according to the configuration of the feast, which employs various types of symbolic and ritual – not exclusively musical – practices revolving around the celebration of the patron saint.

Among these, the procession with the relics of St Agatha throughout the city has to some extent reshaped the town plan. Also, ecclesiastical chant and instrumental music may have played an important role in the (re-)construction of an ideal place for such collective rituality, not to mention that two massive earthquakes (in 1169 and in 1693) and the massive eruption of 1669 have caused crucial actions to reconstruct the city.

By trying to answer a few questions on the rearrangement of the feast to the ceremonial space (or *viceversa*) over the centuries, this paper represents the most up-to-date (ethno-)musicological work on the subject of the feast of St Agatha in Catania, as a city at the centre of the Mediterranean.

Keywords: Urban ceremonial; festive performance; musical ritualities; Mediterranean islands.

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1. The Saint and the city

There are many publications concerning the feast of St Agatha in Catania, and these have so far treated the subject from a fairly folkloristic or devotional point of view, rarely from the historical one, that is, on the basis of archival documents.¹ In this exploratory work it is offered a sketch of the articulation of the three-day festival as well as of the interaction between the rituals and urban transformations of the city.

The festive celebration of St Agatha of Sicily takes place every year on 3-5 February to commemorate her martyrdom, and it is acknowledged as the third most important religious feast worldwide. A second (minor) festive event occurs on 17 August to celebrate the return to Catania (in A.D. 1126) of St Agatha's remains, after these had been transferred to Constantinople by the Byzantine general George Maniakes as war booty (in A.D. 1040). The main festive occasion remains the one occurring in February; in the 17th century, it began on the 1st of February, reaching its acme between the 3rd and the 5th, and often lasting for up to fifteen days. For this reason, its preparation usually started from four to six months in advance.

Agatha of Sicily (ca. A.D. 231 - A.D. 251) is a Christian saint whose liturgical memorial recurs on 5 February. Agatha was born in Catania, Sicily, where she was martyred in approximately 251, which is why she is one of seven women, who, along with the Blessed Virgin Mary, are commemorated by name in the Canon of the Mass.² Together with some cities in Italy (not to mention other places abroad, e.g. Malta and Sorihuela del Guadalimar, Spain³), Agatha is the patron saint of Catania, being also – according to religious faith – the patron saint of breast cancer patients, bell-founders, bakers, firemen, earthquakes, and – especially in the municipalities of eastern Sicily – of the numerous eruptions of Mount Etna.

2. The city through the feast, the feast through the city

How the festival of St Agatha developed over the centuries it has been reported by chroniclers who through the history have provided some detailed accounts and descriptions, such as – only to mention a few – the ceremonial handbook by Alvaro Paternò (i.e. *Liber ceremoniarum et ordinacionum clarissimae civitatis Cathanie*, 1522), the so-called *Cronaca* by notary Antonio Merlino that describes the festival in the 16th century, the memoir entitled *Memorie storiche* by Pietro Carrera (1641), and *Viaggio pittoresco* (i.e. a trip to Sicily) by the French painter and engraver Jean Houël (1785), among the most famous travelers of the Grand Tour (Calogero, 2019: 15).

Houël stayed in Sicily from 1776 to 1779 and then was able to attend the festive occasions in honour of St Agatha. As far as music is concerned, Houël reported some relevant details on the 'soundtrack' performed for the opening ceremony of the *palio* (i.e. traditional horse race), in which «*les tambours, les trompettes, les hautbois, les bassons*» stood out. In addition, during the third day of the festival, the musical band of the City's Senate consisted of “*quatre timbaliers, six trompettes, tous à cheval*”; this piece of information is actually confirmed by the ceremonial book of the

¹ One of the most up-to-date and authoritative publication on the subject has been provided by Salvatore Maria Calogero (see bibliography).

² Cfr. Farmer 2011.

³ In this municipality located in the province of Jaén (i.e. in the eastern part of the autonomous community of Andalusia) it is celebrated a religious feast related to the cult of St Agatha (*Santa Agueda de Catania*, in Spanish), which could be addressed in a separate study in order to deepen our knowledge about the connections between the Spanish festival with the Catanese ceremonial of the cult of the Saint, which still deserves a thorough musicological investigation.

Senate (dated 1761 and still unpublished), in which instructions are given on the regular employment of specific musical instruments (e.g. drums, trumpets and pifferos) as well as about the rule to wear the *divisa regia* (i.e. royal uniform) for the festive occasions.⁴

It is definitely worthwhile to mention the account of the feast reported by the English Anglican priest John James Blunt during his journey to Sicily in the early 19th century. In 1823, Blunt wrote a long description of the feast (Calogero, 2019: 155), underlining the power of Agatha as patron saint of Catania, who sheltered the city from the violence of the near volcano. By comparing the presence of Christian patron saints (e.g. St Peter, St Lucia, St John) – performing a strong protection over modern cities like Rome, Syracuse, Enna and Catania – with the influence of tutelary deities of the past (i.e. Mars, Diana and Ceres, respectively) replaced later by the ecclesiastical authority, Blunt focuses on the crucial refuge allegedly granted by St Agatha and the miracle of her veil against the massive eruption of 1669 that destroyed several areas around the city of Catania. In fact, Blunt suggests a deep connection between the festival ceremonies of St Agatha with the ancient cult of Ceres (i.e. Demeter, in ancient Greek mythology), e.g. the horse race that was among the entertainments of the feast of Ceres, which in the past began the ceremonial of St Agatha on the 1st of February.

On the third day, Blunt describes the employment of twenty-one “clusters of monstrous wax candles” (Calogero, 2019: 156),⁵ at that time already called *cerei* or *candelore* (i.e. *cannalori* in the local dialect), namely large decorated wax candles nowadays characterized by a strong Sicilian Baroque style, offered as sign of devotion of the citizenship to the Saint and placed in the square of “Porta di Aci” (also “Porta Jaci”).⁶

In addition, this kind of votive offerings were – and today still are – provided by workers gathered within craft unions,⁷ such as the ones representing craftsmen like shoemakers, tailors, greengrocers, ice merchants (perhaps not anymore today), bakers, carpenters, etc. As in the case of the horse race, offering a certain amount of wax candles seems that was among the actions made to give honour to Ceres. This could be seen as an emblem of the pines that the goddess is believed to have taken and lit with the fire of Mount Etna when she crossed Sicily in search of her daughter Persephone carried off by Hades. According to Blunt, a reasonable interpretation of such similarities between these two traditional ceremonies might be found in the centuries-old ideological conflict between the pagan and the Christian system, hence the people of Catania at a certain point decided to compromise, by maintaining some pagan ceremonies and agreeing to no longer call “Ceres” but “St Agatha” their object of praise (Calogero, 2019: 159).

While looking for analogies or differences between the Catanese feast and the Eleusinian Mysteries, Blunt describes the various stages of the ceremony in honour of St Agatha, focusing on the behaviour shown by the faithful, such as the way they shouted at the Saint with the expression of praise “*Viva Sant’Agata*” (i.e. “Hail, St. Agatha!”), or danced for her by wearing the traditional white costume (that is called ‘*u saccu*, i.e. a sort of tunic), or how they handled the procession of the *fercolo* (i.e. reliquary float) by carrying the *cerei* or *candelore* through the streets of the city (Calogero 2019: 161). The Italian term *fercolo* (“*vara*” in most of Sicilian dialects) comes from

⁴ Cfr. De Luca 2012: 76.

⁵ About the offer or the employment of light, illuminations or wax candles within the framework of urban ceremonies, see the work by Huub van der Linden, published in a recent volume on music, space, and the performance of identity, edited by Valeria De Luca and Christine Jeanneret (cfr. bibliography).

⁶ I.e. in the current Piazza Stesicoro, in the very city centre of Catania.

⁷ Apart from these, in the mid-seventeenth century, about 43 lay companies and/or confraternities were established under the statutory aim of participating in religious processions and/or carrying out charitable works. Cfr. De Luca 2012: 12.

the Latin *fercūlum*, and so from the verb *ferre* (i.e. to carry), and it is already found in Ancient Rome, referring to a little bed or litter upon which the statues of the gods were placed during processions, or the remains of the enemies were set in triumph as a prize of war. By metonymy, *fercolo* denotes what is carried in procession *per se* as a sign of victory, thus – especially in a religious context – the term itself symbolically represent the saint or the divinity that is carried through the streets of the city.

This sort of carriages are today accompanied by sounds and rhythmical patterns, ritual shouts, religious chants and traditional musical instruments, that are all elements ‘carrying the sound’ and so leading the people to worship what is actually carried on the shoulders of the faithful.

However, what about the music and the sonic engagement? Is there any study on any potential archetype referring to the carriage of reliquary floats accompanied by sounds/music with the specific aim to ‘sound’ (i.e. like adding a soundtrack to) the city? According to what we have found so far in this preliminary stage of our enquiry, quite surprisingly, the answer is “there isn’t”. Nevertheless, there are at least a few Sicilian studies concerning the presence and the employment of music and ‘sonic gestures’ as powerful sources of symbolic representation within the framework of celebrations of religious ceremonies, rituals and processions on the streets.⁸ Another case study fairly relevant for the present investigation could be the one of the *Festino di Santa Rosalia* in Palermo (i.e. festival of St Rosalia, occurring on 14-15 July, to celebrate the Patron Saint of the city), which perhaps might be analysed in a future investigation embracing a comparison with the feast of St Agatha.

Nowadays, the feast opens on the 3th of February with the procession of the *cerei* or *candelore*, in which the “*cittadini*” (i.e. the “citizens”, that is the name used to address the faithful participating throughout the ceremony) offer the wax candles. On this day, the highest religious and institutional authorities of the city take also part in the procession, which is concluded in the late evening in Piazza Duomo (i.e. the main square in the city), along with the traditional fireworks show.

Nevertheless, the actual ‘religious’ feast begins on the early morning of the 4th of February with the celebration of a Mass at dawn, in which the ‘reliquary bust’ of St Agatha is “delivered” to the faithful “*cittadini*”, who carry it in procession along an external path of the city, traditionally called the “*giro trionfale*” (i.e. triumphal tour). This “external” tour ends with the return of the reliquary float to the Cathedral (i.e. *Duomo di Catania*) in the late night, often at the very first light of dawn.

The *giro trionfale* of the 4th of February has been structured in the following way, at least until the 1950s:

il 4 febbraio 1958 il giro esterno della Città prevedeva che alle ore 7 «il Venerato Corpo di S. Agata verrà portato trionfalmente sul Sacro Fercolo, [...] si snoderà per le vie Dusmet, Cali, Teatro Massimo, piazza Bellini, Michele Rapisardi, Coppola, piazza Spirito Santo, S. Maria di Betlem, piazza Carlo Alberto; [...] ore 12,30 – prosecuzione del giro del Sacro Fercolo per le vie Pacini, Etna, piazza Stesicoro. [...] ore 14 – arrivo del Sacro Fercolo nella Chiesa di S. Agata la Vetere. [...] ore 17 – prosecuzione del giro esterno del Sacro Fercolo per le vie Plebiscito, Garibaldi, piazza Palestro, Garibaldi, Plebiscito, Dusmet, rientrando alla Cattedrale da Porta Uzeda. – Fuochi pirotecnici saranno accesi all’arrivo del Sacro Fercolo in piazza Palestro e in piazza Duomo».⁹

⁸ Cfr. Bonanzinga 1993, 1996, 1997, 2006.

⁹ On February 4, 1958, the external tour of the City foresaw that at 7 o’clock «the Venerable Relic of St Agatha will be carried triumphantly on the Sacred *Fercolo* [i.e. reliquary float], [...] it will proceed through via [i.e. street] Dusmet, Cali, Teatro Massimo, Piazza Bellini, Michele Rapisardi, Coppola, Piazza Spirito Santo, S. Maria di Betlem, Piazza Carlo Alberto; [...] 12:30 pm – continuation of the tour of the Sacred *Fercolo* through via [i.e. street] Pacini, Etna, Piazza Stesicoro. [...] 2 pm – arrival of the Sacred *Fercolo* in the Church of S. Agata la Vetere. [...] 5 pm – continuation of the external tour of the Sacred *Fercolo* through via Plebiscito, Garibaldi,

Several slight changes have been made until 1963 to the scheme of the procession and to the order of the streets crossed by the reliquary float during the triumphal tour. Since then, the route of the external tour basically corresponds to the current one (Calogero, 2019: 77).

In the morning of the 5th of February, the Archbishop of Catania and the local clergy celebrate a Solemn Pontifical Mass in the Cathedral, in the presence of the highest religious and civil leaders. During the day, the reliquary bust is exhibited to the faithful and in the afternoon, after another Holy Mass, it is again entrusted to the “*cittadini*” for a final procession, this time along an “internal” route of the city that is concluded in the late morning of the following day (i.e. 6 February). Prior to 1693, the roads inside the city were rather narrow and winding, hence not allowing the carriage of the *fercolo*. Even after the reconstruction of the city – which was a process that lasted for much of the 18th century –,¹⁰ although wider and straight roads were finally built, the municipal contracts stipulated for making the procession of the Patron Saint possible still suggested the external tour. The internal route was then introduced for the first time in 1846.

One of the first description of the route (year 1894) reports that the procession crossed over the following streets: Corso V. Emanuele up to Piazza Martiri, and then back through Via Stesicorea and Via Caronda, then Piazza Cavour, Via Stesicoro-Etna, Salita Lincoln, Via Crociferi, Piazza dei Cereali, Corso V. Emanuele up to Via Plebiscito and Via Garibaldi. In Piazza Duomo, music and fireworks shows were performed until the return of the Patron Saint to the Cathedral (i.e. at about 11 p.m.) (Calogero 2019: 85).



Fig. 1 City plan of Catania (Sebastiano Ittar 1832, cfr. Calogero 2019: 85). The red line shows the external route of the 4th of February, whereas the yellow one indicates the internal tour of the 5th, at least until 1895.

Some changes have been made until the 5th of February 1958; since then, the route of the internal tour has been maintained unchanged until today.

piazza Palestro, Garibaldi, Plebiscito, Dusmet, then returning to the Cathedral from Porta Uzeda. – Fireworks will be lit upon arrival of the Sacred *Fercolo* in Piazza Palestro and Piazza Duomo.» Cfr. Calogero 2019: 73-74. Translation ours; we have kept the original name of places and streets on purpose.

¹⁰ The 18th century is the era of rebirth for Catania. In this regard, the Latin motto *melior de cinere surgo* (i.e. “From the ashes I rise even more beautiful”) – that is an inscription made on the triumphal arch of “Porta Garibaldi” in “Fortino” district – expressly summarizes the image of a city that rises magnificently from the rubble of the horrible earthquake of 1693.

3. (Re-)construction of the sacred space

One of the aim of this paper is to observe how the form of the city of Catania has been improved and reorganized over the centuries according to the configuration of the feast, which employs various types of symbolic and ritual – not exclusively musical – practices revolving around the celebration of the patron saint.

In 1692 the feast took place on one day only (i.e. 4 February); according to historical records, from 1712 it was distributed on two days of festivities (i.e. 4-5 February). The increase to two festive days instead of just one is perhaps due to the fact that after the terrible earthquake of 1693 – which basically destroyed the city – Catania was rebuilt according to an orthogonal town plan. This crucial change of the town plan made the road system easier, with wider streets, and above all the city had expanded so that the tour through its quarters could no longer be carried out in a single day.

It is quite likely that the feast of St Agatha had to undergo a few interruptions in the years following the two dramatic events that destroyed the city, namely the catastrophic eruption of Mount Etna in 1669 and the earthquake of enormous magnitude of 1693. In the process of the great reconstruction of the city, after 1693, a very crucial role was played by the “memory” of the city routes, that were linked to a local rituality consolidated already from the middle of the 16th century and therefore institutionalized during the long Spanish domination (De Luca, 2012: 1). Among the several stages of reconstruction works of the city, it is documented that in 1750 much of streets got a restored paving and new urban spaces were created according to the new town plan determined by the nobleman Giuseppe Lanza, Duke of Camastra, such as the road surface of the “Porta Ferdinandea” (after 1860 called “Porta Garibaldi”, being a triumphal arch build in the so-called “Fortino” district, *Futtinu* in Catanese dialect), and the arcade of “Piano di San Filippo” (nowadays Piazza Mazzini) (Calogero, 2019: 30).

In the second half of the 18th century, among other urban roads, also “Via del Plebiscito” was paved, allowing the inhabitants of some new districts – formed right after the eruption of 1669 – to attend the triumphal tour on the 4th of February (Calogero 2019: 61). Through the historical development of the feast, the period in which the celebration took place has been often regulated by the occurrence of unpredictable events, such as wars or natural disasters, as in the case of the eruption of 1865 that would have endangered the municipalities of Mascali and Piedimonte Etneo, both located on the north-eastern side of Mount Etna. On the 1st of February of that very year, the then Mayor of Catania gave the order to cancel the organisation of the feast «hoping that the danger of the eruption would be soon warded off and the feast could happily be celebrated» (Calogero 2019: 63).

Besides the occurrence of natural calamities, it has been recorded that from time to time the ceremonial of the feast of St Agatha itself has somewhat ‘required’ to make some crucial structural changes in the town plan. Indeed, religious processions were to the core of the city’s rituals, as they redesigned the urban space and made visible «the symbolic cohesion of the community in the stage architecture of the festival, which included magnificent lighting in the most important road junctions» (De Luca 2012: 64) (e.g. Piano del Duomo, Piano dell’Università, Quattro Canti, Porta del mare, Porta di Aci, and Porta Ferdinandea). The function of music in relation to the ritual is crucial. It plays a primary role in both the outdoors and indoors festive ceremonial; it is «a fundamental element in the perception of the citizens’ sense of decorum» (De Luca 2012: 73).

The urban space presents an unusual density of communicative processes based on a crossroads of people,

institutions and means. If on the one hand «these processes highlight the social and symbolic value of concrete physical places», on the other hand «they reflect the complexity of relationships, mainly based on conflicts and mediations occurring within an organized system like the one represented by the city» (De Luca 2012: VI).

Over time musical activities have to a great extent determined internal and external spaces, within which civil and religious rituals are performed, working as areas in which cultural production and symbolic representation are carried out. This is even more noticeable when repetitive traditional practices contribute to ‘shape’ the space sonically. The various urban musical practices bring into play a series of elements such as images, gestures, sounds, scenarios and representations, which are perceived by citizens who interpret them according to traditional ritual and performative codes.¹¹ Citizens physically and acoustically ‘occupy’ and shape the urban space through public practices that in time outline the identity feature of the city, and in this scenario the interconnection between music and urban rituality looks quite strong.¹²

In order to look carefully at the development of some ‘urban scenes’ of the second half of 18th century in Catania – as the result of the construction of sacred (musical) spaces of the city –, we provide here a few quotations from two historical sources, namely two “*Avvisi*” (i.e. public notices) referring to the presence and the importance of musical performances within the festival of St Agatha occurring in 1769 and 1799, respectively. Within the timeframe of thirty years, these two public notices show the main transformations of the *imago urbis*, with a special focus on the functions and features of music in relation to urban culture:

[...] Dopo d’essersi godute per due giorni continui le narrate magnificenze, farà il terzo giorno la più gradita, e dilettevole veduta agli occhi degli spettatori la discesa dalla Porta di Aci d’un superbo, altissimo, e ben architettato trionfale Carro [...] dentro del quale parecchi cori di voci, e di strumenti, che nelle diverse pose replicheranno melodici canti in onore della invitta nostra gloriosa Vergine, e Martire S. AGATA. Girerà per tutta la strada delle Quattro Cantoniere, e per il piano della Cattedrale, passerà a fermarsi nel centro della Piazza, ove pomposamente illuminato darà piacere, e godimento a chi lo mirerà.¹³

This passage clearly describes the way in which the *Carro* (i.e. a triumphal musical float, about 19 meters high)¹⁴ went around the streets of the city centre of Catania by “carrying” the music, to somewhat ‘sound’ the city, like adding a soundtrack to the event that pervaded it. Along with the performance of music, it is perhaps important to mention that streets of Catania, since at least the 16th century, became an open-air theater, a sort of stage on which several forms of dramatisation of the martyrdom of St Agatha were offered to the citizens, according to the ceremonial book of the feast. The well-planned and detailed programme of the feast – as reported in the *avviso* of 1769 – is quite remarkable since it has been arranged right on the recurrence of the hundredth anniversary of Mount Etna’s destructive eruption; as a matter of fact, it was actually an opportunity for the City’s Senate to show its ability to put forces together and carefully prepare the spatial and scenic architecture of the festival (De Luca 2012: 63).

¹¹ Cfr. Kisby 2001.

¹² Cfr. Strohm 1985; Kendrick 2002; Marín 2002; Baker 2008.

¹³ After having enjoyed the narrated deeds for two continuous days, on the third day it will take place the most welcome, and most delightful sight in the eyes of the spectators, [i.e.] the descent from the *Porta di Aci* of a superb, very high, and well-conceived triumphal *Carro* [i.e. a float, not the reliquary one], [...] inside of which choirs of voices and musical instruments will perform melodic songs [*sic!*] in their different poses, in honour of our glorious Virgin, and Martyr St Agatha. It [i.e. the float] will go around all the roads of the *Quattro Cantoniere* [i.e. the four corners of a central road junctions], and on the floor of the Cathedral, where it will stop right in the centre of the *Piazza* [i.e. the square], where it will be pompously lit and giving pleasure to those who will look at it. Cfr. De Luca 2012: 170. Translation ours; we have kept on purpose the original name of places and streets.

¹⁴ Cfr. De Luca 2012: 106.

Another quotation from the same *avviso* from 1769 reports more specifically the kind of music that was performed according to the ceremonial:

Il quinto giorno godrà il Pubblico la seconda veduta della nobile machinosa mole del Carro, colla stessa precedenza, cogli stessi cori di voci, e di strumenti, che scenderà dalla Piazza di S. Filippo per trattenersi indi nel Piano della Porta di Aci, ove illuminato pomposamente per tutta la sera sarà dimora, colla rappresentanza sopra di esso e di vari mottetti, vari concerti in musica, impiegando il tempo per finimento di questo festivo giorno [...].¹⁵

Various “motets”¹⁶ and “concerts” were offered to *il Pubblico* (i.e. the citizens), who enjoyed the feast until the very last day, i.e. the sixth one, in which the faithful congregated to celebrate the solemn Vespers in the Cathedral – by chanting traditional liturgical melodies of the local Catholic Church – in the presence of the Archbishop and the Catanese clergy. Also, the *avviso* from 1799 reports that – according to the programme of the feast – a choir accompanied by an ensemble of musicians would have performed «*le più liete sinfonie*» (i.e. the most joyful symphonies) inside a superb *Carro* (De Luca 2012: 177).

Reading these brief notes enables us to understand to what extent the feast of St Agatha – at least since the end of the 16th century – was the urban festive occasion on which economic resources and organisational energies of both religious and civil power were massively invested.¹⁷

Lastly, by reaching the conclusions, at least three considerations about the reconstruction of the sacred space of Catania are needed:

- Streets are usually restored or built brand new as the feast approaches, especially (but not exclusively) after a natural disaster occurs;
- The tour of the reliquary float of St Agatha may change according to the actual road condition/system;
- The city changes its face, either to restore, renovate or modernise its own roads and districts, in order to facilitate the organisation of festival, both in the external and the internal tour.

4. Further research perspectives

In this preliminary investigation, we have provided some remarks on the relationship between music and spatial organisation of urban ritualities, as well as about the rearrangement of the feast of St Agatha to the ceremonial space (and/or *viceversa*) over its historical development. Amongst our earliest questions: does the feast of St Agatha follow common or trans-historic features belonging to a conceivable standard rite widespread over, or rather

¹⁵ On the fifth day the citizens will enjoy for the second time the sight of the noble *Carro* [i.e. the float], as they did before, carrying the same choirs of voices and musical instruments; the float will descend from the *Piazza di S. Filippo* to remain then in the *Piano della Porta di Aci*, where it will be lit up pompously throughout the evening, along with the performance upon it of various motets, various concerts of music, in such a way as to enjoy the time until the end of this festive day. Cfr. De Luca 2012: 172. Translation ours; we have kept on purpose the original name of places and streets.

¹⁶ It is worthwhile to mention that two seventeenth-century musical sources connected to the festival of St Agatha found in Catania report the motet *O Catanensis gloria*, included in the anthology by Michele Malerba – chapel master of the Cathedral in Catania during the bishopric of Bonaventura Secusio (1609-1618) – entitled “*Sacrarum Cantionum quae binis, ternisque vocibus concinuntur, cum basso ad organum*” (Ed. Magni, Venice, 1614), and the motet *Quam pulchrae sunt mammae tuae*, which is part of the anthology by Antonio Ferraro, entitled “*Sacrae cantiones quae tum unica, tum duabus, tribus, ac quatuor vocibus concinuntur, liber primis [...], cum basso pro organo*” (Ed. Zanetti, Rome, 1617). These two printed copies allowed us to shed light both on the genre of music performed in Catania in the early seventeenth century and on the channels for the circulation of music in Sicily. Cfr. De Luca 2012: 6. See also De Luca 2009.

¹⁷ Cfr. De Luca 2012: 3.

migrating across the Mediterranean area? In which way the Catanese urban plan has been adapted to the requirements of the ritual, or, conversely, how much the feast has been rearranged to the ceremonial space?

We tried to answer the first question by offering a historical description of the feast given by John James Blunt, who suggests a deep connection between the festival ceremonies of St Agatha and the ancient cult of Ceres (among other still unexplored potential archetypes). These are indeed forms of agro-pastoral religiosity, practised by a peasant society that repeats ancient sacred signs and, at the same time, actualises and reinvents rituals and ceremonies of the past. In honour of saints and madonnas, such feasts seem to relive ancient rituals aimed at archaic divinities. It is a perennial repetition of acts and gestures with which man relates to the sacred sphere, honouring a transcendent being, from which s/he feels her/his physical and material well-being – as well as her/his very existence – depend (Buttitta 1999: 8).

The second question has been answered in the paragraph concerning the reconstruction or re-shaping of the sacred space. Other issues might be tackled in a future investigation by taking into account some traditional festivals like the one in honour of St Agatha, such as “how have different Mediterranean soundscapes been configured?”, “Are there any repetitive or spontaneous practices that configure the space sonically?”, “What about any potential archetype referring to the carriage of reliquary floats accompanied by sounds/music with the specific aim to ‘sound’ (i.e. like adding a soundtrack to) the city?”. While waiting to respond to such kind of research questions, we could just sustain that music can be conceived as a means of representing the sacred, since it mediates its distance between the secular and the sacred worlds, drawing them closer together.¹⁸

This paper represents the most up-to-date (ethno-)musicological work on the subject of the feast of St Agatha in Catania, seen as one of the cities at the centre of the Mediterranean. Moreover, this preliminary study could also lay the groundwork for a potential collaboration with other academic environments and research groups, to take part in the international debates on sound studies and, more specifically, the Mediterranean soundscape. As a matter of fact, right in this fall semester, a new PhD project on the ‘migrant sounds’ in the Mediterranean (i.e. the multipart singing traditions of the Ionian Islands) is taking its first steps. This kind of research project – together with our present preliminary enquiry – aims at establishing an international research centre within the University of Catania (i.e. in the Department of Humanities, DISUM - Unict), in order to work on soundscape studies from both the urban musicological and the ethnomusicological point of view, by connecting different countries that overlook the same sea, from Spain to Turkey, through Malta, from Sardinia to the Greek islands and Crete, from Corsica to Cyprus and beyond, looking for the presence and influence of musical ritualities that, over the centuries, have (re-)shaped sacred spaces.

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Cita recomanada

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