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MULTIPART MUSIC AS SELF-DETERMINATION: PERSPECTIVES AND DISCOURSES IN AN ARBËRESH COMMUNITY OF SINGING WOMEN

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ABSTRACT
Anna Stratigò (b. 1958) is an influential singer, musician and songwriter within the landscape of Arbëresh traditional music. She organises singing gatherings where she also holds important discussions about the role of women in the practice and transmission of traditional music. She established the Vuxhë Grash (Voices of Women) choir in 2017 and has been its leader since then. The choir includes several women from the village of Lungro (Province of Cosenza, Calabria, Italy) who regularly take part in the learning and performing of songs from the Arbëresh oral tradition. The learning sessions occur in self-managed, participatory meetings where each participant has the opportunity to experience the reviving of unique songs together with others, exploring and examining the repertoire during friendly singing sessions. These gatherings serve as the heart of their music-making process.

KEYWORDS: multipart singing • Arbëresh culture • women's empowerment • self-determination • self-representation

INTRODUCTION

Between the 1950s and the early 2000s, Italian female folk singers and ethnomusicologists engaged in decades-long collaborative investigations into oral expressions. By interacting with the primary carriers of tradition as interpreters and mediators, folk singers and researchers such as Sandra Mantovani[1] and Giovanna Marini[2] learned from tradition and in turn helped repertoires to circulate by contributing as both performers and scholars of oral traditions. This approach represented an alternative methodological model for subsequent generations of singers, performers, and researchers of traditional music.

The efforts of these ethnomusicologists are even more relevant today when one considers the impact these pioneers had on transmission by creating new singing communities. These transversal experiences – now absorbed throughout various musical circuits at different levels and with fluctuating outcomes – are connected to many dimensions of musical practice, where the transmission of oral music continues in both participatory and presentational forms (see Turino 2008) regardless of whether the singers belong to traditional contexts.

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Recently, in Calabria, Italy's southern mainland region, as more generally throughout the peninsula, female music-makers are becoming central figures in the field, promoting ambitious projects through which social roles and expectations of women in contemporary society are brought to light through the practice of individual and communal singing.[3] For some of these singers and musicians, musical practice and learning of specific repertoires took place in adulthood; in other circumstances they belong to traditional contexts, spending a significant part of their lives in direct contact with expressions of oral cultures, as in the case of Anna Stratigò (b. 1958). One can trace and outline a new feminine influence in the creativity and in processes of transmission of traditional music through these diverse experiences.

By playing a mediation role with the audience, some of these sound groups (cf. Blacking 1995: 232) are driven, in turn, by the desire to study and transmit traditional repertoires, aiming to inform those who lack in-depth knowledge (or any knowledge at all) of specific oral musical traditions.[4] At the same time, these singing communities strive to self-determine through these efforts, though not without difficulty. Regarding the focus of my article, I find it very stimulating to emphasise the significant persistence in transmitting and maintaining cultural and expressive traits among the Arbëresh traditional singing groups, particularly in women's hands, and at an autonomous level. Through arguments strongly focused on the position of women in life, culture, and society – and through specific choices in their lives – singers like Stratigò propose alternative paths to rethink the presence and influence of women in their own society, especially in highly marginal(ised) areas relative to the broader Italian and European social fabric.

Thanks to the persistent work of Stratigò, there is a special musical vivacity in Lungro, one of the 'capitals' of Arbëresh[5] culture, situated in the Province of Cosenza (Calabria region).[6] I am interested in emphasising the tireless commitment of this singing master who is dedicated to transmitting an Arbëresh polyvocal song repertoire by establishing an exclusively female singing group. She plans and carries out regular singing meetings that engage a wide range of participants – including beginners, amateurs, and occasional attendees – and coordinates performances with professional musicians, which typically take place beyond local contexts. In these situations, the multipart singing practice becomes a 'tactic of resistance' and a vehicle to express self-determination. Since the research is ongoing, I will present some features pertaining to the Lungro choir, called Vuxhë Grash (Voices of Women), which has been led by Stratigò since 2017, without the presumption of believing that I encompass the topic.

APPROACHES

I became interested in Stratigò's work around the beginning of 2022, although I have been aware of various aspects of her career as folk singer and jazz musician since the early 2000s. Throughout 2023, I had the opportunity to meet her and her choir many times. The ensemble is made up solely of women native to the village of Lungro and the surrounding areas. In addition to observing their various activities, such as rehearsals, meetings and public performances, we had the opportunity on two occasions to support one another. On the first occasion, they helped me on a fundraising campaign

which had been organised by my association in support of a local library; on the second occasion, I supported them with the 10th Mate Festival, which took place on August 1, 2023. The fact that I am not of Arbëresh culture is a hindrance, as the language predominantly spoken by the women in the musical context is Arbërisht and I neither understand nor speak it. Despite my unfamiliarity, all aspects concerning the music making were punctually translated into Italian for me. At last, we developed a mutual support, as well as a sincere interest and mutual respect for each other's work.

During my research, I have considered bi-musicality (see Hood 1960) an effective method of fully understanding musical expressions and discourses, dynamics, and other aspects of music-making that cannot be solely deduced from participant observation. However, in this specific case, although I had been invited to join the choir, I preferred to remain an observer. There were two reasons: 1) the group itself was created with the aim of making Arbëresh musical and material culture known and giving it continuity: these aspects are strongly rooted in everyday life and are, clearly, tightly linked to the spoken language; 2) the internal dynamics of the group were so complex that I couldn't enter it with ease. The participatory spirit of this choir does not depend only on the willingness of people to be part of it, nor does it reside solely in the moment of the musical encounter between these women. It has deeper roots which are connected to the modes of living in that specific context, and so the spirit of participation emerges in many other situations of daily life during which these singers participate in extra-musical activities.

Their participation in the sound group is the result of choices and constant negotiation, also concerning their private lives. These choices have a direct impact on the composition of the choir itself, for example, for the frequent tours throughout Europe and the relationship of these women with musical environments and individuals which are far from their context of origin. The accomplishment of each of these choices is usually supported by the whole group. In any case, my presence – since the listener also takes part in music making – proved to be effective in understanding many dynamics behind the performance *per se* amongst members of the choir, and between them and people belonging to the same cultural context. I have often wondered, perhaps rhetorically, whether the constant connection of these women has influenced the persistence of their musical activities, goals, and personal choices. After almost two years of research, I have in fact observed that – despite the internal contrasts within the group and the daily vicissitudes that can occasionally break relationships – some women are increasingly self-confident. Some have returned to their studies to complete educations they left unfinished years ago, while others have embarked on new collaborations with fellow musicians in local traditional music scenes, overcoming initial hesitation and reserve.

In the past year, I have been speculating on why there hasn't been any in-depth study on the presence, experiences, and contributions of Calabrian Arbëresh women in the transmission and continuity of traditional music. It is possible that this gap results from "the dominant role of men in determining approaches and methods" (cf. Nettl 1983: 334), as men have more often focused on religious rites – on the gestures, expressions, symbols, and hierarchies they express, are linked to temporal and secular powers – rather than investigating other, more "subtle" and less "evident" musical and para-musical situations connected to everyday dimension. As Tullia Magrini (2003: 2) emphasised, "women's musical activities had not previously been examined as an

expression of specific social situations and cultural responses, even when these activities were well known to scholars."

As a non-Arbëresh scholar, I found that a good way to get to know the group, even though I encountered a culture that was perceived and experienced as 'minority', was to let them feel my presence and my 'disinterested interest' without entering on tiptoe. I wanted to assure them that my participation was totally sincere support for their work, a helpful presence at the right time. This pushed me to get to know the women of the choir and the work of Stratigò, as well as to integrate myself in different situations connected to this group, offering concrete help. In any case, this research is an attempt to observe and describe the work of women who, in complete autonomy, choose to give continuity to their material and immaterial cultural traditions (Rognlie 2023: 455).

SINGING IN LUNGRO

Arbëresh refugees began to settle in southern Italy in the early 15th century, following various waves of migration. The social integration of Albanian refugees in Calabria, which determined a new demographic expansion after the depopulation caused by the earthquake of 1456, created mistrust among the locals for at least two fundamental reasons: 1) the misunderstanding of the language by Calabrian natives (now and then); 2) the Arbëresh membership with the Orthodox Church of Albania, thus, their separation from Catholic rites. (Cf. Rennis 2000 [1993]: 30–31) Most of these communities still preserve language, religion and traditional music (Scaldaferri 2012: 218).

Stratigò is an Arbëresh singer, choirmaster and multi-instrumentalist born in Lungro. In her autobiographical tales, she speaks about the ancient origin of her family, who migrated to the village during the first half of the 16th century. In her twenties, Stratigò was the founder and regular member of two singing groups, Gruppo Arbëreshë di Lungro (The Lungro Arbëresh Group) and Moti i Parë (The Ancient Time), where she and Maria Rogati were two female voices in a group of eight men.[7] Both groups were established in the early 1980s (the latter being an expansion of the former) with the aim of finding, researching and disseminating Arbëresh traditional music; the groups presented a repertoire of songs mainly learned by ear. Amongst the many contributions, Stratigò and members of Gruppo Arbëreshë di Lungro issued an LP titled "Songs of the Albanians of Calabria" (see Gruppo Arbēreshē di Lungro 1983), performing Arbëresh traditional music and Albanian songs such as "Tosks, Fight!".[8] Some years later Moti i Parë collaborated with the Department of Albanology at the University of Calabria to record the CD "The Voice of Time" (Moti i Parë 1998). Though this group broke up some years ago, Stratigò continued, independently, to disseminate that repertoire and other folk songs, undertaking and maintaining numerous relationships with important cultural centres and institutions in other countries, as well as in the 'motherland' of Albania, of course.

In early 2022, I met her and six members of her choir at her house located in the historical core of the village. Today, this place is also a private museum of the *Risorgimento*, the Italian unification movement, a spot dedicated to the memory of Anna's great-grandfather Vincenzo Stratigò, who took active part in Calabrian revolutionary movements, founded a secret society and followed the Young Italy movement.[9] Anna

told me that in the summer of 1859, Vincenzo Stratigò induced Lungro's population to stand up against the Bourbon, and that during this protest many inhabitants were arrested, including his mother, Matilde Mantile. Furthermore, the house museum is both a lodge for tourists and scholars, and the main place for all activities of the local music school or 'music workshop' (with the official name *Officina della musica*) and the International Academy of Mate.[10] The area in front of her house is also the place where the Mate Festival has taken place each year since 2013. Anna cherishes these spaces, arranging weekly singing meetings with her Vuxhë Grash choir (see Photo 1), and giving regular music and singing lessons to a group of Lungro's children, at which both master and pupils speak Arbërisht, keeping the transmission of their own language alive.

The custom of mate-drinking is strongly connected with the phenomenon of Italian emigration to South America, especially Argentina. It has also been established in some regions in Italy, and in Calabrian Arbëresh villages, especially in Lungro, for a century with consumption of mate being tied to moments of high participation both at a family and at a friendship level.[11] Stratigò promotes this tradition by organising the Mate Festival on August 1 each year. It is a one-day event dedicated to promoting handicraft products related to mate consumption, generally produced and distributed by Argentine artisans who come to Lungro every year. During the evening and at night, there are various musical performances by local, national and international artists. The women in the choir play a central role in this context, as they assist Anna in every aspect of the organisation from the cooking of traditional meals – prepared together at Anna's house to be distributed to the people who flock to the festival – to setting the stage. Of course, they have a special role in the specific musical-performative context. In 2012, Stratigò wrote and released her "Mate Song" (*Kënga e Matit*) in Lungro's Arbërisht and in Spanish, a song dedicated to this communal practice.[12]

Currently, the Vuxhë Grash choir consists of nine women: Stratigò, Maria Di Filippo, Carmela Belisario, Elena Forte, Caterina Senise, Maria Carmela Rio, Maria Borrescio, Irene Vaccaro and Carmela Milione, who have attended Stratigò's lessons since 2017; some of them represent the core of the 'travelling' singing groups (see Photo 2) while some of the others participate only at the singing lessons in Anna's basement. As said, the relationships established between these women are based upon assiduous attendance in musical and extra-musical contexts. With most of them, Stratigò shares moments of her everyday life, something that is evident in the sound outcomes. One of the group members, Maria "Mimìa" Di Filippo, represents Anna's alter-ego: she is a trusted friend, with whom Anna shares many aspects of her professional and personal life; they are often in conflict regarding organisational issues, however Di Filippo fully supports Stratigò's work in all its facets. In informal contexts as on stage, they both musically demonstrate this bond. As we will see later, Di Filippo is mainly entrusted with role of second voice in the performance of two- or three-part songs.

Photo 1. The Vuxhë Grash choir singing in the basement of Stratigò's house in Lungro. Photo by Delia Dattilo, February 26, 2023.

Photo 2. Stratigò (right) and the Vuxhë Grash choir rehearsing before the fundraising concert for Cosenza Civic Library, Calabria, Italy. Photo by Delia Dattilo, April 1, 2023.

The Arbëresh represent "a singular case of preservation and development of an oral culture over time" (Scaldaferri 2013: 89). With the exception of interested scholars most Calabrian residents who do not have an Arbëresh background perceive these communities as 'cultural islands' locked in a shell of permanent and monolithic tradition.

Since I cannot dwell upon studies of the Albanian diaspora here – even though, in many ways, they affect this contribution – I will limit myself to underline instead how Calabrian Arbëresh idioms and musical expressions are alive and widely circulating throughout the villages of the region, as well as in non-local contexts. With regards to the Province of Cosenza, in Calabria, and a few villages in Basilicata, Giovan Battista Rennis (2000 [1993]: 16) has divided the Arbëresh communities into three cultural zones (see Figure 1): 1) the Pollino area, which covers the municipalities of Acquaformosa, Lungro, Firmo, San Basile, Frascineto, Ejanina, Plataci, Civita and Spezzano Albanese; 2) the Sibari area, which includes San Demetrio Corone, San Giorgio Albanese, Santa Sofia d'Epiro, Vaccarizzo, San Benedetto Ullano, Marri and San Cosmo Albanese; 3) the Basilicata and northern Calabria area, which comprises San Paolo Albanese, San Costantino Albanese, Plataci and Castroregio.

Some of the earliest fieldwork and field recordings of Arbëresh musical expressions began in the early 1950s, at the hand of Diego Carpitella, Alberto Maria Cirese and Ernesto De Martino. Carpitella and De Martino, in particular, undertook extensive collection and research in Basilicata (former Lucania), and Calabria. They recounted the difficulties in daily life, and the extreme living conditions of many communities (suffice it to say that in the 1950s, most Calabrians did not have running water at home, cf. Carpitella's report in Ricci and Tucci 2006: 172–173).

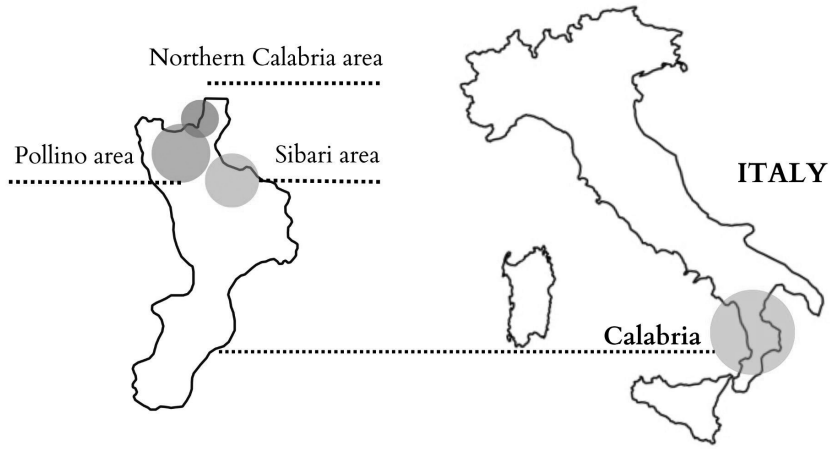

Figure 1. Arbëresh cultural areas in the Province of Cosenza according to Rennis 2000 [1993].

Back in 1968, the Italian National Centre for Traditional Music Studies (NCTMS),[13] with the support of the National Academy of St Cecilia and Italian National Broadcasting, gathered all the research and studies carried out in Italian regions from 1948 to 1960 into a single volume (Nataletti n.d.). This book reports all contributions including lists

of sound recordings of sacred and secular music from the Calabrian and Lucanian Arbëresh communities, collected by Carpitella and De Martino (ibid.: 122–125, Anthology 22). Of these recordings, 69 out of 78 are songs sung primarily in the Arbërisht language while 43 out of 78 recordings feature female voices exclusively.[14] 16 of these 78 recordings were made in Lungro (ibid.: 123–124, No 42–57) of which 14 songs were performed by male singers and players (ibid.: No 42–49, 51–54, 56–57), and only 2 songs were performed by mixed-gender groups (ibid.: No 50, 55; see Table 1). These recordings, as with all the research conducted by the two scholars, were then reissued in 2006 with a critical and analytical apparatus edited by the ethnomusicologists Antonello Ricci and Roberta Tucci. By analysing Carpitella and De Martino's survey conducted in 1954, Ricci and Tucci elucidated the aspects that characterised musical forms and styles in these repertoires. A quantitative analysis focusing solely on the Calabrian Arbëresh repertoires, revealed a remarkable distribution of female vocal repertoires. The only exception was the village of Lungro, where a strong instrumental component indicated a male presence in multipart singing (Ricci and Tucci 2006: 43).[15]

Table 1. Lungro's Arbëresh traditional music recorded by Diego Carpitella and Ernesto De Martino in 1954.

NCTMS Collection (number of sound recording)	Title, voices and instruments[16]
42	"Tarantella" (*Tarantella*; bagpipes)
43	"I Have a River of Blood in This Heart of Mine" (*Ndì kit sèmir kàm gn kanàal me ghiàk*; male voice, bagpipes)
44	"Golden Crown That Shed Light Upon the World" (*Kùròor e àart c'sdalambàrte ssìi*; two male voices).
45	"The Painter Who Paints Your Eyes" (*Pitùrit c'it pitàrti tënden sìi*; two male voices)
46	"Oh, How Weird the World Had Become" (*Mà pòpo jèta si mu bèe*; two male voices).
47	"In This Square I've Spread a Bunch of Rings" (*Ma ndi kìt scèsc i scprìscia gn dòor lùnasa*; male voice, guitar)
48	"You at the Window, Me at the Balcony" (*Ti nègn finestir e ù nègn baklùn*; three male voices)
49	"The Moon in This Alley Comes Out Very Late" (*Hènsa csàaj vanèglie m'dègl sciùum nàt*; two male voices, accordion)
50	"You Are That Knife" (*Ti jèe aiò thìksa*; two mixed-gender voices, bagpipes)
51	"How Must I live to Find Solace" (*Si kam te bègn la vita t'kunzularem*; two male voices, accordion)
52	"The Death of the Donkey" (*La morte du ciucciu* in Calabrian dialect; male voice, guitar)
53	"Girl, My Girl Who Shines" (*Kòpiglie moj kòpiglie c'lambarissin*; four male voices, guitar).
54	"A Black Cloud Is Coming Down the Mountain" (*Kà màgli mu kalàar gn neglie e sèes*; four male voices, guitar)

55	"I Went to the Mountain" (*Sono andato in montagna* in Albanese;[17] mixed-gendered voices, accordion, guitar)
56	"Tonight, Is Carnival" (*Sòonde c'èe Carnivàal*; bagpipes)
57	"Tarantella" (*Tarantella*; bagpipes)

The social and cultural environment of southern Italy – "its peasant world and cultural autonomy" as observed by Carpitella, De Martino and Alan Lomax back in the 1950s – no longer exists today (Ricci 2012: 2). Local forms of traditional music and other kinds of expression are undoubtedly influenced by all aspects of contemporary life. Mobility allows the hybridisation of musical forms and styles, when interpretations of traditional expressions – that is, individuals who grew up in societies where traditional music still played a special role – meet with musicians belonging to other social contexts, in highly heterogeneous performative situations.

VUXHË GRASH CHOIR: SONGS, WAY OF SINGING AND MUSICAL BEHAVIOURS

Stratigò surrounds herself with a group of people regardless of their social and cultural background. Over time, many women have left the group, while others have joined – temporarily or permanently. In the choir, personal and musical experiences are shared, discussed and addressed together daily, both in musical and non-musical contexts. During each informal singing meeting of the choir, Stratigò usually keeps a large sheet of paper where she writes down everything related to the songs that she learned as a child, or the ones that she had the chance to acquire later on in life either from other singers in her community or from sound recordings, that is, not only from tradition of Lungro, but also from other Arbëresh villages. Stratigò passes down to and shares with these women all her knowledge, doing regular research on specific songs and comparing other Arbërisht idioms with the ones spoken in her own town (see Photo 3).

On the one hand, Stratigò and the Vuxhë Grash choir's repertoire is strongly linked to oral traditions *and* mediate listening for example through early sound recordings, as they constitute a route from which these singers reconnect to musical 'thought' as part of their own culture; on the other hand, the thrust offered by Stratigò – the chance to perform abroad – provides the opportunity to connect with musicians of diverse backgrounds, pulling the collective head out of that 'cultural shell' to which the Arbëresh are believed to be confined. In general, the choir's repertoires consist mainly – though not only – of *vjersh*, which are generally (though not always) love songs sung by both men and women and performed in different social circumstances (cf. De Gaudio 1993: 22), and *vallja*, i.e. wedding songs and dances (also called *valle*, *vaghe* or *shoka*).[18] This repertoire includes Lungro's songs and variants as they have been sung (and recorded) in other Arbëresh villages throughout Calabria and other Italian regions.

For all the circumstances related to the apprenticeship in Anna's community, multipart singing produces specific musical behaviours: singers meet informally to rehearse the pieces to be learned so that they are all connected with what could be considered a 'musical and mental object' (cf. Magrini 1993: 1964) perceived as a relic of their past.

Photo 3. From the left, Anna Stratigò, Elena Forte and Maria Di Filippo discussing songs in Stratigò's basement. Frame from video by Nanni Spina, February 26, 2023.

On the other hand, these music-makers re-connect, in some way, with the meaning of the songs themselves, looking for reasons for cultural belonging and finding common feelings within them that are generally tied to the fear of losing their cultural background. There is something that I have always found unique and interesting when listening to some Arbëresh speaking of their own history: that method of addressing their history by using the first person plural, "once we came here when we lost our battle against the Turks" (Italia Orizzonti 2016) as a way of connecting their identity across centuries. In an interview available online, Stratigò said: "We have two homelands, two ministers, two presidents – after all, the Adriatic is not a sea, but a river" (ibid.).

Vallja

An example, amongst the many wedding songs, that serves as a model to the choir is the *vallja* titled "Vaghe Vaghe" or "Vage Vage" (the wording depends on local communities and historical period), as recorded in Montecilfone (Province of Campobasso, Molise Region, Italy; see Agamennone and Lombardi 2011: 38–43). Stratigò and the Vuxhë Grash choir sing and study this song, comparing Montecilfone's idiom with the one spoken in their own village. As Stratigò points out, the case of "Vage Vage"

> is the classic drama of the Arbëresh girl who must get married and is afraid to leave her family, [to forget] the language. She knows that who she marries is also Arbëresh, however, *vallja* is always a bit of a 'farce': the women sing and turn to the father, then they turn to the mother who cries 'once' women had to cry because

> [daughters] were detached from the family. In short, there is this dialogue. We are all women, otherwise it had to be first between [a group of] men, [then between a group of] women. (FM: interview 2023a)

Table 2 presents the lyrics of Montecilfone song "Vage Vage", which Stratigò and the choir used for learning, as published by Alberto Cirese (1957: 47). Vuxhë Grash performed "Vage Vage" during one of their weekly singing sessions at Stratigò's music school differently (FM: video 2023a). Although the published lyrics do not correspond exactly to those sung by Stratigò and Vuxhë Grash, this example represents an important point in Stratigò's research to recover the vocality thought of as 'typically Arbëresh', even if it belongs to other communities. Generally, this wedding song is sung by Vuxhë Grash in the minor key, with the entrance of parallel thirds upon the tune in the *Silezi lezi mezi* verse. Stratigò often struggles with her own singers, as she is very keen that these motifs be performed with absolute precision. In the multimedia example, a quite lengthy discussion is shown amongst the singers regarding the pronunciation and meaning of specific words in this song, as said, sung in Montecilfone's idiom.

Table 2. Arbëresh folk song "Vage vage" with English translation by the article's author, based on an earlier Italian translation (Cirese 1957: 47).

***Vage Vage* (Arbëresh)**	**"Vage Vage" (English)**
Vage vage kurkussage,	Pretty, pretty, charming,
silezi lezi mezi	'Silezi lezi mezi'
Moria bukuroz!	Pretty Maria!
Por sa pash një lepuroz	As soon as I saw a little hare
qeni një folj te shkruonj,	Bearing a paper to be written
Z' ti ta çë dhot kjo shkruam?	Father (I said) what does this writing ever say?
Dhot një vasheznje milj dukat.	It says, "a young girl for a thousand ducats".
Kura rum ka 'to trolje,	And when we arrived on those plains
çuf lulez e mushtaçoljez,	Here were bouquets of flowers and jonquils,
silezi lezi mezi	'Silezi lezi mezi'
Moria bukuroz!	Pretty Maria!
Kur arum ka 'to makje,	When we came to those bushes,
çuf lulez e manussakje,	Here bouquets of flowers and violets,
silezi lezi mezi	'Silezi lezi mezi'
Moria bukuroz!	Pretty Maria!

Vjersh

Stratigò explains that the term *vjersh* does not have a univocal meaning in all Arbëresh communities, but, on the contrary, each local village – at least in Calabria – has a name to identify certain musical models depending on the way in which these songs were or are performed. In the case of Lungro:

> In Carpitella's recordings, the only moments in which women sing are not [during] the [execution of] 'arias' or 'songs' – which we call *këngat*, meaning ditties – but [on the occasion of] *vjersh* with instruments (accordion and bagpipes), where both women and men sing. There is an important difference, precisely because there is no Arbëresh music but several Arbëresh musics: first of all, the word *vjersh* in Lungro has a completely different meaning from that used in other Arbëresh communities. Every village gives a meaning to the words, therefore, in Lungro songs sung with instruments (bagpipes, accordion, and also guitar) – the *versetti*, 'short verses' – are called *vjersh* which derives from 'verse'. [This means that] a man sings and then the woman answers: they are also on Carpitella's records. Instead, multipart songs, or in any case the songs to be sung in the open air, are called *ajret* in Lungro; then there are the *këngat*, songs for which dad also accompanied himself on the guitar ("Girl, O Girl"). If you go to other villages and you say to someone *shëtir një vjersh!* 'throw a *vjersh*!', it does not have the meaning that it has in Lungro. If you say it to Lungro inhabitants they respond 'so, where is the accordion?', [if there is no accordion] he (or she) doesn't sing it. Instead, if you say it to someone from Frascineto, they sing what for us are the *canti all'aria* [songs to be sung in the open air]. If you go to San Martino di Finita, you have to say it with other words; just think that in San Martino di Finita bagpipe songs are called Lungrese songs, because only in Lungro were [these songs] sung with the bagpipes. It is not common in Arbëresh communities, absolutely. It was common in Calabrian towns, but [they were] played faster; in Lungro, just in Lungro, [they were] played slowly. (FM: interview 2023b)

What Stratigò meant is that in Lungro the musical soul is expressed through the *vjersh* (Ricci and Tucci 2006: 41), accompanied with the small diatonic button accordion *organetto* or the bagpipe. In contemporary practice, singers rarely improvise with new words, as in the past, and regarding actual practices (including the choir in question), the improvisation had been replaced by the mnemonic learning of known stanzas (learned by ear or through mediated listening, as said).

In this respect, "Air of the Fountain of Piruca" (*Ajr Piruks*) is an example of persistence in the repertoire of Vuxhë Grash. As Stratigò recounts, this title refers to the fountain of Piruca, a specific spot in the village of Lungro. This song is a variant of the piece recorded by Carpitella and De Martino, issued as "Girl, O Girl" (*Kopile moj kopile*), a "well-known love song usually performed in Lungro" (Ricci and Tucci 2006: 155), sung and played by five men including Anna's father Vincenzo and whose title was taken from the incipit of its first stanza at the time of Carpitella's field recordings (see also Table 3).

Table 3. Arbëresh folk song "Girl, O Girl". The English translation by the article's author is based on the Italian translation (Ricci and Tucci 2006: 155).

Kopile moj kopile	**"Girl, O Girl"**
Kopile moj kopile ç' llambarisin oj	Girl, o girl shining
Kopile moj kopile ç' llambarisin oj	Girl, o girl shining
si borza nd'ata male zëmira jime më je ti	Like snow on the mountains, my dear heart, you are to me,

ti je mi losin	You make me melt.
ti je mi losin	You make me melt.

Stratigò states that, although the title of the song is generally known as "Girl, O Girl" there is another version that she sings with her choir (see also FM: video 2023b):

> This is the name of the song whose first verse is "Red carnation born in the mountains"… we say *garofollith* [to indicate] little carnation flowers typically found in the mountains, because in this song, the virtues of this girl who is compared to a flower or things like that are extolled. It is called "Air of the Fountain of Piruca", erroneously written "Girl, O Girl" from one of the verses of the song, but the exact name is the first, namely "Air of the Fountain of Piruca" which is a fountain in Lungro where the men gathered to drink wine and sing. (FM: conversation 2023)

The incipit "the red carnation" is also found in a song entitled "The Moon in This Alley" (*Hënëza e kësaj vanele*).[19] Stratigò sometimes chooses to perform "Air of the Fountain of Piruca" starting in A minor and then modulating it into B minor in the second half of the song. Whether it is performed in intimate situations at Stratigò's music school or during concerts, the singing can be introduced by a 'riff' (as Stratigò stresses during her lessons): a humming-style intonation of a couple of pitches that characterise and identify the tune of this song, usually accompanied by the guitar or the accordion (Figure 2).[20]

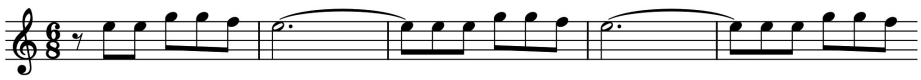

Figure 2. The humming-style motif heard in Vuxhë Grash's performance of "Air of the Fountain of Piruca" (FM: transcriptions 2023).

When I heard it for the first time, I automatically thought of an instrumental part replacement, a kind of embodiment of the *organetto*, or the accordion part into a multipart singing context. On this occasion, the voice of Di Filippo generally sings a third below the tune and, depending on the number of singers involved in specific situations, Forte sings the higher "pedal-part" (fifth grade) (see also FM: video 2023b).

'DANCE OF HOPE'

Vuxhë Grash regularly performs a *shoka*, a song-dance for the bride, titled "Play, Play, Girls, Dance!" (*Loj loj vasha valle*; FM: video 2023c). There are two models that the choir draws from for its performance, both recorded by Carpitella and De Martino in Pallagorio and Carfizzi (Ricci and Tucci 2006: 107, 114), two small Arbëresh villages in the province of Crotone, Calabria.[21] This song dance, which is a part of the repertoire classified as *vallja*, is also found under the title "Constantin the Little" (*Costantino il piccolo*), and was usually performed during the week that preceded the weddings, but also in other social situations (Marchianò 2014: 142) both in Calabria, Basilicata (Scaldaferri 1994; also cited in Marchianò 2014) and the Molise region (Agamennone and Lombardi 2011: 47–48).[22]

Stratigò explains that in the Arbëresh communities, there are two narratives respectively based on the story of "Constantin and Garentina" (rhapsody) and "Constantin the Little", Skanderbeg's brother (song) (FM: interview 2023a).[23] When Vuxhë Grash performs the latter, all women usually wear black dresses on stage adorned with golden motifs on the shoulder, recalling the traditional clothes of Lungro. The preparation of these clothes is often entrusted to Di Filippo. All verses are sung standing still, in a circle, with the singers looking at one another. The refrain is danced around, with all the women carrying a red handkerchief held with the next partner in the circle. In this song, Constantine the Little is portrayed as a young groom who, before leaving for war, tells his bride she is free to remarry if he does not return in nine years, nine months, and nine days.

> This is the *shoka*: a bride's dance around the wedding bed, three days after the wedding … In the history of Constantine the Little – it is a legend, we [also] have the one of Constantine the Great: one of the nine children who, after his death, came back from the other world to bring his living sister to her dying mother. [Constantine the Great] had made the promise to bring his sister back to her mother if the latter was to be left alone. Everybody has died in the war, and the mother scolded her son at his grave for not having kept his promise. Then he, with [his] white horse, resurrects and goes to get his sister who had married in another town, taking her back to her mother: when [mother] opens the door, they both die. She [the mother] asks, "who did you bring?" [and the daughter replies] "Constantine", but Constantine is dead. This, more than anything, is the 'manifesto' of the Arbëresh, that is the *besa*, the given word, the promise, which is the most important thing you must keep, even after death. Instead, [the story of] Constantine the Little – which is a happy coincidence because almost everyone was called Constantine – is [that of] a young groom who after three days of marriage abandons his wife to go to war and tells her: "If I haven't returned in nine years, nine months and nine days, you can get remarried". The moment arrives and he is mad because he cannot return, and his wife will remarry. The king, the leader (however one wants to call him) hears sighs and asks: "is everything ok?" [Constantine replies] "today my wife will remarry", [the king/leader replies], "then you can go". He takes the fastest horse and returns, arriving just when the bride is about to put on the ring (which he himself gave her, telling her "you will use it the day you get remarried"). In essence, there is the wife's fear of her husband's abandonment; therefore, it is a 'dance of hope', to be executed around the bed. This dance is called the *shoka*… It is a dance in Carfizzi and Pallagorio, which was recorded by Carpitella – Carpitella's 'heritage of gold'. I have always loved it, since I went to listen to it at the State Recordings Library in the 1980s. (FM: interview 2023a)

Here, Stratigò refers to two different folk tales, one about "Costantino and Garentina", which she calls "Constantine the Great" (*Costantino il grande*) and the other about "Constantine the Little" (*Costantino il piccolo*). The first is quite widespread in all Arbëresh communities and is also well documented (see, for example, De Rada 1866: 29–33; De Grazia 1889: 138–145; Bruzzano 1890: 55–56; Straticò 1896: 100–106) due to the importance assumed in this narration by the *besa* (Albanian 'the given word' or 'solemn oath') which is particularly heartfelt in Albanian cultures, and intertwines with different

motifs found in ballads, traditional songs and other expressive forms.[24] There is no lack of reference to the narrative of Constantin the Little in folklore or linguistic literature of the 19th century, for example it is associated with the number nine in a variant collected and transcribed by linguist Bernardino Biondelli almost 170 years ago, where there are nine keys that open the doors of the stable, and there are nine horses Costantino can choose from for his departure. Biondelli (1856: 86) specified that, of the uncommon songs that recall the deeds of Scanderbeg, the national hero of Albanians,[25] "Constantine the Little" is one of the few still performed, generally by elders.

Even in this case, Stratigò proposes the song dance of the *shoka* about Constantine the Little by encouraging some of the women in the choir – and, again, Di Filippo – to produce harmonies, introducing a second voice to sing a parallel interval below the main tune (FM: video 2023c).

SINGING MEN'S SONGS

In June 2023 at the Stratigò's music school, during the presentation of a photographic book dedicated to female figures in the Arbëresh communities, including Anna Stratigò herself, the author Lorenzo Fortunati was invited to take part, together with the choir, in the performance of the song "Scanderbeg, One Morning" (*Skanderbeku një menatë*), which was once performed exclusively by men during religious services on Easter Tuesday.[26] This song celebrates the Albanian hero as he summons his company of soldiers to him, inviting them to feast. The choir has been performing this piece for some time. The soloist and the choir alternate in singing each verse (Ricci and Tucci 2006: 144–145; see also Table 4 and Figure 3).

Table 4. Lyrics in the two-part version of "Scanderbeg, One Morning" as sung by Vuxhë Grash and Lorenzo Fortunati in Lungro (FM: transcriptions 2023).

Soloist:	*E Skanderbeku një menatë*	Scanderbeg, one morning
Choir:	Repeats	
Soloist:	*E m'e mbjothi kumbanjin'*	Assembled the company
Choir:	Repeats	
Soloist:	*E m'e mbjoth e m'e mbitoj*	Gathered them together and invited them
Choir:	Repeats	
Soloist:	*Me mish kapoj e lepurish*	With rooster and hare meat
Choir:	Repeats	
Soloist:	*E me filete shtjerrazish*	With lamb's loins
Choir:	Repeats	
Soloist:	*E Skanderbeku një menatë*	Scanderbeg, one morning
Choir:	Repeats	

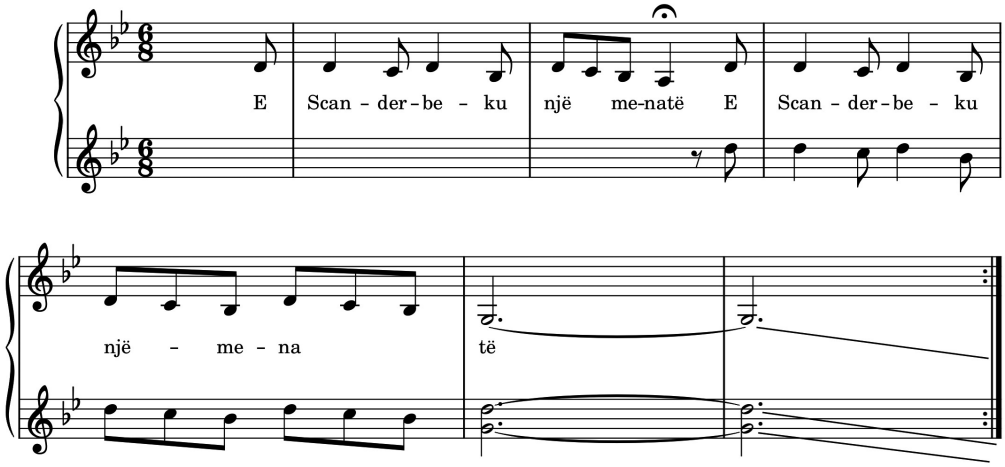

Figure 3. Melodic lines in the two-part version of "Scanderbeg, One Morning" as sung by Vuxhë Grash and Lorenzo Fortunati in Lungro (FM: transcriptions 2023).

Again, it is a two-part song – in the short transcription above, I wrote the solo part at the top and the counterpoint insert on the staff at the bottom. Roughly half of the choir sings the melody in the higher octave, and in the final cadence the voices spread further, distributing themselves between the tonic and the dominant, and the octave above. At the end of the performance Stratigò congratulates Fortunati by ironically exclaiming, "bravo, you have passed the exam". We are, therefore, faced with a reversal, not always accepted, or frowned upon by traditional purists: what was once entrusted exclusively to male expression is now transmitted and circulates thanks to women, in contexts that differ from those that one would expect, for example expressions connected with the relationship between secular power and religious hierarchies. None of this occurs without pressure on the micro-social level such as local universities, conservatories and organisations.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article broadly summarises some of the aspects relating to the work of a group of women who, through singing, decide daily to bring themselves and their listeners onto a social path of self-representation, as well as of re-appropriation and awareness of their own history as Arbëresh, and of their identity as women. My research is ongoing: while I am at the centre of the observation of this phenomenon, the singers have been in this process for years, with all the contradictions and transformations that this brings with it. From a broader perspective, the values of a women's choir and a children's music school, as conceived by Stratigò and her friends, represent an interesting alternative within their social contexts, especially in light of Karen M. Fox's (1997: 168) observation that "as a culture becomes more institutionalised, it acquires rational and technical values and loses expressive and creative values."

The local music school and the mansion of Stratigò are a special place for communal expression and creativity, where distinct events that take place are conceived as attempts to gather Arbëresh communities. A significant part of the cultural transmission takes place there. In these spaces, the women can discuss, plan, cook, take care of each other as well as the (musical and linguistic) education of the children of Lungro village. What is most interesting to me is that they express this care, interest, and awareness through social music.

Not by chance did the late linguist Gianni Belluscio (2008) note in an essay dedicated to Giuseppe Gangale, the father of modern Albanology, that his research was mainly based on fieldwork conducted with female interlocutors who, together with elders, were considered "very conservative" for social reasons. Moreover, Belluscio (2010: 16) complained about the non-application of an important regulation, Law 482/99 by which the Italian Republic protects linguistic minorities and, among them, the language and culture of Albanian populations (art. 2) for which the teaching of the language would be provided from nursery school up to lower secondary school, alongside the use of Italian (art. 4), after proposals from these education institutions themselves. The non-application of this law in the majority of Calabrian Arbëresh municipalities (except for sporadic cases) means that linguistic and cultural transmission continues to occur mainly in the family context, or between social groups that are not necessarily united by kinship ties. In this sense, the role of women remains fundamental, especially in small villages. Their configuration and lifestyle allow children to build relationships that are difficult to imagine in contemporary urban areas. Therefore, returning to expressions in oral tradition, music-making in the hands of Stratigò and the women of the choir – public performances, self-management of singing and music schools, all other para-musical and extra-musical activities that happen in this local context – is fundamental not only for Lungro's cultural life, but also for the relationships that this village (which has a central role in Arbëresh culture) continues to have with Albania and other European and non-European countries.

With regard to my interest and research methodology, on one hand, not being Arbëresh, I found it hard to reconnect the threads of a long, complex and extremely articulated history, while on the other hand, I realise how music promoted by Stratigò is central in at least three processes: 1) cultural (re)appropriation; 2) women's self-determination intensified and made possible by the very cohesion of a singing group; 3) the acquisition of musical skills *stricto sensu* and (and through them) of cultural competences which in turn have an impact on the processes of transmission and transformation of an anything-but-monolithic musical culture that, on the contrary, has profoundly changed, as in the best of traditions.

NOTES

1 Mantovani was an Italian singer and ethnomusicologist. She conducted several fieldwork trips, especially in the province of Cremona (cf. Leydi and Bertolotti 1979).

2 Marini is a singer, singing master, ethnomusicologist and founder of the Testaccio School of Traditional Music (*Scuola Popolare di Musica Testaccio*) in Rome. For an in-depth glance at her life and works read Macchiarella 2005.

3 Here I mention as a mere example two Italian singing masters, Beppa Casarin and Anna Maria Civico.

4 According to John Blacking (1995: 232), a sound group is "a group of people who share a common musical language, together with common ideas about music and its uses. The membership of sound groups can coincide with the distribution of verbal languages and cultures, or it can transcend them."

5 The term Arbëresh, meaning old Albanians, is used to point out the diasporic community of Albanian refugees in Italy. Italo-Albanians, or Arbëresh, are scattered in seven regions of central and southern Italy, namely: Calabria, Molise, Abruzzo, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata and Sicily. The region with the highest number of municipalities of Arbëresh culture and language is Calabria, and particularly the Province of Cosenza.

6 Lungro is the official seat of Albanian Eparchy, together with Piana degli Albanesi, a town situated in the Sicily region, and one of the most important Arbëresh communities in Italy.

7 Namely Vincenzo Straticò (voice, guitar and *organetto*), Orione D'Aquila (bagpipes), Franco de Franco (voice and guitar), and five more voices: Salvatore Forte, Franco Frega, Franco Golemmo, Angelo Matrangolo, Giulio Straticò.

8 The original title of this song is "As the Leaf" (*Porsi fleta*, words by Gjergj Fishta and music by Lec Kurti). Stratigò said (FM: conversation 2025) that she and the other members of the group thought that this was an Arbëresh song, and that they only knew its first stanza when they recorded "Tosks, Fight!" (*Bini Tosk*) (Gruppo Arbēreshē di Lungro 1983). Members of Moti i Parë and other Lungro singers also sing on the "Italy: Music of the Albanians of Calabria" CD (Contri 2011, cf. Scaldaferri 2012).

9 Young Italy (*Giovine Italia*) was a movement founded by Giuseppe Mazzini in Marseille in 1831, the purpose of which was to make Italy a republican nation. It functioned during the Italian *Risorgimento* ('Rising Again') unification movement, a series of ideological, cultural, political, military, economic, and social events that led to the establishment of a unified, independent Italian state in 1861.

10 Mate is a drink made from an infusion of yerba-maté (*Ilex paraguariensis*) leaves, which is a plant native to South America. As with the tea, yerba-maté is dried, cut and shredded.

11 Before the pandemic, people who gathered to drink mate drank from a single bowl (made from a pumpkin) using the same straw.

12 Lungro has been recently nominated the International Capital of Mate, also thanks to Anna Stratigò's efforts for an interconnection between the village and Argentinian institutions, including scholars, artisans and producers (Mancini 2021).

13 Its official name is Centro Nazionale Studi di Musica Popolare. As Maurizio Agamennone (2018: 656) points out, the NCTMS was the first real Italian sound archive, born in 1948, almost fifty years after the Phonogramm Archive of Vienna and Berlin and other seminal archives belonging to European and North American institutions.

14 Only eight songs are sung in Calabrian dialect (Nataletti n.d.: No. 3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 14, 15, 52).

15 A similar pattern was observed in the villages of Molise region, where predominant documentation highlighted a dominant female influence. This was evident from songs for children, magic songs, forms of lament, work songs and tales (Agamennone and Lombardi 2011: 9).

16 The English translation is based on the Italian translation by Carpitella and de Martino (Nataletti n.d.).

17 In the original text, the author reports the song with an Italian title, specifying that it is sung in Albanian.

18 Nicola Scaldaferri (2003: 42) gave a definition of the term *vallja* to identify dances performed on diverse occasions, such as weddings and Easter rituals. According to him, *vallja* can be literally translated as 'dance', indicating a musical form that combines singing and dancing in the streets in the hands of two choirs. While they were once performed in all Arbëresh villages, today they can be seen and heard – as an example of a collective moment that brings together entire Arbëresh communities (as well as tourists and interested people) – around the Easter period and in Frascineto (Cosenza Province, Calabria), were groups of female and male singers and dancers perform a *vallja* repertoire in the main street of the village.

19 This song, recorded in Lungro on April 21, 1954, by Carpitella and De Martino, sung by Antonio and Salvatore Bruno, with the accompaniment of the *organetto* played by Gennarino Mattanò (Ricci and Tucci 2006: 148–150) is also found on the LP edited by Lomax and Carpitella (1957). This record was reissued in 1973. The Italo-Albanian songs recorded in Calabria can be found on this LP (side b, track 8, No. 31–37).

20 This song is also found on the LP "Songs of the Albanians of Calabria" (Gruppo Arbēreshē di Lungro 1983). Here, all the verses are sung by a solo voice while the refrains are sung in multipart singing. The same song was sung by Frega as a fragment within a much longer piece titled "Vjersh de Lungro No. 2" by Franco Frega, Angelo Le Rose, Anna Stratigò, and played on the bagpipes on the "Italy: Music of the Albanians of Calabria" CD (Contri 2011).

21 Pallagorio's version of "Play, Play, Girls, Dance!" was issued on an LP compiled by Lomax and Carpitella (1957).

22 A written variant from San Nicola Dell'Alto (an Arbëresh village in the province of Crotone, Calabria) is also found in Bruzzano 1889: 4, referred to as an Albanian song.

23 Information on these two narratives can be found in Ascoli 1861: 94 and Biondelli 1856: 86.

24 For the sister–brother recognition theme in Albanian traditional ballads cf. Dushi 2020.

25 George Kastrioti or Skanderbeg (1405–1468) was an Albanian feudal lord and military commander who led a rebellion against the Ottoman Empire.

26 In 2022 I listened two versions of this song as sung by mixed-gender groups during the Easter celebrations in Frascineto, an Arbëresh municipality in the province of Cosenza.

SOURCES

FM = Author's fieldwork materials including sound recordings, music performances, interviews, and music transcriptions. Names included with consent of participants.

FM: conversation 2023. WhatsApp conversation with Anna Stratigò, June 26, 2023.

FM: conversation 2025. WhatsApp conversation with Anna Stratigò, March 18, 2025.

FM: interview 2023a. Conversation with Anna Stratigò, recorded on February 26, 2023 in Lungro by Nanni Spina (video and post-production) and Delia Dattilo (post-production).

FM: interview 2023b. Conversation with Anna Stratigò, recorded on October 15, 2023 in Lungro, by Delia Dattilo (sound recording).

FM: transcriptions 2023. Author's transcription made by ear.

FM: video 2023a. Montecilfone's "Vare vare" as sung and performed by the Vuxhë Grash choir, February 26, 2023. Videographer Nanni Spina; post-production Delia Dattilo and Nanni Spina. https://youtu.be/0xXFkutxcS0 (accessed May 19, 2025).

FM: video 2023b. "Girl O Girl" or "Air of the Fountain of Piruca" as sung and performed by the Vuxhë Grash choir in Stratigo's basement, February 26, 2023. Videographer Nanni Spina; post-production Delia Dattilo and Nanni Spina. https://youtu.be/6y3PlDnSFyY (accessed May 19, 2025).

FM: video 2023c. Excerpt of "Play, Play, Girls, Dance!" as sung and performed by the Vuxhë Grash choir, February 26, 2023. Videographer Nanni Spina; post-production Delia Dattilo and Nanni Spina. https://youtu.be/IVT4UvGlbAA (accessed May 19, 2025).

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