

***Sardinian Chronicles*. By Bernard Lortat-Jacob, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. x + 118, compact disc)**

Robert Witmer

Volume 17, Number 2, 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087504ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087504ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Witmer, R. (1995). Review of [*Sardinian Chronicles*. By Bernard Lortat-Jacob, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. x + 118, compact disc)]. *Ethnologies*, 17(2), 181–183.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1087504ar>

*Sardinian Chronicles*. By Bernard Lortat-Jacob, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. x + 118, compact disc)

With this slender and somewhat cryptically titled volume, ethnomusicologist Bernard Lortat-Jacob, director of research at Paris' Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and a seasoned scholar of circum-Mediterranean traditional music, shows how powerful and effective some tenets of "the new ethnography" can be when applied to subject matter engaged by ethnomusicologists. *Sardinian Chronicles* is an audacious (in the positive sense) book. Let me emphasise that I think it is also an important one; any of my following remarks which might be construed as negative criticism are intended solely as non-judgemental observations on Lortat-Jacob's departures from the conventions of traditional academic presentation. I am not myself put off by the departures, but I can well imagine that some others might be.

The ostensible subject matter Lortat-Jacob engages is the village music of Sardinia, with special reference to players of the accordion (an instrument which the author himself plays) who have some experience as freelance professional musicians. I say "ostensible subject matter" because this book is not at all what one might expect from an accordion-playing ethnomusicologist publishing on the results of a field study of an accordion-rich culture. Lortat-Jacob eschews the conventions of mainstream ethnomusicological writing (e.g., problem-oriented and/or data-driven exposition, empirical musical analysis, transcriptions, process models) and also the conventions of mainstream academic scholarship at large (e.g., engagement with other literature and carefully positioned statements of scope, aims, methods, concepts, hypotheses, conclusions/implications). The "ostensible subject matter", as I have stated it, is my construction for this review: Lortat-Jacob never once says that his book is about what I say it is (or "about" anything in particular, for that matter). All that the prospective reader has to go on in this regard is a very brief (1-page) forward by Michel Leiris and the publisher's promotional statement on the book's back cover, both of which position the work in somewhat elliptical terms while simultaneously promising an important and innovative study ("a dramatic turning point in musical ethnography"—Veit Erlmann, Free University of Berlin). The constraints of the Library of Congress cataloguing scheme allow only the following prosaic hints about the book's contents: "1. Sardinia (Italy)—Social life and customs. 2. Accordionists—Italy—Sardinia—Social life and customs" (p. iv). The book's lack of conventional scholarly apparatus and orientation material (preface, acknowledgements, introductory "overview" chapter, "summing up" chapter, reference list) could easily frustrate any prospective reader who is accustomed to being able to quickly and

easily scan an academic monograph to take its measure before deciding whether or not to proceed further.

So, what *does* Lortat-Jacob offer in the absence of so many of the standard underpinnings of academic publishing, in a book released in a premier university press series (Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology)? Essentially, he offers “vignettes focused on individuals...which bring to life an art still very much alive: the music of villages with an oral tradition, sung or played in the company of others” (publisher’s statement). Each of the twelve vignettes is an autonomous piece, yet they are all interrelated and, when taken all together, form, in the words of the forwordist, Michel Leiris, “a gallery of living portraits...that make the lay reader sense that there do indeed exist human beings called ‘Sardinians’” (p. x). In Lortat-Jacob’s account, the “human beings called ‘Sardinians’” do many, many other things besides producing, consuming and reflecting upon music—including those individuals whom he singles out as musicians and who form the locus of his study. While it may be a truism that readers and writers of musical ethnographies realise that such works typically present a tightly framed picture, Lortat-Jacob’s account shows absolutely no signs of editing out what some ethnographers might categorise as irrelevant or peripherally relevant information *vis-à-vis* the task of delineating a musical culture. The traditional ethnomusicological rallying cry, “music in its cultural context,” is taken by Lortat-Jacob entirely literally: the cultural context of music is potentially *everything* that happens in the culture that the musical ethnographer is able to witness or become aware of. By adopting the stance of the all-observant memoirist or diarist, Lortat-Jacob draws us into the routines and exigencies of the everyday lives of music makers and their associates (he astutely includes himself prominently as a member of both groups in his writeups, a strategy which makes his accounts almost irresistibly compelling). The end result is one of the most richly nuanced, insightful and poetically evocative accounts of a musical culture—not to mention the enterprise known as ethnographic fieldwork—yet to appear in print. The sheer power and beauty of the book as a piece of literature hit me soon after I began to prepare this review: after reading the first few pages I set my pencil and notepad aside and settled in for the pleasures of a “good read” (and was in fact compelled to finish the book at a single sitting—a practically unique occurrence in my relationship with ethnographic/ethnomusicological monographs, for whatever that may be worth as a recommendation). The author who most often came to mind as I was reading *Sardinian Chronicles* was the V. S. Naipaul of *The Middle Passage* (1969) and *An Area of Darkness* (1968)—(probably owing in no small part to the translating skills of Teresa Lavender Fagan). The belles-lettres/storytelling approach is, to be sure, not all that new in musical ethnography (see, for example, Tedlock 1992, where novelistic dialogue is juxtaposed with more standard modes of ethnographic presentation), but in my estimation Lortat-Jacob has set a new benchmark for this approach.

Notwithstanding Lortat-Jacob's iconoclastic approach (I could see calling it an example of "postmodern ethnomusicology"), the baby has not been thrown out with the bathwater. An index has been provided (pp. 117-118), as well as a list of "Other Works by Bernard Lortat-Jacob" (pp. 109-110), thus making the book not only usable but very useful as a reference tool. The sub-entries under "music" in the index, for example, will alert the musicologically savvy reader to the fact that some standard (ethno)musicological topics and questions have indeed been engaged. For such readers, tracking said entries will reveal the author to be a sophisticated musical intelligence in the conventional western academic mold, but also perceptive beyond the mold. The book ships with an expertly produced compact disc, the notes for which include English translations for song lyrics and indications as to which chapter each selection pertains to. The book also reproduces a number of black-and-white photographs taken during the course of the author's fieldwork, although, in keeping with the contra-conventional posture of the book, they are neither listed in the table of contents nor keyed to textual commentary. They are seemingly offered as just another element adding to the immediacy and memorability of the overall package, like snapshots pasted into a diary. While neither the photos nor the recorded examples represent the twelve essays even remotely evenly, they, like the essays, are each twelve in number. I somehow have the feeling that this numerical parallelism is not accidental (but perhaps I am being unduly influenced here by the many other clevernesses of Lortat-Jacob's presentation).

### References Cited

Naipaul, V. S. 1969. *The Middle Passage*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1968. *An Area of Darkness*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Tedlock, Barbara. 1992. *The Beautiful and the Dangerous: Encounters with the Zuni Indians*. New York: Viking.

ROBERT WITMER  
York University  
North York, Ontario

---