

FOLK DANCES OF THE WORLD:

Southern Italy's Tarantella The "Dance of the Spider"



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Table of Contents

Overview	2
California Common Core Standards	3
A history of the Tarantella.....	4-6
Discussion questions and activities	7-8



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ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What are folk dances, and how do they reflect the histories, cultures, and experiences of the people who created them?

What is the *tarantella*, and why is it known as the “dance of the spider”?

OVERVIEW

Folk dances, or dances of a particular country, region, or people, tell stories and reflect a group’s diverse history and culture. The tarantella, which dates to the fifteenth century or earlier, is one of the most famous folk dances of Italy. It began as a cure for a condition called tarantism, which was believed to be caused by the bite of a spider widely thought to be poisonous. The spider’s victim, who was typically a woman, engaged in a frenetic dance, accompanied by musicians playing fast-tempo music, to “expel” the venom from her system. This type of dance mania spread across southern Italy, with an untold number of people participating. Since the spider’s bite was not poisonous, it is likely that other factors influenced this phenomenon. Over the centuries, the tarantella evolved into a dance performed by couples. In the United States, it is often danced at weddings, while in Italy, many contemporary musical groups embrace this living tradition of dance and music, reinterpreting the tarantella and its regional variations for contemporary audiences.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Be able to define and identify a folk dance.
- Recognize folk dances as a reflection of historical periods and cultures.
- Describe the tarantella and its origins.
- Analyze the role of the tarantella in southern Italian society, especially among women, in the early modern period and the long nineteenth century.
- Learn to dance the tarantella.
- Identify folk dances as living traditions that are passed down from generation to generation and change over time.
- Understand dance as a way to communicate and create meaning, stories, and emotions.

NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This lesson can be adapted to students’ skill levels, from kindergarten to high school, and be utilized for a variety of subject areas.

CALIFORNIA EDUCATION CONTENT STANDARDS

Performing Arts-Dance

3.0 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Understanding the Historical Contributions and Cultural Dimensions of Dance

Students analyze the function and development of dance in past and present cultures throughout the world, noting human diversity as it relates to dance and dancers.

Development of Dance

3.1 Name and perform folk/traditional dances from the United States and other countries.

History and Function of Dance

3.2 Identify and perform folk/traditional, social, and theatrical dances done by Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

3.1 Identify and perform folk/traditional, social, and theatrical dances with appropriate stylistic nuances.

3.2 Describe ways in which folk/traditional, social, and theatrical dances reflect their specific cultural context.

Performing Arts-Music

3.0 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Understanding the Historical Contributions and Cultural Dimensions of Music

Students analyze the role of music in past and present cultures throughout the world, noting cultural diversity as it relates to music, musicians, and composers.

Role of Music

3.1 Describe the social functions of a variety of musical forms from various cultures and time periods (e.g., folk songs, dances).

Visual Arts

3.0 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Understanding the Historical Contributions and Cultural Dimensions of the Visual Arts

Students analyze the role and development of the visual arts in past and present cultures throughout the world, noting human diversity as it relates to the visual arts and artists.

Role and Development of the Visual Arts

3.2 Identify and describe various fine, traditional, and folk arts from historical periods worldwide.

3. Compare the beliefs, customs, ceremonies, traditions, and social practices of the varied cultures, drawing from folklore.

World History

7.6 Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the civilizations of Medieval Europe.

About the Tarantella

Throughout history, dancing has been used as a way to celebrate, worship, inspire, express emotion, and even treat diseases. Countries around the world, including Italy, have **folk dances**, which can be defined as a traditional dance of the common people of a country or region. Passed down from generation to generation, folk dances are connected to a people's rituals and customs. They tell stories and reflect a group's distinct history and culture. The costumes worn while performing a folk dance are often a source of national pride and help illustrate the character of a dance. Among the many folk dances of Italy, the **tarantella** is arguably the most famous.

Origins

The tarantella is a lively southern Italian folk dance, usually in 3/8 or 6/8 time, that is often performed at weddings. Its origins, however, are ancient, spanning several centuries, as well as quite peculiar. It is believed that the tarantella,



Women in Naples, Italy, perform the tarantella, circa 1870

which is nicknamed the “**dance of the spider**,” began in the fifteenth century. The word “tarantella” comes from *tarantism*, a hysterical condition that was thought to be caused by the bite of a tarantula (or *tarantola* in Italian). The dance traces its origins to Taranto, a city in Puglia, the “heel” of Italy’s “boot.”



The city, in fact, takes its name from a type of wolf spider native to the area, a spider that became the subject of considerable myth and lore. According to popular belief, the spider's bite was particularly venomous and produced frenzied behavior in its victims, who were usually women of lower socioeconomic status.

*The *Lycosa tarantula*, or wolf spider from which the tarantella takes its name*



Dance as a “Cure”

After being bitten by the spider, the victim, who was referred to as the *tarantata*, would be overtaken by contortions, begin dancing convulsively, or enter a state of delirium. To save the person thought to be possessed by the spider’s venom, musicians were beckoned to perform a very fast-paced rhythmic style of music which became known as the pizzica. (The word pizzica is derived from *pizzico*, which means “bite” in Italian.) The music would “awaken” the tarantata from her stupor, or, if she was already contorting, the mandolins, guitars, and tambourines would provide the rhythm to which she would dance for hours or even days as a way to expel the venom from her body. (In many cases, the tarantata would begin gyrating on her own, without the benefit of music.) Townspeople surrounded the tarantata as she performed the frenzied dancing ritual and sometimes participated in it. The tarantata continued dancing until she was exhausted, at which point she was considered “cured.” The combination of music and dance was widely accepted as a remedy, even among scholars, at the time.

An 1877 drawing that illustrates how tarantism was “cured” through the dance

Although a tarantism “epidemic” swept through Puglia and the Italian regions of Sicily, Calabria, and Campania between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, factors other than the spider’s bite, which is typically no worse than a bee sting, were actually responsible for the phenomenon. Tarantism, which some people called “dance mania,” was likely a manifestation of psychological, rather than physical, ailments.



*Map of Italy depicting its 20 regions, including Puglia, the “heel” of Italy’s “boot” where the tarantella originated. The dance is known in Calabria as *Sonu a ballu*, and in Campania (the region where Naples is located) as *tammurriata*. In Salento, a province of Puglia, the dance is called the *pizzica*.*



A tarantata in Puglia, Italy, 1950s

The dance offered women, especially economically disadvantaged women, an opportunity to express themselves, convey the emotions they were experiencing, and have their experiences recognized. Italian peasant women had few rights. Mortality rates were very high, they made a fraction of the wages of their male counterparts, and they did not have a choice as to who they would marry. The dance provided women an outlet to express their sadness, rage, and desires—behaviors and emotions that were often viewed as unacceptable or that they were expected to suppress, without fear of judgment. Some hypothesize

that the catharsis the tarantata experienced by way of the music and dance frenzy enabled her to return to the duties of her daily life. Tarantism also created an opportunity for the community to come together in support of the affected women, which encouraged a sense of togetherness.

The Tarantella Evolves and the Dance Today

As time passed, the legend of the spider's bite faded, and the tarantella morphed into a flirtatious dance performed by couples. Centuries later, we have come to think of it as a festive, lighthearted dance that is commonly performed at weddings. The tarantella remains a living tradition of dance and music. In Italy today, several contemporary groups perform modern regional interpretations of the ancient dance and music. Italian-born ethnomusicologist, vocalist, percussionist, and dancer Alessandra Belloni travels the world lecturing about and performing southern Italian folk rituals and culture, including the dance and music traditions of the tarantella.



The tarantella as it is often performed today



Alessandra Belloni



A group performs the Pizzica Salentina, the interpretation of the dance from Puglia, Italy, in 2018

Discussion questions:

1. What is the tarantella, and when and where did it originate?
2. Compare the tarantella to a folk dance of another country. How are they similar? How are they different? (This can become a much larger activity, such as a report on a particular country. See activity section below.)
3. Do you think the tarantella was really about curing the effects of a spider's bite?
4. Has there been anything in recent years that resembles "dance mania" in the United States?
Clue: Search for United States dance crazes.

Activities:

A. Students learn how to dance the tarantella.

Step-by-step instructions for dancing the [tarantella can be found at this link](#).

A video that provides instruction for dancing the [tarantella can be found on this link](#).

A second video with instructions [can be found at this link](#).

[The dance as performed](#) by modern musical groups is illustrated at this link.

Other resources:

Two videos of ethnomusicologist Alessandra Belloni performing "the Dance of the Spider," which more closely resembles more ancient forms of the dance.

[First link](#)

[Second Link](#)

[A 1960 video](#) from Puglia, Italy, that shows music therapy as a treatment for tarantism.

B. Students create a choreographed dance that expresses an emotion and perform the dance.

Some believe that the tarantella offered women an opportunity to express their emotions without fear of being judged. Select an emotion you are experiencing or have experienced. Create a 1-2 minute dance that expresses this emotion. What type of gestures, steps, expressions, or other movements would you use to express this emotion? What type of costume or outfit would you wear while performing this dance? Describe it or draw a picture of it.

C. Students, working independently or in small groups, research a folk dance of a particular country or group.

Assign students a folk dance. Examples include:

- Ball de Bastons (Spain and Portugal)
- Céilidh (Scotland and Ireland)
- El Jarabe Tapatio, Huapango (Mexico)
- English Country Dance, Square Dance (England)
- Fandango, Jota (Spain)
- Bomba (Ecuador)

- Kartuli, Khorumi, Acharuli, Partsa, Kazbeguri (Georgia)
- Angelica, Carpaea, Cordax (Greece)
- Hora (Balkans)
- Atilogwu, San Dance, Aduma Dance (Africa)
- Kolo (South Slavic)
- Irish Step Dance
- Ballu Tundu (Italy)
- Contra Dance (United States)
- Morris Dance (England)
- Polka (Czech Republic, danced today around the world)
- Bar, Halay, Horon, Zeybek, Sufi (Turkey)
- Verbuňk, Ugrós, Karikázóm, Legényes, Csárdás (Hungary)
- Polska (Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway)
- Sword Dances (From various parts of the world)
- Dollu Kunitha, Bhangra (India)
- Troika (Russia)
- Attan (Afghanistan and Pakistan)
- Odori and Buyō (Japan)

Students create a report that discusses the origins of the dance and presents a profile of the country/region/group in which it originated. The report should address:

- What country/group/region does the dance belong to?
- When was the dance developed?
- Why was the dance developed?
- What was taking place in the country/region/within the group that created it during that time?
- What does the dance look like?
- Who dances it? (Women and men, only women of a certain age, etc.)
- Does the dance tell a story?
- What is the mood of the dance?
- What emotions does it convey?
- What does the accompanying music sound like?
- What instruments are involved?
- What kinds of attire do the dancers wear when performing it?
- Can a video be sourced?
- How has the dance been preserved? Is it still danced today?
- Can students demonstrate the dance or a portion of it?