**2013 INTERNATIONAL BIRDSONG IMITATION CHAMPIONSHIPS:**

CONNECTING LOCAL CULTURE INTERNATIONALLY THROUGH A SHARED HUNTING HERITAGE

*20 APRIL 2013*

THE SCENE

The audience falls silent in anticipation as Mariano, a 22 year old from the Treviso countryside walks the stage of the 16th Annual International Birdsong Imitation Championships. His Italian national team mates sit with the French and Spanish teams on the side of the stage. The 6 experienced judges (2 from each competing country) are sitting behind a panel so that the contestants who are called by numbers cannot be identified by them. Mariano stands in front of the audience, puts his hand up to his mouth and starts to sing like a Song Thrush. The enchanting melody fills the air. The other contestants listen carefully to the subtleties of the notes. The audience is entranced as they try to decipher the quality of the song, awed by the sheer skill involved in producing such a beautiful sound. The timekeeper touches Mariano on the shoulder to let him know his time is up. The audience whispers a few hushed comments as the young Italian returns to his seat amongst his team mates and the next contestant is called up – the audience does not clap and break the atmosphere until all the contestants have completed the Song Thrush category.

Mariano started to learn this ancient art when he was 10 years old. This is his first time competing internationally but he has earned his place on the Italian team. The knowledge of birdsong imitation is a precious heritage, traditionally passed through families. Mariano’s father was a hunter, but not a birdwhistler. His father’s friend was though, and he shared his knowledge with Mariano, along with another established birdwhistler, Ettore Scabin, who runs a local school for learning this art and was also on the Italian team; teacher and student competing together. Mariano’s passion for birdsong has been nurtured by mentors for the past 12 years; they have shared their rare knowledge with him and others, transferring the centuries of experience and improvements in this practice that their forefathers and those before passed to them - and he is only just starting out. The personal dedication, the lifetimes of listening carefully to birds and practicing their songs are distilled into a present day living cultural heritage that the audience and those involved are fortunate enough to be part of in 2013.

THE COMPETITION

National teams made up of 4 contestants each for France, Italy and Spain gathered in the salubrious Provençal town of Saint-Cyr-sur-Mer to compete in the International Birdsong Imitation Championships. These 3 countries, rich in culture, contain the regions of the Mediterranean arc where the magical art of birdsong imitation is practiced and woven with passion into the very cultural fabric that make up these beautiful pockets of Europe where people are close to nature.

The International Championships location rotates each year, this 16th edition was organised by the French Association of Birdsong Imitation (AICO) who welcomed the contestants and guests with the characteristic warmth and hospitality of their region. Each team consists of 4 contestants; 3 of which compete in all 3 core categories: Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos),* Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*) and Blackbird (*Turdus merula*); the 4th contestant performs in the freestyle category, offering 3 birdsongs of this choice - from larks to nightingales, owls to canaries.

Contestants and guests gathered on the eve of the competition for a welcome reception at the Town Hall of Saint-Cyr-sur-Mer in good spirits, under the auspices of the town’s Mayor, Monsieur Philippe Barthélémy followed by a dinner in the bay. The anticipation mounted amongst the contestants, with constant twitters emanating from the delegations wherever they went (much to the confusion of passing American tourists). The competition was set to be tight as the sizeable crowd gathered at the Espace Provence in St-Cyr-sur-Mer which was filled with the scent of the natural foliage adornments and opened with the local orchestra playing the national and Provençal anthems. Between Spain defending the Championship title and France’s record of the most international wins, Italy had a lot to deliver - and deliver they did, taking the Championships with 601 points, 4 points ahead of France followed by Spain coming in with 536.5 points. Marc Allione, AICO President announced the results as the prizes were presented by the Mayor M.Barthélémy and Mme. Josette Pons, Member of the French National Assembly for the Var *Département* as well as M. Giovanni Bana, President of the European Association for Traditional Hunting Methods (AECT)/Vice-President of the European Federation for Hunting and Conservation (FACE), M. Marc Meissel of the scientific Mediterranean Institute for Hunting Culture and Wildlife (IMPCF).

SUSTAINING A CULTURE, SUSTAINING NATURE

The meticulous planning, organisation, procedures and rules are all testament to the dedication of those involved in this devoted tradition - not just the ones who practice birdsong imitation, but those who support them, who recognise the richness of this tradition, and the need to pass on this rich hunting culture to future generations. It is with this in mind that the Association of Birdsong Imitation (AICO) set up *L’école du chilet*, offering invaluable lessons and courses to share this tradition and ensure it is passed on.

The efforts made to preserve this local cultural heritage in the Provence region runs in parallel to local endeavours in Italy and Spain. This awe-inspiring practice is testament to a knowledge and closeness to nature not many can claim to know, and furthermore it has evolved as a part of a local hunting tradition that has its roots in a time when man was closer to nature. The devotion to nature, to observing it, to learning how to interact with it, is a tribute to the incredible complexity and skill of the art of traditional hunting, developing simple, natural tools and shaping one’s environment and voice to hunt a bird. The hunted bird encompasses the deepest knowledge of the birds themselves, of the local nature and a rich culture built on experience and a love of nature.

This honest relationship with natureis underpinned by an openness to share knowledge and values with other organisations, as well as strengthening a solid scientific basis to ensure the sustainability and increased knowledge of the species.

The International Championships provided the opportunity for the European Association for Traditional Hunting Methods (AECT) to hold a meeting with the delegation representatives from Spain, including M. Pascual Batalla Llorens, AECT Vice-President, and Italy as well as the AICO’s Marc Allione, Lionel Long and Jean-Paul Florentino; the latter provided an inspiring presentation on the cultural heritage of the local traditional hunters. These representatives were joined by various partner organisations: the French National Hunters’ Federation (FNC) Director M. Claude Bussy provided a national context for this local activity and was joined by the Regional Hunters’ Association President M.Bernard Mathieu. M.Nicholas Noblet, Director of the famous *Maison de la Chasse & de la Nature* and Marilise Saghbini from the European hunters’ organisation FACE were also present, lending their support.

The AICO, the Mediterranean Institute for Hunting Culture and Wildlife (IMPCF), represented by its President M. Marc Meissel and the European Association for Traditional Thrush Hunting (ADCTG) represented by its President M. Eric Camoin signed respective Collaboration Conventions with the AECT so as to better coordinate the scientific and technical aspects including species conservation and monitoring work.

These continued developments in one of the oldest and purest forms of man’s relationship with bird, from new collaborations and new generations express the timelessness of this precious cultural hunting heritage. Mariano and his fellow birdwhistlers represent the potential of a real connection with nature, in a world where opportunities for such a fine experience with nature has become rare. The very least we can do is stay in tune - with nature, with the people who know about it, with this culture.

**\*\*ENDS\*\***

NOTES TO EDITORS

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**Championships video** - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YitbCxIvBIk&feature=youtu.be>

**Photos:**

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.513661032003759.1073741826.174836995886166&type=1&l=50c7032f10>

**Useful links**:

AICO - Association for Birdsong Imitation: [www.imitation-chants-oiseaux-paca.com](http://www.imitation-chants-oiseaux-paca.com)

FACE - European Federation for Hunting and Conservation: [www.face.eu](http://www.face.eu)

FNC - French National Hunters’ Federation: [www.chasseurdefrance.com](http://www.chasseurdefrance.com)

FRC - French Regional Hunters’ Federation for Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur: <http://fdc06.fr/qui-sommes-nous-/les-federations/frc-paca.html>

IMPCF - Mediterranean Institute for Hunting Culture and Wildlife: [www.impcf.fr](http://www.impcf.fr)

ADCTG - European Association for Traditional Thrush Hunting: [www.chasse-grives.fr](http://www.chasse-grives.fr)

Maison de la Chasse & de la Nature: [www.chassenature.org](http://www.chassenature.org)