



The Sounds of Christmas in Italy



Bagpipes in Italy?!? No Christmas is complete without them.

If you think bagpipes were inflicted upon the world by the Scots, you'd be wrong. Originating in Mesopotamia, bagpipes were brought to Rome long before they made their way further north. And no Italian Christmas would be complete without the sound of *zampogne* (bagpipes). Everywhere from the piazzas of Rome to remote hillside villages, the *zampognari* (bagpipers) continue the tradition of festive bagpipe playing that dates back to ancient Roman times.

Traditionally, the pipers were shepherds who, in a bid to earn an extra income, would travel down from their mountain homes at Christmas time to perform for the townsfolk in their market

squares. The regions where you're most likely to see a piper are Abruzzo, Basilicata, Campania, Calabria, Molise, Puglia, and Lazio.

The traditional dress of the piper consists of short breeches with criss-crossed leather leggings, sheepskin vests with a woolen cloak, and peaked caps. There are regional changes



such as velvet jackets or neckerchiefs, but the look of the piper remains mostly the same as it has for centuries.

Legend tells us that of the shepherds who visited the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem, after gazing upon the baby Jesus, some took out their bagpipes and played. In keeping with the legend, the pipers will stop at public *Presepi* (Nativity scenes) for a few minutes of quiet contemplation.

Historically, the piper is accompanied by a *ciaramella*, a medieval woodwind instrument. However, today's pipers are usually accompanied by an oboe player. They play traditional music, with one song being the Christmas



Calabrian bagpipes and ciaramella

hymn, *Tu scendi dalle stelle* (You come down from the stars) which is Italy's favorite Christmas carol.

To listen to this song played by *Zampognari Arconatesi* from the Arconate comune in Milan, [click here](#).



Zampognari Arconatesi

If bagpipes aren't your thing, listen to what the beautiful Christmas hymn *Tu scendi dalle stelle* sounds like sung by a church choir by [clicking here](#).

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