# Preservation, conservation and phonetic study of the voices of Italian poets: A study on the seven years of the VIP archive

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## Abstract

Poetic speech, like other oral traditions, is a fragile cultural heritage that requires proper conservation to prevent dispersal. Therefore, since the early 20th century, there has been a growing global recognition of the need to handle such oral data appropriately. This awareness has led to the establishment of both digital and analog archives dedicated to preserving poetic readings. Noteworthy is *Voices of Italian Poets* (VIP), a prominent project focused on conserving and studying contemporary Italian poetic speech. This paper aims to outline the value of the VIP vocal archive by providing a descriptive analysis of its data, seven years after its creation. The study presents the structure and purposes of the online platform and highlights the large number and variety of recordings and poets involved in the project. The *VIP-Platform* results as a crucial hub for preserving culturally significant materials and a crucial case study for nurturing a shared cultural inheritance.

**Index Terms**: Italian contemporary poetic readings, Historical recordings, Oral archives, Phonetics, Poetic speech

## 1. Introduction: Poetic speech as a cultural heritage

It is widely recognized in both language sciences and oral history that speech is an inherently delicate form of data requiring meticulous preservation, particularly when dealing with culturally significant or artistic expressions [1], [2], [3]. Poetic speech, in particular, holds a unique significance as a form of cultural heritage deserving of careful preservation and appreciation. In this paper, we present a compelling case study exemplifying the preservation, management, and phonetic approach of poetic recordings data through the *Voices of Italian Poets* (VIP) research project. Seven years since its inception, this project remains a cornerstone in Italy, bridging the realms of prosody and conservation. Our paper delineates the genesis, evolution, and underlying scientific principles of the VIP project. Furthermore, we offer a detailed exposition of its contents and attributes through a selection of illustrative graphs. While research on speech has seen rapid advancement with the proliferation of acoustic analysis tools and the convergence of metrical and stylistic inquiries with rigorous textual linguistics, the intersection between these disciplines has seldom yielded convincing outcomes. However, the preservation of sound documents plays a pivotal role in facilitating linguistic investigations into poetry recitation. The practice of recording and preserving poetry readings traces its roots back to the early 20th century, marking an intersection not only with the domains of recording and radio communication but also with linguistics, serving as the archival foundation for phonetic analyses [4, 5], [6]. This tradition has internationally flourished, leading to the establishment of various preservation practices and the digitization of analogue archives. A preliminary survey of poetry voice archives conducted by Colonna [4, 5] reveals their proliferation, particularly in English-, French- and Spanish-speaking regions, encompassing monolingual (e.g. the French *Archives de la Parole* [7]) and multilingual collections (e.g. the American archives *PennSound* [6] and *UbuWeb* [8]), some of them including translations (e.g. *Lyrikline* [9]). Many of these archives – such as *A media voz* (Colombia), *Archivo audiovisual de la Biblioteca nacional digital de Chile* (Chile), *National Sound Library of Mexico* (Mexico), *Archivo Virtual Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña* (Puerto Rico) and the *La Fonoteca de Poesía Contemporanea* (Spain) – serve both national and international audiences, preserving literary works in their original language as well as translations. Some are affiliated with academic institutions and have been subject to scholarly inquiry (e.g. the *Phonodia* archive of the University of Venice [10], mainly dedicated to Spanish-speaking and Italian poetry). However, until 2017, the year of the creation of VIP, there was no digital archive entirely dedicated to Italian poetry, as the scholar informs. Nevertheless, physical archives maintained by state broadcasters, private organizations, and literary festivals contributed to the preservation landscape, although often with limited accessibility. Examples include the *Teche Rai*; the RSI - *Radio Svizzera Italiana*; the various research centres dedicated to national authors, local TV and radio; the archives of literary festivals (like *Festivaletteratura*) and other analog archives, such as the *Archivio della voce dei poeti* (*Archive of Poets' Voices*, located in Pontassieve) and *Le voci della poesia* (*The voices of poetry* of Baronissi Poetry House). This paper aims to describe the work conducted within the VIP project to preserve and deepen the historical voices of Italian poetry. It offers descriptive insights of the archive in its first seven years while contextualizing them within the broader landscape of international archives. This field of research enriches the study of poetic speech and plays a pivotal role in safeguarding the cultural heritage encapsulated within 20th century poetry.

## 2. The *Voices of Italian Poets* Platform

The vocal digital archive of *Voices of Italian Poets* (*VIP-Platform*) has been an integral part of the project since its inception in 2017 [4]. The *VIP-Platform*, which has been accessible online since January 2018, is hosted on the "Research" section of the website of the Laboratorio di Fonetica Sperimentale 'Arturo Genre', which offers a repository and research instruments for a wide array of speech corpora. The VIP project section comprises, besides the archive, further four parts: an introductory page; an overview of the methodology; a page related to an organized conference; and a page with further activ-

ities and information [see `https://www.lfsag.unito.it/ricerca/VIP_index.html`]. In this paper, we will focus on the archive section to see its growth over time. The *VIP-Platform* remains particularly active and undergoes regular updates, with the most recent update in February 2024. The ongoing pursuit of material acquisition, editing, cataloguing, and integration into the platform reflects the vibrant landscape of Italian poetry across generations. From its beginning the platform is largely based on the retrieval of historical sources and the collaboration of contemporary poets and skilled voice professionals, who have generously contributed to its development. Moreover, the tangible backing from publishing houses, events, and partner institutions, which recognized the project's significance and facilitated the retrieval of diverse materials, has been invaluable. In adherence to established protocols [4, 5], all gathered materials undergo storage and analysis in .wav format, with a sampling rate of 44.1 kHz (and 32 bit), ensuring high-fidelity capture. Subsequently, these materials are made accessible online in .mp3 format, although with a reduction in sound quality, down sampling at 16 kHz. This format adjustment facilitates ease of download while maintaining a reasonable compromise between file size and audio fidelity. Each file is licensed under GPL for Research purposes and requires a specific detailed mention. The archive's ongoing enrichment owes much to the efforts of collectors, primarily recording poets within the controlled environment of the *Amplifon* modular booth situated within the Laboratory. However, recordings are also sourced from diverse settings, employing environmental recorders, such as TASCAM DR-40. During the pandemic period, additional measures were adopted to ensure continuity in data acquisition: poets utilized voice recorders to conduct self-recordings while ensuring a standard of quality suitable for preservation purposes. Each author is previously informed and consents to participate in the project. As of 2024, the archival volume remains considerable, notwithstanding the relatively brief history of the VIP project and its modest contributor base. The *VIP-Platform* operates along two principal axes of inquiry and interpretation: firstly, a temporal dimension aimed at furnishing a historical perspective on the evolution of reading styles over time, and secondly, a comparative dimension offering opportunities to explore diverse interpretations of identical texts. Organized alphabetically by author, navigation within the archive can be facilitated by selecting the corresponding letter buttons and choosing the poet's name or by scrolling through the page. Each recording is classified according to the metadata of the Author, Poem, Performer, and Source/Collector, facilitating the identification of multiple renditions of the same text. The platform involves original readings by both living and 20th century poets alongside those by professional voice artists, thus presenting a broad spectrum of prosodic features. Criteria for selecting 20th century poets were rooted in established literary canons, albeit tempered by practical constraints such as the availability of recordings, which unfortunately precluded the inclusion of several initially foreseen authors. Conversely, contemporary selections represent a substantial part of the database and reflect a diverse range of styles and demographics. Indeed, authors from different generations and parts of Italy contribute to a snapshot of the rich variation in Italian poetry reading styles. Efforts are also made to document internal variations in individual authors' readings across different stages of their lives. Living poets include established figures, burgeoning talents with substantial poetic oeuvres, and a select group of emerging voices already garnering critical acclaim. Table 1 provides a global overview of the number of data in the archive.

Table 1: *VIP-Platform summary table*

| Category | Numbers |
|---|---|
| Total number of readings | 1122 |
| Readings collected by VIP project members | 988 |
| Total number of poets represented | 148 |
| Individual readings | 645 |
| Comparative readings | 477 |

## 2.1. Data analysis through descriptive graphs

This section provides a detailed analysis of the metadata manually collected for each recording and presented through graphs created with R[11]. We will discuss the following aspects: the source of the recording; the age and gender of the poets; the category of the poets depending on the attributed period by the phonetic classification; the regional distribution of the poets; the type of reading, by the own author or by another voice; and the 20th century poems most read and represented in the corpus. Finally, we will provide an analysis of the collectors' work, divided among VIP members over time. Going into detail, most of the sound data on the online platform was collected specifically by the project curators (988 recordings, 87.9%): 596 were recorded by Colonna V.; 257 by Petris M.; 117 by Lo Iacono F., and the remaining 18 by other collaborators (Fig. 1).
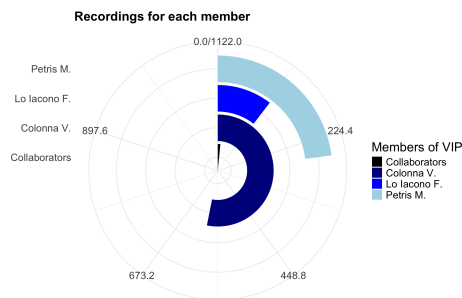


Figure 1: *Readings collected by each member*

However, the platform registrations reach 1122 if we also take into account the 78 mentioned readings from the *Teche Rai* (*RAI*); the 16 from the *I 30 discolibri della letteratura italiana* (*30Dlli*) [12]; the one from the book *Canto senza voce* by Claudia Ruggeri (*TU*) [13]; the 2 from the *Contemporary Poetry Centre* of the University of Bologna (*CB*); the 18 from the *Mendrisio Association* (*A.M.*); and the 15 readings from external platforms of which we provide a link (*External links*). As we can see also from the chart (Fig. 2), not all the material considered by the VIP group is listenable directly from the platform. There are indeed 115 recordings (15.12%), mainly belonging to the 20th century, which for copyright reasons cannot be included in the archive. However, they have been consulted for studies. The included materials are either out of copyright or provided by the institution, such as the CB, which has entrusted the vocal archive to VIP. The poets that can be consulted number 148, the clear majority of whom belong to the male group (108 and 40 women, Fig. 3). For this reason, a Gender Plan for promoting gender equality is currently being implemented. Furthermore, as shown in the Fig.4, the largest and most up-to-date part of the poets' corpus is undoubtedly dedicated to contemporary poets, which currently numbers 129, as opposed to 20th

century poets. This latter set of poets, whose inclusion incredibly increases the historical value of the platform, is also divided into two subgroups: *First radio-television* poets (8), known for their declamatory readings; and *Second radio-television* poets (11), recognized for their more introspective and experimental style, aligning with classifications proposed by Colonna [5], that resonate with some of Eco's theoretical frameworks [14]. The presence of the voices of 29 poets who have since passed away contributes to the enhancement of their oral testimonies as an invaluable historical legacy. Geographically, Lombardy emerges as the most represented region, boasting 24 poets, followed by Marche (14), Piedmont (14) and Apulia (13) (Fig. 5). One of the objectives for the future of VIP is to expand its reach to regions with limited data.
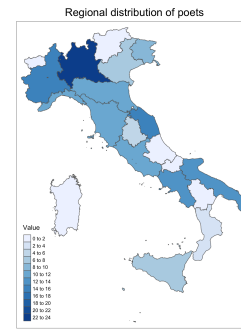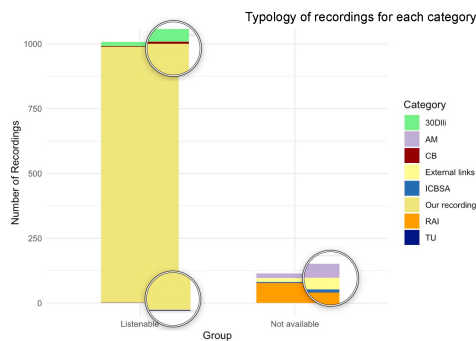


Figure 2: *Global composition of VIP-Platform*
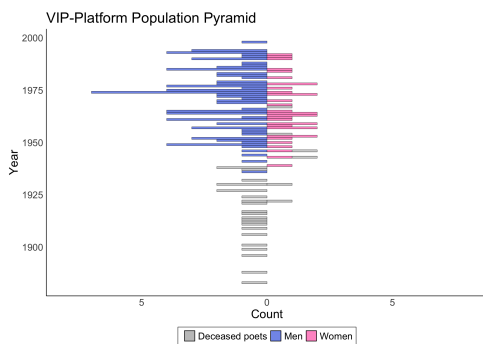


Figure 3: *VIP-Platform population pyramid*



Figure 4: *Categories of poets*



Figure 5: *Regional distribution of poets*
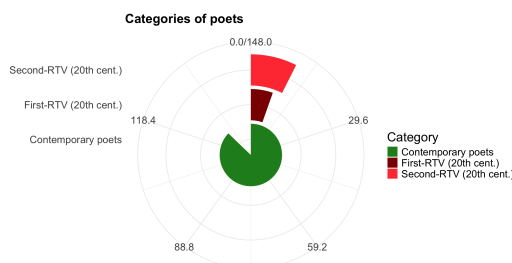
The main stages in the development and growth of the archive showed the dual lines of the VIP archive from the beginning [15, 16]: a historical line and a comparative line. The first aim is to examine the historical overview and the variation of poetry reading over time through individual readings. The second aim is to enable a comparative study of the same materials based on various criteria (e.g. reading styles, region). Indeed, from the perusal of the archives of the *Teche Rai Media Library* in Turin and the *Central Institute for Sound and Audiovisual Assets* in Rome, a relevant presence of poetry oral data from the 20th century emerged, mainly belonging to male authors, with an almost total absence of female voices. The first voices identified were those of F. T. Marinetti and A. Palazzeschi, even though the quality of these recordings did not allow them a concrete study. The other line of the archive is aimed at a comparative collection, based on the recovery of different vocal interpretations of selected texts [17, 18, 19]. The objective was to gather multiple readings of texts by well-known poets of the last century, also preserving the original reading. The metrical, rhetorical, and stylistic structure of the reference texts was also evaluated. This selection, which is still used in the project, includes one to three poems per author. In 2017, it formed the first core of the archive and comparative studies. The data related to this research line show a consistent number of comparative and individual readings, specifically 477 comparative entries and 645 individual entries (Fig. 6).
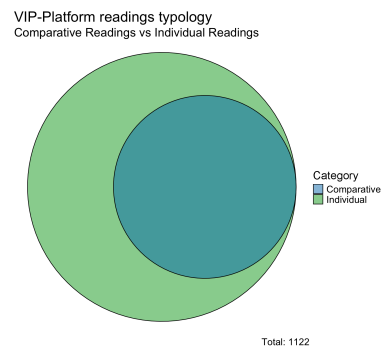


Figure 6: *Comparative vs individual readings*

We can represent these lines as an individual axis (historical line) and a comparative axis (comparative line). The archive is internally subdivided, with authors listed alphabetically and the multiple interpretations of the texts easily accessible. The individual axis (57.54%) is more substantial than the compar-

ative axis (42.52%) and therefore on average offers a rather wide range of repertoire for each author. In the comparative set, Caproni's *Congedo del viaggiatore cerimonioso* stands out with 66 readings. The two least represented poets in the 20<sup>th</sup> century selection are Zanzotto and Zeichen, each with only two comparative recordings of the respective poems *Con dolce curiosità* and *Ho volutamente confuso* (Fig. 7).
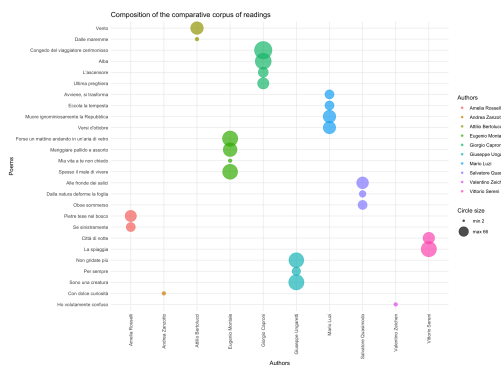


Figure 7: *Composition of the comparative corpus*

For 80 poetry readings we also included in the platform the file of the annotated reading through the PRAAT software [20], in .txt format. One of the future goals is to make the archive accessible through different levels of consultation that, in addition to making explicit the duplicity of the axes that compose it, provide useful groupings and labeling, which can also be realized in an automated classification system of reading styles. Aware of its little balance at a gender (but also geographical) level, we aim to comply with a further goal of balancing through a specific plan. The lengthy setting up of this archive and the continuous work of collection and cataloguing represent attempts to respond to the need to preserve the oral-acoustic datum of poetry. However, there is still a significant amount of data to be collected, both from modern poets and older sources that require digitization, such as the *Contemporary Poetry Centre* of the University of Bologna. Therefore, we also aim to increase our efforts in digitization and conservation of partner archives. The decision to share sound documents from other archives, showcases or scattered platforms on the *VIP-Platform* aligns with the goal of preservation, conservation, and study. This approach allows for different types of recordings to be easily traced and correlated with other interpretations, enhancing our cultural heritage. Additionally, phonetic analysis can be used to gain a better understanding of this historical material.

## 3. Research on poetic speech in the world

The emphasis on the phonetic examination of spoken data is equally pivotal. In fact, a multidisciplinary methodology such as the one proposed by the VIP research group can allow us to detect aspects not easily evident from the text layout [4, 21], [22]. We advocate for a documentary-conservative approach, characterized by an inclusive sharing aimed at diverse audiences and stimuli. Moreover, we endorse a scientific inquiry that integrates contemporary technologies and methodologies while acknowledging their historical origins and depth. Since the inception of sound archives for poetic speech, a significant convergence has emerged between the realms of poetry and phonetics, both demonstrating a mutual interest in safeguarding oral data. In this field as well, the three most important areas

are the Anglophone area with Byers [23, 24, 25, 26], Barney [27, 28], MacArthur [29] and Mustazza [6]; the Francophone area with Puff [30] and Lang [7]; and the German-speaking area with Wagner [31, 32] and Meyer-Sickendiek [33, 34]. Finally, the works of Fant *et al.* also deserve significant consideration [35, 36, 37]. Despite Italy's vibrant landscape, characterized by numerous events, literary publications, and cutting-edge phonetics laboratories, the integration between phonetic and poetic studies remain underdeveloped, although there have been pioneering works by Beccaria [38], Bertinetto [39, 40], on the theoretical front, and Schirru [41, 42], on the experimental one. Hence, within the Italian tradition, the corpus of works explicitly addressing the linguistic register of poetic speech is rather limited, with perhaps only Nencioni's seminal work offering substantial insights in this regard [43]. It is against this backdrop, marked by a dearth of scholarly attention and the acknowledged significance of oral data, that the imperative and aspiration to establish a specialized digital sound platform have gained traction. Such a platform aims to faithfully represent the breadth of our national poetic landscape, ensuring ease of online access while adhering to rigorous scientific research protocols (e.g. the *VIP-Radar*, in which 20 acoustic, rhythmic and prosodic parameters are visualized at once [44]). In various fields of research, the analysis of poetic speech have long been regarded as central subjects. Within these domains, multidisciplinary approaches, technologies, and specialized tools for data extraction and both qualitative and quantitative analysis have been developed. Additionally, techniques for the preservation and enhancement of this specific type of acoustic data have been advanced. International collaborative efforts have underscored the significance of integrating diverse expertise in investigating this subject, highlighting the potential benefits of combining traditional and innovative methodologies previously not applied to the study of poetic recitation. Such studies stand to yield positive outcomes through the amalgamation of expanded knowledge, a trend expected to continue to evolve. Further interactions between phonetics, metrics and poetics in the broad basin of the digital humanities are desirable for the future, too.

## 4. Conclusions

The VIP project stands as a significant endeavor in the preservation and phonetic study of poetic speech, which is a linguistic register of great cultural and historical value. By presenting a convincing protocol and a sound methodology, in such a short time VIP project builds a bridge between phonetics and archival science, demonstrating a practice of preservation, management and phonetic analysis of Italian poetic speech. The ongoing development of the project will afford opportunities for its continued refinement and enhancement. The paper has outlined the genesis, evolution, and scientific principles underlying the VIP project, offering insights into its contents through illustrative graphs. While the field of research on speech has advanced rapidly, the intersection of phonetics, archival science and poetic studies remains underdeveloped, with limited outcomes. However, the preservation and the memory of significant oral documents like poetic readings plays a crucial role in handing down a cultural heritage that might otherwise dissipate and be irreversibly lost. The VIP project, with its online platform and ongoing efforts in data acquisition and conservation, contributes to this research landscape while enriching also the speech science in general. Moving forward, further collaboration between linguistics, archival science, and digital humanities is desirable to advance our understanding of read-aloud poetry.

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