

Italian Migration and
Urban Music Culture in Latin America

Populäre Kultur und Musik

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Simona Frasca

Naples in New York: Sources and research perspectives in the repertoires of the Italian diaspora

Neapolitan song was one of the most important Italian folk repertoires which contributed to the birth of Italian popular music. Among the cities of the peninsula, Naples was among the first Italian birthplaces for the public entertainment industry with its large amount of music halls, vaudeville theaters, publishers, and performers. At the end of the 19th century, the Neapolitan dialect left behind its folkloric dimension and opened itself to new musical trends from abroad, such as maxixe, fox trot, shimmy, blues, rag and tango, coming from the Americas. When listening to the famous Neapolitan song '*O Sole Mio*', it becomes clear that it is very difficult to present the Neapolitan tradition as a ›pure‹ and uncontaminated essence of a local culture. This song shows its contaminated nature as a result of the combination of the dialect, the Neapolitan dialect, and a rhythmic pattern apparently not connected to any local tradition. The song, written in 1898 in Odessa, Ucraina, by the poet Giovanni Capurro and the composer Eduardo Di Capua, is a stylized *habanera*, the exotic rhythmic dance came to Europe from Cuba around the second half of the 19th century. The success of the Bizet's opera *Carmen*, performed for the first time in Italy in Naples at the Bellini Theatre in 1879, played an important role in spreading this trend. Enrico Caruso sang and recorded probably the first version of the song and by doing so, established a canon for the next interpreters.

The name Caruso brings us to another fundamental aspect of this story, occurred in the first stages of the development of the recorded music industry, when the American record label Victor Talking Machines engaged the Neapolitan opera singer.

At the beginning of the last century, Caruso became one of the leading figures in Italian opera thanks to his voice, which was discographically perfect; of course this didn't imply that Caruso's voice sounded better with technological support than in a live performance, as suggested by Siefert.¹ In spite of being feted with money and fame in the most exclusive circles of American music, Caruso maintained his ties with the Italian immigrant community in New York City, where he

1 Siefert, Marsha. Aesthetics, Technology, and the Capitalization of Culture: How the Talking Machine became a Musical Instrument. In: *Science in Context*, VIII 2, 1995, pp. 417–49, here: 430–31.

moved to after being engaged by the Metropolitan Opera House. There was a tenacious, albeit small, bond among the Italians in the American city, and Caruso's will to sing Neapolitan songs was a way of emphasizing this tie.

The extra-operatic pieces sung by Caruso consist of 21 songs composed in Naples or inspired by the Italian city; all of them were produced in the Victor sound studios in New York City and Camden, New Jersey. Most of them were conducted by American or non Italian conductors, two of whom, Walter B. Rogers and Josef Pasternak, worked in operatic music, as well as in marching music, American music and ethnic music.

Among these 21 songs there is a group I should call ›hybrid‹ due to their geographical position, since they were written half way between Naples and New York.

The ›hybridness‹ of these songs lies in the fact that the lyrics of a song were often conceived in Naples, but the music was written in New York or vice versa. In fact, it often happened that an author of lyrics who had never been to New York heard a song of his accompanied by music written by an immigrant composer whom he never would meet in his life. It also happened, although less frequently, that the author would send the lyrics from Italy to a composer residing in America –as in the case of Raffaello Segrè, who migrated to São Paulo, Brazil, in 1906–, a custom I call ›composing by mail‹.

Among the Neapolitan compositions written in the American framework, *I m'arricordo 'e Napule* (I remember Naples) reveals some interesting points for discussion. In this mournful remembrance of Naples, the music identifies strictly with the city itself, declaring an indissoluble link between the city and the song.

I m'arricordo 'e Napule was published in 1921 in New York by Giuseppe Gioè, who signed it with a pointed J., which stood for an anglicized Joseph. The song had an enormous popularity in North America, especially in the main cities of the country, thanks to Caruso's interpretation recorded in 1920. The tenor also wrote a letter to the authors which demonstrates the strength of his feelings for the Italian community in New York:

I don't deserve any thanks, in fact it's me that has to thank you for giving me the pleasure of singing those lines that not later than yesterday I recorded in the Victor Talking Machine. I also listened to a working copy and I found in it the whole soul of three ›napulitane verace‹ (veracious Neapolitans) feeling the longing for their beautiful and beloved country².

The poetical structure of the song, with three repetitions of the strophe, is canonical for the Neapolitan *canzonetta* as it developed from the end of the 19th century.

2 *I m'arricordo 'e Napule*, La Follia di New York 26th of September 1920 [trans. by the author].

ry. Each section is articulated in 3 parts: an instrumental introduction, 8 bars in the first section and four in the second and third, one strophe of rhyming endecasyllables following the pattern a-b-a-b-c-c-d-d and an added part with a different meter formed by four settenari (seven-syllable lines). The custom of using added parts reproduces the practice of tropos and farcituras. This practice of composing was common in 18th-century comic opera librettos, where musical models from the folklore tradition were openly cited, imitated or falsified. I have expressed this concern³.

Therefore, what I call the added part is a sort of a ›fossil‹ or ›find‹, constituted by a singsong, a stornello or a proverbial expression, something not connected in any way with the main strophe and can thus present itself as nonsense. Each of the three sections of the song describes a typical aspect of Neapolitan everyday life, portraying some *topoi* of this repertoire set in specific hours of the day. The song, following the rules of the genre, depicts nature taking an active part in the narrated action and uses iconographic and linguistic stereotypes.

The most significant idea of the whole song is the insertion of a poetical digression at the end of each stanza, the aforementioned added part (in italics):

I

I' m'arricordo 'e Napule 'e matina,
quanno schiarava juorno a ppoco a ppoco,
'nu ventariello doce e 'n'aria fina,
spuntava 'o sole 'ncielo comm' a fuoco,
nu fruscio 'e fronne, nu canto d'eaucielle,
te salutava 'a tutt' e nenne belle,
e 'a 'nu guaglione 'mmanech' e 'ncammise
sentive chesta voce 'e paravise.

Rose d' o mese 'e maggio,
Rose pe' nnammurate,
Cu st'aria 'nbarzamata,
Vuie dint' o lietto state?

II

I'm'arricordo 'e Napule 'e cuntrora,
'o sole te cuceva 'e sentimento,
'na coppia 'e nnammurate a 'na cert' ora,
se deva a Margellina appuntamento.
chillo Vesuvio visto da luntano,
'o mare che sbatteva chiano chiano,

3 Frasca, Simona: *Italian Birds of Passage*. New York 2014, p. 64.

mentre de' scoglie respirav' addore,
sentive n'ata voce 'e vennetore.

*Chi tene 'a 'nnammurata
ch'è bella, isso è geloso,
i' tengo 'e perziane
apposta pe' chist'uso.*

III

I' m'arricordo 'e Napule 'e nuttata,
'ncopp' 'a ll'onne, Pusilleco durmeva,
e te menava n'aria profumata,
'o manto 'argento 'a luna le spanneva.
E quanno m'arricordo 'e chillo cielo,
me vene all'uocchie 'e lagrime 'nu velo,
pare ca veco 'e stelle na curona,
e sento ancora l'eco 'e 'sta canzona.

*Oj varca lenta e stracqua;
i' penzo 'a nenna mia,
c' a voglio bene ancora
e moro 'e gelusia.*

This technique naturally creates variety and holds the listener's attention, inspiring a paradoxical, pleasant sense of musical frustration. To all appearances, due to the absence of a real refrain, the listener will seem to lose the thread of the poetical narration. Even though technically speaking, *I' m'arricordo 'e Napule* was written in the United States, the true origin of the lyrics lies in Naples. The dialect used here is the original spoken in the Italian city and the images come from that reality which has little, if anything, to do with the urban imagery of New York.

The song performed by Caruso is a unique sound document not only because it is related to what I called a European cultured/popular area, a characteristic shared with other contemporary musical examples, but also because *I' m'arricordo 'e Napule* characterizes the identity of the city of Naples: the immigrants' Neapolitan/Italian ethnicity itself is consigned to music more than to any other form of artistic expression. In this respect, the connection between Naples and its musical tradition becomes manifest. The Neapolitan light repertoire is made up of poetic and aesthetic elements deduced from the ›form‹ of the city itself, from its real and ideal geography. These elements thus become almost an aetiology of the sounds and contribute to giving the Neapolitan song tradition that special lyrical and musical mark which causes us to talk more about its geography than its history.

Speaking more generally in certain social frameworks, such as the one I am analyzing here, it is clear that the study of historical processes alone is not able to analyze in depth the cultural practices of the modern and contemporary age. The

issue of space as historical geography and urbanization is an integral part of the theory of society. In this regard, David Harvey emphasizes quoting Anthony Giddens⁴ that if spatial-temporal connections are characteristic constituents of the social system, then the question of space is certainly too important to be left exclusively to the field of the traditional study of geographers. From Marx onward through Weber, Durkheim, and Marshall –Harvey writes– there has been a strong and almost hegemonic predisposition to give priority to the time and the history with respect to space and geography; this has led to a distortion in the reductive sense in the understanding of some processes among which I would include the Neapolitan song as a cultural process formalized into the twentieth-century popular repertoires.

When the immigrants first came to America, they were forced to rethink the poetic and then the formal characteristics of their songs if they did not wish to revise the latter only on the basis of memory. This manner of rethinking happened over time, but before this could occur, a phase of suspension intervened. Even before the immigrants became aware of what was happening, the uprooting took the form of nostalgia, the feeling of loss and regret. This is the state that informs the song of Esposito and Gioè as interpreted by Caruso. The nostalgia over the loss of one's native land is continued within the settenari. These seven-syllable lines are inserted where the structure of the song form subsequently formalized provides for the placement of the chorus (or refrain) and creates a hiatus that appears almost as an act of the collective unconsciousness.

From Enrico Caruso to the most middling small-town *vedette*, Italian vocal music abandoned its operatic tendencies for a more ›popular‹ imprint by introducing new subjects, employing new techniques, and attracting new audiences. We could review the years spanning the political unification of Italy and the fascist regime of the early 20th century with the help of the examples of significant performers such as Gilda Mignonette –a singer known in New York as the »carusiana« and »the queen of the immigrants«– to trace the transformation of a popular tradition written in dialect to a popular tradition written in the Italian language.

One of her most interesting performances is *La Rumba delle Fragole* (›The Strawberries Rumba‹): even though the song is performed in Italian, the singer has a strong Neapolitan accent, since she was born in Naples and took her first steps in music there before moving to New York in 1926. The original song *La Rumba delle Fragole* sounds as to be inspired by *The Peanut Vendor*, one of the first English rumbas to become famous around 1930. *The Peanut Vendor* is the English version of the original cuban *pregón* song *El Manicero* and composed by Moises Simons.

4 Harvey, David: *The Urban Experience*. Baltimore, MD, 1989, pp. 17–18.

The Peanut Vendor was a song of big success which helped introduce Latin American music to the New York entertainment industry. The song was recorded for the first time by the Cuban director don Azpiazú and the American editor Edward B. Marks subsequently sold more than 600 Latin American songs. It became a stock arrangement and thus entered Neapolitan/Italian tradition. »As with a lot of other Cuban lyrics –writes Janet Topp Fargion– flirting and snacking are often associated, and many lyrics relating to food have an implicit sexual meaning⁵. The new Italian version replaced the word ›peanut‹ with ›strawberries‹ in the title but kept the sense and the meaning of the original English/Cuban version unchanged.

The song performed by Mignonette introduces the other topic of this article relating the Italian migration to the United States. Due to a lucky historical circumstance, Neapolitan popular song, although forced to embark on a mass migration (1880–1920), managed to utilize the latest technology of the sound reproduction era, the phonograph, and maintained strong ties with its traditional origins in Italy. The emigration of Southern Italians helped transform this very unique ›local‹ cultural inheritance into one of the first modern examples of transnational music. The song *'A Festa d'è Marinare*, composed by John Gentile and performed by Joe Masiello, is an example of this.

'A Festa d'è Marenare [trans. by the author]

Marenare, Marenare,
tirate 'e barche a siccò, oi marenare.
Arrecettate 'e rezze 'a terra 'a rena
oggi nui simmo 'e terra e no' d' mare
è 'a festa d' a Madonna d' a Catena.
Pe' 'na iurnata sola nun s' more
manco nu vuzzo c'adda restà fore.

Vene 'na vota all'anno
'a festa d' a Madonna
'a festa Nzegna, ohè!
C'avimmo 'mbriacà d'acqua zurfegna,
stanotte 'e guaia l'avimmo jettà a mare
stasera è festa grande, è 'a festa nosta
è festa 'e marenare.

Piscature, piscature,
passa 'a Madonna, uè passa 'a Madonna,
purtata a spalla a tanta marenare.

Seamen, seamen,
Beach the boats, seamen.
Put the nets in order on seashore,
Today we stay on the ground, not on the sea,
It's the Madonna of the Catena feast.
We won't die if we couldn't work for a day,
Neither a boat has to be out on the sea.

It comes once a year,
The feast of the Madonna,
The feast 'Nzegna, ohè!
We must booze by the sulphurous water,
Tonight the troubles we must throw to the sea,
Tonight is a big holiday, it's our feast,
The feast of the sailors.

Sailors, sailors,
is passing the Madonna, is passing the Madonna,
brought on the shoulders by many sailors.

5 Trio Matamoros: *Out of Cuba. Latin American music takes Africa by storm*. CD cover lines by Janet Topp Fargion, Topic Records/British Library Sound Archive, TSCD927, 2004.

'A santa vista è bella 'ncoppa all'onna,
hanno sufferto tanto 'nmiezo 'o mare,
ricco e cuntento stà 'o zì parrucchiano
ce benedice e ride sotto 'a mano

Vene 'na vota all'anno [...]

The song was composed in New York City, but set in Naples during the Madonna della Catena feast. This religious cult, named *'Nzegna*, was celebrated in the homonymous church of the Santa Lucia neighbourhood. The church was built under the slopes of mount Echia, from which sulphurous and iron water springs emanate that are cited in the text, in 1576 (a time in which town-planning was completely different to what it is today). It was constructed close to the sea, near to the Harbour of the Provenzali, which no longer exists.

Another example of stock arrangement which is worth quoting is *'Mpareme 'a via d'a casa mia*, probably the most famous macchietta composed in New York by Eduardo Migliaccio, known as Farfariello. The American city was a major point of entry for Italian immigrants and there was a continual flow of Italians and specifically Neapolitans until the early 1920s, many of which chose to settle in New York. *'Mpareme 'a via d'a casa mia* is the Neapolitan/Italian version of the American song *Show Me the way to go home*, written by Irving King in 1925 and made famous in the same year by the performance of the California Ramblers. This American orchestra was one of the most important dance bands of the 1920s. It was formed after the success of the Original Dixieland Jass Band, two members of which were of Italian origin.

'Mpareme 'A Via D'A Casa Mia [trans. by the author]

Non so perchè pensaje
d'andare a Broduè
nun c'ere state maje
vulette andà avedè.
Migliara 'e lampetelle
girano accà e allà,
te giren 'e cirvielle, c"a forza 'e alluccà.

Portame a casa mia
me voglio andà a cuccà,
me ne sò asciuto iere
non saccio cchiù addò sta.
M'ha fatto male, i' crere, quell'urtempo
bicchiere.
Chi m'empara pè cortesia
'a via d'a casa mia.

Trovai 'na naise ghella

The saint is beautiful above the wave.
They suffered very much in the middle of the sea,
happy and satisfied is the uncle priest,
he blesses and smiles under his hand.

It comes once a year [...]

I don't know why I thought
to go to Broadway
I've never been there
I wanted to go and see.
Thousands of lights
swirl here and there
your brain twists, forced to scream.
Show me the way to go home
I want to go to sleep
I went out yesterday
I don't know how to come back.
The last drink, I bet,
was too much.
Please, someone show me
the way to go home.
I found a nice girl

Che disse »mi know you«
Pareva tanto bella
Pittata rossa e blù.
Nu vaso le cercaje,
nun me dicette no,
'a sacca me sfrattaie,
poi disse »c'atro vuò?«

Portame a casa mia [...]

who said to me: »Mi know you«.
She looked so beautiful
all made-up in red and blu.
I asked her for a kiss
she didn't say no
she checked out my pocket
then asked »You want more?«

Show me the way to go home [...]

For a detailed analysis of the piece I refer to my book.⁶ It is important to note that the numbers of the stanzas (five) seem to be decided on by the author-performer Farfariello step by step. Farfariello's song did not present itself as a closed piece with a fixed number of verses according to an established schema. The number of verses was, in fact, changed from time to time by him. Various performers created and gathered realistic events by using a scenario in which appear famous narrative structures, characters, and situations, to which he refers on stage as a common experience shared by actor and audience. In this way, the performer brings life to an episode of the collective life, removing the distance between himself and the audience. Thus, the bond that supports this mode of creation-execution-performance and the one described by Geraci about the professional storytellers (*cantastorie*) in Southern Italy and Sicily in particular becomes stronger signing a more direct derivation of the repertoire of Italian-American macchietta to the oral tradition of storytelling.⁷

In Farfariello's sketch, the use of a refrain, which is a unique trail of the original American song, and the musical accompaniment in Dixieland style, make this song *>commercial<* and enriched by purposes different from those derived from the original Italian repertoire. These pieces were part of an urban music repertoire devoted to mechanical and domestic repeatability with new functions and tasks. The structure of Farfariello's macchietta is cyclical, an aspect which is characteristic of many examples of folk music in the south of Italy, and both songs and repertoires narrate events from everyday life experiences. Farfariello learned this practice while still in Naples; when he moved to New York, probably fascinated by American vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley music, he worked in the way of graft of one tradition into the other.

'Mpareme 'A Via D'A Casa Mia is a very peculiar song, a sort of experiment between the Italian tradition imported to the United States and the local rising wave of the theatrical entertainment scene of the 1920s. Further evidence of this is the fact that the fifth stanza is the last one only because at the time, a 10 inches record

6 Frasca: *Italian Birds of Passage*, pp. 91–97.

7 Geraci, Mauro: *Le Ragioni dei Cantastorie*. Roma 1996, p. 105.

could generally contain three up to five minutes music on each side. When performing live, Farfariello could probably go ahead with his narrative inventions without any time constrictions in the same way a storyteller does.

In the 1930s and 1940s, a new generation of Italian-American performers emerged. One of them was Louis Prima, who had Sicilian roots. In his repertoire he used to play a renowned Neapolitan song: *Maria, Mari*, a love song written by Vincenzo Russo and Eduardo Di Capua in 1899 and translated it into English shortly afterwards, in 1905. It was one of the first Neapolitan musical compositions to quickly enter the Italian-American canon.⁸

It is not necessary to be able to speak Italian, nor the Neapolitan dialect to realize that the song has completely lost the meaning of the original version. Besides the refrain, we could listen to a syncopated, accelerated mixture of Dixieland and boogie-woogie styles enriched with techniques such as jive-talk, *calembour* and nonsenses without any trace of the original words. By the 1940s, the Italians started to forget their tradition and to begin a new process in which their musical traditions were intertwined with the new influences coming from the United States.

One of the assumptions of this article and more in general of my investigation relating to this field of research has to do with assessing the Italian diasporic experience as something positive, by recasting and reformulating cultural codes in light of a true social rebirth. As Gilroy states, the elements that analyses of the diaspora allow us to perceive can establish new visions of it. They can also give rise to a new solidarity because these elements do not define a linear voyage that has a final destination –namely, identity– rather, they suggest a different modality of connected social, economic, cultural ways or forms among different ethnic groups, or they deal with issues of the diasporic phenomenon. The elements of the immigration experience represent more than a protracted condition of social bereavement occasioned by the trauma of exile, of loss, and of brutality. Rather, they generate a more indefinite emotional state, in which the alienation from one's birthplace and cultural estrangement can produce penetrating visions and creative talents that go beyond making perceptible only the anxiety over the possible loss of racial and national unity and of the stability of an imaginary ethnic spirit.⁹

I'd like to conclude this article by quoting Sal Canzonieri, an Italian-American musician who is the leader of the indie punk-rock band *The Electric Frankenstein*. I met him in New York and we talked about his mixed ethnicity, half Italian and half American:

8 Tosches, Nick: *Dino: Living High in the Dirty Business of Dreams*. New York 1999, p. 78.

9 Gilroy, Paul: *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London 1993, pp. 37–38.

I'm a leader of a band which is Italian/American for the 75%. The Italian American rock 'n' roll bands during the 1950s and 1960s were important and they constituted a big wave in that musical area, the habit to adopt fake Italian names by musicians who weren't Italian was very common in those years. The Italian way of living and acting had its importance in the juvenile delinquency underground culture and the myth risen by that feeded up by cinema and other medias; all this had its incredible impact on the topic of racism which was a heavy tribute we Italian Americans still have been paying at least on the tv series [i.e. *The Sopranos*].¹⁰

10 The interview to Sal Canzonieri is a part of a documentary directed by me and now on Vimeo <<http://www.vimeo.com/17346460>> (14th May 2012).