

Folk and Popular as »National«: The Invention of the Italian Unity through Poetry and Music

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The first issues on popular music in Italy arose during the last decades of the eighteenth century, at the time when European civilization was stressing the concept of exoticism in connection with the music of 'wild' peoples of other continents, beginning to consider, at the same time, the oldest cultures in the Mediterranean basin such as the Turkish and the Arab ones. Almost immediately, in consonance with the *Volkslied*, as it was conceived by Johann Gottfried Herder, it is worth taking into account the emergence of songs linked to the origin of every nation, dignified after the lifelong debate upon the ancient bards such as Homer. However, any comparison between music of the ancient Greek civilization and contemporary folksongs was avoided by Italian literati and musicographers. The above-mentioned paradigms, peculiar to the mentality of the Enlightenment – the so-called *musica naturalis* and the music of the nations provided by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean-Benjamin De Laborde, Charles Burney and others – did not enter the musical treatises printed on the Apennine Peninsula.¹ Until the 1830s, Italian Romanticism idealized people's spontaneous traits, always relegating them to a pastoral ambience. Insofar of this tendency, it is not surprising that the Italian scholars collected poems without any systematic approach. Furthermore, as a consequence, it can be added that this trend never increased new anthropological categories, which could define a useful classification of various items.

The Italian discourse on bards was submitted to the controversial unwritten tradition of the ancient epic, never stimulating a survey on similar performances practised by the people. The rules of this phenomenon became the core of the matter around the mid-nineteenth century, when, in view of a national unification, unknown amateurs or renowned scholars gathered an appreciable number of poems brought from several parts of the country, even though Italy was not yet a state, and had consisted of many petty states mainly administrated by foreigners² since the Middle Ages.

¹ On this topic, particularly the discourse on nature as otherness and its related categories, ancient, oriental and folk, see: Matthew GELBART, *The Invention of »Folk Music« and »Art Music«, Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 40-79.

² Alberto Mario CIRESE, *La poesia popolare*, Palermo: Palumbo, 1962; Roberto LEYDI, *Le molte Italie e altre questioni di ricerca e di studio*, in: *Guida alla musica popolare in Italia*, 1. Forme e strutture, ed. by Roberto Leydi, Lucca: LIM, 1996, 1-102.

This tendency towards territorial unity, then established as the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, developed into profound research into vernacular poetry associated to music during the second half of the century, ideologically aiming at justifying the interconnection among different dialects spoken in the north and the south. Romanists and ethnographers, with the marginal collaboration of musicologists, addressed their efforts in collecting and comparing poems from a multilingual culture as an expression of Italianness.³ Therefore, the whole territory was examined after the poor results of the previous amateurs, who had succeeded only in gathering the circumscribed materials coming from single regions. In this regard it is noteworthy to highlight the ambiguous use of the term *canti*, in certain cases defining song or poetry and in others referring to a poem probably sung in past times, because – as asserted by the ethnologist Giuseppe Pitrè – people can easily remember a text by singing its verses.⁴

The main difficulty was to decide what was authentic or not, and as a consequence, it was urgent to describe the various degrees of corruptions in cultivated poetry, and thus define the true folk poems sung by heart. In this respect, Ermolao Rubieri (1818-1879) distinguished three main classes in which folk and popular coexist: songs or poems created by people for people, songs or poems on people but not created by people, songs or poems composed by cultivated authors and adopted by people (*Storia della poesia popolare*, 1877).⁵ I have drawn some case studies, provided by three Romanists and a composer devoted to folklore from the 'mare magnum' of Italian studies and ethnography.

The first impulse in recognizing the unity of dialects in poetry came from Costantino Nigra (1828-1907). For many years Nigra played an important role in political affairs: as ambassador in 1876 he moved to St Petersburg, in 1882 to London, and in 1885 to Vienna. As a Romanist he translated many Greek and Latin poems and as an ethnologist he edited the collection *I canti popolari del Piemonte* (1888), in which some poems associated with musical notation appeared.⁶

Nigra undertook a modern method of working quoting the names of his collocutors, as well as the places of each record. In his book he premised an essay on the evolution of popular songs in Italy, formerly published in the periodical *Romania* under the title »La poesia popolare italiana« (1876). In this essay he affirms that folk/popular poetry involves two traditions related to northern and southern Italy, and while in the north the narrative poem, or canzone, flourishes, in the south we can find the lyric poem, or *strambotto* and *stornello*. The first one is located only in the regions above the River Po; on the contrary, the second one emerges also in the North to the same extent of the literati's poetry, which contaminated popular songs. These

³ Referred to Italianness, during the nineteenth century the term 'people' acquired various meanings; see Alberto ASOR ROSA, *Scrittori e popolo. Il populismo nella letteratura italiana contemporanea*, Roma: Savelli, 1965; Giuseppe COCCHIARA, *Popolo e letteratura in Italia*, Palermo: Sellerio, 2004.

⁴ Giuseppe PITRÈ, *Studi di poesia popolare*, Palermo: Pedone, 1872, 28.

⁵ Ermolao RUBIERI, *Storia della poesia popolare*, Firenze: Barbera, 1877.

⁶ Costantino NIGRA, *I canti popolari del Piemonte*, Torino: Roux, 1888.

trends reveal the characteristics of two well-shaped races: the historical and objective contents of the northern poems are marked by Celtic civilization, while the loving, elegant and subjective versifications of the south symbolize the mentality of the Italic peoples. This 'poetic behaviourism' does not prevent Nigra from discovering a strategic medium in the Mediaeval *strambotto*, divided into two stanzas of hendecasyllabic lines. This kind of poem, like the cultivated poetry of the past, was preceded by similar Latin forms and Latin was the official language of all the inhabitants of Italy. Even if the cultural separation between two ethnic groups is unquestionable, Nigra deserves recognition for two analogue solutions: on one hand, he affirms the influence of the written Mediaeval *strambotto*, covering the great part of the country, and on the other he asserts the power of Latin poetry as a common ancestor. These arguments explain the long life of the Sicilian *ottava* as a variant of *strambotto*, which survives in some regions of the centre and of the north. Referring to the dissemination of the courtly *strambotto*, Nigra accepts the probable interweaving with the oral tradition, thus shifting back in a magmatic and obscure past the origin of the musico-poetic double tetra-stich nucleus, which strengthens the osmosis among dialects and the Italian language.

The great Romanist, Alessandro D'Ancona (1835-1914), educated in Florence and appointed professor of Italian literature at the University of Pisa after the unification of the country, spent most of his time in writing a book on the folk/popular poetry of Italy published in 1879 (*La poesia popolare*).⁷ D'Ancona believed that the poor heritage of written sources resulted from the oral transmission related to music and the political life of the Italian communities in the isolated context of the towns. In order to address this lacuna, he formulated his hypothesis on an intermixture of folk and cultivated elements as a dynamic social connection between the upper and lower classes. Giuseppe Pitrè (1841-1916), the founder of the Italian Demologia at the University of Palermo, as a follower of Wilhelm Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie* in his *Studi di poesia popolare* (1872) traced the limits of the »rustic poet« singing only 'extempore', and the cultivated poet who repeated continuously his own verses.⁸ D'Ancona, not completely convinced about this principle, rejected any boundary between folk and literary cultures.⁹ He renewed the monogenetic theory of *strambotto* and focussed on its evolution during time. As regards methodology, D'Ancona's approach to the matter was subject to statistics. As a paradigmatic case he gave some examples of the Sicilian ancient poems, which migrated later to other regions of the country, particularly to Tuscany, and he compared the various versions stating the major entries are found in Sicily. It is a test about the ancient nature of some poetic relics recovered on the island and then grouped by him. In this sense he was fasci-

⁷ Cf. Alessandro D'ANCONA, *La poesia popolare*, Firenze: Giusti, 1906, 2nd edition.

⁸ Giuseppe PITRÈ, *Studi di poesia popolare*, Palermo: Pedone, 1872, 28. Folk music and popular poetry in Pitrè's writings are analyzed by Annamaria AMITRANO SAVARESE, *Demologia e comparativismo: gli interessi musicali di Giuseppe Pitrè*, *Musica e Storia*, XIII/2 (1995), 335-48.

⁹ D'ANCONA, *La poesia popolare*, 130-31.

nated by the vitality of the folk *strambotto*, which was still rooted as a proper tradition in the south.

In view of this penetration in other regions, to increase the value of the primary source, D'Ancona attached less importance to the cultural variety of dialects. The specious argumentation, emphasized by the Romanist, was to convey a unique cultural level, in which literature and unwritten poetry co-operate or live together as two branches of the same tree. It is obvious that the ideological use of D'Ancona's comparative method lay in rethinking the history of the Italian poetic language, born at the court of Frederick II in Sicily and transferred to the continental area, firstly to Bologna and after to Florence, as testified to by Dante in his *De vulgari eloquentia* and by Petrarch in the fourth of his *Trionfi*. Later, from 1868 to 1871, the authoritative poet Giosuè Carducci (1835-1907), as a professor at the University of Bologna, gave five lectures entitled *Cinque discorsi sullo svolgimento della letteratura nazionale*.¹⁰ Carducci analysed the marginal role of the people in the construction of the national identity after the Middle Ages. He formulated a concept of popular without folk, exalting the migration of *literate* poetry from Sicily to Tuscany, and this argument represented an uninterrupted leitmotif of Italian historiography during two centuries (practically from Giovan Mario Crescimbeni's *Historia della volgar poesia*, 1698, onwards).

Very different was the evaluation of popular in music historiography. For instance, in several writings of Oscar Chilesotti (1848-1916) the main topic was sixteenth-century popular music that – by transforming the polyphony of the Flemish school – established Italian musical supremacy. The concept of the Renaissance was based on this reasoning, particularly shown in his essay *Sulla melodia popolare del Cinquecento* (1889).¹¹ Despite the ties between Italian and Flemish art music, the meaning of the Italian *popolare* remains doubtful in this case: it should be translated either as national music inspired by folk music, or as national music based on popular music. This misinterpretation was recurrent in the Italian musicology of the time, whose discourse was concentrated on the written *frottola* tradition. The modest results in uncovering a folk spirit in the previous fifteenth-century polyphony prevented scholars from broadening the analysis to encompassing the unwritten repertoire of *strambotto*, frequently sung on patterns or formulae known as *bassi a discanto*.¹²

The true journey through time of the *strambotto* and its related forms, intended as a self-propagating national tradition, became an 'idée fixe' for many historians, not only in the years of the Revival Movement, i.e. Risorgimento, but also after the

¹⁰ Giosuè CARDUCCI, *Dello svolgimento della letteratura nazionale*, in: ID., *Prose e critiche*, ed. by Giovanni Falaschi, Milano: Garzanti, 1987.

¹¹ Oscar CHILESOTTI, *Sulla melodia popolare del Cinquecento: saggio*, Milano: Ricordi, 1889; the concepts of 'folk' and 'popular' in Chilesotti's writings are discussed by Ivano CAVALLINI, *L'antiwagneriano perfetto*. La musicologia di Oscar Chilesotti e l'idea di musica popolare, in: *Oscar Chilesotti: la musica antica e la musicologia storica*, ed. by Ivano Cavallini, Venezia: Fondazione Levi, 2000, 193-232.

¹² The first musicologist who investigated this repertoire was Alfred EINSTEIN, *Die aria di Ruggiero*, *Sammelbände der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft*, XIII (1911-1912), 444-54.

administrative unity of the country in 1860/1861 under the reign of the Savoy dynasty. It was only at the end of the nineteenth century that some younger scholars rejected the positivistic dilemma of the previous generation referring to the persistence of a compromise among folk, popular and cultivated poetry. Among the scholars who were uninterested in the contemporary achievements of ethnology, in particular, a broad pessimistic attitude prevailed towards the modern urban and peasant masses, blamed for their lack of imagination in comparison to ancient people. The reasons for this gap, which marked the divorce among history of literature, ethnology and musicology, are retraceable in a reactionary point of view. For a correct interpretation of this cultural turn it is necessary to recognize in the word 'people' the synonym for the bourgeoisie of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the population was not an active class, and the so-called middle class represented the antithetical side to the nobility's culture. At the same time, the Italian intelligentsia, variously devoted to evolutionism, was influenced by German philology and culture, with an enthusiastic admiration for, and envy of Ludwig Uhland and Richard Wagner. This trend implied the negligibility of a dynamic perspective of history, combined with an overemphasized concept of national epic. Unfortunately, unlike the rich German Mediaeval patrimony, which was reassessed by Wagner in his *Musikdramen*, Italy has never had an equivalent source of poetry for music. So the Mediterranean country failed in its claim for a national theatre under the 'Latin sky', as imagined by Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863-1938); but, in any case, this cultural lack stimulated a new survey on similar features in the Italian legends.¹³

For example, Ezio Levi (1884-1941) claimed that the *cantari legendari* played the same role as the German and pre-German epics. His book *I cantari legendari del popolo italiano nei secoli XIV e XV* (1912) investigates the European origins of Mediaeval legends played in public squares by domestic minstrels and mountebanks. Handed down and recreated by the people, this oral and partially written heritage is identified with the authentic spirit of national culture.¹⁴ If art is a mirror of each national life, the academic literature is the fruit of the courtier minority (or upper class) unable to show the unity of the Italians. The aulic poets were compelled to force their insight in finding the original topic and verses, and vice versa, as outlined by Levi, the street players turned their attention to the well-known stories in Italy and Europe, performing by heart poems and legends upon certain formulae. Even though their music was unwritten – i.e., lost for Levi – its widespread dissemination on the territory reinforces the author's opinion about the legends, which were at the core of Italian literature. With regard to the contemporary philologists, who recovered the major part of their sources, Levi deplored their inability to come out from the exegesis in a narrow sense that prevented them from embracing historical methods. He argued about the important role of music, which was an essential element in

¹³ Cf. Luca ZOPPELLI, *The Twilight of the True Gods: 'Cristoforo Colombo', 'I Medici' and the Construction of Italian History*, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, VIII (1996), 251-69.

¹⁴ Ezio LEVI, *I cantari legendari del popolo italiano nei secoli XIV e XV*, *Giornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana*, Supplemento no. 16, 1912.

performing practice based on improvisation. The success of this kind of poetry, connected to sound, is also verifiable by its survival in the current folklore of Tuscany, Abruzzi, Sicily, Veneto and the Ladin provinces of the Alps.¹⁵

Three years after this, the Romanist intensified and showed his opinions by publishing the book *Poesia di popolo e poesia di corte nel Trecento* (1915).¹⁶ It was during the fourteenth century that the people's genius flourished in Italy and glorified national life, whereas the court poetry was a mere solipsistic exercise of certain rhetoricians doomed to failure. Paradoxically, regarding the sources typology, the true perspective appears upside down today. While the court work has been handed down to posterity thanks to writings, the popular poetry, appreciated by all social classes, quickly disappeared because it was unwritten. If the historians had been taking into account this seeming contradiction, as sustained by Levi, they could have easily restored the definitive role of the improvised poems accompanied by music in fourteenth-century Italy. In any case, this neglected tradition flows constantly just as a karst underground river comes to the surface in the folk performances. About the textual criticism of his contemporaries, Levi advised analysing the poems as historical documents, thus renouncing aesthetic judgement, in order to shift the attention towards the pivotal elements of the Italian mentality, which was preserved until the nineteenth century.¹⁷

Very unusual for a Romanist, this decision marks the breaking point between the quasi democratic image of the folk poetry and the nationalistic approach to the past. Attracted by Nietzsche's 'philology of the origins', the young scholars tried to set the first principles of creativity, or the unchangeable rules that have led the human processes of poetic imagination. It was an unhistorical tendency raised at the time of the disruptive irrationalism, when d'Annunzio experienced the archaic region of Abruzzi in his *Figlia di Jorio* (1904). As a new bard, he modified the archetype of the popular *canzone*, which became the 'primordial tune' preserving the 'world essence' – a mix of Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's philosophies.

Alberto Favara (1863-1923), an ethnomusicologist and follower of Nietzsche as also shown by his opera *Urania* (1894), declared that a composer, similarly to an archaeologist, should discover the music generated by mythology.¹⁸ Joining Nietzsche's thought on the birth of tragedy from the spirit of music with folk studies, he investigated the ancestral constituents of civilization before history. His remarks illustrate such a position involving a changeover in methods. As an aesthetician and a scholar devoted to fieldwork, Favara promoted a classification of folk praxis that is more an enumeration of human behaviour rather than a history of folk song.¹⁹

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5, 20-21, 48-51, 155-59.

¹⁶ Ezio LEVI, *Poesia di popolo e poesia di corte nel Trecento*, Livorno: Giusti, 1915.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, VII-X.

¹⁸ Alberto FAVARA, *Il canto popolare nell'arte, L'arte musicale*, Palermo 1898, reprinted in: Alberto FAVARA, *Scritti sulla musica popolare siciliana. Con un'appendice di scritti di U. Ometti, C. Bellaigue, E. Romagnoli e A. Della Corte*, ed. by Teresa Samonà Favara, Roma: De Santis, 1959, 13-25.

¹⁹ Sergio BONANZINGA, *Etnografia musicale siciliana*, Palermo: CIMS, 1995 (Suoni e Culture, vol. 1), 26-31.

In the article »Il canto popolare nell'arte« (1898) he sketched an eternal dialectic between popular intuitionism and rational power. These two categories – depicted as the unconscious emotion coinciding with music on the one hand, and the logical process contained in the elitist language on the other – are always in conflict. In his essay, the folk/popular songs shape the 'nation's book' because the spontaneous tunes of the people go on through the epochs. So the abstract rhetoric of the language and the dialect – nourished by onomatopoeic sounds, cries and interjections – are two states of mind preceding history. From this point of view, the dialect is the suitable field for melos, or in other words, it is the leading medium for the authenticity of music. In this kind of nativism, one cannot avoid the evocation of Nietzsche's Dionysian poetic frenzy vs. the Apollonian contemplation of beauty.

From that position, in which the meta-historical dichotomy operates, it is surprising to see the scientific way of tackling the problem of the Sicilian tunes, assembled by the composer and printed posthumously under the title *Corpus di musiche popolari siciliane* (1957).²⁰ Without any evolutionistic implications, Favara recorded more than one thousand entries and compared their variants through the procedure of *hic et nunc*. This cultural bilingualism, unsolvable for scholars imbued with Spencer's and Darwin's ideas, is rightly employed by Favara, uninterested in what concerns the transformation of popular songs during the ages. According to Favara, the scope of ethnomusicology is to explain the circumstances and the modality implying the birth of a song, whose rules remained the same as in Greek lyrics of the pre-classical world. The difficulty in describing the oral transmission in relationship to a doubtful chronology stimulated Favara's anthropological proposal, and he accomplished his survey in the field of synchronicity, because every historical viewpoint embodies all issues in diachronic ranges.

In conclusion, notwithstanding their opposing theories, all of these authors – Nigra, D'Ancona, Chilesotti, Levi and Favara – mystified the roots of popular poetry accompanied by music in order to consolidate the unachieved Italian national identity through linguistic similarities. Because, as it is well known, almost all Italians have remained bilingual up until the present day.

²⁰ Alberto FAVARA, *Corpus di musiche popolari siciliane*, vol. 2, ed. by Ottavio Tiby, Palermo: Accademia di Scienze, Lettere e Arti, 1957.

Sažetak

**Folklorno i narodno kao »nacionalno«:
izum talijanskog jedinstva putem pjesništva i glazbe**

Prije i nakon teritorijalnog ujedinjenja Italije 1861. godine, neki su znanstvenici usredotočili sve svoje napore u unificiranju jezika i kulture u cijeloj zemlji, ne uzimajući u obzir ni unutarnje regionalne podjele ni dijalekte. Istraživanje studija o svjetovnom pjesništvu uz pratnju glazbe pokazalo je da je postojao prijelaz iz istraživačke faze temeljene na regionalnim pjesmama u fazu posvećenu općim pregledima nove države. Tako, na primjer, Costantino Nigra (*La poesia popolare italiana*, 1876) i Alessandro D'Ancona (*La poesia popolare*, 1879) promicala su neke usporedbe među raznim dijalektima i jezicima čije je jedinstvo bilo djelomice temeljeno na srednjovjekovnim strambottima sa jedanaesteračkim stihovima, pjevanima napamet, što su ih izvodili narodski pjevači i dvorski pjesnici u doba srednjega vijeka i renesanse. Unatoč svim dokazima, ovi su intelektualci slijedili trag narodnog strambotta, koji je migrirao od Sicilije do Toskane kao kultivirano pjesništvo onoga doba, učinivši ga temeljem modernog talijanskog jezika Dantea i Petrarce. Nužno je i podsjetiti da su sicilijanski ljudi od pera s dvora Friedricha II. napisali neke pjesme na temelju obrazaca koje su pružili francuski trubaduri, koje su kao prvi prepisali u Bologni i potom u Toskani, potičući na taj način djela velikih toskanskih pjesnika. S obzirom na samostvorenu tradiciju, etnolozi i povjesničari talijanske književnosti naglašavali su ovu paradigmu i pretvorili je u simbol zajedničkog podrijetla talijanskog naroda. Osim komparativne metode koju je ustanovio D'Ancona, Ermolao Rubieri razlikovao je tri smjera u stvaranju narodne pjesme: pjesme koje je narod izmislio za narod kao narodnu razinu, pjesme koje se stvorilo za narod kao popularnu razinu i napokon umjetnički njegovane pjesme koje je narod prihvatio kao drugi tip popularne pjesme (*Storia della poesia popolare*, 1877).

Krajem 19. stoljeća drugi istraživači, na koje je utjecala Nietzscheova i d'Annunziova 'filologija povijesti', odbacili su ove kategorije prihvaćajući teoriju narodnog/popularnog kao nepisane tradicije sadašnjeg i starijih vremena. Ezio Levi prepoznao je korijene talijanskoga duha u usmenim pjesmama i legendama sajamskih opsjenara i svirača, tj. u naslijeđu koje se smatralo oprečnim elitističkoj pisanoj tradiciji dvora i Crkve, koja je predstavljala manjinu (*Poesia di popolo e poesia di corte nel Trecento*, 1915). Istodobno je etnomuzikolog Alberto Favara sakupio na stotine sicilijanskih narodnih tvorevina, odbijajući svaku usporedbu s drugim talijanskim zemljama, jer ga nije zanimala ni historijska rekonstrukcija ni spajanje umjetnički njegovanih i narodnih pjesama (*Il canto popolare nell'arte*, 1898). Polazeći od tog shvaćanja Favara je primijenio sinkroničnu metodu, pokazavši da ne postoje nikakve promjene između prošlosti i sadašnjosti u odnosu na spontano stvaralaštvo narodnih pjesama.