



# Singing out of Other Throats: Performing Corsican Polyphony from the Outside In

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**“SINGING OUT OF OTHER THROATS”:  
PERFORMING CORSICAN POLYPHONY FROM THE OUTSIDE-IN**

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Central to a significant body of Tullia Magrini’s work was an interest in the interrelation between individual and social dimensions of music-making. This essay takes as its starting point some of the issues raised in her paper “From Music-Makers to Virtual Singers,” in which she considers the consequences of the appropriation of “world music” sounds by the music industry and the resultant loss of referentiality as sounds become detached from the musical events that once gave them meaning (Magrini 2000: 322). The way in which “musics that were basically colloquial and connected with specific forms of social interaction are now used to fuel the production of new musical commodities conceived for one-way communication” (ibid.: 323) emerges as a particularly critical concern. “What gets lost,” Tullia argued, “is the possibility of making music as a basic form of being human and experiencing the world, of thinking in sound and giving form to thought through the body, of working out and sharing experience within a social group” (ibid.: 326).

Later in the same paper, Tullia adopts John Blacking's concept of the "sound group" as a useful tool for making sense of the "apparent anarchy" of individual musical choices as "musics coming from the most different places . . . find unexpected new listeners, fans, and sometimes performers in the most unlikely places" (ibid.: 328). Among the various media by which once-local musics have been conveyed to ever more dispersed listeners, festivals have been especially significant in allowing for direct encounters between performers and their new audiences. Workshop culture can be seen as a logical extension of festival culture as participants seek to move beyond observation to direct participation. Corsica is one of the latest recruits to a growing cohort of cultures that now have what we might term empathetic diasporas or loosely affiliated networks of supra-ethnic sound groups that not only listen to but also perform traditional music from cultures other than their own.<sup>1</sup>

This phenomenon raises a number of intriguing questions. What does the performance of music by cultural outsiders say about the relationship between music and identity? What does the experience of learning to sing or play in a style with which one has not grown up reveal about matters of interpretation? To what extent can the adopted style be truly embodied rather than merely imitated? How far might the experiences of the "guest" performers map on to local procedures, conceptualizations, and representations? What might it mean for practitioners and audiences in the home culture to hear their own music reflected back to them by strangers? What is the potential for genuine two-way communication between these two constituencies?

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<sup>1</sup> Balkan music has long been a favorite with choirs and ensembles outside the region. In 2005, Bulgaria's Koprivshitsa festival (attracting 200,000 guests, including 30,000 non-Bulgarians) saw twenty-five foreign groups enter the competitions for performing Bulgarian music and dance.

I wish to explore some of these questions by focusing on a summer camp held in Corsica in 2004. Organized by the Vermont-based association Village Harmony, the three-week session began with a period of intensive learning of multi-part songs from Corsica, Georgia, South Africa, and the American shape note tradition.<sup>2</sup> The group of twenty-plus participants (all but two from North America and approximately half of them high school or college students between the ages of fourteen and twenty) then took to the road to perform a series of nightly concerts in different parts of the island and meet with local singers. The Corsican songs were taught by Benedettu (Benoît) Sarocchi from the village of Rusio, one of the most celebrated strongholds of the island's polyphonic heritage.<sup>3</sup>

Of all the music in the group's program, the Corsican style was the least familiar and the most challenging. The identity of the polyphonic songs preserved in the island's oral tradition lies not only in characteristic sound combinations but also in the very process of musical construction and the social interactions upon which this is built. From an insider perspective, traditional songs – with their elastic rhythms, inflected pitches, and rich melismatic embellishment – are “interpreted” rather than “sung,” with each rendition viewed as a reinterpretation of a model that is never realized in the same way twice. With only one voice to each part, individual singers are expected to develop their own personal style while remaining flexible enough to adapt to their fellow singers, whose vocal

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<sup>2</sup> Village Harmony – which operates as “an umbrella for a range of choral music, world music and harmony singing activities,” with a special interest in polyphonic styles and community singing traditions ([www.villageharmony.org](http://www.villageharmony.org)) – has held similar camps in Bulgaria, Bosnia, the Republic of Georgia, South Africa, and Ghana, as well as in the United States and the United Kingdom.

<sup>3</sup> A former member of the group Voce di Corsica, Sarocchi now has his main base in Paris and fronts his own group, Sarocchi. The Georgian songs were taught by Frank Kane and the South African and shape-note songs by Patty Cuyler.

movements they may come to anticipate intuitively after a long history of singing together. The structure of a performance thus demands a degree of improvisation, but within the bounds of a collectively endorsed and integrated musical grammar.

Tullia Magrini spoke of this type of procedure in terms of “a collective overall plan” or “shared group plan” that “suggests the essential guidelines of the group’s creative and performative activity,” involves “the elements of a system of making music which is open to various configurations,” and determines “the high context situation in which group improvisation may be accomplished” (Magrini 1998: 173). The flexibility inherent in such a system presents obvious challenges for classically trained musicians and others from outside the tradition more accustomed to learning repertory off the page. Jean-Claude Acquaviva of the group A Filetta describes how, during a workshop in Paris, he was demonstrating a particular line from a song and the class complained “but you never do the same thing!” “That’s the very thing you have to learn,” he observes. “You have to learn not to learn things that are fixed. You have to learn more a way of singing than a song” (Acquaviva 2004).

The social dimension goes beyond the project of musical construction, allowing the performative space to function as an arena in which interpersonal relations can be negotiated. Cecce Guironnet comments: “When you sing a *paghjella* [the most common form of polyphonic song] with someone you don’t know, it’s a moment of encounter. . . . It’s a kind of dialogue that generates energy” (Guironnet 2004). The close collaboration necessary for a successful musical interpretation is also responsible for a range of affective qualities that further enhance the sense of togetherness. Ghjiseppu Turchini comments that the sensations the singers experience “are much more than just a musical aesthetic – they’re corporeal, they’re physical because there are

phenomena of vibrations” (Turchini 2004).<sup>4</sup> When the singers are completely in harmony – musically, socially, and with their environment – the experience can assume powerful spiritual and metaphysical dimensions, allowing them to reach an ecstatic or transcendental state typically described in terms of intoxication, taking flight, being “transported” or “going somewhere else.”<sup>5</sup>

The task facing the Village Harmony singers, then, was not so much to learn songs as clearly defined entities but to learn the art of interpretation, including local approaches to ornamentation and improvisation, as well as how to function as part of a collective while taking personal risks – in short, to uncover and cultivate an appropriate “shared group plan.” Caitlin reflects: “It was really different to be singing pieces that were completely unique each time sung. Though we learned the patterns and soon got a hold of it, each group that got up to try would make a completely different song out of it because of their use of ornamentation and rhythm. You really have to put a piece of yourself into it, more so than any style I’ve ever tried before.”<sup>6</sup> For most participants, this was the first time they had encountered a style that they perceived as “highly ornamented.” Combined with “the freewheeling improvisational aspect of the ornamentation,” as one of the group described it, this meant that initially some felt “out on a limb.” Rosa comments: “The improvisation

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<sup>4</sup> The visceral dimension to the way in which sound is experienced is reflected in frequent references to the gut (French *les tripes*; Corsican *i tripi*). One singer of my acquaintance, for example, recalled being told by the old village singers that one should sing “with the guts”; another explained the typically overpowering effect of traditional polyphonic songs on listeners with the remark “it hits them in the gut.”

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the various dimensions of the singing experience alluded to here, see Bithell 2007, chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> Quotes from the Village Harmony singers are drawn from questionnaires distributed to participants on their return home and are used with permission. I have assigned a pseudonym to one respondent who preferred to remain anonymous.

was really difficult for me because the same song could be sung a hundred different ways and the ornamentation seemed to be able to just go on forever when the Corsicans sang.”

Once they had grasped the underlying principles, however, a whole new level of music-making was opened to them, together with a wealth of repertory that did not need to be learned from scratch. Meiling explains: “I liked the mix of such heavy ornamentation and opportunity to improvise combined with a basic format which, once learned, enabled us to sing with many different musicians songs we had never heard.” Charles speaks of the way in which “we were learning how to sing all the songs with the first song he [Benoît] taught, learning what they meant, beyond the words, learning with our ears, minds, and bodies, not just our eyes”.<sup>7</sup>

As they worked intensively in small groups with one voice to a part, the singers acquired the habit of watching one another’s every move and communicating with nods and other gestures, allowing them to coordinate their vocal movements in a way that is developed into a fine art by native singers. Reflecting on the process of “getting to know how the song actually fits together . . . and in general how all three parts move to resolve the phrase,” Anthony comments: “This for me was a bodily thing, after a while it just ‘felt right’; it became something automatic . . . beyond intellect.” Caitlin describes how in one rehearsal with her trio “we were all making adjustments and trying to find the right sound and then it just suddenly happened. We locked in to each other and you could just tell it was all fitting just right. I almost stopped singing because I was so excited by the sound we were creating.” “By the last concerts,” she reports, “we were tight enough to not have any breaks for breath or ornamentation that didn’t fit because we could anticipate what the other person was going to

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<sup>7</sup> Charles is making a comparison here with the experience of simply learning songs from sheet music, hence the reference to the eyes.

do.” Village Harmony co-director and tutor Patty Cuyler reflects: “Singing in a small ensemble when you really know the other singers and the music is very different from choral singing. I think it can be the ultimate in singing experience, approaching a nirvana of sorts – when a group is breathing together, singing through each other, resonating together from some sacred space that is more than the sum of the individuals involved. These are all elements at the core of the delight of singing and listening to Corsican polyphony.”

The theme of music’s power to act as a bridge between cultures emerged in the reflections of many of the Village Harmony campers. As Heidi so vividly expresses it, “Singing the traditional songs of cultures other than our own puts us empathetically in other bodies, looking out of other eyes, singing out of other throats. It helps us to imagine ourselves in other times and places than within the narrow confines of our own life histories.” Anthony shares the sentiment that the group had made real and meaningful contact with their Corsican hosts: “I feel that we met Corsican people in a way that far surpasses any interaction that would have come about by being mere tourists. There was a real sharing and mutual respect that grew from the whole experience.” Heidi continues: “The Corsicans we met and sang for were obviously deeply moved and pleased that we respected and loved their music enough to come to their island and study it, and the Corsican singers who sang for us and with us connected with our group with enormous warmth and generosity. Singing together obviously creates harmony in more than one sense!”

A highlight was the last night in Canari, the village that had been the group’s home for most of their stay. Heidi describes how they gave “a peripatetic, by-popular-demand farewell concert, singing, and dancing from I Fioretti to the Bar des Amis, followed by dozens of our new friends, who were waving, blowing kisses, and singing along.” And Meiling remembers:



“It was like the music sent out a million little streams which found people in their homes and pulled them outside and to us. It was beautiful.”

The notion of musical performance both creating and emerging from a place of empathy occupies a central position in Patty’s thinking: “All those elements necessary to successfully replicating a folk song from a culture outside our own – emulating pronunciation, body stance, cadence, vocal quality – can only come successfully if it comes from a point of open-ness deep inside the singer. . . . This opening up can create a fabulous empathy among the singers. . . . And that empathy in the immediate group tends to extend to the culture from which tradition we are singing. People become eager to hear stories about the music, to place the song in the stream of ancestors from that culture, to play the role of being there.”

There were a number of occasions on which the Village Harmony group were able to experience “authentic” music-making, Corsican-style, both as observers (for example, attending a traditional sung mass or witnessing a group of village men break into song at the bar) and as participants. Another highlight of the tour was an evening spent in Talasani, where the group was joined toward the end of their concert in the village church by their hosts, the group Tavagna. For an hour they traded songs back and forth before moving outside, where they continued to sing together long into the night. Dan comments: “I realized then that I couldn’t ever adequately articulate how special the whole experience was – who ever goes to a country to sing its traditional music in rural hamlets at midnight?”

Most intriguing, perhaps, were moments when the visiting singers appeared to cross the divide and become part of the local scene as viewed by other visitors. Among her most vivid memories of the trip Heidi lists “five of us offering an impromptu ‘Agnus Dei’ in the church of St. Julie in Nonza and being thanked by teary-eyed tourists.”

What, then, did Corsican listeners make of Village Harmony's performances? Certainly the group's spirited renditions and palpable enjoyment of the music were infectious; as each concert unfolded, more and more faces in the audience relaxed into expansive but attentive grins. At the end of the final concert, I exchanged a few words with a group of local residents. The Corsican songs, one enthused, were amazing: "The correct pronunciation and everything – they sang them better than some Corsicans." For one Corsican musician in the audience, this did raise potentially perplexing questions about the relation between musical competence and cultural identity. The fact that strangers could learn to perform the songs so convincingly in such a short time, he mused, threw into relief what Corsicans themselves had to some extent lost. Members of the group Barbara Fortuna reflected in a similar but more optimistic vein, as Heidi reports: "That our traveling there and respecting and loving Corsican traditional music enough to want to learn and perform it validates and encourages them in their own efforts to preserve something that many Corsicans, in their rush to be modern, don't value enough. They seemed sincerely grateful to us for giving them heart in this."

Petru Guelfucci, who as vocal adviser to the island's Centre for Traditional Music also runs workshops for visiting overseas groups, expresses the view that Corsican culture can only be enriched by opening itself to others. He's not worried, he says, about people going away and carrying on singing the songs and maybe changing them a bit. As long as it doesn't impoverish the music in its original locality, why should it be a problem? Frontiers only exist "in the heads of certain politicians . . . music itself travels." It's important to respect the nucleus, he continues, but if the

songs evolve further, “so much the better – that’s the richness of it all” (Guelfucci 2004).<sup>8</sup>

As far as processes of globalization and the concomitant problems of music’s increasing dislocation from its source are concerned, Village Harmony’s Corsican adventure bears witness to an active interest in traditional, participatory, everyday forms of music-making as much as in the newer, technologically enhanced styles promoted by the world-music industry – an interest that is comparatively benign and that offers greater opportunities for direct human encounter between ordinary people, not just “stars” engaged in fusion-type projects. It suggests the possibility of a meeting of hearts and minds that crosses ethnic and geographical boundaries and transcends conventional notions of consumerism and tourism – a meeting that nonetheless demands significant investments of time, money, and energy by the visiting party and a warm reception by the host culture, both inspired by curiosity and respect. It also reminds us that what may be seen as appropriation does not necessarily imply a one-way process. Timothy Rice alludes to Ricoeur’s notion of appropriation “ceas[ing] to appear as a kind of possession” and instead implying “a moment of dispossession of the narcissistic ego” (Rice 1994: 5; citation from Ricoeur 1981: 192–93), through which the individual experiences a new way of “being-in-the-world” (Rice 1994, with reference to Heidegger). Such moments emerge clearly in the responses of the Village Harmony campers. At the same time, by “being there” the visiting singers were able to enter into meaningful and cherished exchanges with local people.

Several of my respondents spoke of the profound sense of privilege they felt at being granted such intimate access to another culture. As Ellen

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<sup>8</sup> While it may be seen to relate to post-nationalist discourses of global harmony, Guelfucci’s position is also in line with the policies of the Corsican Assembly with their emphasis on the need for Corsica to “open up” to the outside world via a process of “encounter” and “exchange.”

expresses it: “The massive wealth of musical knowledge that we as humans share should be given and accepted as precious gifts, and as a source of essential nourishment for the mind and the heart. To actually perform the music of other cultures is a huge privilege never to be taken lightly or for granted.”<sup>9</sup>

Of course not all of the workshop participants will maintain life-long connections with Corsica. In future years, many of them will choose a different camp in Bosnia, Georgia, or Ghana, while new faces will arrive in Corsica. But some will no doubt return further to deepen their knowledge of the island’s culture; some may help secure invitations for one or other of the Corsican groups they met to tour to their own country; and some of the more seasoned singers will continue to include Corsican songs in their own performances, at which point they will begin to take on a life of their own – in a way not too dissimilar from the Georgian songs now included in the programs of many Corsican groups, learned from the ensembles who regularly appear at the island’s annual festival of polyphony and in some cases from visits to Georgia itself. The fact remains, however, that what has been learned is not just a new cache of songs. It is a new way of using the voice, of embodying a musical grammar, of daring to give something of oneself, of relating to others through sound, of reaching an understanding of what those sounds mean in local contexts, of how they weave a thread from past to future; it is a new way of being in the world, of reassessing

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<sup>9</sup> Some of the Village Harmony singers did feel uncomfortable about certain aspects of the enterprise. For Clara, for example, “it always felt a little strange to be performing Corsican music that we had only learned two weeks earlier to people who had been singing it their entire lives,” while several of the girls felt self-conscious about performing songs that were normally the preserve of Corsican men. Clearly, initiatives such as the one described here raise many more issues than can be addressed in the space currently available. Other aspects are explored in Bithell 2005 and in work in progress.

one's own identity, of exploring the complexities of other identities, of expanding one's understanding of culture and history; it is a way of building bridges, of nurturing empathy, of sharing simple pleasures. Above all it is a chord of optimism. Music is not irredeemably condemned to become a mere commodity simply because it is admired, appropriated, or embraced by others.

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