

## Neapolitan Music: When a Local Tradition Becomes a Global Issue

Marina `Melchionda (March 18, 2009)



The conference “Neapolitan Postcards. The Canzone Napoletana as Transnational Subject”. Interviews with Joseph Sciorra, the main organizer of the symposium

What are postcards? Maybe we could define them as eternal shots of a faraway place that help us remember its beauty and keep the fog away from its defined shapes. They are portraits of memories, tributes to a lost beauty, romantic images, bookmarks to have at hand when turning the page and starting a new day.

We send postcards to friends and relatives, lovers and colleagues, mothers and children, to share a wonderful experience in some exotic place with them, a touching thought or unexpected sensations and emotions. Or maybe we buy postcards for ourselves, to keep them with the pictures of the trip. Or, finally, we might also purchase some, or even only one, of our own birthplace or hometown to carry it with us wherever we go, just to keep in mind that “there’s no place like home”.

Sometimes we just need to touch it and see it, to feel the stiffened paper under wrinkled fingertips and look at melancholically delineated landscapes.

As Neapolitans, we stop and look at the image of a splendid seashore and we miss Sorrento “Ma nun me lassa’, Nun darne stu turmiento! Torna a surruento, Famme campà” (Then say not “goodbye”, Come back again, beloved! Come back to Sorrento, or I must die); or we could meet a girl and think she is just like the one we left back in Italy, the one to whom we dedicated “Anema ‘e core”,

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“Tenímmoce accussí: ánema e core...nun ce lassammo cchiù, manco pe' n'ora... stu desiderio 'e te mme fa paura... Campá cu te, sempe cu te, pe' nun murí...” (Hug me tight, with your soul and heart; don't ever leave me behind, not even for an hour; this desire I have of you scares me; I want to live with you, always with you, don't let me die”.)

These images, sounds and notes accompanied Neapolitan peasants and proletarians since the very beginning of the 19th century, when they first emigrated to the United States in search of better fortune. They filled their cardboard suitcases with hundreds of postcards, each one a thought and a piece of their soul. They built their new lives on this fragile and at the same time solid basis, managing to mix past and future by creating a present founded on a brand new bicultural identity, the Neapolitan-American one.

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The symposium “Neapolitan Postcards. The Canzone Napoletana as Transnational Subject” aims to study and reflect on the way Neapolitan music has contributed to the integration of people coming from that area of Southern Italy to the United States. Exploring its contents, analyzing its features, analysts realize that it has represented both a strong bond to Naples but also a spur, an injection of courage that drove these people away. Although typically Mediterranean in rhythm, music and sound, in fact, these songs talk about universal themes such as love, friendship and family. And they can be translated in every possible corner of the world.

The Conference, scheduled for March 20th-21st, will be held at the Calandra Italian American Institute/Queens College and at the CUNY Graduate Center. Sponsored by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College, CUNY, USA, and the International Centre for Music Studies, Newcastle University, UK, and organized in collaboration with the Archivio Sonoro della Canzone Napoletana, RAI, Italy, it will feature the presence of some of the highest experts on the subject who will involve the public in a long voyage through the story of this gender. Musical performances and film screenings will be proposed between a session and another, with the aim of embracing the theme from the widest point of view possible.

i-Italy interviewed one of its most active organizers, Joseph Sciorra, the Associate Director for Academic & Cultural Programs at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College (CUNY) and a graduate of University of Pennsylvania. We talked about his relationship with Neapolitan music, the Conference and the essays he is going to present for the occasion.

Mr.Sciorra, how did you come up with the idea of the Conference?

The idea has been bubbling in my head for a couple of years now but as grown primarily talking to what I call “community scholars” who live here and have an incredible knowledge of the history of Neapolitan music in the United States. Among them, the late Luigi Rossi, who ran “Rossi & Co.” on the corner of Mulberry and Grand Street. He was a major player and seller of Neapolitan music here in the US; Mark Pezzano, who now performs Italian and Neapolitan pieces from the 1920s and '30 and is incredibly knowledgeable about Neapolitan composers, singers and recording companies. Talking with them over the years has helped me understand the history of that music. Many scholars are also starting their studies in this area. I am thinking in particular of Simona Frasca, who is doing a lot of research on Neapolitan music in the United States before World War II. So, being in constant conversation with her and her colleges, I wanted to organize a conference that could involve all those interested in the subject. This event thus becomes a vehicle that researchers can use to finish the work they might be just thinking about.

What is your personal experience with Neapolitan music?

I didn't like Neapolitan music at all. As a child it made me think of Italian weddings, places and celebrations to which I was not interested in going. Especially in New York, moreover, it was performed in a highly orchestrated way, the singing style was somehow bombastic and over-the-top. Singers like Jerry Vale and Jimmy Roselli were indeed very far from the world of a post-Beatles kid! Plus I did not understand the lyrics of the songs, first because I was not paying attention to them and second because they were in Neapolitan. So this really kept me from becoming knowledgeable on



the issue.

Did your visit to Italy in 1975 change your inclination towards the genre?

Not at all. I had the opportunity to meet many Italian singers and composers and appreciated their work, but Neapolitan tradition never attracted me too much. Things started to change as time passed by: I came to understand the different types of singing styles, the different performers and their own styles, the history of the genre, the themes of the songs: this allowed me to appreciate it much more. Today I listen to both old and new Neapolitan authors, and I am also becoming familiar with a couple of neomelodici such as Nino d'Angelo and Gigi Finizio.

Do you think Neapolitan music reflects some of the characteristics of the native people of the area?

There are certain issues that are certainly specific to that particular society, or even to just a piece of it, and this is also because these songs are generally, or totally, sung in Neapolitan dialect. However I believe that from the beginning of the XXI century on, some of the production refers and wants to reach a much wider public. Songs like "Core 'ngrato" or "O sole mio" and "Santa Lucia" just conquered the American public who in most cases did not understand the lyrics at all but bought that music, the piano rolls, the sheet music, and played it.

Why is that so?

There are a couple of reasons to explain the phenomenon. The first is an historical one, and comes from the fact that for a great period Naples was somehow considered the capital of Southern Italy under the reign of the Bourbons. Neapolitan thus became a sort of lingua franca and immigrants who came here from whichever corner of that area, understood and knew those songs and spread them. Plus, during the 19th century Neapolitan theatrical culture became very powerful in the United States, and achieved a sort of hegemony in cultural production, in New York City in particular. There was also other traditional musical compositions coming from other areas of Italy, Sicily for example. But only in the case of Naples did we have great writers and poets putting down verses and translating them into beautiful songs. Just think of Gabriele d'Annunzio or Caruso. There was an international level of success that transcended the limits of a local culture.

This said, would you state that it is folk music?

I really cannot answer. While I just said that Neapolitan music is made of art songs, produced by poets recognized the world over, on the other hand, some of the rhythms may be considered typically folkloristic. If ever, I would prefer to define it as popular music, the result of a flow going on between the upper and lower classes.

One of the essays you will present at the conference is entitled: "Hybrid Formations in sound"...

Yes I chose to talk about this because I think that Neapolitan music is itself a sort of mixture of Hybridic sounds and identities. I believe that looking at it from this particular point of view makes it much more interesting and respects the real nature of the genre. From this perspective, Neapolitan music can be considered a clear example of globalism in the XIX century: when Neapolitans came to America, they kept their relationship with Naples strong and alive. There were also in constant conversation with other small neighborhoods in Montreal and Buenos Aires, where their co-citizens lived. Artists like Gilda Mignonette arrived in New York on a ship and then sailed around the world, exporting Neapolitan music and getting inspiration from places like Argentina, London, Europe. Thanks to people like her we are finding parts of Italian-American movies in Buenos Aires, as well as Neapolitan and Italian-American music archives in Montreal. These artists started an international flow that today is transforming into a transnational one.

[2]

The second essay you will present is named: "Mediated Renderings and Diasporic Musings: "Core



'ngrato," a WOP Song". You know that WOP comes from "guappo" an appellation also used to refer to Camorra people. What is the point you want to make?

I am looking at the word "wop" from two perspectives. I don't subscribe to the first because it is the American interpretation of it. It means "without papers" and refers to the fact that when Italians came to America they had no legal permission to remain here. This shows how Italians were looked at between the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX. When I think of that song, however, the first thing that comes to my mind is that it is maybe the only famous Neapolitan piece written in New York and sung for the first time in New Jersey (by Caruso). Only after that, the song was brought to Naples. For a moment it "lost its papers" and became transnational.

Anyway it remained a WOP, a Neapolitan song. It had been conceived for and by the people that came from that land. It might not be a "Made in Naples" product, but a "Made by Naples" one for sure.

The song has been sung by innumerable performers and artists and also used as a song track for the last episode of the third season of "The Sopranos". The character Uncle Junior performs at a restaurant after a funeral. The sentimentality of that song in the mouth of a Mafioso to me opens up the possibility to discover it in ways that had not been considered in the past. I will try to explain my point! My research, by the way, made me develop an special bond with that song. In my i-phone I have at least five versions of it and I can't decide which one I like the best!

What future can we imagine for the Neapolitan song?

I think that people are rediscovering the genre, as part of their original culture. This also happens in America and involves the youngest generations too. So I am kind of optimistic.

I can't wait to hear what my colleges think about this. At the end of the conference we will present a final document in which we will draft our impression to this regard. We will see....

## CONFERENCE PROGRAM

THURSDAY, MARCH 19, 2009, 6PM

John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, 25 West 43rd Street, 17th floor, Manhattan (between 5th and 6th Avenues)

Welcome and Reception

ANTHONY JULIAN TAMBURRI

John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College, CUNY

JAMES MUYSKENS

Queens College, CUNY

MAURIZIO ANTONINI

Consulate General of Italy in New York

JOSEPH SCIORRA

John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College, CUNY

GOFFREDO PLASTINO

The International Centre for Music Studies, University of Newcastle

PAQUITO DEL BOSCO

Archivio Sonoro della Canzone Napoletana (RAI)

Film Screening

Closing Time: Storia di un negozio (2006), 30 min.



VERONICA DIAFERIA, director

FRIDAY, MARCH 20, 2009

CUNY Graduate Center, Elebash Recital Hall, 365 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan (between 34th and 35th Streets)

10-11:30AM

THE COMPOSER AND SINGER IN CONTEXT

Chair: GOFFREDO PLASTINO, University of Newcastle

Francesco Pennino and the Italian-American Sceneggiata

GIULIANA MUSCIO, University of Padua

Enrico Caruso and the Emergency of Italian Identity

SIMONA FRASCA, Federico II, University of Naples

The Musical and Literary Neapolitan Chant: The Songs of Aurelio Fierro

GIULIA GUARNIERI, Bronx Community College, CUNY

11:45AM -1PM

RITA BERTI: A NEAPOLITAN SINGER IN NEW YORK

Chair: Joseph Sciorra, John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, CUNY

In this panel, Ms. Berti will discuss her long career and present a recital of Neapolitan music. She will be accompanied by Emilio Morelli.

1-2:30PM

Lunch on your own

2:30-4PM

TEMPORAL/SPATIAL CONSIDERATIONS OF THE SONG

Chair: EDWARD SMALDONE, Queens College, CUNY

Mediated Renderings and Diasporic Musings: "Core 'ngrato," a WOP Song

JOSEPH SCIORRA, John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, CUNY

"Maria Mari"/"Oh, Marie": Acculturation from Neapolitan Song to Italian-American Jazz

SAMUEL PATTI, Independent Scholar

"Tammurriata Nera": Collective Memory, Recuperation, and Contamination in a Neapolitan Song

JENNIFER CAPUTO, University of Alabama

4:15-5:45PM

CULTURAL POLITICS AND THE ECONOMICS OF CULTURE

Chair: JAYSON KERR DOBNEY, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Tears and Triumphs: Five Topical Songs in Neapolitan from the United States, 1923-1941

MARK PEZZANO, Independent Scholar

The Neapolitan Mandolin and Italian Music Publishing Houses in New York City during the Early Twentieth Century

JOHN LA BARBERA, Bergen Community College

Alternative Musics and Alternative Economies in Naples

JASON PINE, Purchase College, SUNY

SATURDAY, MARCH 21, 2009

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CUNY Graduate Center, Elebash Recital Hall, 365 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan (between 34th and 35th Streets)

9:30-9:50AM

Napoli International (delivered in Italian)

PAQUITO DEL BOSCO, Archivio Sonoro della Canzone Napoletana

10-10:30AM

Neapolitan Heart (2002), 30 min. excerpt

PAOLO SANTONI, director

10:45AM-12PM

PERFORMING/SCREENING IDENTITIES

Chair: ANTHONY JULIAN TAMBURRI, John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, CUNY

Italian Immigrant Identity in American Sceneggiata Performances

ALAINA WISSNER, Brandeis University

You Can Go Home Again: Santa Lucia Luntana, the Film

GIORGIO BERTELLINI, University of Michigan

12-1:30PM

Lunch on your own

1:30-2:30PM

NEAPOLITAN JUKEBOX

Chair: GOFFREDO PLASTINO, Newcastle University

Paquito Del Bosco presents selections from the Archivio Storico della Canzone Napoletana of Neapolitan songs performed by recording artists from around the world.

2:45-3:45PM

HYBRIDIC FORMATIONS IN SOUND

Chair: JOSEPH SCIORRA, John D. Calandra Italian American Insititute, CUNY

From Canzone Napoletana to Tango Criollo

ANA CARA, Oberlin College

Returning to Sorrento: Diasporic Hybridity in Italian-American Popular Music

JIM DE FAZIO, Arizona State University in Tempe

4-5:15PM

KEYNOTE

Tutta n'ata storia: Authenticity and Otherness in the Neapolitan Song Canon

GOFFREDO PLASTINO, University of Newcastle

All presentations are free and open to the public.

SEATING IS LIMITED.

In conjunction with the "Neapolitan Postcards" conference, the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute presents "Chist'è New York: The Mark Pezzano Collection of Neapolitan Sheet Music from New York" in its 43rd Street gallery space (March 19-June 26). The exhibition is a sampling of New York City's vibrant Neapolitan music scene during the first half of the twentieth century. It features thirty-one items— sheet music, sceneggiata scripts, and concert programs— that connoisseur Mark Pezzano has collected over the past thirty years. Eduardo "Farfariello" Migliaccio, Gilda Mignonette, Francesco Pennino, and Clara Stella are among the celebrated composers, performers, and publishers represented in the exhibit.



Opening reception: Thursday, March 19, 2009 at 6pm  
Gallery hours: Monday-Friday, 10am-4pm

John D. Calandra Italian American Institute  
25 West 43rd Street, 17th Floor  
New York, NY 10036  
(between 5th and 6th Avenues)

For further information, visit the Calandra Institute's Web site [www.qc.edu/calandra](http://www.qc.edu/calandra) [3] or call (212) 642-2094.

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- [2] <http://www.i-italy.org/multimedia/facts-stories/singing-neapolitan>
- [3] [denied:x-msg://4/www.qc.edu/calandra](http://www.qc.edu/calandra)