



“SENTITE CHE VE DICE ER SOR CAPANNA” THE LAST STREET SINGER IN ROME

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, before the birth of the record industry, street musicians helped modern song find its way to popularity: in Naples and Rome, as *posteggiatori*, they went around restaurants and other public places singing the songs written by a new generation of professional songwriters. Not all of them, though, lent themselves to making late-Romantic middle-class taste for new songs hegemonic: Pietro Capanna, “Sor Capanna” as they called him, was a singer and guitar player who lived and worked in Rome all his life. Hidden behind big black sunglasses, always at the street corners of his city, Capanna used to sing the *stornelli*¹ he himself composed about political and current events often beginning with the line “Sentite che ve dice er Sor Capanna” (“Hear what Mister Capanna is saying to you”). During his performances he sold broadsides of his songs which constantly satirised power and railed against the morals of society. For such a reason he was sometimes in trouble with the law but never bowed to the pressure of authorities: quite a peculiar combination of artistic autonomy and adhesion to traditional values, as he often adopted a conservative attitude. Although very famous and successful – the great actor and playwright Ettore Petrolini used to sing Capanna’s *stornelli* in his own shows – Capanna died in abject poverty in 1921.

We do not really know much about Capanna, as there are no recordings and his name is still surrounded in a shroud of myth. It is possible, though, to address his repertoire and legacy, sketching at least a portrait of this extraordinary artist, certainly the last traditional street singer and storyteller to have performed in Rome. I will look at Sor Capanna’s life and activities, at his fame and fortune, and at some of his controversial political stances, when Italy was a young country heading towards the First World War and fascism.

¹ A genre of folksongs of the Central Italy consisting of three lines, mainly improvised, the first of five syllables and the second and third of eleven syllables, the third rhyming with the first, the second only in consonance with it.

An anonymous square on the outskirts of Rome: this is what the Eternal City has dedicated to one of the most idiosyncratic musical artists it has ever had: “Sor Capanna,” né Pietro Capanna. It is something at least, as Sor Capanna is largely ignored or forgotten today. Those who know of him generally associate his name with the above-mentioned *posteggiatori*, the itinerant musicians, mostly Neapolitans, who, before the birth of the record industry at the beginning of the twentieth century, gave an essential contribution to the spreading of modern song. The *posteggiatori* went around restaurants and other public places singing mostly songs written by a new generation of professional songwriters, songs that would become the musical trademark of the middle-class brought forward by the unification of Italy. It is an inappropriate assimilation, though, because, as far as we know, Sor Capanna did not sing those modern songs, but rather the old urban repertoires, which it is necessary to briefly describe.

The new songs, in fact, marked a turning point from these previous urban repertoires, still filled with a folkloric mood in terms of content and form. The old songs were modular, with interchangeable verses each of which could come in virtually any order, or just be left out. They could sometimes be very long and often ended with a final couplet, while the new songs had a recurring refrain, which would become “the pivot of every song,” as the Neapolitan poet Salvatore Di Giacomo used to say². The contents were different too, as the new songs were more inclined towards a late Romantic imagery than the old ones and dealt with the symbolic world of the lower classes and their needs. Such a symbolic world also included social criticism, satire, and political commentary, that is to say a tradition expressed in Rome, as it still is sometimes, by the so-called “talking statues,”. These were ancient busts, still now located in various spots around the city centre (the most famous one being “Pasquino”, near Piazza Navona). People used to hang unsigned posters with poems made up of astute observations on events which happened in the city with sarcastic remarks on the misbehaviour of cardinals and popes, and ruthless complaints about the way power was used. At first, one might think of Sor Capanna as continuing this trend, but there is a difference: Capanna was a folksinger and a singer-songwriter: he sang his songs, and played them on the guitar; he did not write poems.

Sor Capanna was born in Rome in 1865 in what used to be a country lane, but is now a street full of buildings and cars, in Trastevere, still considered one of the most traditional areas of the city. He lost his sight, almost totally, from a conjunctivitis contracted when he was young and worked in a candle factory. Because of this, he always wore dark spectacles. After a few odd jobs he decided to try to make ends meet by singing in the streets, putting on his own itinerant show with a small company of artists going around on a horse-drawn cart, always dressing in his typical outfit: a dark jacket together with a dark tie, a bowler and, of course, his dark spectacles. He could perform many

² In the refrain of his classic *Canzone a Chiarastella* (Di Giacomo-Falvo 1912).

different kinds of songs but, it seems, he mainly used the *stornello*, the typical song-form of Central Italy that he slightly modified. Capanna's *stornelli* were of two types, one made of two verses (the first of eleven syllables, with alternate rhymes, the second with the first two couplets of 8 syllables, the third line of five syllables, and the last two of eleven syllables, with rhyming couplets). The other, called *bombacè*, was made of two lines of seven syllables, with the first one repeated; both these *stornelli* had a final, sarcastic, gag. The music of these two kinds of songs are supposed to derive from pre-existing melodies. The first may have its roots in a "novina," written by Saint Alfonso de' Liguori, a seventeenth-century Catholic bishop-musician and poet, the other probably derived from a soldier's song of the First World War.

Together with *stornelli*, Capanna used to sing "ballads," in which he dealt with daily happenings in Rome and in Italy, targeting politicians' faults and abuse of power, scandals, and corruption, which took place in the years following the Unification of the country. He had problems with censorship; his guitar was sequestered and he was under arrest, on one occasion, for some verses against Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti, sung during a performance held at the Ambra Jovinelli theatre. In spite of all this, though, not all of his lyrics were necessarily "progressive," because being a folksinger does not mean automatically being on the side of emancipation. Organised workers, homosexuals, and women, for example, suffered Capanna's arrows, arrows often amply dipped into a well of indifference and cynicism. His political position, therefore, if indeed he had any, was ambiguous; his criticism of power went hand in hand with nationalism, social commentary with a derision of any kind of political antagonism. In the last verse of a song composed by Ettore Petrolini, who declared Capanna his master, Petrolini has him say:

*Appena incominciò l'inno reale
La gente der teatro s'arzò in piedi
Sortanto Giovannino lo speciale
Essendo un sovversivo restò a sede'
Tutti dissero "alla porta"
Lui disse "che m'importa! Conservo l'ideale ner sedere."³
(original lyrics in Roman dialect)*

When they played the Royal Hymn,
People in the theatre stood up
Only Giovannino the apothecary,
Being a subversive, sat down
Everybody said: "get him out of here!"
"What do I care? I'm pleased," he said,
"My ideas, I've got them in my bottom." (my translation)

³ It is possible to listen to this song on YouTube (Ettore Petrolini, *Dediche a Roma – Er Sor Capanna*) at minute 2'20.

This attitude was, in any case, quite common in Italian popular music at the turn of the century: all the forms of popular shows in the music business had a reactionary side, probably the product of formal school education which actively favoured the unified state.

Capanna was enormously successful, but he never got rich. Once he was convinced by Petrolini to join him in one of his shows in a theatre, but he was not born to be a star of the music business. In 1921, while performing in a corner of Parliament square, in Rome, he felt sick and was brought to the hospital ward of the poor, in the polyclinic of the city, where he died. He was just 56 and almost everything belonging to him, which could have helped us to better know this unique man, was dispersed by his family. Capanna represents a kind of musician that does not, and could not, exist today. He was a lower class man who had to scrape a living every day and was never to be assimilated by the music industry.

Capanna was brought up and educated in a chauvinist society by which he was certainly affected, but his derisive laugh, his vitriolic outlook on the world around him, even in its contradictions, is a demonstration of his intellectual independence and indeed he never took any advantage from what he said. Musically speaking, he was a link between the traditional way of making folk-songs and the new songwriting taking place in his own times. The very fact that Petrolini – one of the most influential Italian musical artists of the last century – kept him in high regard is significant. In the 1960s, an American sculptor, Harry Jackson, made a statue of Sor Capanna which was installed in a public square in Trastevere. The City Council, though, wanted it to be removed. It is now in a restaurant called Meo Patacca, in the same area.

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