

Giovanni Vacca

Songs and the City:
Itinerant Musicians as
Living 'Song Libraries' at the
Beginning of the 20th Century
in Naples: the *Posteggiatori*

Who were the *posteggiatori*? Where did these ‘missionaries of the song’, as once defined (Narciso 1929: 67), come from? According to different scholars, they were the heirs of those folksingers, often blind, mentioned by some writers of the vernacular Neapolitan literature of the past centuries: Giambattista Basile, for example, or Giulio Cesare Cortese.¹ These folksingers (we know of Masto Ruggiero and Velardiniello, of Sbruffapappa and Giovanni Della Carriola, among the others) were travelling musicians who sang folk songs in taverns and in the streets, and whose performing style was also described in great detail by the above-mentioned authors. Such musicians, though, already active in the 16th and 17th century, could more aptly be ascribed to a line of urban ‘bards’, whose repertoire was mainly made of tarantellas, serenades, barcarolas,² satirical songs and political chants of oral tradition: repertoires which, at least partially, would later circulate on what in English are called ‘broadsides’. That is to say, as the folk song historian A. L. Lloyd defined them, ‘song – and – ballad texts in the form of street literature’ (Lloyd 1978: 15). The *posteggiatori*, on the contrary, appeared at the end of the 19th century and they were, more likely, the product of a change in the way of making music in Naples. In a situation where the music industry was just at the beginning, they worked as music ‘journeymen’, being the main popularizers of what was going to become the Neapolitan song, a new repertoire composed by professional musicians like Francesco Paolo Tosti or Enrico De Leva and well-read poets like Salvatore Di Giacomo, Ferdinando Russo, Libero Bovio and Ernesto Murolo.

The *posteggiatori*, recruited by music publishers and sometimes by the same songwriters, certainly performed in the streets, like the old bards, but also in restaurants, at marriages, at family parties, in theatres, in hotels, in *café-chantant* and in bathhouses. Coming from the low classes, they were able to communicate effectively with the ordinary people, filtering the new ‘educated’ songs through the various urban folk intonations. Such a mediation, an early example of ‘transculturalism’, found a compromise precisely in the singing style, a style that inherited the grace, the ornamentations and the impersonal performing attitude of Pezillo and Velardiniello: a style identified, described

1 Giambattista Basile (1566-1632) and Giulio Cesare Cortese (1570-1640) were two Neapolitan writers: their work drew much inspiration from local folklore. Basile was the author of a world famous book of fairy tales, *Lo cunto de li cunti*, also known as *Il Pentamerone* (1982). Cf. also the English edition, *The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones*, published by Wayne State University Press in 2007) Cortese wrote several books of poetry. In his *Viaggio del Parnaso* (1621), the popular Neapolitan mask of Pulcinella is mentioned for the first time.

2 Repertoire of songs generally performed by boatmen and gondoliers.

and celebrated since the 16th and the 17th century by the Neapolitan writers mentioned above.³ It was an alienated, epic, 'urban' style, far from the strained, tiring way of singing of the ritual folk tradition of Southern Italy, and peculiarly suitable for what was the more 'measured', bourgeois, confidential tone now requested by the Neapolitan song. The Neapolitan song, in fact, was actually conceived as an 'art song' and it was created as an intentional cultural output by an emergent middle class which meant to do away with the old picture of Naples as a plethoric *ancien régime* city and its widespread image of a plebeian metropolis. The creation of the modern Neapolitan song must then be set into the context of a more general social and cultural mutation of the city itself, from ancient capital of the Kingdom of Naples to subordinate city in the unified Italian state.

Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Naples underwent a large urban reorganization: the big port area was almost completely pulled down to be rebuilt according to bourgeois aesthetic criteria, and the living folk culture, which was ingrained in that area, was dispersed. It was mostly in these districts, at the pier for example, that minstrels, jugglers, peddlers, street artists and, of course, itinerant folksingers played the old traditional songs.⁴ The *posteggiatori* inherited part of these repertoires and mixed them with the new songs, churned out by what was becoming a real music-making machine. A 'machine' which was supported by the newborn cultural industry with its magazines pumping out the hits, its music scores sold at street corners, its song contests (the local Piedigrotta Festival, an annual competition for launching new songs) and the institutions of the *belle époque* age (the *café-chantant* and the theatres). Later on, the birth of the records and of the cinema will give the Neapolitan song the final boost. Getting rid of the traditional subjects of the old folk songs (legends, mythical subjects), as well as of those of the more recent urban songs developed among artisans and in the student milieu (which mainly dealt with current events, funny characters of the city life, trades, pedlars' cries), a late Romantic aesthetics displaced a now obsolete pack of images, providing a new imagery to the whole population of the city with the help of a

3 The Neapolitan singing style was prized, even before than Basile and Cortese, by Gioan Battista Del Tufo (1548-1600) in his *Ritratto o modello delle grandezze, delizie e meraviglie della nobilissima città di Napoli* (2007, from a manuscript dated 1588).

4 Among the itinerant musicians there were also the so-called 'viggianesi', mainly coming from Viggiano (in the Basilicata region), who gained a reputation as harp players, especially abroad, and performed opera pieces too cf. Zucchi (1999).

a historian of the Neapolitan song, describes the style of Elvira Donnarumma, a popular performer of the beginning of the century:

Just when the orchestra started, her face was already moving, anticipating the words and the music. Between her eyes and her mouth forms of interpretations came to life and were immediately communicated to the audience, needing nothing else, neither light nor stage.

Her gestures accompanied the singing with physical adherence which conceded nothing to reasoning and just followed unbridled the urge of a feeling which had to be immediately expressed, communicated to those who were there to listen to her (De Mura 1969, II: 136-138).⁷

With the burst of the music industry concerned with the Neapolitan song the *posteggiatori* did not disappear but they became marginal, as they were superseded by Music Hall stars like Elvira Donnarumma and Gennaro Pasquariello or by opera singers, who often liked to sing Neapolitan songs (and it seems that Enrico Caruso too started as a *posteggiatore* when he was very young). Their epic style, though, was not only typical of the Italian folk tradition. This is how A.L. Lloyd describes the way of singing folk songs in the British Isles:

To vary the psychological climate he would not as a rule put drama and pathos into his voice (though in fact the 'showman' singer is not such a rarity in tradition as some make out); more likely he would convey the mood of the song by a small alteration of pace, a slight change of vocal timbre, an almost imperceptible pressing or lightening of rhythm, and by nuances of ornament that our folklorists, with the exception of Percy Grainger, have consistently neglected (Lloyd 1967: 78).

Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, on the other hand, in their book *The Popular Arts*, tell us how the advent of the Music Hall changed all that: the community had become an audience and art had been individualized (Hall and Whannel 1964).

The *posteggiatori* were distinguished into proper *posteggiatori* (music 'journeymen', working for tips, '*chetta*') and *gavottisti* (musicians hired by cafés and restaurant and getting a fixed income). Their ensemble included guitar, violin, and, sometimes, a low flugelhorn, and divided their song, basically, into *canzoni di strumenti* (sentimental songs) and *canzoni a grosse tammore* (rhythmic songs). They called themselves 'professors' and, as any close-knit group, they spoke their own jargon (*parlesia*) not to be understood by strang-

7 My translation.

ers (Greco 1997). The name *posteggiatore* comes from *posteggia* (or *pusteggia*). The Altamura Neapolitan Dialectal Dictionary, in this regard, says: 'Pusteggia: itinerant little ensemble; place where the ensemble performs' (Altamura 1968: 254).⁸ Giovanni Artieri, who wrote a book about the *posteggiatori*, adds:

It is right, but it is not all; because *posteggia* is also the place, the *square*, of the musical ensemble; it is also the performance itself; it is also the time between one *chetta* (questing) and another. That is to say between a questing tour in the audience and another (Artieri 1961: 10).⁹

Probably, as Attilio Margheron, a now dead old singer of Neapolitan songs once told me, the name just comes from 'place': 'they were called *posteggiatori* because they went from place to place'.

As they came from the folk tradition, and they were able to memorize easily new songs, they were much sought-after by music entrepreneurs, who could utilize them to produce records quickly and to market the new songs together with some of the old ones, which still had, in the low classes, an audience of potential record buyers. In some way, so, they really acted as living 'song libraries'. The song *Coppola Rossa*, for example, comes from the old tradition: it is a song of the underworld, performed by one the most important *posteggiatori*, Pietro Mazzone, who recorded it in 1910.¹⁰ In this song, like in many old songs, he uses the same melody and the same chords for all the stanzas; the scale is the Lydian mode.

If compared with '*O marennariello*, a 'classic' Neapolitan song performed in the same year by the same musician,¹¹ it is possible to remark the difference in form and content (distinction between verse in minor and chorus in major, as in many other Neapolitan songs, tonal structure, more articulated and 'cantabile' melody).

The words of the last song were in the beginning written by Diodato Del Gaizo, a poor, illiterate, travelling performer who wrote lyrics for songs often with open erotic references, something quite common in the folk music of Southern Italy. The words were later changed, though, with new lyrics (composed by another songwriter, Gennaro Ottaviano) more 'acceptable' for the

8 My translation.

9 My translation.

10 Cf. *Pietro Mazzone*, Phonotype Record, Napoli, serie storica cd 0133 cel, c&p 2001.

11 Cf. *Pietro Mazzone*, Phonotype Record, Napoli, serie storica cd 0133 cel, c&p 2001.

necessities of the new Neapolitan song: Del Gaizo sued the publisher of the song but he lost the trial, died in misery and was buried in a common ossuary. The reason was certainly that the words of a song had now to fulfil the new 'Order of Discourse', romantic and polite, in line with the new image of the city being built. The lyrics of the new songs, in short, broke up an old popular vision of the world, with its symbols and its references to folklore, and introduced a new perception of the city itself. A city idealized in its natural beauties, with its gulf, its sky, its panoramic scenarios, in a nostalgic mood fit to regroup the different sections of the Neapolitan society into a whole and give a new representation of the Neapolitans in Italy and abroad.

If 'transculturalism' is meant today as a paradigm of borderless traditions, 'a consequence of the *inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures*', to use the words of Wolfgang Welsch,¹² the *posteggiatori* are exactly what we need to understand this process at the beginning of the mass culture era. Characterized by the intertwinement and interaction of different traditions, stretched between an ancient folk language and the necessities of an epochal mutation, they placed themselves as far as possible from any kind of 'homogenous islands or enclosed spheres', to follow Welsch again, and as close as possible to what Michel Foucault writes in his *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*. That is to say, they are the musical evidence that if we 'listen to history we find that there is something altogether different behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms' (Foucault 1977: 142). Do the *posteggiatori* still exist? Yes, sometimes, but they do not have the same function they used to have: what they do now, is simply replicating the classic Neapolitan songs in the restaurants of the city. Fortunately, though, they still do not use loudspeakers as, unlike the noisy, cumbersome and often unbearable, amplified itinerant performers we are unfortunately accustomed to in our times, the *posteggiatori* were generally quite discreet; and here, again, it is a matter of attitude.

12 Cf. Welsch, in this volume, p. 34

References

ALTAMURA, Antonio

1968 *Dizionario dialettale napoletano*, Fausto Fiorentino, Napoli.

ARTIERI, Giovanni

1961 *I posteggiatori*, Longanesi & C., Milano.

BASILE, Giovan Battista,

1982 [1925] *Il Pentamerone*, edited by Benedetto Croce, Laterza, Bari.

CORTESE, Giulio Cesare

1967 *Opere poetiche*, edited by Enrico Malato, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, Roma.

DE BOURCARD, Francesco

1989 [1866] *Usi e costumi di Napoli e contorni descritti e dipinti*, Marotta & Marotta, Napoli .

DEL TUFO, Gioan Battista

2007 [1880] *Ritratto o modello delle grandezze, delizie e meraviglie della nobilissima città di Napoli*, edited by Olga Silvana Casale and Mariateresa Colotti, Salerno Editrice, Roma.

DE MURA, Ettore

1969 *Enciclopedia della canzone napoletana*, Il Torchio, Napoli.

DE SIMONE, Roberto

1982 'Appunti per una disordinata storia della canzone napoletana', *Culture Musicali Quaderni di Etnomusicologia*, II, 3: 3-40.

DI MASSA, Sebastiano

1969 *Il Café-Chantant e la canzone a Napoli*, Fausto Fiorentino, Napoli.

1982 *Storia della canzone napoletana*, Fausto Fiorentino, Napoli.

FOUCAULT, Michel

1977 *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History in Language, Counter-Memory and Practice*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.

GRECO, Maria Teresa

1997 *I vagabondi del gergo. I posteggiatori*, ESI, Napoli.

HALL, Stuart and Paddy WHANNEL

1964 *The Popular Arts*, Hutchinson, London.

- LIGUORO, Mimmo
 1995 *I posteggiatori napoletani*, Newton Compton, Roma.
- LLOYD, Albert L.
 1967 *Folk Song in England*, Lawrence and Wishart, London.
 1978 [1962] 'Foreword', in Leslie Shepard, *The Broadside Ballad*, Legacy Books, Hatboro, PA: 5-8.
- MAROTTA, Giuseppe
 1977 [1948] *San Gennaro non dice mai no*, Bompiani, Milano.
- MOLINARO DEL CHIARO, Luigi
 1985 [1916] *Canti popolari raccolti in Napoli*, Arnaldo Forni Editore, Bologna.
- NARCISO, Adolfo
 1919 *Napoli scomparsa*, Ferdinando Anazzo, Napoli.
 1929 *Lo Char à Bancs dei comici*, Casa Editrice Audaces, Napoli.
- VACCA, Giovanni
 2013 *Gli spazi della canzone. Luoghi e forme della canzone napoletana*, LIM, Lucca.
- VAJRO, Massimiliano
 1954 *Canzonette napoletane del primo Ottocento*, R. Pironti e figli Editori, Napoli.
- ZUCCHI, John E.
 1999 *The Little Slaves of the Harp*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool.