

**MAURO BALMA****TWO STYLES OF MULTIPART SINGING, TWO  
REPERTOIRES OF LIGURIA (ITALY): THE *TRALLALERO*  
OF GENOA AND THE *CANTO A BORDONE* OF CERIANA  
(IMPERIA)****1. Introduction**

Liguria is a small region in northern Italy which stretches like a bow between the sea and the mountains. The Alps and the Apennines join in the western part of Liguria.

Two important multipart singing repertoires, are to be found in Liguria: the *trallalero* in the urban area of Genoa and the *canto a bordone* in the inland of western Liguria.

**2. First Theme: the *Trallalero***

It is basically a way of singing probably born in the historic centre of the town, in the taverns, where the singers sat around a table. From this lay-out the teams derive their standing in circle which allows the mutual control.

We do have four soloists, three of whom form a perfect vocal *terzetto*: male *contralto*, (dialect: *contraeto*), tenor (*primmo*) and baritone (*controbaritone*), The vocal guitar (*chitara*) and the basses (*basci*) offer a rhythmic and harmonic support.

In the *osterie* (wine shops) an audience gradually summons around the singers, who become competitive. Owing to the high number of inhabitants, the urban milieu allows the creation of different groups called *squadre* ("teams"). These teams, frequently at the beginning, were made up of men who lived in the same neighbourhood or who had the same job in common. Therefore to be successful in singing was a reason of proudness for the various social groups which identify themselves with it.

The interest focuses more and more on the interlink of voices, on the sound result, on the virtuosity of the soloists: this provokes a lack of interest in the verbal texts of *trallalero*.

With this name we refer to the traditional repertoire (the same term is used to define the music genre).

**3. Second Theme: the *Canto a Bordone* of Ceriana**

Totally different is the situation in the village of Ceriana, situated in the province of Imperia in a mountainous environment but not too far from the coast and so characterized by a good deal of permanent inhabitants<sup>1</sup>. This fact, in addition to an extraordinary inclination to multipart singing, keeps alive, in this village, the activity of three groups linked to the secular repertoire and four lay religious organizations who sing the traditional sacred repertoire especially on the occasion of the Holy Week.

I shall deal here only with repertoire sung with perfect stylistic mastery by the singers of the *Compagnia Sacco* and, in particular, with the secular repertoire which gives the

opportunity to stay on the ground we can compare with the Genoese singers.

The *canto a bordone* is a genre of male multipart singing that consists in the stretching in melismatic singing of the soloists of light tone (*primo*) or medium light tone (*secondo*) on the dark and motionless background of drone basses stable over the dominant of the basic tune (usually F sharp).

#### 4. First Development

##### a - The Verbal Repertoire of *Trallalero*

Let's examine some examples referred for now solely to the theme and the structure of the texts that are not rarely made up of a single strophe:

Sei tu che m'innamori  
col viso così bello  
sei fatta col pennello  
dalle mani di un pittor.

(It's you that make me fall in love / With such a beautiful face / The hands of a painter drew you so perfectly well / Out of his paintbrush)

It is clearly a concise declaration of love although embellished with the gentle reference to the artist's picture. This is the prevailing structure of the *trallalero* texts, which can be referred to the genre *canzone*<sup>2</sup>.

Another well-known example to the amateurs: *La partenza*, about which I shall revert later:

La partenza da Parigi  
sta per andarsene a Livorno  
ma camminando di notte e giorno  
sempre pensando a te mio bene.

(Having left Paris / The departure is about to reach Livorno / But walking night and day / It keeps thinking of you, my beloved one)

Who is leaving? How is he reaching Livorno? The departure becomes the subject of its own action; therefore a passage is missing. We imagine that this journey from Paris to Livorno has never taken place and that "Paris" is in fact a ship leaving the port of Genoa towards the not distant port of Livorno. But, then, why "walking"? "Walk", as we said, can also be employed in the meaning of the Genoese dialect "go fast". In any case these are pure assumptions and the sense remains obscure.

A bit less concise are those *trallalero* where a second strophe is added to the first, to which it is invariably connected by weak links. Here follows a *trallalero*, *I bei concerti*, related to a situation of singing (usually to open a concert):

Qui si forma dei bei concerti  
qui si canta finch'è l'ora  
s'apresenta una signora  
bei concerti ad ascoltar.  
Cosa vuoi che m'innamori  
di un visino così bello  
sembri fatta col pennello  
dalle mani di un pittor.

(Here we create the nice concerts / Here we sing until late / A Lady is attending / To listen to nice concerts. / Why should I fall in love / With such a beautiful face / You look made by a painter / Out of his paintbrush)

Usually the arrangement of the text in two strophes recures more often. The borderline case is given by *Me dixèiva 'na votta mae nonna* (My grandmother used to tell me), where the advice given by the grand-mother to the grandson on the qualities a good wife should possess, has suggested to reach the number of four strophes...

### **a' - The Trallalero and the Professional Songs**

The half of the twenties marks the watershed which divided into two clearly different aspects the way the teams sing: the change is caused by the sharp variation of the texts.

The reason lies in the establishment of a movement which aims at imposing a Genoese traditional songs' repertoire, as a late imitation of the historic one from Naples.<sup>3</sup>

A basic characteristic of the texts written by native authors is the thorough production in dialect; the main part of the *trallaleri* were instead in Italian. This situation causes the incorrect conviction that the dialect is a necessary condition to define the "traditional" song.

### **b - The Repertoire of the Canti a Bordone of Ceriana**

The songs of Ceriana belong mostly to a repertoire of *canti narrativi* (narrative songs) of ancient origin<sup>4</sup>.

Here a great importance is given to the lyrics; all the singers sing the words, although also in this case a single singer (usually the *secondo*) sings the text entirely. An interesting feature is that linked with the linguistic level employed: the texts are for the most part in the dialect of Ceriana; this is the result of a doubtless wish of exploiting and transforming a narrative repertoire in many ways common to other Italian and European areas.

It is well known the *canti narrativi* are usually sung with a balanced rythmics apt to control the performance in a not too long lapse of time. Here, instead, we can find a style which allows the soloists to emerge and emphasize the expressiveness of the vocal modulation, in a game of *parlando rubato*, of loosen rythms, embellishments and held notes.

The consequence is a bigger development of musical phrases. A negative reaction in this practice of performance is given by the shortening of the narration at the moment of execution, although memory retains a great number of verses<sup>5</sup>. Here follows the complete text of a *canto narrativo*, *Me descausu e me despegliu* (following we will listen to the first strophe):

Mi me descausu e me despegliu	mi fon pe andamene a durmire
me n'è vegniù 'n mènte la bèla	è mé né sun turnau a vestire.
Mi mé né sun muntautu 'n ciassa scigurandu	alla mia scignura

mi né l'hon ciamà trè voute  
Mi né l'hon truvaita 'n léitu  
mi ghe n'hon dunaitu in baju  
«Nu che nu t'èi tradita  
«se tū t'èi quél giuvinoutu  
«Mi sun pasaitu da la finestrè la

ma la bè la mai séntiva.  
che la durmiva sola  
«o maire mi sun tradita.»  
mi né sun quél giovinoutu»  
dime dunde t'èi pasaitu.»  
dunde o bè la me n'hai insegnaitu.»

(I took off my socks and clothes and went to bed/ Suddenly I recalled my sweetheart and put again my clothes on/ I went up the square whistling to my lady/ I called her three times but my sweetheart could not hear/ I found her asleep on her own/ I gave her a kiss “oh my mother I'm betrayed / No, you are not betrayed: I am that guy/ if you are that guy tell me where you got through/ I got through that small window you had shown me).

A large number of songs refers, instead, to the more simple and more recent metric scheme of the *canzone*<sup>6</sup>

The repertoire which was learned thanks to the diffusion of people earning their living by singing<sup>7</sup>, is not absent in Ceriana even if it is subordinated compared to the previous genres. An example is a *romanza*<sup>8</sup>, *Stanotte in sogno* (after, we will also listen to the beginning).

Stanotte in sogno io la vidi  
che verso il tempio il piede moveva  
ma il suo volto a me risplendeva  
sembrava un angelo pareva un fior.  
La man le presi gliela baciai  
ed in quel mentre mi svegliai  
io la cercai ma non la trovai  
oh Dio che sogno menzogner.  
Da quel giorno mai più io la vidi  
e notte e giorno sospireremo  
vieni o bella sopra il mio seno  
senti il cuore a palpitar.

(Tonight I saw her in dream/she walked to the temple/ but her face shone to me/she looked like an angel she looked like a flower/ I took her hand and kissed her/ and meanwhile I woke up/ I looked for her but I couldn't find her/oh God what a false dream. /Since that day I have not seen her any more/and night and day we shall sigh/come oh sweetheart onto my breast/ listen to my heart drobbing)

## 5. Second Development. *The Verso Cantato*<sup>9</sup> (“sung verse”)

### a. In the *Trallalero*

Genoese singers grew rapidly conscious that they had to give more space to the musical part.

The most brilliant and striking solution was to include a sung section on *nonsense* syllables, mainly arranged on the syllables *tra – la – lero*, hence the term *trallalero*, with which we mean also the section without a text (third and last meaning of the term). Usually, but not always, this part is a melodic variation of the original motif.

A second solution has been to repeat whole verses or part of them.

In fact, the performance of *I bei concerti* looks like this:

Qui si formano i bei concerti  
qui si canta finch'è l'ora  
s'apresenta una signora  
s'apresenta una signora  
qui si formano i bei concerti  
qui si canta finch'è l'ora  
s'apresenta una signora  
i bei concerti ad ascoltar.

[trallalero]

Cosa vuoi che m'innamori  
di un visino così bello  
sembri fatta col pennello  
sembri fatta col pennello  
cosa vuoi che m'innamori  
di un visino così bello  
sembri fatta col pennello  
dalle mani di un pittor.

[trallalero]

bei concerti ad ascoltar.

(Ex.1).

As we see, just one singer tunes up the whole text: the tenor.

The behaviour of the baritone is particularly interesting because he breaks the words completely. In his role the *nonsense* prevail on the tuned syllables by exploring a territory between sound and noise.

The *Partenza* is a case apart for different reasons. Here we find combined the use of the fragmentation of verses and even of words with the employment of *trallalero nonsense*, not only at the end but also inside the strophe. Besides, there is a pure musical element executed in a rather limited number of *trallalero*: the prevalence of melismatic singing on the syllabic one. Definitively the performance supplies the following shape:

La partenza da Parigi  
sta per e andar  
sta per andarsene a Livorno  
[trallalero di intermezzo]  
ma camminando  
[trallalero di intermezzo]  
di notte e giorno  
[trallalero di intermezzo]  
sempre pensando  
ohi bella mi sto pensando  
sempre a te mio bene.  
[trallalero]

Instead, a classical example of the assembling of a text tuned on musically different motifs is *La buonasera* which is sung usually at the end of a performance:

Mi ve lascio a bona seia  
bella mi ve lascio un bello addio  
se o mae cheu ve l'ei senti o  
se o mae cheu ve l'ei senti o  
mi ve lascio a bona seia  
bella mi ve lascio un bello addio  
se o mae cheu me l'ei senti o  
vado a letto a riposar.  
Oh mi ve lascio a bonn-a seia  
oh mi ve lascio in belo addio  
oh bella se o mae cheu ve l'ei senti o  
mi vado a letto a riposar.  
Ve lascio a bona seia  
ve lasciu un bello addio  
se o mae cheu ve l'ei senti o  
se o mae cheu ve l'ei senti o  
Ve lascio a bona seia  
ve lascio un bello addio  
se o mae cheu ve l'ei senti o  
vaddo a letto a riposar.

[*trallalero*]

(I bid you good night / I bid you farewell / I bid you farewell with all my heart / I'm going to bed to rest).

(Ex.2).

### **a' - In the Genoese Professional Songs**

The text of the composed song usually displays a wide extension along a strophe and a refrain. As a consequence, the melodic part already owes a remarkable extension which makes the *trallalero nonsense* no longer necessary in order to prolong the duration of singing. There are introductory sketches of nearly chorus character, duettos and solo performances of the basses.

It is important to notice how the seafaring themes intruded into a type of repertoire in which they were not at all included.

As to maritime songs, a tribute to Cristoforo Colombo could not be missing: the song *E trae caravelle*. It describes the calls of the sailors from one ship to another, the *mugugni* (mumbling) about a too long navigation, the joy for the arrival ashore, the exaltation of the Genoese navigator.

### **b - In the *Canto a Bordone***

The performances of the *Compagnia Sacco* always begin with the voice of the *secondo* soloist, who seems to introduce the title of the song. The *primo* and afterwards the other voices of *bassi di bordone* follow, according to variable modes. This way of singing is strongly melismatic, especially in the narrative repertoire; the songs with shorter verses and more regular syllables usually give rise to less melismatic melodic structures. The verse, therefore, influences the musical development also in the way

in which the melisms are distributed, that is to say always on the syllable carrying the tonic accent and nearly always inside the final word of an hemistich or the verse.

Here is the first strophe of *Stanotte in sogno*, one of the most melismatic songs which, with its magic extension, can be associated to the dream theme (Ex.3).

The fragmentation of verses and the repetition of all or part of them cause a subordination of the abstract structure of the verse to a new musical dimension.

Exemple:

*U camijin bagnau*

A mezanöite a bèla se descì a

e la s'è messa a ciagne

(*At midnight the pretty baby wakes up and her nightdress is wet / and she begins to cry calling her father.*)

A mezanöite a bèla se descì a

cu u camijin bagnà

ciamandu so papà.

ma a se descì a

a bèla a se descì a

e la s'è messa a ciagne

a bèla a se descì a

e la s'è messa a ciagne

cu u camijin bagnà

ciamandu so papà

cu u camijin bagnà

ciamandu so papà.

If we observe more closely the details of a performance, we would realize that the fragmentation of the lyrics can go further and takes place also inside the single word.

The fragmentation results still more evident through the fact that after the pause the singers do not perform the following syllable, but retake the vowel of the left-over syllable.

In *Me descausu e me despegliu* both these stylistic structures are extremely clear at a glance to the transcription (Ex.4).

## 6. Conclusion

Concluding the development of the themes, in this sort of struggles between words and music, who wins in the case of the two repertoires examined?

In the example of *trallalero*, singing is the winner over the text. Paradoxically, we can't omit that the shortness of the verses, the prevailing rhythmic and syllabic performance make easier the understanding of words which, in themselves, are hardly meaningful.

In Genoa, in the songs written by composers the importance of the text prevails.

In the *canto a bordone* of Ceriana the text, always handed down from father to son, produces a stiff strophic structure, omits added nonsense insertions (except some short refrains). The texts are therefore closed.

Nevertheless, paradoxically, the very melismatic style, which is syllabic only in the *incipit*, produces a more difficult understanding of the text. This is often incomprehensible to those who do not already know it.

Even if the repertoires are different we are led to conclude that in both cases the "sung verse" is located in a context which is neither that of poetry nor that of music, but derives from the combination of the two, as we have remarked for other repertoires linked to the tradition handed down from father to son.

Indeed, if you ask a Ligurian singer to repeat a not very clear verse, he will tell you he has difficulties in remembering it only as regards the text: while if he sings it in the complete sequence, everything will result more simple to him.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> About a thousand and three hundred.

<sup>2</sup> I am using this term that is attributed to the definition of genres by the Archive for Traditional Communication (A.C.O.) of the Region Lombardy, the main reference for the repertoire of northern Italy. In this usage traditional song, *la canzone*, has got a strophe made up of four verses, repeated in different versions with a number of syllables going from seven up to ten. The first three verses are plain, the last is apocopated. The subject may be various: a narration, a satire or a love story.

<sup>3</sup> A remarkable recording production makes possible to trace styles and repertoires starting from 1928 until nowadays. This extraordinary production of records which is hardly to be found in any traditional Italian repertoire is due to the fact that, through the dialect song (solo or in team) the fascist organizations meant to keep in contact the homeland with the emigrants in South America, to whom the records were mainly destined.

<sup>4</sup> I'm still using this term according to A.C.O. of the Region Lombardy. The main poetic structure refers to the so-called epic-lyrical metre that characterizes the narrative songs of more ancient origin. It deals with a long verse, divided into two parts called hemistichs: the former is plain, the latter is apocopated. (or vice versa), usually unrhymed. The strophe may coincide with the verse or be arranged in two verses, with occasional rhymes and phrasings.

<sup>5</sup> This happens particularly in relation with recordings: it is a common judgement that a strophic song, if extended too long, may be boring for the listener.

<sup>6</sup> See note #3

<sup>7</sup> We speak about the *cantastorie*, who let circulate the texts they wrote through printed editions both in the first person both through pedlars. In Ceriana somebody remembers that authors were paid for teaching their songs of which they reserved the ownership. The already mentioned *Cereghino* (wandering ballad singers of rural origin) gave to the people of Ceriana one of the most famous songs composed by them, *La storia di Pierina*. This song is frequently performed, obviously in a shortened version.

<sup>8</sup> In the *romanza* a love text shows evident and not fortuitous references to the Italian literary or semi-literary repertoire.

<sup>9</sup> I take this nice expression from the title of the publication *Sul verso cantato*, edited by Maurizio Agamennone and Francesco Giannattasio, Il Poligrafo, Padova, 2002.

**Translated by Laura Giardelli**





Musical score for measures 11-16. The score is written for five parts: Clarinet (Cl.), Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Bassoon (B.), and Bassoon (B.). The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The lyrics are written below the staves.

11 Cl. Fl. Ob. B. B.  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16

Musical score for measures 17-22. The score is written for five parts: Clarinet (Cl.), Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Bassoon (B.), and Bassoon (B.). The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The lyrics are written below the staves. A section marked [trallalero] begins at measure 17.

17 [trallalero] Cl. Fl. Ob. B. B.  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22

Musical score for measures 21-30. The score is written for five staves: Oboe (Ob.), Trumpet (Tr.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (B.), and Bass (Ba.). The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings. The woodwinds and strings play a complex, rhythmic pattern. The bass line features a prominent, sustained note.

Musical score for measures 31-40. The score is written for five staves: Oboe (Ob.), Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (B.), and Bass (Ba.). The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings. The woodwinds and strings play a complex, rhythmic pattern. The bass line features a prominent, sustained note.

Cl  
Tr  
Cm  
Tb  
Bc

La Concordia Valbisegno  
Cantieri all'Opera  
CD DEVEGA 2000 - DL 1017  
1a strofa e "trallalero"  
Trasor. Mauro Balma













The image displays two systems of musical notation for a brass quintet. Each system consists of five staves, labeled from top to bottom as: **Cr.** (Cornet), **Tr.** (Trumpet), **Cl.** (Clarinet), **E.** (Euphonium), and **B.** (Trombone). The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. In the first system, there are markings for **[ 9 ]** above the Cornet and Clarinet staves. In the second system, there is a marking **(p ass)** above the Cornet staff and **[ 9 ]** above the Clarinet staff. The music is written in a complex, rhythmic style with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes.

Gruppo Spontaneo Traillero  
Trascr. integrale: Mauro Balma

მაგალითი 3.  
 Example 3.

*Stanotte in sogno*

Compagnia Sacco  
*U menestru de Seriana*  
 CD AMORI 1996 - AM 008

*Primo*  
*Secondo*  
*Bassi*

Stanotte in so - gno han mai - o la vi - di che verco, il  
 di che verco, il

*Pr.*  
*Sec.*  
*Bs.*

stan - pio of piede mo: ve - va e ma: il suo - vol - to più, a me - ri - spica -  
 stan - pio of piede mo: ve - va ma: il suo - vol - to ubé a - me - ri - spica -  
 stan - pio of piede mo: ve - va ma: il suo vol - to a me - ri - spica -

♩ = 76

♩ = 92

7 *mf* *♩ = 64*

Pr. de - va e sem - bra

Sec. de - va mi sa - ge - lo sem - bra

Bs. de - va e sem - bra va un an - ge - lo sem - bra

11 *mf* *♩ = 66*

Pr. an - ge - lo pa - re - va un fior e sem - bra

Sec. an - ge - lo pa - re - va un fior e sem - bra

Bs. an - ge - lo pa - re - va un an - ge - lo sem - bra



მაგალითი 4.  
Example 4.

*Me descausu e me despeglu*

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system includes a tempo marking of ♩ = 100. The vocal parts are labeled as Primo, Secondo, and Bassi. The lyrics are written in Georgian script below the vocal lines. The second system continues the vocal parts with the same labels and lyrics. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

The image displays a musical score for the song "U mese du granu". It is divided into two systems, each with three staves. The first system (measures 7-10) includes vocal parts for Primo, Secondo, and Bassi, and piano accompaniment. The lyrics for the first system are: "U mese du granu vegnuto non - fe lu", "U mese du granu vegnuto dicit te te", and "U mese du granu vegnuto dicit te te". The second system (measures 11-14) includes vocal parts for Primo, Secondo, and Bassi, and piano accompaniment. The lyrics for the second system are: "U mese du granu vegnuto dicit te te", "U mese du granu vegnuto dicit te te", and "U mese du granu vegnuto dicit te te".

*U mese du granu - Compagnie Sacco di Ceriana*  
 CD - AMORI 1993 - AM 001  
 1a strofa  
 Tracci.: Mauro Balma