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**“RAGAZZINE, VI PREGO ASCOLTARE”... THE POLYPHONIC SONG
AS AN INSTRUMENT TO COLLECTIVELY SUMMON AN ANTI-WAR SPACE,
INVESTIGATED THROUGH ITALIAN SONGS OF WARTIME RESISTANCE**

Since the Italian folk revival of the 1960s, academic interest in Italian folk music has often focused on Italy’s heritage of songs of protest, resistance, and partisanship. Due to this aforementioned focus on certain song repertoires, themes of war maintained a predominant thematic position in the early presentation of Italian folk songs, particularly when we discuss traditional music outside Italy’s more commercialized, exported forms (such as *canzoni napoletani*). This was because Italian songs of resistance often maintained a historical link to anti-war and anti-fascist sentiment. (Fanelli, 2015). The space of polyphony, which is an expression that is multi-voiced in nature, facilitates and nurtures a collectivity that lends itself well to guerilla-spirited assemblies of resistance.

Therefore, the conditions that triggered these assemblies of singers in Italy throughout the 20th century, and particularly in wartime Italy, created a space that embodied this inclusive, collective defiance conveyed by the multi-voiced expression of polyphonic song. This spirit of protest can be a spiritual leitmotif that links different repertoires based on the struggles and suffering of the people within a specific locus that holds that song repertoire – for example, later in this paper, we will see how a women’s space can host songs that express feminist self-determination and drive to amplify the struggles of the women who sing those songs. But what this paper explores, specifically, is how this spirit of resistance would later be shaped by anti-war sentiment catalyzed by the trauma of post-war Italy, in which the folk revival of the 1960s would retrospectively look at folk song as a medium to magnify that sentiment that had always been present.

In this paper, I will investigate how Italian polyphonic songs have been a catalyst to create intangible environments of anti-war sentiment, beginning with the political orientation of early Italian ethnomusicology that amplified the partisan voice of traditional music in Italy after the folk revival. This will then be juxtaposed with a case study from my own ethnographic research, in which I analyze songs in the Salento region of southern Italy, and how these songs may channel this sentiment.

Il Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano, Bella Ciao and the Feminist-Socialist Voice of the Mondine

The spirit of resistance that is embodied in Italian partisan and protest song has been something of an Italian folk music avatar for much of the post-war 20th century. Within Italy, one of the earliest and most influential musical groups that focused on researching and performing traditional Italian music was *Il Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano* (“The New Italian Songbook”), an ethnomusicologically-oriented project based in Milan founded by pioneers of Italian ethnomusicology, Roberto Leydi and Gianni Bosio. (Bermani, 1997; Savini, 2019). The project was initially a periodic magazine produced for a growing audience of Italians interested in their own folk song traditions. It must be noted, however, that Bosio also had strong connections to the Socialist Italian Party, being a director of the publishing house that released their periodicals, as well as a long-time member of this party and an active anti-fascist. (Bermani, 1997). This was the same publishing house that also released the editions of this new magazine, indicating the political character in which this music

was positioned, disseminated, and interacted with. Bosio's political orientation and how it shaped Italian ethnomusicology is an integral component to the specific repertoires and traditions that were of scientific interest to researchers and performers, and we can see the political heritage of Italian ethnomusicology in the modern day¹.

The magazine *Nuovo Canzoniere* gave rise to a community of Italian ethnomusicologists who were united by scientific interest and passion for traditional music, focusing primarily on the socio-political character of Italian folk song. This culminated in a performance group who created a theatre production that utilized politically oriented Italian folk song as a thematic protagonist in a series of musical vignettes. The repertoire of *Nuovo Canzoniere* focused on this character of traditional Italian music that had become a protagonist sentiment in post-war Italy – a character of revolution, partisanship, and social resistance. (Bermani, 1997; Fanelli, 2015).

A celebrated anthem of this anti-war sentiment from the repertoire of *Nuovo Canzoniere* is the partisan song “Bella Ciao”, illustrating the spirit of revolution which became the *Canzoniere*'s socio-political nucleus. Over time, the song cultivated a reputation well beyond Italy, becoming an anti-fascist hymn for freedom:

Stamattina, mi son alzato – bella ciao! E l'ho trovato l'invasor
 O partigiano, portami via – bella ciao! Che mi sento di morir
 E se muoio da partigiano, bella ciao! Tu mi devi seppellir
 E seppellire lassù in montagna – bella ciao! Sotto l'ombra di un bel fior
 Tutte le genti che passeranno o – bella ciao! Mi diranno “che bel fior!”
 Questo e' il fiore del partigiano – bella ciao! Ch'e' morto per la liberta'²

What is not common knowledge, however, is that there is little documentation of “Bella Ciao” as a genuine anti-fascist hymn that would have been actively sung by partisan brigades. Instead, it developed its emblematic status after it was presented by *Il Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano* at the 1964 Spoleto Festival dei Due Mondi.³ (Bobba, 2021). This famous partisan iteration of the song was, in fact, created as a politically performative variant based on a folk song⁴ from the polyphonic repertoire of *le mondine*. A *mondina* (plural: *le mondine*) is a woman rice weeder who works in the rice paddies of northern Italy, particularly within the Po Valley. These women worked outdoors in groups and over time developed their own tradition of polyphonic song, with the engendered milieu of polyphonic song being the host of their shared sentiments and stories as *mondine* women. (Savini, 2019).

Mondine repertoire is characterized by a spirit of protest and opposition that reflects the intersectionality of being Italian women workers exploited during these politically complex times. This intersectionality may be described as the meeting point of Italianness, womanhood, and political defiance, creating an idiosyncratic space in which the intersectional *mondine* experience was

¹ For example, one of Italy's primary folkloric cultural institutes, L'Istituto Ernesto de Martino based in Florence, was founded by Gianni Bosio and to this day maintains a notable focus on folk music with themes of resistance, proletarianism, and anti-fascism.

² Translation: *I got up this morning, and I found the invader – goodbye beautiful! O Partisan, take me away, because I feel that I'm about to die. And if I die as a partisan, you'll have to bury me, way up in the mountain, under the shadow of a beautiful flower. Everyone will pass by, and will say to me, “What a beautiful flower! This is the flower that died for freedom!”*

³ Translated as “The Festival of Two Worlds, this is a renowned symposium of music, dance, arts, and academics that still takes place in Spoleto to this day.

⁴ The original *mondine* song is titled “*Alla mattina appena alzata*”.

instrumental to forming the character of *mondine* polyphonic songs. This feminist, socio-political character of the songs can be perceived at both a textual and musical level. Textually, the words of *mondine* songs earnestly depict the political and revolutionary nature of Italian society in the 20th century. As women, *mondine* were subject to particularly grueling work conditions. Their songs reflected their own protests of maltreatment within the *risaia*⁵ workspace, often introspectively connected to their own position as women within Italian society. The frustrations of participating in an oppressive society that classified women as second-class citizens, in conjunction with the revolutionary, broader anti-fascist movement of time, created an intangible locus in which *mondine* polyphonic song interwove these frustrations as the thematic threads to create a fabri of feminist-socialist political revolt via the performance of the song.

Noi vogliamo l’eguaglianza, siamo chiamate malfattori
E noi siamo lavoratori, che padroni non vogliamo
E noi donne sventoliamo le bandiere insanguinate
E faremo le barricate per la vera libertà
Ancor benché siamo donne, noi paura non abbiamo
Per l’amor de’ nostre figlie, noi in lega ci mettiamo
E giù la schiavitù, vogliamo la libertà!
Siamo lavoratori, vogliamo la libertà!⁶

This demonstration of politico-feminist thought was linked to the musical character of the songs as well. For example, the timbre, volume, and register of the *mondine* voice, alongside cathartic sustained harmonies meant to accompany laborious work, also illustrate a musical dimension in which these hardships, stories, and political sentiments were expressed through the character of the voice, and the voices resounding in harmony in that specific performance context.

The phenomenon of Italian folk culture providing a locus for women’s assertion and catharsis in gendered expression is not limited to the *mondine* space. For example, we will analyze a case study of Salentine polyphony later on in this paper, and the Salento region is also home to a gendered folk custom⁷, in which the expressive catharsis of women is the spiritual protagonist of that setting that hosts the custom. (Daboo, 2010; De Martino, 2013). While beyond the scope of this paper, it is noteworthy to mention that feminist expression via intangible vehicles of folk tradition can also be historically observed in other Italian cultural spaces of the past.

Channeling this spirit of protest born from intersectionality, *Nuovo Canzoniere* fostered the *mondine* anima by amplifying this repertoire in new performance contexts. Within this socio-political framework, the realm of songs of resistance became one of the most important transmission mediums of Italian folk song, and particularly the earliest iterations of “professional”, ethnomusicological-informed performance of Italian polyphony.

With the emergence of *Bella Ciao* as a partisan variant of a *mondine* song, *Nuovo Canzoniere* reproduced the resistant sentiment of *mondine* songs through a socially inclusive song that also bore

⁵ Rice paddies, typically of the Po region of northern Italy.

⁶ Translation: *We want equality, we’re called evildoers – we are workers, and we don’t want bosses! And we, women, wave the bloodied flags, we will make the barricade for true freedom. Even though we are women, we are not afraid – for the love of our daughters, we put ourselves in league. Down with slavery, we want freedom! We are workers, and we want freedom!*

⁷ *Pizzica*, a folk dance connected to a ritual of healing via ecstasy and trance

a sentiment of anti-war protest. (Savini, 2019). The *mondine* song, in fact, forged a space of dissent towards the conditions of women and political structures in the 20th century, which then was a spiritual nurturing ground for anti-war thought. Therefore, the collective act of polyphonic song in assemblies of singers as a manifestation of social revolt transformed from the *mondine* context to a broader, politico-musical milieu in which anti-war sentiment was the protagonist.

“When I Return, I’ll Bring You a Flower”:

An Ethnographic Case Study from the Salento Region

Throughout this paper, I have discussed the space of anti-war sentiment primarily through the optic of the formative role of songs of resistance in Italian ethnomusicology. However, it is important to also analyze this sentiment in other Italian cultural spaces of polyphony. Therefore, I would like to juxtapose this concept with my own ethnographic experience in the Salento region.

Salento – which is the endonymous name for the Salentine peninsula, the “heel” of Italy’s shape-like boot – is home to a particular and regional culture with its own language, cuisine, history, and customs. The Salento region has seen a resurgence of cultural activity in recent decades (Tomatis, 2020), predominantly catalyzed by a renewed interest by Salentine people in the *pizzica* dance and healing ritual, thus setting in motion an ongoing folk revival movement in which Salentine people reanimated dying local traditions. (Morello, 2018; Santoro, 2019; Daboo, 2010). Salentine polyphonic song, while peripherally positioned within this large scene, also witnessed this revival and is performed in new performance contexts. These new performance contexts differ sometimes significantly from the traditional settings that hosted the Salentine polyphonic song in the past, which is a phenomenon that continues to fascinate me and catalyze my own ethnographic work in Salento.⁸

While the general phenomenon of the reanimated performance practice of polyphony in the Salento region is a large topic beyond the scope of this paper, reading Italian polyphony through the thematic lens of this paper compels me to reflect on songs, stories, and moments of polyphonic performance in the field. In particular, I recall several songs that depict war and have strong anti-war themes, and I had not made the connection of thematic similarities to the repertoire of *Nuovo Canzoniere* until analyzing that group more closely for this paper. While not nearly as pronounced and present as the repertoire of the *mondine*, political themes, and anti-war sentiment can be traced in Salento to narrative songs that depict stories of its past (Muci, 2018).

Language is also an important discourse for this analysis. While in the field, I didn’t grasp the ambiguous distinction between songs in Salentine or Italian, as Salentine people are generally bilingual, and a linguistic dichotomy that could reflect musical sub-dialects within the tradition never occurred to me.

What is particularly interesting is that Salento is not just home to exclusively Salentine polyphony, but also to non-Salentine polyphonic songs that have traveled to the region via inter-regional movement and migration, and have been “Salentinized” in their sound, texture, ornamentation, vocal styling, and approach to harmony.⁹ This is evidenced by the aforementioned linguistic dichotomy that exists in Salentine polyphony, in which songs of exclusively Salentine origin are often sung in the local Salentine language, while songs of non-Salentine origin that have entered

⁸ I have spoken about this in more detail in previous papers submitted for this symposium in 2016, 2018, and 2020.

⁹ This texture has a penchant for similar motion with independent ornamentation of voices versus strict parallel motion (Morello, 2018).

the canon of local polyphony are often sung in standard Italian. Salentine people’s bilingualism also reflects a national-versus-cultural identity binary of biculturalism. This means that they maintain a national identity alongside a cultural one, with both having their own identity markers (In this case, these markers are language, in which the Salentine language in traditional song is a marker of Salentineness, while the Italian language in traditional song is a marker of Italianness). Although it requires further investigation, it can be noted by looking at songs from my ethnographic work that songs that resemble these themes in Salento are very often in standard Italian and imply a non-Salentine origin

This retrospective analysis of historical migration and origin does demand a philosophical dimension: that is, the existence of anti-war sentiment in such a canon of repertoire is implicitly self-referential since the existence of Salentine polyphonic songs of non-Salentine origin is a result of historical trans-regional song migration catalyzed by intra-war displacement and post-war economic collapse.

One song¹⁰ comes to mind, which I heard on various occasions at social gatherings sung as a *brindisi*.¹¹ Interestingly, upon further investigation, this is a song that belongs to the latter aforementioned canon of Salentiny polyphony. It is of non-Salentine origin, but it has been Salentinized in its polyphonic structure and texture and sung in standard Italian (with some Salentine words). The variants of the song that I found attribute these words and melody to the Po Valley region, which is the same region that was home to the *mondine* tradition:

Quando ritorno, ti porto un fiore, viva l’amore, ci la sape fa
Quando ritorno dall’Albania, o beddha mia, ti sposerò
Quando ritorno, ti troverò zitella, baciami mia bella, ti sposerò
Quando ritorno, ti troverò sposata, prendo la spada e mi ammazzo il cuor
E tu, non piangere, amorosa mia, se vado via – ritornerò¹²

What is most interesting about my experience of this song in the field, however, is that the themes of the war seemed to be peripheral, and not particularly significant to the performance context – a sober, unembellished reflection of the history and stories that these songs bore. I did not realize this at the time, but this song was not only of non-Salentine origin but also part of a specific repertory of songs from Northern Italy for conscripted soldiers, sung as farewell songs to loved ones as they left for war. While my knowledge of this repertoire needs to be greater to have a broader comparative analysis, I can attest to the phenomenon and nuance of this specific song in my experience, which retained a spirit of anti-war sentiment – complete with hope, humor, and romanticism. Framed by these positive attributes that have often characterized the thematic content of Salentine songs (Muci, 2008), the song was then remodeled and trans-performed as a toasting song to celebrate the joy and unity of a Salentine social gathering.

Again, an argument can be made for the song’s very existence being a self-referential phenom-

¹⁰ “Quando ritorno, ti porto un fiore”, (*When I return, I’ll bring you a flower*). collected by the author in Nardo in November 2016.

¹¹ “A toast.

¹² Translation: *When I return, I’ll bring you a flower – long live love, who knows how to do that? When I return from Albania, oh my beautiful, I’ll marry you. When I return and I’ll find you an unmarried spinster, oh kiss me my beautiful, I’ll marry you; when I return and I’ll find you married, I’ll take my sword and kill myself through the heart! Don’t cry, my beloved; if I leave, I’ll return!*

enon, in which the act of singing the song is indeed an affirmation of the future created and wished by those conscripted soldiers' songs of the past, born from their anti-war sentiment that carried these songs into the present. The song's presence in the Salento region is a result of the intercultural exchange between regional peoples in post-war Italy after internal migration, and at the same time, the song itself references this wartime period of pastness with defiance and optimism. Indeed, the social settings in which I heard the song itself is a meta-reference within the song's own story – a post-war period of peace, with loved ones, that is marked by celebration.

Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed the notion of anti-war sentiment being a catalyst to collectively summon a space of resistance and protest via polyphonic song. Polyphony – being a collective expression of multiple voices – can be utilized as a powerful instrument of united expression via its prescribed collectivity. This concept was investigated primarily through an Italian historical context, tracing the roots of the Italian folk revival to the post-war politicization of Italian folk song, propelled by the inception of *Il Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano* and their study and presentation of politically oriented repertoire. (Bermani 1997; Fanelli, 2015). In particular, the song *Bella Ciao* has become an avatar of this phenomenon, which itself was a partisan variant of a song from the repertoire of the *mondine*. This is an important optic for analysis, as the repertoire of the *mondine* created an intangible space of protest for the lives of *mondine* women, with text and collective performance propelled by feminist-socialist values. The intersectionality of women's issues with workers' mutiny generated a unique locus in which a spirit of revolution was able to be cultivated and transferred to other formations of Italian polyphony, such as that of *Nuovo Canzoniere*.

The texts of songs are a significant element of summoning anti-war space. Language is essential to generate this, as the voice is the collective instrument of song and also the same instrument for language. This is why in this paper, analysis of songs was primarily through the content of the texts rather than musicological analysis. The discourse of language also becomes stronger when the case study of Salentine polyphonic song is presented, in which the repertoire bears two languages that reflect the bilingualism and biculturalism of Salentine people: Salentine language songs reflect local themes and folklore, while Italian-language songs reflect national and broader themes, often descending from repertoires from northern Italy. This case study also indicates other important related factors that shaped the tradition, such as the post-war intermigration of Italians, and remodeling of songs of revolution within other cultural contexts (such as toasting and social celebration). This presented a meta-referential paradigm, in which the performance of the song in these post-war, peaceful social scenes affirms the hope and perseverance that had been carried within these songs in wartime Italy of the past.

What this analysis of Italian polyphony suggests is that the act of polyphonic song can be a robust medium for social mutiny against a societal oppressor, and therefore can summon space to generate and disseminate powerful anti-war sentiment. A polyphonic song, as a multi-voiced expression that requires unity and collectivity, can be a vehicle that conveys the shared value of fighting against the evils of war. By channeling the *mondine* spirit that was an important element of early Italian ethnomusicology's focus on the musical culture of resistance, anti-war space can be collectively created and fostered by blending group song, powerful text, and the cathartic resonance of the folk voice. The inclusive collectivity of such an assembly of singers resisting their oppressor can therefore summon, quite literally, a united anti-war voice.

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