

CHAPTER III

Historical and 'pre-historical' short accounts on the Neapolitan song. The style of Neapolitan singing. *The posteggiatori* (strolling musicians)

The first accounts of song compositions in Neapolitan date back at least to the first half of the thirteenth century. Ettore De Mura⁹ wrote: "*Here we have the first convincing signs of the presence of the Neapolitan song*".

And the customary reference to *Jesce sole* is just to emphasize what Vittorio Paliotti wrote on the subject: the song "*Must have been quite successful, if it has been translated into several dialects...*" and that the lyrics have been lying in a 15th century versifier codex in the Paris National Library.¹⁰

These song compositions, just "*Signs*", cannot be called "Neapolitan songs" since they are primitive forms of a genre in both their literary and musical structure, they are just one of the seeds of a plant that would bear the best fruit during the 19th century and in an ever increasing manner.

Antonio Venci points out that «... *Since the 12th century minstrels travelled throughout Italy...coming from France... they sang the "Chanson de Gestes"...*» and while in "*Florence, at the time of Lorenzo il Magnifico and in the whole of Tuscany, they were singing May songs. Carnival songs, Travelling Theatres Sirventes, Lays, Romances, Pastorals.... In Naples they sang La Canzone pe lo spasso de sto Carnevale (song for the fun of this Carnival), especially lo Recottaro, (ricotta seller) lo 'Nfornataro (the baker), lo Ciardeniero (the gardener), lo Cacciatore (the hunter), lo Polliero (the chicken seller), lo Piscivinnolo (the fishmonger)...*"¹¹.

Naturally, it is impossible to ascertain what else was actually produced in such a remote epoch but it is evident that, as it was customary for most ancient forms of performance of oral folk culture, these songs were related to the daily activity cycle of country and town people.

It seems, therefore, helpful, to give some general information, in order to offer a picture, even though sketchy, of the cultural substratum later secular songs in Neapolitan would spring from.

The Swabians, who reigned during that time, attracted to court cultured men from all nations and just in confirmation of the climate in the city at that period Fredrick II, to those who insisted on the University being built in Palermo rather than in Naples wrote that he preferred "*the much beloved city of Naples, where all things abound, where the houses are ample and cosy, where the customs of the residents are amiable, and where everything necessary for living can be easily transported by land or sea*"¹² (This is how Fredrick II replied to the recent institutions of the universities in Bologna, 1088, and Padua, 1222, what's more he was in the region which hosted the oldest university in the world the IX century Scuola Medica Salernitana).

From that moment onward, during a cumbersome succession of cultural, musical realities the outcome, at times, of deep political upheaval, this music genre developed and took shape unequalled in the history of folk and popular music in the world, that reached its full splendour between 1880 and 1910 ca., therefore at the end of the Risorgimento historical process, which, although in part, originated from the Neapolitan Revolution in 1799, which Anna Maria Rao described as "*... a crucial moment ...in the development of the Italian democratic tradition*"¹³ *Funiculì Funiculà* "opened" this period of splendour; it was so beautiful and so famous that Strauss could not resist taking it "on loan" to use it in one of his works, as it will be told later on.

Therefore the wealth and complexity of the Neapolitan musical heritage derive, more than anywhere else, from the stratification of a large number of factors related, not only to the evolution of music in its different genres, but also and perhaps mainly to the political, economical, social, traditional history, in a natural setting of unique beauty.

Furthermore, the presence of numerous musicians from all over, contributed towards enriching

the musical culture of a genetically cosmopolitan city.

As a matter of fact, Naples attracted musicians, artists and intellectuals from the whole of Europe, in different periods and not only when it was considered, together with Paris and Vienna, one of the major European cities, one of the three cultural, economic crossroads on the continent. On the other hand, the city too, had already influenced and enriched the whole European music heritage, as I will point out later on.

« *Let's think about all the writers and artists who, for three hundred years, have been mysteriously attracted by Naples, addressed by Shelley: 'You, the heart of men', Goethe ... Montesquieu ... Voltaire ... Stendhal, Mme de Staël ... Flaubert, Lamartine, Alexandre Dumas, Fenimore Cooper ... Walter Benjamin, Sartre ... Pasolini ...* », among the thirty artists listed by Jean-Noël Schifano in his book *Neapocalisse*¹⁴ and then Virgil, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Tasso, Caravaggio, Lady Hamilton, Giacomo Leopardi, Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, and more recently Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol...

Inevitably anything that was produced in Naples from the 13th century onwards, pertaining to the structural side of singing compositions and the style of the melodies, was deep-rooted into a substratum of pre-existing musical realities of the Mediterranean area. But just an undeserved simplification could lead to assign to the Neapolitan song all the characteristics that distinguish the music belonging to such geographic context.

Naples has indeed, its own musical tradition, permeated with a rare synergistic coexistence of learned, refined culture on the one hand and deep, exuberant popular culture on the other advancing side by side into history, a coexistence which also, most certainly, originated from Fredrik II of Swabia's enlightened political choices in the fields of culture and education.

The most "primitive" forms of singing always originate from the work cycle - in its various activity and break phases - and from the peoples' religious cults. Of course, this is what happened in Naples, too, in epochs before and after those in which the first written evidence was discovered, namely from the 13th century onwards.

What's more, it can't be ruled out that the songs of an even more ancient Naples, some sources refer to, had quite a few ties with the production of Greek opera itself and that therefore the cultural matrix of these very old songs was mixed in nature: rural, maritime but also refined.

In truth, there has always been a medium between refined culture and folk culture in ancient civilizations, and if it is true that in the ancient Greek culture this medium was represented by the rhapsodists, in the Latin one by the *jaculatores* and, if already at banquets in ancient Egypt «...even the noblewomen competed for the title of 'leading poet at Amun's table'...»¹⁵ it seems logical to suppose that these 'social intermediaries' (who would leave the courts to go into the streets and squares during public events), grown more and more itinerant while the Greek colonies established themselves, were already productive in Naples during the Greek-Roman period just as much if not more than in the past, only if one thinks what unusual role the Neapolitan strolling singers really had in all the epochs to come.

In the Mediterranean area the songs took root into the culture of the three major religions (Jewish, Christian and Muslim), and the secular songs, during the centuries, were, in part, a by-product of the sacred liturgies of those religions.

The Jewish Diaspora and the Islamic dominations in some areas of the Mediterranean, such as North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and Sicily following the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the growth of the great Arab power under Mohammed, prove without a doubt the existence of contamination among musical cultures that needs no arguing over, since the influence of the Middle Eastern stylistic elements in the Mediterranean songs is in fact far too evident and recognizable due to the different harmonic and melodic requirements which still to this day distinguish the western music production on the one hand and the middle eastern one on the other.

But a more or less constant trace of the Middle Eastern music culture within the Neapolitan melodic culture is not recognizable, therefore those rare undertones we can find come from

mere artistic evocations of authors such as Pasquale Mario Costa, who in his *Napulitanata* offers a sample of it of incomparable charm.

Therefore, some attempts at 'easternizing' the expository style of the Neapolitan song at all cost prove to be rather misleading.

As a matter of fact the most evident traits that associate Neapolitan songs to the other Mediterranean songs are just some among those mentioned by Paolo Scarnecchia¹⁶ in his book *Musica popolare e musica dotta* (*Folk music and classical music*).

Referring to a study by R. Leyedi, the author points out: «...a) a distinctly melodic framework...; c) propensity to a melismatic evolution; d) great preponderance of solo performances; ... f) generally free rhythmic structures ... h) predominance of 'operatic' texts ... ».

But the Neapolitan song is a phenomenon of its own also because of its harmonic and melodic richness especially during its most glorious period when it was perhaps more classical than folk.

Scarnecchia had good reasons to write that “ ... Since the 16th century Naples has shown its own "multicultural" music character ... ”, then pointed out that “ ...in the salon they cultivated the song that was most directly influenced by the opera, and that is more similar to the romance ... ”¹⁷. The salon was among the most distinctive elements of Naples in the 18th century when, in the times of *Te voglio bene assaje*, (1835) the use of the periodica¹⁸ was wide spread .

This is also true for the singing style that requires considerable technical, artistic training, apart from those marginal cases related especially to the last 40 years (period during which, pop music in Neapolitan has been produced alongside with traditional songs and a 'neo-melodic' song has made its entrance, having however no continuity factors with the tradition, but the use of dialect, which stands out because it is more hybrid, lacking, grammatically and syntactically wrong).

Furthermore, Neapolitan singing has never really required the interpretative *pathos* typical of strained vocal emissions, the consequence of the tightening of neck and throat that enriches with incomparable and powerful charm the other Mediterranean songs, particularly the Andalusian one.

In the peculiar variety of forms and manners of the Neapolitan song, imitations of styles similar to the one I have just described have existed and still exist, but they don't fit with its own intrinsic nature, even the nasalization of sounds is not part of it but the more impatient one is when studying singing the more common this device is. And this behaviour, if we take in consideration the learned and refined Neapolitan singing tradition, represents the biggest of all contradictions.

Another point of consideration on the topic comes from some statements in *I posteggiatori napoletani* (*Neapolitan strolling musicians*) with which the author seems to be describing the style of all the singers of the past rather than just that of the posteggiatori²⁰: for centuries, from the 15th to the 20th century it was going to be « 'folk'... » and it was never going to “ surrender in favour of refined interpretations, from madrigal performance to the aria, to the opera ... ” save ... incursions ... always contained... ”²¹.

Such opinions don't seem to be shared by authoritative scholars on this subject, nor it is easy to understand what the term «... "Folk" style... » means and why what is "folk" cannot be "refined", unless one doesn't wish to get entangled in obsolete, misleading concepts.

But if the attribute 'folk' was used to describe the style of the untrained, uneducated singer, then these conceptions would tend to ignore the singing quality in the very first recordings of famous and not so famous 'folk' interpreters (meaning that they came from the lowest rung of the self-made man practical school) of the early 20th century, like Nicola Maldacea, Vittorio Parisi, Salvatore Papaccio, Gennaro Pasquariello, Elvira Donnarumma, Gilda Mignonette or the quality expressed by a large number of refined professionals we have information about and even more so the quality found in the recordings of opera singers of international renown

such as Caruso, Gigli, Schipa, and more recently Di Stefano and others all probably enchanted and influenced by the singing coming from the streets, those same streets where some among the most famous Neapolitan artists of the time had also studied.

The street, in fact, has produced throughout the world skilful, refined artists and every country preserves the memory of their own artists no matter how famous they might be. Proof is the story of the renowned Edith Piaf.

Nor a rough and ready way of singing, the author seems to attribute to Neapolitan singing by calling to our attention to «...*"Those... gargles" Basile spoke about*», seem fitting for "... *the modulated hyperbole of many itinerant sopranos and tenors...*", described in a 19th century manuscript by some Domenico Palmieri a.k.a *Ciccione (Fatso)*, discovered by Alfonso Miola, one of the librarians of the "*National Library*"²².

Such conceptions don't seem to take in account the vocal skill Neapolitan singing has always required, in the course of its history, because of the emerging melodic structure of the scores, which demand, anyway, the same respect of the dynamic, agogic expression marks the cultured music demand.

The vagueness leads, then, to contradiction when it is concluded that the secular style of the Neapolitan singing would never be 'refined': why would the interpretations proposed by some voices the author himself described as "... *Suitably pitched ...full of tones, suspensions, arabesques* never be considered "...*Refined...*"? And the 'Confusion' increases when we read later on, that «...*Enrico Caruso... always carried in his heart and brain a "way" of singing Neapolitan songs kin to, besides the powerful tone of the voice, the sensitivity and art of the posteggiatori...*».

This "...*Powerful tone...*" wasn't the main feature of Caruso's uniqueness - who, by the way, was starting his career as baritone - the Neapolitan tenor sang 'his' songs with the same zeal he put when he sang opera.

These recorded statements lead us to "establish a kinship" between the singing of the strolling musicians and that of the opera singers.

So, did the strolling musicians sing in a "folk" or "refined" style?

On the other hand, it behoves me to point out how in recent times that of the strolling musicians' has become, more and more of a residual, fall back profession.

In the 18th century, it had to be quite customary to come across street musicians singing coarsely just like it seemed to have happened to Burney in 1770, who, while dealing with the topic of street music in his *The present State of Music in France and Italy*, wrote about two strolling musicians he had met during the first week of his stay in Naples and he defined them 'Admirable' instrumentalists but "*singing...noisily and coarsely ...*"²³

It is therefore certain that the tradition contemplates extemporizing strolling musicians or mediocre *tout court*, but mainly it lists one so lofty it enchanted musicians from different places and classes even some of the most famous 16th century madrigalists in Europe.

Nor the Neapolitan singing tradition can be reduced to that ancient profession! On the contrary: as Scarnecchia reminds us again in Naples there was "*the salon,, the caffè and the theatre*"²⁴. There is also a discography of unexpected quantity and quality, that today is making few selected collectors rich¹¹

What's more, already in the 16th century "*... in Naples they, really, only sang villanellas, in the salons and at the academies, in polyphonic form ... in two, three, four parts, in chorus; in the streets, the squares, on the shores, in the inns, with the accompaniment of various instruments, in monodic form ... Along our Gulf parties of day trippers on boats and feluccas – the first one crammed with common people, ... the second one with gentlemen and gentlewomen ... Singing performances were very important during folk ...fests...*"²⁵

And what can be said of the first public performance of Gaetano Donizetti's *Canzone marenara* in 1835, by Luigi Lablache!²⁶ "*... (Naples 1794 – 1858) considered the most famous bass of*

his time (who) sang in most of the capitals in Europe ...”²⁶ . What about the orchestra performances conducted by renowned conductors? Who launched the new releases at the end of the 19th century? What was the quality of singing of those who, back then, created the conditions for the Neapolitan song to conquer the whole world?

Even if one wants to exhaust the history of Neapolitan singing into that of the strolling musicians one must quote Sebastiano Di Massa, one among the most influential scholar who, in his work on the subject published with Fausto Firentino Publishing House in 1961²⁸ , speaks about strolling singers of old as “*skilful and talented singers and musicians who ... not just the common people appreciated* “ and Vittorio Paliotti ,on the same subject, reminds us that “*... up to the 18th century ... the most refined, talented , well- known musicians ... when they couldn't find a cushy job as `chapel master` , were forced to work as `house musicians` for some aristocrats, or ...some affluent family*” and that young Mozart performed “*... at the court of Prince Conti in Paris*”.²⁹

I will tell you, later on, about Richard Wagner's admiration for a Neapolitan strolling musician. Can you just imagine that 'monstre sacré' of music allowing himself to be enchanted by a singer with an improvised vocal technique, with a voice with no soft ring to it, all `throat and nose`?

The truth is that in Naples, by tradition, singing has always been lived as a true cult by its people and singers have expressed it with considerable skill most of the times. This is another reason why any attempt at defining it with just one adjective would appear inadequate: misleading if defined classical, as much if defined `folk`.