

Introduction

A study of the Neapolitan song, its history, however thorough and detailed, dealing with its musical and poetic viewpoint, would end up giving you a perspective educated on the one hand but dry, boring and probably disappointing on the other, because it would not explain its essential traits which consist of its extraordinary wealth of production in terms of both quantity and quality, and also and mainly its amazing modernity.

Every composition in the Neapolitan language or in the Neapolitan dialect, be it solemn or folk, that can properly qualify as our music unquestionable historical antecedent is always anticipating the times, coming before other music realities or contributing important elements for their birth or development.

This modernity astounds even the most informed, shrewd audience when they are told that that song was composed in 1885 or in 1887 rather than a hundred years earlier, or that that song wasn't composed by a musician but by a doctor, a decorator or a workman....

“...*Core, core, core 'ngrato t' 'e pigliat' 'a vita mia, tutt' è passato...*”

Who has never heard these lines? Is there anyone willing to bet that there isn't at least one tenor in the world who, once finished the opera season, hasn't studied this song or isn't studying it this day and age, in view of summer concerts? Or that the "Three Tenors" have never argued over it in their internationally televised concerts?

Well, *Core 'ngrato* was composed in 1911 in New York 'as a pastime' -as both the authors would say- by the worker-poet Riccardo Cordiferro and the doctor-musician Salvatore Cardillo. Clearly the comment made in the opening words refers to a historical study coming from my own pen, therefore rather than showing off as a musicologist or music historian, I want to talk about some slow processes, about some assumptions on history, environment, custom, collective psychology, that are the foundations of this vast musical heritage and that can, more generally, help you to understand the reasons of a likewise extraordinary singing tradition. Moreover, just one look at the light-blue and purple spines of the *Storia di Napoli, Storia politica ed economica* in ten volumes, three kilos each, would keep me from treating systematically even just one of the different profiles on the history of Naples.

After a mention - only seemingly off the point - to the foundation of the city and after some other historical accounts, I will proceed with muddled considerations, quote precious testimonies, document unequivocal records in the music history of Naples, only after telling two delectable society episodes intentionally chosen from two different periods of the history of Naples, one from Naples in the Greek-Roman period and the other one from Naples at the end of the 18th century with the purpose of arguing other considerations on some aspects crucial for understanding the relationship between the Neapolitans and singing with the intention of communicating a tactile, intimate, sensitive knowledge of the Neapolitan song culture to you so that it may then, belong to you, and through it you may get down to the core of a people which turned singing, both theirs and other people's, into a fundamental *raison d' être*.

That being stated, the necessary references to the different historical periods of the Neapolitan song will be brief and to the point.