Polyphony of Ceriana

The Compagnia Sacco

A Film by Hugo Zemp
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THE MAKING OF THE FILM BY HUGO ZEMP

PREPARATION

After thirty-seven years of working with the CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research) Ethnomusicology Research Group at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris I decided to spend my retirement years in the city of Nice, on the French Riviera. So far I have not heard of any ethnomusicologists who have completely stopped working after they retired and I am no exception. This explains why during my first year, even before moving to Nice, I started to inquire about the music of my new neighborhoods. Luc Charles-Dominique, professor of ethnomusicology at the University of Nice, gave me the transcripts from a symposium about Mediterranean voices (Charles-Dominique and Cler, ed. 2002). An article by one of the participants caught my attention and the song excerpts of the accompanying CD reminded me very much of Eastern Georgian table songs. (I am a great lover of the polyphonic songs of Georgia, where I shot two films in 1991. It was while editing the second one in 2006, that I received the book with the CD). I searched on the web for other recordings of The Compagnia Sacco and ordered them from the producer in Switzerland, asking if there was also a DVD available. The producer sent me four CDs and said she knew about me, having seen my documentary on Solomon Islands music, at a festival in Geneva many years ago, but she did not mention a DVD. A short time later I received a letter with a DVD (see References) from The Compagnia Sacco, inviting me to come to dinner at a Friday evening rehearsal. The DVD, with a great deal of voice-over narration and only short excerpts of singing, did not satisfy my ethnomusicological requirements (and pleasure), so I thought it would be exciting to go to Ceriana and make an entirely different film.

We agreed on a date. For this occasion, The Compagnia Sacco invited Giuliano d’Angiolini, an Italian composer and musicologist, originally from a neighboring valley, who lived and still lives in Paris. I was glad to meet the author of the article that inspired me to make the film. He was familiar with some of my publications and had seen my earlier documentaries when he was a student at the Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Siena (Italy), where the father of Italian ethnomusicology, Diego Carpitella, invited me to a summer seminar in 1984. While in Ceriana, I spoke about my particular way of filming music, distinctive from TV norms and aesthetics. Giuliano strongly supported the project and the members of The Compagnia Sacco accepted the idea. This is how the film making adventure started.

THE EVENTS

Ceriana being only a one and a half hour drive from Nice was easy for me to visit. I went there for a few days at a time on several occasions, between the spring and autumn of 2009.

1. Easter 2009

On Holy Thursday, the afternoon is dedicated to making chestnut bark trumpets and the evening is dedicated to singing by the four brotherhoods in the village church. I did not edit the rushes of the afternoon activities, as they are irrelevant to the gist of the documentary and the singing in the church because the lighting was too dark. After the church service, members of The Sacco and their friends met in the company’s house for a party. That night I filmed 23 songs, of which I only kept one which shows oral song transmission from a member of The Sacco to his lovely son. On Friday, at lunch, I shot two songs and in the evening I shot seven songs. Redentore Rebaudo (second voice), the most senior member and president of The Compagnia Sacco, who does not perform in public anymore, sang with Nicodemo Martini (first voice), since there were now only a few people in the rehearsal room. One song and the eighth stanza of Donna Lombarda can be
found in the final cut. On Friday afternoon we could see the procession of the four laymen brotherhoods singing verses of the sacred chants in Latin by turns. I filmed at different places throughout the village, and kept one long shot in the film.

2. Feast of St. John, 24 June 2009
The religious aspect of the event attracted mainly older women who attended mass inside the mountain church, and a few people outside listening to the priest’s words transmitted through loudspeakers. For most people the Feast of St. John was the occasion to enjoy a picnic with friends and family in a nice mountain glade. The members of The Sacco and their friends spent the day eating, drinking, chatting and, of course, singing. Two unexpected incidents happened that afternoon. First, two ladies walked by, who of course knew the singers sitting at the table of The Compagnia Sacco (everybody knows everybody in the village of Ceriana!) and offered to sing a song. Attilio Lupi, with his cap on backwards like teenage boys in Genoa or New York, who is not a member of The Compagnia Sacco, but the grand-father of one, immediately stood up and started to sing a popular song. Even though “Life is beautiful” does not belong to the repertoire of The Sacco, some of the choir members joined in with a drone. Biancalina Lupi (“a Lerna”), singing next to Attilio, is a member of the women’s choir Mamme Canterine (“Singing Mothers”) who recorded the same song on a CD.
The second incident took place at the end of the afternoon. Giovanni Martini and Attilio Lupi started an argument about the lyrics of the song they had just performed. Their discussion was a heated one (both had previously enjoyed some wine) and quite interesting as it is a first-hand example of oral transmission between two adults. The members of The Compagnia Sacco and their friends were among the last to leave the mountain glade to go down to the village. They were also the only group that was singing at the Feast of St. John in 2009; at least I did not hear any other singers as I walked around. During this event I filmed twenty-seven songs, of which I retained three in the final cut, two stanzas of Donna Lombarda, and two songs plus a long potpourri in the extra features.

3. Meeting The Sacco in Nice, 18 July 2009
Clockwise: Nicodemo Martini, Camillo Rebaudo, Hugo Zemp, Katia Djanaiéff, Mirco Soldano, Giovanni Martini, Claudio Martini, Redentore Rebaudo

So far I had finished my first rough cut of the rushes and I invited some members of The Compagnia to our house for a screening. They liked it and enjoyed the scenes with the small boy singing in his father’s arms as well as the scene of the argument about the lyrics. They were also satisfied with the quality of their singing, with the exception of a trallalero sung together with young people in the rehearsal room on Easter Thursday, which they judged too raucous giving The Compagnia Sacco a bad image. They asked me to delete it, which I did. After lunch on our terrace, they started to sing as they always do after banquets. I filmed six songs, of which I kept only the third stanza of Donna Lombarda in the final cut.

4. Concert, 7 September 2009
While I was primarily interested in their informal singing with friends at local festivities, it was clear from the beginning that I could not ignore their performances on stage in front of an audience. Little by little, as the editing was progressing, it appeared that this two-sided activity was to be the central focus of the film: The Compagnia Sacco drew its repertoire from the local tradition and still presents it to international audiences, and in return the members of the choir continue to nurture and keep alive the village singing of today.
The Sacco usually gives several concerts a year, in different cities in Italy and Europe. Because I did not have the necessary budget, I was not able to follow them on a tour. Since they had told me that singing in their own village was
what gave them the strongest “emotional reaction”, because everybody knew them and their songs, and also because of hair-splitting critics from rival choirs, I waited for the yearly concert they give on the square in front of the parish church. This event also gave me the opportunity to record the other four choirs and to keep at least a short excerpt of each in the documentary.

Following my idea to reproduce the different stanzas of Donna Lombarda in different settings, I asked The Sacco to include this ballad into their program. They agreed, with the only restriction that they would not perform the entire song, since it would take too much time away from the other choirs. Finally they sang stanzas 1 to 4, 7, 9 and 10, of which I kept no. 1, 4, 7 and 9.

After the concert, the mayor of the village invited the choirs and their friends to a dinner in a large room belonging to the town council. The room was full of people. The other choirs left after dinner; only The Sacco stayed. I shot ten songs which, to my regret, I had to decide to discard in the final cut (editing means eliminating!).

On the next day there was a procession to the Madonna della Villa church on the hill above the village. A mass took place inside while a brass band played outside. However I did not include these rushes since The Compagnia Sacco was not represented.


These events were the only ones organized for the purpose of the film. Like in my documentary An African Brass Band, I planned a discussion between the singers on the history of the choir, concert performing, singing with friends and the future of The Compagnia, rather than interviews or voice over narrations. I also wished I had another shot of the sixth stanza in a different environment for the editing of Donna Lombarda. For several months Giovanni Martini had promised me he would invite some young people who were better singers than those present at the Easter party and whose trallalero The Sacco had asked me to delete from the film. The chosen place was the country house of the hunters’ association, of which Nicodemo Martini is an active member. After some very noisy conversations during the meal, the young men and young girls got together with members of The Sacco and sang a few songs of The Compagnia’s repertoire. Then just before leaving, they performed popular songs of their own choice which, in previous times, would not have been thought suitable for girls to sing! The contrast was a striking one between the very rapid popular songs of the young people, soon joined by three members of The Sacco, and the slow traditional songs with a drone bass of The Compagnia Sacco’s repertoire.

Then we started the conversation about the concert that was given two weeks before and the history of the choir. Matteo Lupi, speaker for The Compagnia at concerts, and grandson of Attilio with his backwards cap, started the topics. However, on the following day when we checked the rushes with some of the singers, we found that many parts were really too noisy. I then asked for a second meeting with fewer people. On the following Saturday we met on the terrace of the same country house. That same day there was a mountain biking rally going on and every few seconds the conversations were disturbed by the noise of the cars driving to the competition. I kept three short sequences of this day for the film. The conversations shot the week before were livelier and I finally kept some of them despite the background noise made by the fans.


In October I found my editing was already well advanced but much too long, and I did not think it was necessary to accept the Chestnut Festival invitation. I eventually changed my mind and do not regret it, since it shows not only a different context but also the largest village square, a place that is used for many banquets and festivities. It also gave me the opportunity to film a trallalero belonging to a different polyphonic tradition, that of the Genoese dockers, well-known all over Liguria. Giovanni Martini invited a few friends who were not members of The Compagnia Sacco, others also later joined the ad hoc group, including two or three members. Of the eleven songs, I kept three in the final cut, plus the second stanza of Donna Lombarda.

SHOOTING AND EDITING

As in my previous documentaries, I am still persuaded that long shots, with a single moving handheld camera, are a very useful strategy for filming musicians in the field. Ethno-
graphic filmmakers rarely, let’s say never, have the budget of a large TV team using multiple cameras for symphony or rock concert broadcasting. To vary shots with a single camera, documentary filmmakers frequently use and abuse cut-away shots to bridge the time necessary to change camera positions. Another technique is to ask the musicians to repeat the same tune and then shoot it from different angles, editing the shots together. In cyclic African music it is possible to shorten a sequence by cutting out whole cycles, but not in European songs, which are strophic. I prefer sequence shots showing in real time the relationship between the musicians, and the relationship between the musicians and the people attending the event. In this way the audience at the documentary gets the feeling of being right there, where the camera is, in the heart of the action.

Having listened to the CDs many times before my first visit to Ceriana, I was worried that I could only keep a few songs in their entirety. I had first planned to make a short film, but after the Easter events I gave up the idea! In fact, I noticed that whenever they sang together at informal meetings with friends, the soloists did not perform entire songs, many times only two or three stanzas. For d’Angiolini (see excerpts of his liner notes in the second part of this study guide), shortening lyrics by The Compagnia Sacco is a new trend which appears for songs “whose narration is really long or whose slow tempo is at odds with the fast pace of today’s world.”

With the exception of Donna Lombarda (see below), my intention was to keep all songs without cuts from beginning to end. However there are a few exceptions for technical reasons. At the beginning of the two songs performed at Easter in the house of The Compagnia, the camera was not stabilized or well focused, as I never knew in advance which singer would begin or when a new song would begin. This is why, for Stanotte in sogno and for ’A figlia d’in paisan, I anticipated the sound from the preceding shot. This is a very common procedure in editing, which I find less disturbing than cut-away shots in the middle of a performance. In two songs I made a cut between two stanzas because of bad camera movements (Stanotte in sogno and, in the extras, La Violetta). At the Chestnut Festival, the ad hoc formation sang two stanzas of a trallalero. I decided to cut at the end of the first stanza, after the panning to the village square full of people; panning back to the singers in the same shot was visually unsatisfactory. The only other songs I did not reproduce in their entirety were those performed by the members of The Sacco and the young people. For the first song (La Marietta), I kept only the first stanza and for the second (A Pinota), I kept only the last stanza since they appear at the end of the film and the documentary was already quite long.

Donna Lombarda is an emblematic ballad of Northern Italy –Lombardy is a province north of Liguria– and a standard of The Compagnia Sacco’s repertoire. As the performance of the ten stanzas takes nearly ten minutes, even though the verses are short, I thought of editing each stanza using alternate shots from different meetings with friends as well as shots from the concert. This was possible because the singers use a pitch pipe allowing them to have the exact pitch in all performances of the same song but in fact, the eighth stanza sung in the house of The Compagnia was too low while the last stanza at the Feast of St. John, too high. I want to thank Giuliano d’Angiolini for having corrected the pitch with the sophisticated software he had as a composer, by raising the former 80 cents, and lowering the latter 50 cents (in acoustic measurements of intervals, the semitone of the well-tempered scale equals 100 cents; thus an interval of 80 cents is a bit smaller than a semitone, 50 cents correspond to a quarter tone). I also need to thank my special editing adviser, Jean-Christian Nicaise, for suggesting to start the film straightaway with Donna Lombarda. Without comments, this long sequence allows the audience to discover the two-sided activity of The Compagnia Sacco and thus the main gist of the documentary. So, before they can view the “establishing shots” that show the beautiful mountain village, the audience has to be patient and wait a little while!

After the concert, some members of The Sacco asked me why I did not come up on the stage, like the TV cameraman did for regional TV news or coverage. I answered that I stepped back on purpose, as I adopted the perspective of a member of the audience sitting at a distance from the stage. On the other hand, during informal singing with friends, I favored a subjective, participatory camera, being part of the party, adjusting my position and framing according to what was
happening. In the sequence of the colorful procession, what is seen on screen continually changes without interruption. The participants of the procession moved for me!

At the concert, to avoid the monotony of static shots with a single framing, I set two cameras side by side on tripods, one camera covering the whole stage and part of the audience in the foreground in backlight, the other camera with a long focus position of the zoom lens for tight shots with panning. To facilitate the editing of conversations, I also set two cameras, side by side on tripods, with different focal lengths, or used a second hand-held camera from a different shooting angle.

**BODY POSITIONS AND MOVEMENTS**

Right at the beginning of the film, one can see the intense concentration of the lead singers. Giovanni Martini starts with the second voice. He puts his right hand to his ear in a gesture very common in European traditional collective singing (and even in Africa where I photographed the same gesture among the Dan people of Côte d’Ivoire). When Mirco Soldano joins in to repeat the first line with the name of *Donna Lombarda*, Giovanni turns towards him and gives him a look. Then Giovanni makes a slight downward then upward movement with his upper body, which gives the beat for the entree of the bass of the choir, and he then looks at those of the choir who are on his left. When it is time for the first voice to come in, he turns to look at Demo Martini on his right. In later stanzas, he does not feel it necessary to give these cues to the singers on his left, so he only interacts with the first voice singer on his right.

As it is easy to see from the shots of the concert, The Compagnia Sacco does not sing under the direction of a conductor, while the other four choirs do, some of their members can even be seen holding musical scores, or only lyrics in their hands just in case. Another difference is that the soloists of The Sacco move on stage, even though not in the same way as pop singers!

At concerts, Demo Martini, the singer of the top voice frequently changes his weight from his left to his right foot which is set at a slight distance apart, giving his body a gentle movement, a kind of slow irregular rhythmic swaying to and fro towards the middle voice singer, often but not systematically at the end and/or at the beginning of a verse, or at another moment of accentuation. Furthermore, soloists also frequently flex their knees, going down for a moment and then stand up straight again.

**NICODEMO MARTINI AND MIRCO SOLDANO**

In the editing process, during the lengthy viewing of the rushes, some features catch the eye which might get unnoticed or might be less obvious while attending a concert or witnessing informal singing with friends. It concerns glances, attitudes, gestures, body postures and movements, non-verbal communication.
In 2006 I filmed similar body movements at the Notre-Dame de la Visitation yearly festival at the mountain chapel of Vievola, up the village of Tende, in the hinterland of Nice. This village didn’t become French until 1947 and is inhabited by many people originally from Piedmont, the neighboring Italian province. The senior lead singer, who sang in Italian, about seventy years old, regularly went down onto his knees, simultaneously twisting his chest when straightening up. In other Italian regions, folk singers apparently do not move in this way. Are these movements characteristic of singers from western Liguria and neighboring southwestern Piedmont?

Italian ethnomusicologist Francesco Giannatasio, after the screening of the film in Rome, suggested that the flexing of the knees by Ceriana singers might be a kind of echo of body movements of instrumentalists, such as those of leaders of small brass bands, i.e. cues to coordinate collective music making without a conductor. Members of The Sacco also told me that the soloists contribute to coordinating the songs through their body movements.

But this is not the only explanation. Cues to start a verse or a section of a verse could be given with head movements and looks (which also exist), or movements of the hand, like those of a choirmaster or of the leading singer of other small vocal groups without a conductor. When singing at informal moments with friends, the cohesion and absolute synchronization of the voices are less important. Why then flex the knees and sometimes make a slight contortion of the head like Giannino Ferrari in ‘A figlia d’in paisan? In this song, he and Giovanni Martini alternate their knee flexing. Singers of The Sacco told me that these movements, both horizontal and vertical, express their deep feelings for the lyrics and their satisfaction of singing “in perfect harmony” (in all senses of the word, musical and social). They have seen their elders sing this way. Body postures and movements are orally transmitted just like the polyphonic singing style. See also the analysis by Guizzi, Meandri and Raschieri of the relationships between body movements and the harmonic structure of Donna Lombarda (“Polyphonies of Ceriana: Current Research Perspectives, Future Cues”, pg. 24, in “Related Resources” on the web page of this film).

At informal meetings with friends, other gestures express their profound fraternity and the great pleasure they have singing together. Giovanni Martini likes to put his arms around the shoulders of the singers sitting next to him. Soloists like to sit or stand next to each other and when they are at a greater distance, for example around a table, they bend towards each other.

The five-minutes shot of the ballad E tre figliete at the Feast of St. John reveals the subtle interactions with non-verbal communication between soloists who change their parts of the polyphony. Let’s remember that it is always the singer of the middle voice, called secondo in Ceriana, which starts the incipit, the opening words of a song, while the singer of the top voice, primo, and the bass of the choir enter afterwards. Giovanni, sitting, starts, and Nicodemo standing at the end of the table bends towards him, singing the primo. As the first stanza is finished, Attilio Lupi, sitting (off frame) opposite to Giovanni, wants to start the second stanza, but he makes a mistake in the order of the first words (Severina, the pretti-est). Giovanni corrects this and sings with Nicodemo. Then, surprisingly, Attilio quickly starts the third stanza (She sailed for three days); Nicodemo bends over to him singing the top
voice, while Giovanni, excluded as soloist, joins the collective drone bass. For the fourth stanza (“O fisherman of the waves!"), Attilio passes over the secondo to Giovanni, in making a gesture and saying “Vai, vai!” (“Go, go!”), and changes his part in singing now the first voice. Since Attilio is not well framed, I go backwards to the end of the table, but there stands Nicodemo with his black T-shirt preventing me from getting a better view. So I go around and arrive at the end of the stanza with the view of Giannino, singing the drone bass with two guests from Sweden and Belgium. I am just in time to capture the beginning of the fifth stanza (“Fish for my little ring"), where Giovanni turns his head and looks up to Nicodemo who takes over the primo. For the sixth stanza (“When I have caught it"), Giovanni turns and looks again at Attilio, who takes over the primo, getting up from his seat four times and bending over the table, expressing his pleasure in singing closely with Giovanni (these rhythmic movements remind singing on stage, described earlier). Giovanni changes his partner again for the sixth stanza (“A hundred coins of gold"), turning towards Nicodemo, while Attilio smokes his cigarette. Just before the final note, Giovanni looks at Attilio, pointing his finger upwards to give him the sign to sing the final note at the upper octave. Satisfied with the pleasure of having well performed a fine song together, Giovanni claps his hands once and with other singers, he shouts “Bravi!” (plural of bravo).

In this ballad, soloists mostly look at each other; this is because they change partners and voices of the polyphony. In most other songs, once eye contact is made with Nikodemo who sings the primo, Giovanni Martini feels the song so strongly that he often sings with his eyes closed. Theatrical gestures – who would be surprised? – are another favored physical expression which he does not fail to use when he sings the few verses of the two operas that appear in the potpourri of the extra features. Redentore Rebaudo also likes using gestures to enhance the lyrics. In a minor register, at the end of Stanotte in sogno, he expresses his affection for and satisfaction to be singing again with Nicodemo Martini, his privileged partner for many years, by touching him his arm in a gentle and unobtrusive way.

POSTSCRIPT

The Premiere took place in Ceriana, on 30 July 2010, after a banquet, with two simultaneous open-air screenings, one on the main village square and the other on a smaller adjacent square. Three Italian ethnomusicologists – Giuliano d’Angiolini, Mauro Balma, Febo Guizzi, all having studied the polyphony of Ceriana for many years – introduced me and my work and discussed the film. Of course, after the audience had left, the members of The Compagnia Sacco and their friends met in the room of the town council to celebrate the event with food, wine, and songs until late in the night.

The second public screening, in a cinema on the main street of Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, during the 5th International Symposium on Traditional Polyphony, in early October, was a great success. The similarity with East Georgian table songs probably sparked the enthusiasm of the audience. Some viewers were deeply moved and came to thank me for having presented the film in Tbilisi. Apparently the Georgian audience was more familiar with choirs singing on stage and had not often seen documentaries showing table songs performed in the traditional context of banquets.

The third screening, in November 2010, took place at the University of Turin, at a seminar about my film work, organized by Febo Guizzi. The fourth was at a seminar in memory of Italian ethnomusicologist Diego Carpitella. Since his death in 1990, the screenings of ethnomusicological and anthropological films, which he organized for many years, have been discontinued. In 1980, he invited me to show my first two films on Solomon Islands music at the Italian Association for Scientific Film in Rome. Being invited thirty years later to present my latest film about an Italian choir at the Materiali di Antropologia Visiva in Rome, I felt deeply honored to be able to contribute to the homage given for this pioneer.

The last screening in 2010 was organized in Paris by the French Society for Ethnomusicology, which financially contributed to the film.

Finally, I would like to thank Monique Wengierski and Jennifer Prowe for revising the English of my text.

I am also grateful to Giuliano d’Angiolini for having given the authorization, together with his publisher Buda Records, to include excerpts of the liner notes of the CD (see below).
My special thanks go to Febo Guizzi, Ilario Meandri and Guido Raschieri from the University of Turin, Department of music, visual and performing arts studies. Their article “Polyphonies of Ceriana: Current Research Perspectives, Future Cues”, reproduced in the “Related Resources” on the web page of this film, is more than just a companion to the film. This essay, especially written for the film, is so far the most comprehensive study in English about the singing traditions and the musical life of Ceriana.

January 2011

Mirco Soldano and son Sebastiano
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d’Angiolini, Giuliano

Guizzi, Febo ; Meandri, Ilario ; Raschieri, Guido

DISCOGRAPHY (CD ONLY)

Compagnia Sacco


Lomax, Alan (recordings)


FILMOGRAPHY

2. EXCERPTS FROM THE LINER NOTES
BY GIULIANO D’ANGIOLINI

OF THE CD
Italie: Polyphonies vocales de Ligurie. La Compagnia Sacco
di Ceriana
Buda Records (collection “Music from the World”), 3018100.

WITH COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR AND BUDA RECORDS

IN 1930

THE SINGERS

The only definite document on the creation of La Compagnia Sacco is its statutes, defining it as a cultural association and dating back to 1960. Yet various accounts attest to its existence as early as the late twenties. At a time when musical tradition and the environment in which it could be expressed did not undergo the present-day crisis, its constitution as an official formation may surprise. It must have come to ratify an arrangement that already linked its members, possibly following the example of Genoese trallalero groups or Alpini (Alpine hunters). It is also possible that the large number of active singers in Ceriana justified the need for them to group together so as to better stand apart from one another.

Eventually, La Compagnia Sacco has ended up playing an official part in the musical life of the village. Even so, up to this day it has never been a ‘folk’ group with the derogatory sense of being artificial and lacking authenticity. It is true that certain important ‘spontaneous’ occasions (such as gatherings in wine cellars, meetings at the local inn, work in the fields etc), which once provided as many opportunities to sing, have now disappeared. Nevertheless, people still sing a lot in Ceriana, and many know or are interested in the tradition. This village located in the Ligurian pre-Alps of the San Remo Valley has four brotherhoods, all of them very active. At Easter celebrations, they have prime of place in the long village processions where most their members sing. A very lively musical village, Ceriana also includes a number of groups whose repertoire is devoted to secular songs. Yet many of these groups have changed the essential character that made this polyphony’s specificity. By introducing structural elements originating in erudite music and by taking considerable distance from the specific local musical language, they have watered it down. On the contrary, La Compagnia Sacco truly conforms to the traditional style and is the living product of oral culture. Over the past decades, a large number of its members have practiced this form of singing in its traditional environment, perpetuating old stylistic modes.

Nevertheless, the reduced opportunities previously mentioned and the weakening of their underlying collective circumstances, along with the rise of new opportunities (recording and stage shows), have brought about slight changes. These new situations (which do not exclude more spontaneous events inherent to village life) tend to result in some uniformity. They drive people to polish their singing and ‘clean up’ their songs, bringing these closer to a definite, almost crystallised object. They also give rise to greater strictness in the performance and this rigorousness tends to erase the differences that formerly existed between songs. Furthermore, La Compagnia Sacco has decided to take the line of orthodoxy and to always sing “with a drone” – this for all songs, even those which originally did not include one (La figlia del capitano), or which were sung in four polyphonic parts (Barcaiol).  

Today, the members of La Sacco follow different dynam-
ics. On the one hand, they ensure that they retain the most important aspects of the tradition, starting with the style of interpretation and its ornamentation. They make sure that they scrupulously respect the song form and its polyphonic structure, as well as all essential elements of the musical syntax. They adopt a specific vocal posture to emit the drone, whose sound paste has the ruggedness of reed instruments. On the other hand, they exert great control over themselves and tend to define every detail, which leads them to partly inhibit personal initiative. The habit of singing together in a set formation has brought about greater parallelism in the production of ornamental formulas and, more generally, homogeneity. One can note that younger singers have introduced slight changes in their performing style and adopted a more relaxed vocal emission.

A new trend has appeared lately, which goes towards shortening lyrics. It is a change of attitude vis-à-vis the musical object. Not all songs are concerned, but notably those whose meaning has become obscure, at times because the erosion of the lyrics already started in the past. This phenomenon also concerns songs whose narration is really long or whose slowness is too much at odds with the fast pace of today’s world.

In order to be fully appreciated, such a ballad as Donna Lombarda—which, for that matter, is still performed in its entirety—requires that listeners totally give themselves over to the music. Indeed, it invites one to settle in timeless slowness and repetition, two fundamental factors of this aesthetics and the thought that generated it. Such is the choice that these interpreters have set for themselves, yet it does not exclude that they prize history and are sensitive to what it evokes. A while ago, one of the soloists told me that he could not interpret the song “E come mai, mia cara Emma?” because of the sad event it relates. Indeed, singing is experienced with true intensity. In Donna Lombarda, for example, one can hear the special emphasis that Redentore Rebaudo (a historical pillar of La Sacco and an exceptional interpreter) puts into the words “devi morir” (“you must die”). For that matter, very expressive mimics and body postures accompany these words.

Modernity has thus brought along a number of changes, yet La Compagnia Sacco represents a living reality totally in keeping with the tradition it aims to perpetuate. This, they do with enthusiasm and sensitivity, taking care to retain its most fragile aspects and not to violate its essence. With both passion and intelligence, they champion the most authentic repertoire, exalting its charm and beauty. These singers are endowed with great musical qualities and their interpretations have an immediate impact, as can be seen from the documents gathered here.

**DRONE POLYPHONY**

The musical forms in use in Ceriana pertain to a larger ensemble, specific to Northern Italy. They belong to this vast family on account of their general character, their melodic content, their harmonic structure and their vocal style. The polyvocality once found in this extended geographical area—including close to Ceriana—did not always call for a strict, formal order of roles exactly distributed between participants. There were sometimes informal accumulations of parts, piling up on to one another as participants joined in. On the contrary, in Ceriana there are three polyphonic parts: a soloist in the high-pitched register (locally called “primo”, the first), a soloist in the middle register (“secondo”) and a drone in the lower range, placed on the dominant and rendered by a large number of singers. This layout is very singular: the presence of a drone to accompany the main melodies is not current elsewhere in Italy. Nevertheless, one must consider that it is an implicit option, which follows the harmonic laws governing most songs from these regions. These songs often oscillate between the tonic and the dominant. The natural solution suggested by this structure is therefore a pedal point on the dominant (which tends to resolve to the tonic at the end of a phrase).

The movements of the solo voices follow a paradigmatic model common to other polyvocalities in Northern Italy, favouring parallel thirds. Yet it should be specified that such a model is not rigidly applied and other harmonic relations can

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2 “La madre risuscitata”, Nigra 39 (see note 11).
3 Track 6, ca. 8’45”.

4 It was probably more widely spread in the past. A few years ago, it could be found in the neighboring village of Baiardo and in Porto Maurizio. There are also drone polyphonies in Southern Italy, amongst communities hailing from Albania. These belong to another cultural family, have other origins and have no relation with the ones dealt with here.
take place, either owing to diverging ornamentations between soloists or because of a true contrapuntal choice.

Soloists have a role of prime importance as they must ensure certain qualities of interpretation and their voices must have the adequate tone colour. For these reasons, few are those who take up the task. Beyond the care put into the fulfilment of all these formal aspects, the music of Ceriana stands apart for its distinctive elaboration of melodic lines. The very same songs, which in other regions or even in places close to this village are based on simple melodies, are structured in a more sophisticated way here, on melodies with ample breath. As often as not, this polyphony frees itself from the metric regularities imposed by measure, and quite often manages without a regular tactus – such modes of execution as generally pertain to older forms of songs. All this makes up the prize and originality of this tradition.

THE REPERTOIRE

The ballad is at the centre of the secular repertoire and it represents its most ancient layer. It was the form of narrative song that asserted itself in the Late Middle Ages in many countries of Northern Europe (and sporadically in the south). In those places it is almost always monodic, while in Italy ballads are frequently sung in polyphony. They nevertheless also exist as soloist songs, so that –even in Ceriana– the same song can be found in two versions, one monodic and one polyphonic.

Ballads comprise several stanzas and long verse lines of imprecise, even variable meter. A type of versification frequently encountered presents an approximate alternation of seven and eight syllables, as well as oxytone and paroxytone inflexions. Lines can include assonances, yet they can just as well exist without them. Narrations have the same style and topics as are to be found in fairy tales (and sometimes they coincide with those). Characters correspond to recurrent emblematic figures: kings, sons of king, knights, young maids of wedding age, young brides, beggars, shepherdesses etc. Scenarios refer to medieval atmospheres and landscapes. They feature such characteristic dramaturgic means as disguise, role changes and their ensuing ambiguities, alteration of behavioural norms, abduction, war and betrayal.

Two types of enunciation are blended: the narration is first told in the third person, with the distance and objectivity that come from an outside look on things. Yet direct discourse often occurs in the shape of short dialogues featuring the protagonists themselves. It is like going from wide shot to close up and reversely. Moods, feelings and emotions are rarely expressed in words (as we shall see, that is what music is there for). Sometimes, a brief moral comment is uttered, but only at the end. Although it can linger on with much detail and repetitions, this form is rather plain and severe, depicting the essential traits of situations and lacking in psychological introspection.

In Ceriana, there are also many non-narrative songs. The oldest among them were formed from strambotti. A strambotto is a one-stanza composition with eleven-syllable lines that either rime or are in assonance. Originally, these structural traits pertained first and foremost to the poetry of Southern Italy. They made their way into northern regions via erudite literature, which adopted these formal typologies. In the same way that ballads are to be found in the south of Italy –although they are not prominent in the repertoire—the strambotto or stornello can be encountered in northern regions. Among these songs of Northern Italy, it is therefore necessary to differentiate those that are specifically narrative from those of the lyric type (such as the strambotto). Nevertheless, it seems to me that the latter rarely reach the degree of abstraction they attain in the poetry of the south. In many traditions of Northern Italy—for instance in Ceriana—one has the feeling that all these songs contain a few elements of narration. This is especially true when various strambotti follow one another to make up a composition of several stanzas (as in Lenga serpentina and ‘U mese du grano). So narrative songs not only

5 Donna Lombarda, for example, regularly alternates paroxytone and oxytone inflexions and has but a few assonances.

6 The story of Paire de Catarina (“La guerriera”, Nigra 48), which is no longer sung in Ceriana but still was in the 50s and 60s, is that of a tale of oral tradition collected by Nerucci and called “Fantajhë, persona bella” (Gherardo Nerucci, Sessanta novelle popolari, Firenze, 1891, reprinted under the direction of R. Fedi, Rizzoli, Milano 1988). This theme of the “virgin-warrior” is commonly found in European countries.

7 The practice of improvised—or originally improvised—distich is found along the Adriatic Coast, up to the region of Venice. Yet there are no traces of it in Ceriana, and there aren’t any stornells there either.
prevail in terms of quantity but also serve as models for other poetry-and-music forms.

In the analytic approach of these repertoires, people have studied lyrics but underestimated music and its semantic properties. Long before the literary material, music proceeds in formal constructions of the narrative type. ‘U mese du granu is not a ballad, yet it has a precise, expressive gestuality. Its formal envelope – in the choral phase – is a parabola made of three arcs whose curves are gradually less pronounced. Once one reaches the summit of any of these curves, tension can no longer be sustained and one ends up falling back somewhere around the starting point. The momentum progressively lacks strength. Vigour decreases in intensity, in a movement of withdrawal accentuated in fine by a cadence whose plaintive accents lower the melody – in the high-pitched voice – towards the major third. Long before the words are uttered, the melody seems to be saying that from the object of love the song is about, one will have to accept betrayal and final separation.

In conclusion, it can be said that narrative intentions and effects of narrative function pertain to the music independently from linguistic utterance.

Polyphonic songs of the narrative type usually follow the same development sequence. The soloist performs the overture as a simple enunciation of the treated subject, without affective inflexions. Its characteristics are musical neutrality and purely informative objectivity. This melody is usually built on the triad, expressed in simple figures and performed to a fast tempo whose character is light and relaxed. It is then the task of the chorus to develop the deeper, lyric and dramatic aspects of the narrative material. In the choral repeat an emotive amplification takes place, stemming from heightened tension, ample melodic inspiration, pathos, sound thickness and harmony – the latter introducing the poignant sweetness of the major third. This process aims to create a contrast between the enunciation of the event, bluntly described as a chronicle, and the stirring movement that follows. In its choral phase, the music supplies the narration with heart-rending inspiration tinted with pity and assuming an epic dimension. It arouses emotion even though the lyrics imply nothing of such poetic depth.

The story of ‘A Barbiera makes one foresee implications and a development that are not explicitly written. Its literary composition merely ‘suggests’ – soberly, even obscurely, cryptically – whereas its music introduces a pathetic force and expressive amplitude that open up a new horizon on these lyrics, so that one feels that the episode in question has become a dramatic event. Music gives it feeling, comparable to that encountered in the story of Donna Lombarda. The sentence “Ma paura ne ho” (“but I’m afraid”) becomes a sad lament. One savours at length the melancholy taste of the word “speranza” (hope). When the barber woman finally decides to cut the stranger’s beard, music evokes the tragedy of a destiny – better still, of all destinies. It seems to be saying that, in essence, fate is tragic. One of the sources of emotion that singing provides the singer stems from the fact that the themes conveyed in his songs concern the lives of everyone of us, with all their burdens of pain and suffering. This is where the secret of this and other kin traditions lies: whatever the narrative content, music adds on thick melancholy, a sentimental load and a depth of feeling that go far beyond what a mere reading of the lyrics may suggest. It works in a subtle way in relation to the narration. Let’s see the case of Donna Lombarda: while the narrative develops a story, the music neutralizes itself in the repeat of an everlasting present. Everything takes place as though the related event was not so much a special alteration of the state of the world as the expression of its constant nature, its true essence. With its cyclic, immutable structure and in such a system of pathos amplification, the ballad represents what is unavoidable and the immanent anticipation of the tragedy to come. It expresses its dramatic constancy and the sorrow stemming from the evocation of a deed past done.

8 On the contrary, the melodies of the stornelli from Central and Southern Italy are, in most cases, semantically neutral.
10 In the present album, this is the case with ‘A barbiera, ‘A figlia d’in paisan, Donna Lombarda, Barcaiolo and ‘U mese du granu — as we have said, the latter is not, strictly speaking, a narrative song.
THE SONGS

Note by H. Zemp: In the booklet published by Buda records, there are short descriptions of the twelve songs on the CD, of which eight songs are also in the film. Only the descriptions of these eight songs are reproduced here. Furthermore, a PDF file on the CD reproduces the complete song texts in Italian or dialect, as well as English (and also French) translation of the lyrics. The reader interested in the lyrics should refer to the CD, since the soloists mostly did not sing complete song texts in the film.

1. ’E tre figliete (“La pesca dell’anello”, Nigra 66)
This album starts with a well-known ballad found in many regions of Italy and in France. The shortening of the lyrics has transformed the meaning of the seventh stanza and in the present conclusion the fisherman is rewarded with a hundred gold coins and a kiss. This ending, which does away with the original moral advice (for that matter, it is still remembered) stating that he does not want to be paid and only wants a ‘kiss of love’. As opposed to such a song as Donna Lombarda, the musical atmosphere in this piece is just as soft and serene as the lyrics.

2. ’A Barbiera (“La barbiera francese”, Nigra 33)
In general, each text has its specific music. Yet some melodies can be applied to various lyrics and the same poetic composition can be put to different melodies. This bears witness to the whole elaboration work that has taken place throughout the ages. In Ceriana, there are two versions of ’A Barbiera with almost the same lyrics but not the same music. This ballad is also found in France where, according to Nigra, it originated from. The lyrics are incomplete, the collective memory having definitely forgotten what follows. The song is about betrayal, yet even in the more complete versions listed by Nigra, this possibility is only hinted at, there is no dramatic development. Originally – in French versions – the barber woman rejects the man’s advances and asserts her faithfulness to her lover.

3. ’A Pinota
’A Pinota has features that pertain to ballads, starting with its versification principles. Nevertheless, it does not appear in the collection established by Nigra. It is a narrative song indeed, yet its subject is rather light-hearted and expresses a simple idea, treated in a slightly expeditious fashion. These characteristics differ from that encountered in more archaic ballads. While it is true that the arguments of ballads are not necessarily stern, what makes them stand out, nevertheless, is the presence of precise topoi: situations, places, and mythicised characters, which contribute to create a special atmosphere. Even when they are very concise, the most emblematic among them always introduce narrative complications and certain mystery in the formulation. Therefore, ’A Pinota could well have been created more recently than other songs. The melody, which brings to mind the songs of the mondine (the women who work in rice fields), is very simple; this could also indicate its relative modernity. However, in this case – as would be the case elsewhere – the characteristic musical style of Ceriana makes sure to sophisticate it and make it more varied.

5. ’A figlia d’in païsan (“Cattivo custode”, Nigra 50)
Again, this ballad is often found in Italy as well as in Provence (“Le Louisoun”). It has the mysterious charm of a fairy tale and is characterised by a somewhat elliptic narration thread. In certain versions from other regions, it is clearer and includes a bitter conclusion. The young maid who has been abducted is held in a goal, and after seven years a small window looking onto the street is opened, but she remains in captivity. This is what the Ceriana version omits to indicate. She sees her father, or someone else she knows, go by and ask how she is. Whether to defend her honour or to reassure those who care for her, she says she is happily married to the most handsome man in the army. For both the singers and their audience, the logic of the narration is not the only criterion.
to appreciate these songs. Its musical sentimentally isolates a word or a phrase and this suffices to evoke a whole fascinating world, which sharpens and fulfils our imagination. This song has been entirely retained in the memory of singers. I personally recorded its full version by some of the village elders, who still performed a few years ago.

6. Donna Lombarda (idem, Nigra 1)
This famous ballad has been much commented on. Contrary to others, it seems to refer to a historical character who really existed and who has become legendary: Rosmunda, queen of the Lombards. This is the story as it was told in medieval sources: Alboino, the king of the Lombards, at war with Cunimondo, the king of the Gepides, kills the latter and weds his daughter Rosmunda, who becomes the queen of the Lombards. Chronicles relate an especially colourful episode that has remained in the Italian imaginative world: Alboino forces Rosmunda to drink from a cup made with the skull of her father Cunimondo. She takes revenge by allying with Alboino’s brother Elmichi and driving him to kill Alboino. She then becomes the mistress of the Ravenna prefect Longino and resolves to kill Elmichi by giving him a poisoned drink. When he sees that he has been poisoned, he threatens her with his sword and forces her to drink too. Beyond the reference to a female character explicitly called the “Lombard woman”, various elements of the narration correspond to the old chronicle. This especially upsetting story has enjoyed great notoriety throughout the Middle Ages and even later. It appears in Jacobus de Varagine’s Golden Legend, which probably accounts for its success. The Golden Legend was widely disseminated until the late 15th century. This book was a must in the library of any man of letters, and surely there must have been versions that circulated amongst the common people. So that was perhaps the time when oral tradition drew its inspiration from the chronicle of this highly dramatic event evoking Shakespeare. The circulation of this ballad all over Italy bears witness to its old age. The expressive qualities of its music can be heard in numerous details. This is not the place to provide an exhaustive analysis of its musical processes but one can note, for example, the way the melody emphasizes the dramatic essence in some phrases, when the choir repeats certain lines: “ma ne ho paura” (“yet I’m scared”), “fa’llo morire” (“make him die”), “o moglie mia” (“Oh, my wife”).

9. Stanotte in sogno
Stanotte in sogno is a recent creation from both a musical and poetic standpoint. The meter alternating lines of eleven and ten syllables, the use of Italian rather than a dialect, the lexicon, all indicate that it is the work of a modern poet adopting an affected style to imitate classical authors. This is not a narrative song, neither is it a lyrical song of the strambotto or stornello types. Since it is a recent creation, it has travelled less than other songs, yet traces of it have been found in the Canavese and Trentino. The lyrics sung in Ceriana are apparently incomplete. In Tende, in the southern France department of Alpes Maritimes where a community of Piedmont origin has settled, I had the opportunity to collect what could well be the last stanza. It confirms the interpretation that Redentore Rebaudo makes of this song: the narrator does not dream about a woman he longs for, but about his dead wife.

10. La Marietta
Contrary to custom, which imposes that the drone remains on the dominant, in this piece bass voices go down to the subdominant. This is the best possible proof that this song is recent. It resembles those of the “Alpini”, which have been known in post-war years. This one has a light tone to it, in both the argument and the music, and lacks the moral suggestions that one finds in narrative songs. Singers like this elation, whose aim is entertainment. La Marietta is poles apart from the committed strictness of great ballads.

13. ‘U mese du granu
‘U mese du granu has resulted from grouping together isolated strambotti. Its formal language seems to be of erudite

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15 Mauro Balma provided this information. Cf. Voci e canti originali del Canavese vol.1, under the direction of A. Vigliermo, Cetra Folk, LPP 333, Italia, 1976. The further back a song is rooted, the more it spreads geographically and differs musically, as well as - to a lesser extend - poetically.

16 Per non lasciarti a sospirare / Perché nel sogno tu mi hai veduta / Solo nel mondo e l’ho perduta / E notte e giorno pensando a te (So that you do not remain in yearning / because you saw me in your dream / I am alone in the world, I have lost her / Day and Night I think of you)

17 A Piedmont strambotto corresponding to the third stanza of our song can be found in Nigra’s book Stella Diana, fammi ‘a po’ na grassia / Fammi veder l’amur quandu che ’l passa / Quando che ’l passa,
origin. Some of its formulas bring to mind a poetic genre that was current in early Renaissance, mixing hints at stil novo with a style of folk inspiration. Starting from well-known strambotti, people create new ones. They are stringed together into composition of several stanzas, ensuring a semblance of logical unity and the germ of a narration. Amongst traditional environments, such a creative process shows the strong attraction of narrativity. As we have seen with Lenga serpentina, this phenomenon has been repeated, even in recent years. The present poetic composition stands halfway between the pure, subjective lyricism of the strambotto and the objective look that the ballad takes at real events. It expresses unhappy love with very evocative images. In Ceriana, this song is considered as beautiful and important. As to some of its musical aspects, readers can go back to what I have put forward in the preceding paragraph.

Giuliano d’Angiolini,
translated by Dominique Bach

passerà cantando / Gli occhi bassi e nel core suspirando (Nigra, 1974, pag. 704).

18 The expression “Stella Diana” (Star Diana) symbolises female purity. Since Antiquity, it has referred to the morning star dawning to the orient, and metaphorically to a very pure woman of luminous beauty (l’è naitu cu ina rösa in mano, “A beautiful girl is born with a rose in her hand”). Furthermore, in religious literature this figurative meaning also applies to the Madonna, which explains the sentence: Ô Diana Stella faimene ina grasia (“Ô Diana Stella grant me a favour”). This rhetorical figure, as well as that which compares the beauty of women to that of roses, belong to 15th century literature, and came about with the dolce stil novo. They are thus featured in a lauda by Guido Guinizelli: Io voglio del ver la mia donna laudare / ed assembrarli la rosa e lo giglio: / più che stella diana splende e pare / e ciò ch’è lassù bello a lei somiglia (“I want to weave praises for my lady / compare her to roses and lilies / She appears and shines more than the star Diana / and the beauty that lies in the sky resembles her”). In poems by Lorenzo de Medici (“La Nencia da Barberino”) one can read: Io t’assomiglio a la stella diana [...] Ed in quel mezzo ell’è come la rosa [...] (“to my eyes you are like the star Diana, gleaming like a rose”).
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