

Giovanni Vacca

## **The Street, the Voice, the Print: Overturning the Sources in the Making of a Book**

The Neapolitan Song is mainly a genre of the past. Apart from the historical recordings, to work at it using print as a primary source of information appears obvious. Many books about the subject were written in such a way. When I decided to write “my” book about the Neapolitan Song,<sup>1</sup> I had been studying Southern Italian folklore for years, following itinerant singers and all sorts of outdoor rituals in many remote villages. Trying to imagine if and how such a traditional culture had become part of the “Old Naples” (that is to say before the city was largely torn down and rebuilt at the end of 19th century), it became natural for me to start going around its streets, while visiting libraries to look for documents. But books and printed sources soon turned out to be only a trace of a work that had to be done mainly in the open air, in order to establish how the mutation of the city had allowed the Neapolitan Song to become a dominant force in the local culture, superseding all pre-existing popular musical forms. I discovered that for my book I spent more time in the streets than in consulting printed sources. The investigations in the city, the listening to what was left of its music, the conversations with old witnesses led to an overturning of the sources for the book: the printed sources were actually giving way to something based on the direct observation of the city and of its living culture.

It is always difficult to discuss one’s own work without risking being self-complacent if not narcissistic. Sometimes, though, you may happen to become aware that your way of working differs radically from the way your colleagues work and you begin to wonder why there is such a difference. I will try to discuss how I worked at my last book and how I related to libraries: the book is about the Neapolitan Song and it has become part of a revival of studies about this subject; a revival that, in the last ten years, has renewed an old and somewhat outdated tradition. The Neapolitan Song is a genre of urban songs developed in Naples in the 19th and 20th centuries, whose classic period is conventionally placed between 1880 and 1945: mainly conceived by middle class poets and composers, very often in a sentimental tone, it was enormously successful in Italy and abroad, giving the world probably the most famous repertoire of urban songs connected to a single city rather than to a whole nation (like the French Song, for example).

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1 Giovanni Vacca, *Gli spazi della canzone*, Lucca, LIM, 2013.

In recent times, as I said, a generation of scholars, mostly in Naples but also in other cities, has begun to develop a new approach to the subject, detaching this genre of music from stereotyped views that included such notions as “the Neapolitan Song as the product of a happy people” or as the sole outcome of talented musicians and inspired poets. In short, they, or “we”, tried to get rid of established, naïve, superficial and journalistic methods of dealing with such an important Italian musical and poetic tradition, this last one, an approach, once common with some noteworthy exception. The tools of the most advanced musicology, in combined effort with those of the most updated social sciences, provided the critical background to veer in a new direction, much more in tune with our times. When many of us started to meet in Naples on a regular basis, in yearly meetings at the Roberto Murolo Foundation (an institution named after a famous Neapolitan singer), I noticed that most of the work my colleagues did was in libraries: they spent hours and hours in libraries, reading old newspapers, looking for vintage music sheets or photocopying worn out “broadsides”, those pieces of paper with the songs printed on, which were the most common way people had to get hold of new songs before the advent of the record industry.

At the time I was beginning to think about my book about the Neapolitan Song, a book that I later called *Gli spazi della canzone*, and I certainly went to libraries too, when I needed a certain document for example, but libraries would not be my immediate source of information. *Gli spazi della canzone* means “The Spaces of the Song”, a title in which, by “spaces”, I actually mean both the physical spaces where the Neapolitan Song had seen the light of the day and the symbolic spaces it occupied within the Neapolitan society and within Italian culture. As I said, I came from a long season of field research about folk music and folklore in the south of Italy, where it was quite natural for me to investigate such subjects as living things. So I instinctively adopted the same practice while turning to the Neapolitan Song. But how could I make a living thing of something which had been a living thing a century ago or even before? Of course the Neapolitan Song is still recorded, performed and listened to, it still has countless fans, but the dominant trend of the research work carried on by the new generation of scholars would privilege the *Belle Époque* period and the period before, that is to say the beginning of the 19th century: it was that period which was bound to tell us something unexpected about the birth of what is now commonly called “popular music”, namely the urban music developed in the 19th century which today is the prevalent part of our daily sonic experience. The mass media of the time were essential to launch and support the Neapolitan Song: those were the years when mass culture began to emerge and the newspapers, the advertising posters and the printed music that my colleagues looked for in the libraries helped build a reputation to the genre. It was actually the interaction between the graphic components, images on the music scores for example, that made up the modern song as a product quite diverse from the old repertoires, something which one would immediately verify in a library looking for such old documents. In spite of this, I felt that a work mainly carried out in libraries would not take me too far.

A song is firstly made of sounds and the sounds of the Neapolitan songs once resonated in the new urban environment which was being built as the product of a modernization of the city in the very same years that Neapolitan Song was being born. It was an environment those newspapers and magazines, and often the songs themselves, celebrated as the mark of a new era and which the advertising posters of the new-born cultural industry overlaid all around. So I started to reverse what could have been the ordinary schedule of a scholar, and spent longer time in the open air than indoors: I tried to decipher how Naples was modernized after the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was unified to Italy (1860), how it differentiated from the old city and if there was a relationship between the music which was once produced in it and the new one. Naples, like many other cities, underwent a big urban reorganization between the 19th and the 20th century and this reorganization had changed the places where the music was performed. I meant to understand if, and how, the Neapolitan Song had somewhat fitted in the renewed environment and if it had been somewhat functional to it: for example, how would the performing style of an itinerant musician change when the ancient urban setting he, or she, was in, turned into a metropolitan scenario where street music was banned or strongly reduced and he, or she, had to accept a job in a *Caf -Chantant*? Such an exploration could only be carried out walking around for long hours and for many days, and it reduced the time I could spend in libraries, which eventually became only complementary to the work I did outdoors. And it was not only the streets which were involved: the birth of the middle-class parlour, for example, gave the Neapolitan Song another important place to conquer hegemony so I devoted some time to speaking to people who continued this tradition. In short, I really had the feeling that only reading books about the Neapolitan Song, which I obviously did, and exploring the printed sources, which I did too, would not give an adequate portrait of the genre: in short, it would have been a “dumb” portrait. Walking in the streets, in fact, meant not only exploring the city but also talking to people, giving new relevance to the oral transmission and by means of that, casting a light on the continuity that some cultural forms can have for decades. Speaking to the elderly, for instance, meant to gather information about the world of the Neapolitan Song in the '40s and in the '50s, discovering that, for some aspects, it really coincided with what I knew was the attitude performers, authors and the audience itself used to have during the *Belle  poque* period.

I had, obviously, to listen to a lot of music too. Looking for old recordings and confronting them with the current and more recent ones is obviously an important aspect for a research of this kind. I was interested to understand if there were any differences in style, what was left and what was dispersed in the music, and if there were any peculiarities characterizing that age: getting hold of early recordings is not easy, as the only institution that owns a lot of such material, the former *Discoteca di Stato* (now *Istituto centrale per i Beni Sonori e Audiovisivi*), is in Rome (I fortunately live in Rome) but it can't lend or record anything and I really needed to have the music at home to listen to it again and again in order

to make the necessary comparisons. Thanks to the contacts I had with an old Neapolitan recording label I solved the problem, as they provided me with the necessary material which I associated to, and integrated with, what I already had on my own. But, most of all, there was the living music too, the Neapolitan songs still heard by the voices and the instruments of itinerant musicians that I still occasionally found out, which gave me some good hints to understand a possible genealogy of the performing styles.

Carrying on my research in the streets did not mean that I did not read books: as a matter of fact, I do read a lot and I found some precious old books in libraries; but I do not go much to libraries and there are some reasons for that. First of all, many of the sources I normally use, like maps or oral recordings, are not easy to find in them; secondly, I am forcedly a non-Academic scholar, I only hold a doctorate, and I do not spend my time in a University with a well-stocked library inside. For an ordinary person it takes time to go to libraries: you have to invest at least half a day owing to waiting times and in some cases, if my memory serves me well, I also had problems in having access to some documents as I was asked which institution I belonged to... Third, unlike many foreign scholars, I have tons of books at home, I'm used to underlining books and need to have them always at hand. My small flat is literally stuffed with books and, as I have many subjects I am interested in, I keep on buying them, storing them at home and at friends' or relatives' flats... Given all that, it is difficult for me to be a regular library-goer and books are really going to become a problem for me, in terms of space and money!

I hope it is clear that I am not a snobbish person who dislikes libraries, as I really consider them an important institution and an important resource for scholars but I have some hindrances because of my way of working. On the one hand, I just wonder what results I would have obtained if I had just spent my time in the silent rooms of a library: would I have got a vivid portrait of the subject? Would I have fully understood what then became the core of my work, that is that a modern song needs to fulfil the demands of new relationships in a new environment? Would I have perceived how much oral transmission helps us to understand the past and the way people represent it? I do not think so: I have the feeling that it is the outside that evaluates the inside, it is real life that enhances what is kept in the premises of a library, it is the everyday experience that makes it important and crucial, not the other way around. On the other hand, I know that libraries are fundamental and I wonder how, with my approach, I could try to reset my relationship with them and how I could benefit from their services in a way that suits my needs.