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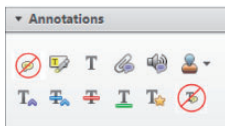
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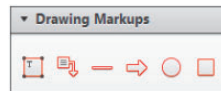
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Article

# Five easy pieces 1964–2006: 40 years of music and politics in Italy, from B(ella ciao) to B(erlusconi)

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## Abstract

In five interconnected ‘pieces’ spanning almost half a century of Italian history, the author recollects the main critical junctures in the complex relationship between music and politics since the 1960s. The first piece recounts how the growth of the Italian folk revival centered around Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano, a group of progressive ethnomusicologists and folksingers who in the early 1960s helped break the musical establishment’s conservative stranglehold on musical expression. The second piece traces the evolution of Stormy Six, a folk-rock-turned-progressive-rock band formed in Milan in 1966, as well as the creators of L’Orchestra, an independent label aimed at promoting a wide range of non-commercial music, from avant-garde and jazz to political protest song. The last three pieces chronicle the decline of these and other such forward-looking, countercultural initiatives over the 1980s and 1990s, as the influence of the intellectual Left on the Italian government wanes and a new anti-communist coalition led by Christian Democrats establishes tight control on the political system. In newly conservative Milan, *Musica nel nostro tempo*, a prestigious season of modern and contemporary music started in 1976, is allowed to go bankrupt, and Claudio Abbado is forced to resign as La Scala’s chief conductor because of his ‘excessive’ attention to the modern repertoire.

## Keywords

Claudio Abbado, Festival di Sanremo, Italian folk revival, Roberto Leydi, *Musica nel nostro tempo*, Luigi Nono, Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano, L’Orchestra, Michele L. Straniero

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## I. 'O Gorizia' (trad.), Sandra Mantovani, from the album *Bella ciao, I Dischi del Sole, 1964* (now on CD Bravo Records BR 128553735-2)

'O Gorizia' circulated widely in Northern Italy during the First World War. Based on the traditional modes of expression of Italian storytellers, it was known in different versions even before the bloody battle of Gorizia, a town now on the border between Italy and Slovenia. The song was included in the show *Bella ciao*, a program of Italian folksongs collected by Roberto Leydi and Filippo Crivelli presented at the Spoleto Festival in 1964. At the premiere, Sandra Mantovani (who was originally supposed to sing 'Gorizia' in the show, and who sang it for the recording) had a cold, and Michele L Straniero substituted for her. Straniero sang a different version of one of the verses, which addressed as 'cowards' the officers of the Italian army on the battlefield who sent their soldiers to inevitable death. Part of the audience in the theatre, which included army officers, neo-fascists, local authorities and members of Roman aristocracy, rioted against the performers. Straniero and the authors of the show were accused of public insult to the army. As they objected that the song was a traditional one, offered as a document of popular culture in the past, members of the local neo-fascist party suggested that charges might be lifted if 'Faccetta nera' (a well-known Fascist battle hymn) were included in the show. The left-wing parties, and especially the Italian Communist Party (PCI), reacted and organized solidarity rallies in Spoleto and in other towns; the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano, until then a group of anthropologists, ethnomusicologists and folksingers known in small specialist circles and amongst militants of the left, ascended to nationwide popularity.

At the suggestion of Nanni Ricordi, a record producer and organizer of cultural events who also acted as a consultant for the 1964 season, the conservative Spoleto Festival (a creature of Giancarlo Menotti's) had invited Crivelli and Leydi in the spirit of the recently formed center-left government, where – for the first time since the end of the Second World War, and after years of severe confrontation during the Cold War – the Socialist Party (PSI) broke its alliance with the PCI and was admitted to power alongside the Christian Democratic Party (DC). The idea of a show presenting work songs, religious songs, love songs, jail songs, and even anti-war and political songs (including songs from the antifascist Resistance), all of them rigorously traditional, appealed to Menotti and to the authorities of the small mediaeval town in Umbria, not far from Rome, usually a summer resort for members of the Roman upper class, politicians and intellectuals.

They most likely did not know exactly who the members of the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano were, nor where they came from. Combining tradition, a slight leftward shift, and an attitude that seemed distanced from the avant-garde as well as from pop culture, they seemed a good choice. Reebee Garofalo (2002), commenting on the support American record companies provided in the late 1950s to well-behaved folk groups like the Kingston Trio, used the expression: 'They stepped on a tiger's tail.' Menotti did almost exactly the same thing, about five years later.

Actually, the Italian folk revival is in some respects related to the corresponding American and British movements. Roberto Leydi, a journalist and music critic, assisted Alan Lomax during his field recordings in Italy. He wrote a book (Leydi and Kezich, 1954) on American blues and protest songs that were then little known in Italy, and conceived the idea that a similar repertory existed in Italy and had to be discovered. So he started his own research (later he also formed a folk revival group, *Almanacco popolare*, which included his wife Sandra Mantovani). After *Bella ciao* and the following show *Ci ragiono e canto* (directed by Dario Fo) he left the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano, thinking traditional modes of expression to be per se oppositional (while some of his colleagues insisted that within folk culture one should look at the progressive elements derived from class consciousness). He then put together a show similar to *Bella ciao*, where the performers, however, were not folk revivalists, but the original traditional performers. In 1968, he invited Ewan MacColl and his London Critics Group to Milan for a show that was one of the most influential in the Italian folk revival and political song in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1972, he was appointed professor of ethnomusicology at the University of Bologna. (He died in 2003.)

Michele L Straniero, who sang 'O Gorizia' at the 1964 show, had been one of the founding members (in 1957) of Cantacronache, a group based in Turin, initially conceived as a workgroup to promote changes in Italian popular song, then subjected to the conservative policy of the State radio (RAI), and of the Sanremo Festival. Their models were the French *chanson* (Georges Brassens, above all) and German political songs (Brecht-Eisler). Writers such as Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco and Franco Fortini contributed with lyrics. Gradually, members of Cantacronache became convinced that they should find their models also in Italian traditional music, and started fieldwork to collect work songs and political songs. At some point, the group started collaborating with Milan-based folklorists and revivalists such as Leydi, Gianni Bosio and others. In 1963 the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano was born, while Cantacronache dissolved.

But the following year four of the members (Straniero, Liberovici, Jona, De Maria, 1964) issued *Le canzoni della cattiva coscienza*, a collection of essays on popular song, strongly based on Adornian prejudices against popular music (Umberto Eco, who was asked to write the introduction, had to distance himself from the general attitude of the essays). The book formed the commonsense of Italian left-wing intellectuals on popular music for quite a while.

*Bella ciao* and *Le canzoni della cattiva coscienza*, in different ways, marked a new season for Italian political song. The 'scandal' in Spoleto projected the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano to popularity, and new political songs, conceived on the ideological premise of the book, became popular, at least amongst left-oriented audiences. The song 'Bella ciao' itself became something like the 'official' Resistance song. At the time of the partisan guerrillas another song, 'Fischia il vento,' had been generally more popular. But 'Fischia il vento' had been the song of the communist and socialist partisans, and it was based on a Russian melody. 'Bella ciao' was of uncertain origin, and known to be sung especially by the regular Italian troops that

had come from the South with the Allies. During their fieldwork, Leydi and Bosio recorded a different version, sung by Giovanna Daffini, a rice weeder (*mondina*) who declared that the song had been used as a work song before the war. The story fitted perfectly the group's ideology: a work song that becomes a battle hymn for the antifascist partisans, revealing the workers' progress towards class consciousness. On this basis it could be adopted by the left as, while free of the embarrassing Soviet origins of 'Fischia il vento,' it suggested a common ground for communists, socialists and progressive Catholics, in view of an enlargement of the center-left policy.

Later, Vasco Scansani, a trade unionist from the small agricultural village of Gualtieri (in Reggio Emilia) wrote a letter to *L'Unità* (the newspaper of the PCI), saying that he was the author of the 'rice weeder's version.'<sup>1</sup> Daffini had asked him to give her something new, as she wanted to please those two kind professors coming from Milan with a tape recorder and a microphone. The letter was never published, the embarrassing falsification was not addressed until very recently (in a book by another founding member of the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano, Cesare Bermanni (2003)), and still the idea that 'Bella ciao' as a partisan song originated from a pre-existing work song is generally accepted. Some evidence indicates that, actually, the battle hymn was probably derived from a popular song composed in the late 1930s by a Fascist *carabiniere*, but more research is needed.

## **2. 'La fabbrica' (Franco Fabbri), Stormy Six, from the album *Un biglietto del tram*, l'Orchestra, 1975 (now on CD Vinyl Magic VM CD 096)**

'La fabbrica' was composed a few days after 11 September 1973, following a concert in Milan of the Chilean group Inti Illimani, who performed in tears commenting on the news of Pinochet's *golpe*. A couple of weeks before, Umberto Fiori and Tommaso Leddi had sung to the other members of the Stormy Six an unfinished version of 'Stalingrado,' a song they had composed recently. Shortly after, both songs were completed (by adding to 'Stalingrado' a middle vocal and instrumental section, composed by me, and an instrumental coda, composed by Carlo De Martini), put together into a suite, and received the first of about one thousand performances by the group. They are still played by the Stormy Six in occasional concerts, have been covered by dozens of other groups, in versions ranging from ska to brass band to a *cappella*, and are still sung at demonstrations.

'Stalingrado' and 'La fabbrica,' with their narrative about the spreading of the news of the German defeat in Stalingrad and its influence on the birth of antifascist resistance in Italy, formed the nucleus of a series of songs that were recorded for an album – *Un biglietto del tram* – issued in April 1975, thirty years after the end of Mussolini's rule. The Stormy Six weren't a folk or political song group: they started in 1965 as a rhythm and blues combo, were one of the supporting acts of the Rolling Stones' first Italian tour in 1967, recorded covers of Small Faces and Creedence Clearwater Revival tracks, and in 1972 released an album (*L'Unità*) which included songs on Italian history and current politics, very much in the way of The Band or

Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. Involved in the students' movement of the early 1970s, the group members came into contact with the partisan songs and new political songs performed by the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano and its individual members (Ivan Della Mea, Giovanna Marini, Paolo Pietrangeli, Gualtiero Bertelli, Fausto Amodei), and for a while abandoned rock (including the group's own material, except for a very few pieces), turning to Italian and international topical songs.

They released an album with a few traditional songs and songs by, amongst others, Mikis Theodorakis, Woody Guthrie, Ewan MacColl and Fausto Amodei, not very much unlike the mood that is familiar these days to the listeners of Bruce Springsteen's *Pete Seeger Sessions*. Members of Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano (particularly Michele L Straniero) were disappointed by the renditions of the folk material, but liked the 'classical' string arrangements of 'Per i morti di Reggio Emilia,' a song by Amodei based on a theme by Mussorgsky. Classical suggestions, Mediterranean melodic lines influenced by Theodorakis, and more than an ear offered to English progressive rock (Jethro Tull and Gentle Giant, especially), form the basis for the style of *Un biglietto del tram*, an unusual combination (at least for Italy) of political poetry and fairly complex music (Theodorakis' song cycles based on poetry by Ritsos or Elytis being the most reasonable comparison, see Papanikolaou, 2007). Some militants dismissed it as 'formalist,' other called it 'zdanov-rock.'

*Un biglietto del tram* was a deliberate answer to the poetics of musical pauperism implicit in the production of the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano and its combination of Adornian and Lomaxian prejudices according to which 'good' songs should be accompanied by one or maybe two acoustic instruments, avoiding the 'tricks' of arrangement and – especially – of recording technology (such as multitracking, editing, sound processing). *Un biglietto del tram* was the first album issued by l'Orchestra, a cooperative that involved musicians from various genres: folk, political song, rock, jazz, classical music, electronic music (see Fabbri, 2007). Later, musicians from other European countries (including the English group Henry Cow and German musicians such as Heiner Goebbels) would join the cooperative in plans for the reciprocal distribution of records and concerts, culminating in the activities of Rock In Opposition and in tours by the main Italian groups in the cooperative – Stormy Six and Gruppo Folk Internazionale – especially in Germany (both East and West), France and Belgium.

The idea from the 1960s that 'political music' should be either music by (belonging to) the working class or music presenting the highest degree of class consciousness, or even a combination of the two (like in the exemplary case of 'Bella ciao'), changed in the mid-1970s into the idea that, just as music (of any kind) is a metaphor for reality, any music can be 'political,' if it addresses political change or progress. This ideological change, well represented in the 1970s by the great attention given by large Italian audiences to jazz and classical avant-garde, is exemplified by l'Orchestra's record production (about 50 albums, from *Un biglietto del tram* to an exoteric performance by Giancarlo Schiaffini, a jazz soloist and one of Luigi Nono's collaborators) and by the evolution of the cooperative's schools of music. Started in 1974

basically as places where amateurs could learn the best-known political songs, three years later they were offering classes in music theory, the history of music, composition and ensemble improvisation, and had become part of a national network, represented by the journal *Laboratorio musica*, published jointly by Ricordi and the cultural association Arci, and edited by Luigi Nono.

### **3. Extract from *Suite da Prometeo*, from Luigi Nono's *Prometeo*, 1984, Lucerne Festival Orchestra, Claudio Abbado (dir.), Rachel Harnisch, Juliane Banse, Susanne Otto, Marek Torzewsky, Caroline Ghanoiolleau, Mathias Jung (voices), live recording (20 August 2005)**

Luigi Nono's *Prometeo* was first performed in 1984 in Venice. Subtitled *Una tragedia dell'ascolto* ('A tragedy of – or about – listening'), in terms of drama it is not a tragedy at all. There isn't any visible action, and there shouldn't be. The declared effort of Nono (and his librettist, philosopher Massimo Cacciari) was to take music – mainly dramatic music, but not just that – away from the realm of the eye, and bring it back to the ear. Whatever happens in *Prometeo*, it must be heard, not seen. Therefore, it cannot be performed in a traditional opera theatre, but in a special custom-built venue, where members of the audience are not 'spectators' tied up in chains to the linear perspective of the theatre, but 'auditors' listening to sound sources all around them. The venue for the premiere was a church in Venice, with its internal space filled with a wooden 'ark' designed by Renzo Piano, where listeners would sit facing each other in two groups, while orchestra players, singers and loudspeakers (performing sophisticated spatial effects) were distributed around and above.

Some cynical commentators (including myself) noticed that the elimination of the disadvantage of looking at a traditional scene – according to Nono's intention – was largely compensated for by the unexpected side effect of having to look at other members of the audience in a sort of waiting room embarrassment. The main ideological issue of the work was well received, though, as well as the desperately rarefied music, superbly performed under the direction of Claudio Abbado. It was a gigantic production by La Scala and the Venice Biennale, and there were protests against the enormous cost of Renzo Piano's 'ark,' which hosted a few thousand listeners in just a couple of performances. The ark was then dismantled, partially reassembled a few years later in a former factory in Milan (the entire ark was too tall for the ceiling) for some concerts (*Répons*, by Pierre Boulez), and never again used for Nono's work. It was lost in a flood at the warehouse where it was stored.

By a strange coincidence, Milan's Sports Palace, the venue of another gigantic production by La Scala in 1984 (Stockhausen's *Samstag aus Licht*), was destroyed by a huge snowfall at the beginning of 1985. The snowfall, and the devastating effects it had on the city's life for about a week, marked the end of the local government, which had been ruled by the left (PCI and PSI) for 10 years. It was also the end of the



left's hegemony in Milan's cultural policy. Since 1983, the national government had been in the hands of Bettino Craxi, the leader of the PSI, allied with the Christian Democrats in a new version of the center-left partnership, now with a much more anti-communist orientation than it had had in the 1960s. Enrico Berlinguer, the leader of the PCI, had died in 1984. At the beginning of 1985, the *giunta rossa* in Milan was an anachronistic remnant of the past, like some of the cultural institutions or policies from the 1970s. A campaign was raised against the artistic direction of La Scala and against Claudio Abbado as its principal conductor, criticising the huge expense of contemporary music productions and Abbado for his allegedly excessive attention to the modern repertoire.

Abbado left (he would later be appointed director of the Berliner Philharmoniker and of the Wien Modern Festival) and never conducted again at La Scala; Riccardo Muti replaced him. During the same months, a similar campaign was set up against *Musica nel nostro tempo*, a season of contemporary music started in 1976 by a collaboration of almost all Milanese music institutions. It had been an astonishing success in the 1970s, in the climate of ideological support to musical 'progress' discussed above. Its origins can be found in *Musica/Realtà*, a program of concerts, discussions, guided listening sessions and exhibitions, established in Reggio Emilia in 1973 (see Pestalozza, 1980a, 1980b) by a group of musicians and music critics including initially Luigi Pestalozza, Maurizio Pollini, Luigi Nono, Claudio Abbado, Giacomo Manzoni, Armando Gentilucci, Piero Santi and Vittorio Fellegara. *Musica nel nostro tempo* was, in a way, a slightly more conservative version of *Musica/Realtà*, where some of the most radical aspects of the Reggio Emilia program (discussions in factories, the participation of the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano) were removed in view of the less advanced environment in Milan (it must be noted, though, that the promoters were almost exactly the same).

However, soon music other than the classical avant-garde was included (classical Indian music, Cecil Taylor, Giovanna Marini, Père Ubu, Peter Hammill), under pressure from l'Orchestra, which in 1977 organized a *Jazz nel nostro tempo* festival (with Anthony Braxton, Steve Lacy, Globe Unit and many Italian performers) as a polemical complement to *Musica nel nostro tempo* which was, in its first edition, limited to contemporary classical music. With more than a thousand subscribers for almost 20 concerts a year, all dedicated to modern and contemporary compositions, *Musica nel nostro tempo* was, for a few years, a wonder amongst classical music supporters and organizers in Europe. In 1984, however, the number of subscribers had dropped, in the Reagan-era rush to other pleasures. Moreover, it wasn't easy to maintain the exceptionally high and well-balanced standards of the early years, as the program turned to a string of first performances of works by radical and often little-known composers, and very few expensive premieres by big names.

Some composers (like the then flourishing neo-romantics), feeling that they were excluded, protested publicly and accused the series of insisting on the old avant-garde while avoiding composers, styles and schools that tried to address the audience with an aim to please rather than to shock. Political alliances were soon established; under a new local government more in line with Craxi's policies, the season's

direction was entrusted to the leader of the neo-romantic composers, with the result that *Musica nel nostro tempo* disappeared before the end of the decade, after the number of subscribers (all efforts to please notwithstanding) had fallen to less than 200.

#### **4. ‘Inno di Forza Italia’ (Anonimo italiano [Silvio Berlusconi]-Renato Serio), 1994, as extracted from Forza Italia’s website**

In November 1993, a few months before the start of the 1994 World Cup, big posters appeared in Italian cities, with the slogan: ‘Fozza, Italia!’ It sounded like ‘forza Italia’ as pronounced by a small child, and though no product was advertised, most people understood the poster as early encouragement for the Italian football team (or soccer team, as the World Cup was to take place in the USA), that might be followed up by a clearer advertisement, probably from one of the sponsors. Few people have visual memories of that poster, as it soon disappeared, and it is impossible to find a photograph of it (as far as I remember, there were children on a vividly colored background). Years later, various sources (both in favor and against Silvio Berlusconi as a politician), suggested that the posters were part of an astute subliminal campaign, announcing the birth of Forza Italia, Silvio Berlusconi’s political party, officially founded in 1994.

According to the author of that campaign, Maurizio Sala, this is not true (see Barbacetto, 2004). The campaign was aimed at reintroducing the poster as an advertising medium to investors affected by the economic crisis, who usually chose television as the main medium, with an encouragement to grow (like the children portrayed on the poster), and win (like the country or its football team).

In fact, the campaign was launched by Publitalia 80, Berlusconi’s own advertising agency, and after a few months the new party, which was initially based on the workforce of some of Berlusconi’s companies, especially Publitalia, acquired the same name. The best explanation for the coincidence, unless we distrust Sala (who would probably get more rewards as the inventor of the name of Forza Italia and the shrewd instigator of such a subliminal campaign) is that the new party, its name, its symbols, the very idea of Berlusconi ‘entering the field’ (*la discesa in campo*), were planned with the same aims and methods of a good advertising campaign, addressing Italians on the basis of their irresistible passion for football and the national team. At that time, the repertory of images, symbols and sounds articulating this passion had been revived by Italy’s victory at the 1982 World Cup in Spain, by the 1990 World Cup (that took place in Italy) and by the success of the team owned since 1986 by Berlusconi himself, AC Milan (winner of both the Italian championship and the Champions Cup – against Barcelona – in 1993–1994). The suggestion that Forza Italia’s anthem, composed by Renato Serio (a composer and arranger for TV variety shows) to lyrics written by Berlusconi himself, sounds like a football team anthem or like a TV title tune (or a combination of the two, like the title tune for the broadcast of a football cup competition), is not surprising. It may be rather more surprising to

know more about other relations amongst Berlusconi's various interests in the media, in football, in politics and in music.

After his early accumulation in the real estate business, Berlusconi's fortune was mainly based on television. It is well known that he was able to exploit the void that was created in the Italian legislation after the Constitutional Court, between 1974 and 1976, abolished the monopoly of RAI and allowed local TV stations to broadcast, until in 1990 a new law (under a *pentapartito* government and with the protection of Craxi)<sup>2</sup> substantially sanctioned the status quo. During that period, Berlusconi's three networks were gradually built on the edge of legality. As the Constitutional Court's decree allowed the existence of privately owned local stations, but no commercial networks, Berlusconi's Canale 5, Italia 1 and Rete 4 worked as networks sending cassettes to local stations, which would broadcast them at the same time of day, avoiding air interconnection – which was prohibited.

For quite a while, however, Berlusconi's television channels (i.e. the Fininvest group) did not pay any license for the use of the music they broadcast. The first license agreement was signed in 1985 with SIAE, the Italian performing rights society, and was based on 2.5% of the total income from advertisements (RAI paid 4.75%). In 1987 SIAE fixed a new amount (about 11 billion lira, 9.8 million euros at today's value), again largely inferior to the fee paid by RAI (about 54 billion lira, 48 million euros at today's value), but based on a similar percentage of the advertising income (RAI's income includes subscriptions from TV set and radio receiver owners, and the total sum includes radio broadcasting). Fininvest stations appealed to the Constitutional Court, maintaining that SIAE should not be allowed to establish the cost of licenses, and that this should be the result of a commercial dealing. The Court rejected the appeal. The next year, Rome's Court of Justice raised the amount (solicited by SIAE) by 5%, in line with the rate of inflation, while RAI's fee was increased by 19%. And so on. If one adds the amount of the license fees Fininvest never paid (before 1985), to the difference between the fees the company should have paid – if the criteria for establishing the sum were the same as those applied to RAI – and the fees actually paid by Fininvest, one very easily arrives at the sum of about 43 billion lira (38.3 million euros at today's value), a figure that Berlusconi spent in 1986–1987 to gain control of AC Milan (about 20 billion lira, 17.8 million euros at today's value) and to buy new players (about 23 billion lira, 20.5 million euros at today's value). In November 1989 – long before Berlusconi established Forza Italia – I wrote an article (now in Fabbri, 2008: 320–323) where I suggested that all authors, composers and music publishers should be supporters of AC Milan, as the team was totally financed by (unpaid) performing rights. Was I wrong?

### **5. 'Mi sono fatto da solo' (Biglioli-Camponuovo-Rota), La famiglia Rossi, 2004, from the album *Mantova Musica Festival*, CD UPR 0154662UPR**

Rossi is the most common surname in Italy. 'Famiglia Rossi' means the average family, with the added connotation that 'rossi' means reds. 'Mi sono fatto da solo,'

a summary of Berlusconi's career, was a success in the winter of 2003–2004, and La famiglia Rossi was amongst the groups invited to the Mantova Musica Festival, from 1–7 March 2004.

Italy has a long tradition of song contests and festivals. The first was established in Naples in 1839 and went on until 1861, when the Regno delle Due Sicilie was defeated by Garibaldi and the Festa di Piedigrotta, as part of the *panem et circenses* policy of the kingdom, was abolished. It started again in the 1880s and it helped the Neapolitan song to flourish. The Sanremo Festival (*Festival della canzone italiana*) was established in 1951, and for almost the whole decade was dominated by lyricists, composers, singers and conductors who started their careers under Fascist rule. It was a good example of how the Christian Democrats – during the Cold War – recycled people, institutions and symbols from the Fascist era in an effort to keep the left away from power and the media (another excellent example being the struggle that the DC fought against neo-realist cinema). When Domenico Modugno won the contest in 1958 with 'Nel blu dipinto di blu' (aka 'Volare'), a crack was opened through which new styles (influenced by French *chansonniers*,<sup>3</sup> bossa nova and rock 'n' roll) had a chance to filter in and gain access to monopoly-ruled radio and television.

Yet Sanremo remained the sanctuary of the Italian melodic tradition, where the occasional participation in the contest of musicians from different styles, genres or nations (from Louis Armstrong to the Yardbirds, from Gene Pitney to Wilson Pickett) was generally dismissed as too exotic. A real fracture in Italian popular music took place in 1967, when Luigi Tenco, one of the best-known singer-songwriters, committed suicide after his song was eliminated from the contest. A few years later, in 1974, another festival was started in Sanremo (not a contest, in this case), the *Rassegna della canzone d'autore*, promoted by the Club Tenco, an association of 'quality song' supporters. The two festivals remained separate (one at the end of the winter, the other at the beginning of autumn), though in some cases there were attempts to organize alternative festivals during (and against) the *Festival della canzone italiana*.

In September 2003, RAI, then finally and firmly in the hands of the center-right government, entrusted the direction of the Sanremo festival to Tony Renis. A songwriter of international fame ('Quando, quando, quando') and winner of the 1963 contest, Renis was definitely a champion of conservative interests in the Italian popular music industry. But someone knew that there was more about him than just songwriting. Nando Dalla Chiesa, son of Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa (a general of the *carabinieri* who was killed along with his wife in a mafia ambush) and a senator for the center-left party Margherita,<sup>4</sup> recalled having seen Renis' name in the proceedings of the parliamentary anti-mafia commission. It was proven that Renis had contacts with *Cosa nostra* leaders; he had even been a guest of one of the best known mafia families, the Gambinos, at the same time as Michele Sindona (a banker who would later be killed while serving time) simulated a kidnapping and hid in the same villa where Renis was staying.

Dalla Chiesa protested, but RAI directors stuck to their decision (in August 2001, one of the ministers of the Berlusconi government declared: 'One must coexist with mafia and camorra'; alleged dealings with the mafia are at the origin of many of the trials that involved Berlusconi himself). So Dalla Chiesa, with a group of intellectuals, proposed organizing another festival, to be held on exactly the same dates as the Sanremo festival, but in Mantua.

The Mantova Musica Festival was immediately received by many as a chance to renew the Italian music scene. It was open to all popular genres, access was granted to all artists, even if they had no recording contract, and no distinction was made amongst participants, who were allowed the same time on stage (not just a song, as in Sanremo, but a quarter of an hour), with no exception, even for the invited stars. There was no contest, though in the end a jury gave a number of 'critics' prizes.' The 'artistic commission' that had to evaluate participants received over 800 proposals, out of which 30 were admitted. Boycotted by almost all media except *l'Unità*, a few independent radio stations and one of the small TV networks – which broadcast the shows in the middle of furniture sales, soft-porn movies and even the election of 'Miss Lega,' the beauty queen of the xenophobic party led by Umberto Bossi – the Mantova Musica Festival started disastrously on the Monday, but then on the Friday and Saturday reached a national audience of three million, while some newspapers were forced to cover it as it became one of the main topics of discussion amongst people in Sanremo.

The festival became the musical outcome of the vast movement started by the so-called 'girotondi,' which brought a million and a half people to a demonstration in Rome on 5 December 2003. The triple CD, which included one song by each of the participants, entered the compilation charts, and even in the music industry there were signs that this festival might become as important as the other event that takes place in Mantua (in September), the *Festivaletteratura*, one of the most successful Italian book fairs (but, more than that, a place where writers and readers meet).

But that didn't happen. The 2005 festival, which took place in June (avoiding direct competition with Sanremo), was a flop. Contrary to the spirit of the first festival, mainly for economic reasons, the program focused on the 'big names,' reintroducing (instead of reducing further) the differences between unknown artists (who had proven to be exceptionally good, and sometimes supported by a huge local following) and alleged 'stars' pushed by managers and record companies. But it was clear, at some point, that political choices were no less important: neither Dalla Chiesa (a member of a moderate party, with his parliamentary mandate to expire in less than one year), nor the local authorities (worried by the impact of the festival on a traditionally left-leaning town, which, however, happens to be one of the richest in Italy), nor the artistic management of the festival (professionals who deal with a politically varied clientele for most of the year, organizing festivals and seasons all over the country) wanted to commit to a strongly oppositional image.

The enthusiastic support of the independent music community was discouraged, yet the appeal to moderates did not work. It was a perfect anticipation of the outcome of the national elections in April 2006, which some read as the result of a

country divided in two, between supporters of Berlusconi and Prodi. It might also be read as the result of the shyness, division, lack of clarity and the inability to frame discourses that affect the Italian left, preventing it from winning, even against an opponent who had become an object of ridicule all over the world.

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## Notes

1. Scansani had written his new lyrics – for the melody of the already existing partisan son – shortly after the end of the Second World War.
2. *Pentapartito* means ‘formed by five parties.’ The expression was preferred to ‘center-left,’ acknowledging the rightward shift of the PSI.
3. The term *chansonnier* is used in Italy and elsewhere to denote French singer-songwriters, who are known in France as *auteurs-compositeurs-interprètes*.
4. One of the parties that in 2007 merged into the Partito Democratico.

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