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Author

Vitale, John Luke

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Exploring *Canzone Napoletana* and Southern Italian Migration Through Three Lenses

John L. Vitale

Preamble and Purpose

As a first-generation Italian-Canadian, the southern Italian immigrant experience has figured centrally in my upbringing. I have vivid memories of the rich and vibrant conversations that transpired at the dinner table every day. There were countless tales of my parents' childhood, which included living in impoverished conditions and surviving the devastation of the Second World War. Other common topics of conversation included crossing the Atlantic, being separated from family, and the daily struggles of immigrating to an English-speaking country.

At the very core of these conversations, however, was music, particularly the form of popular song that emanated out of Naples in the 19th and 20th centuries, otherwise known as the *canzone napoletana*. These songs of love, laughter, sorrow, and pain—famous the world over—have always been a genuine and sincere portal into the heart, mind, and soul of the southern Italian immigrant experience in Canada.

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, through a biographical lens, this article investigates my own personal experiences as a first-generation Italian-Canadian and explores how post-World War II southern Italian immigrants in Toronto, Canada used the *canzone napoletana* as a coping mechanism for the daily hardships and struggles of immigrant life. Second, through the lens of the Italian Diaspora, this article investigates how Neapolitan song became the metaphorical voice for the vast majority of southern Italian immigrants around the world. Lastly, through the lens of non-Italians, this article examines how the *canzone napoletana* influenced non-Italian perceptions about Italy on a global scale. In order to provide a contextual framework, I will first begin with a historical background on Neapolitan song.

La Canzone Napoletana: A Historical Background

Neapolitan song, rich in history and tradition, has been celebrated and venerated around the world. This form of popular music developed within the context of the annual songwriting competition that intermittently ran in Naples between 1830 and 1950, the Neapolitan feast of Piedigrotta.¹ The most famous songs to originate from this festival include *O Sole Mio*,² *Lacrime Napulitane*,³ *Torna a Surriento*,⁴ *Santa Lucia*,⁵ and *Funiculi Funicula*,⁶ among many others. The widespread popularity of the Piedigrotta festival was felt across the Atlantic, where an American

¹ Jeff Matthews, "The Festival of Piedigrotta," *Naples: Life, Death & Miracles A Personal Encyclopedia* (blog), 2008, accessed June 12, 2015, <http://www.naplesldm.com/piedifest.htm>.

² Please see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XT2kHxSFMS0> (accessed 10 August 2016)

³ Please see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0oJcgFkFuAc> (accessed 10 August 2016).

⁴ Please see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77z_J0JL6ps (accessed 10 August 2016).

⁵ Please see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xX4SzE_GDRE (accessed 10 August 2016).

⁶ Please see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oo2uvBAvhNw> (accessed 10 August 2016).

version of the festival took place in New York City in 1910.⁷ Although the annual songwriting competition ended in the mid-20th century, many popular compositions were written after 1950, such as *Malafemmena*⁸ and *Maruzzella*⁹, which today are considered part of the canon of *canzone napoletana*. Many world famous singers capitalized on singing *canzone napoletana*, such as Enrico Caruso and Elvis Presley among many others, which I will further discuss later in this article.

Looking through a Biographical Lens: Neapolitan Song as a Coping Mechanism for Southern Italian Immigrants in Canada

Through my own personal experiences, I would like to explore how many southern Italian immigrants in postwar Toronto, Canada used the *canzone napoletana* as a means to cope while living abroad in an English-speaking country. It is first necessary, however, to provide a brief synopsis of Italian immigration in Canada.

Italian Immigration in Canada: A Brief Synopsis

According to the last official census of Canada in 2011, almost 1.5 million Canadians claimed full or part-Italian ancestry.¹⁰ Despite a long history of Italian-Canadians (starting with Giovanni Caboto back in 1497), the overwhelming majority of Italians came to Canada in one of three waves of immigration, namely: the first wave between 1870 and 1914, the second wave between 1920 and 1930, and the third and largest wave between 1950 and 1970.¹¹ During the third wave, 40% of Italian immigrants to Canada settled in Toronto. This allowed the pre-war Italian population of Toronto (approximately 16,000) to grow to 300,000 by the 1980s.¹²

Much like the Italian diaspora around the globe, the majority of Italian immigrants to Toronto and Canada in general (approximately 75%) were from Southern Italy.¹³ Although the Canadian government considered Italian immigrants to be undesirable (particularly during the first¹⁴ and second waves of immigration), Italians in Canada have made significant contributions

⁷ Simona Frasca, *Italian Birds of Passage: The Diaspora of Neapolitan Musicians in New York* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 39–40.

⁸ Please see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLGipm9cm3M>.

⁹ Please see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zx2kb2ASSzs>.

¹⁰ “National Household Survey (NHS) Profile, Canada, 2011 National Household Survey,” *Statistics Canada* (September 11, 2013), accessed June 1, 2015, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=PR&Code1=01&Data=Count&SearchText=canada&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&A1=All&B1=All&Custom=&TABID=1>.

¹¹ “The Italian Trunk,” *Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21*, 2013, accessed June 9, 2015, <http://www.pier21.ca/culture-trunks/italy/history>.

¹² Tyson Brown, “Our Memories Are Here: Italian Heritage in Toronto,” *Heritage Toronto: People, Places, Events*, December 6 2012, accessed June 2, 2015, <http://heritagetoronto.org/our-memories-are-here-italian-heritage-in-toronto/>.

¹³ Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 1993), XVIII.

¹⁴ Clifford Sifton, the Canadian minister in charge of immigration from 1896 to 1905, wrote: “I have explained at least a dozen times that I don’t want anything done to facilitate Italian immigration.” David J. Hall, *Clifford Sifton* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), 2: 68.

to the country and have become highly successful as an ethnic group.¹⁵ Moreover, they have the highest rate of home ownership in the country.¹⁶

Italian Immigration in Postwar Toronto: Life Was Tough

Life was tough for Italian immigrants in postwar Toronto. Italian-Canadians were still fighting the stigma of the Canadian War Measures Act of 1940, where 31,000 Italian-Canadians were officially designated as enemy aliens because of Mussolini's alliance with Nazi Germany.¹⁷ In fact, approximately 600 of these enemy aliens were unlawfully removed from their homes and separated from their loved ones.¹⁸ They were considered fascist supporters and spies, and were incarcerated despite never being formally charged in a court of law. These unlawful events created fear and aggression in Italian-Canadian communities across Canada, leading to unemployment, debasement, destruction of property, verbal abuse, and even violence.

In addition, Italian immigrants faced harsh weather and undesirable living conditions in postwar Toronto. Here is an excerpt from a southern Italian immigrant's account of his first encounter with life in Toronto in 1954:

After the second day in Toronto, I cried again like a baby, I wanted to go back home. There were twelve people in the house with one bathroom, no kitchen as we used an electrical element with two burners at the top of the stairs. Dishes were washed in the bathtub and a fridge or cooler didn't exist. The little window was our cooler in the winter and food would freeze, in the summer if it wasn't eaten fast enough, it would spoil.¹⁹

Moreover, most southern Italian immigrants to Toronto during the postwar era came from a poor agrarian existence and made the sudden transition into the urbanized proletariat, working in lower-status jobs in an industrial economy.²⁰ In addition, their Catholic faith created tension in a largely Protestant city. For example, in 1955 (the year that my parents immigrated to Toronto from Cosenza, Calabria), the mayor of the city was Leslie Howard Saunders, a staunch member of the Orange Order of Canada. In fact, the Orange Order was the largest protestant fraternal

¹⁵ "The Plight of Immigrants." *Canadian Human Rights Commission: Human Rights in Canada. A Historical Perspective*, 2014, accessed June 7, 2015, <http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca/historical-perspective/en/getBriefed/1900/immigrants.asp>.

¹⁶ Carolin Vesely, "Industrious Italians Rose from Peasant Roots and Adapted to Canadian Society," *Winnipeg Free Press*, August 25, 2012, accessed June 7, 2015, <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/special/ourcityourworld/italy/they-built-their-community-by-hand-167413375.html>.

¹⁷ Angelo Principe, *The Darkest Side of the Fascist Years: The Italian-Canadian Press, 1920–1942* (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 1999), par. 2; "Memories of World War II: Italian Canadians as Enemy Aliens," July 2015, accessed September 3, 2015, http://www.italiancanadianww2.ca/theme/detail/italian_canadians_as_enemy_alien_memories_of_wwII.

¹⁸ The names of these internees can be found at <http://www.italiancanadianww2.ca/tour/internees>, accessed September 5, 2015.

¹⁹ Phil Magnoli, southern Italian Immigrant from Calabria, Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, "The Italian Trunk," last modified 2013, accessed November 25, 2016, <http://www.pier21.ca/stories/italian-immigrant-phil-magnoli>.

²⁰ Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, XXIII; Harold Troper, "History of Immigration to Toronto since the Second World War: From Toronto 'The Good' to Toronto 'The World in a City,'" CERIS Working Paper 12, 2000.

organization in the country and Saunders himself exhibited public behavior that was anti-Catholic in nature,²¹ making life difficult for Italian immigrants who wanted to freely practice their faith. In addition, simple cultural traditions such as having an espresso with your friends on the street corner were considered radical, boisterous, and unorthodox behavior by Toronto law enforcement officials. In fact, many of my own relatives have described how they were unlawfully removed from public spaces, harassed by police, targeted by racist remarks, and generally treated as second-class citizens.

The workplace was no different, as Italians endured “unsafe work sites, poor wages and even threats of deportation.”²² Even newspapers published accounts that affirmed the poor working conditions of Italian laborers, including the headline that they were “treated like animals.”²³ In general, Italian immigrants found Toronto to be “an extremely cold and unfriendly place” and “Italians emerged as a target of scorn.”²⁴ Clearly, “an anti-Italian prejudice did permeate Toronto life in the 1950s and 1960s,”²⁵ creating an Italophobia of sorts that imbued the psyche of the Canadian government in the 1960s, as poorer working-class Italians were now denied entry into Canada.²⁶ As an immigrant group, Italians in postwar Toronto were clearly “racialized and stigmatized.”²⁷

Unable to handle the stress, anxiety, and pressures of being racially profiled and stigmatized, many Italian immigrants in postwar Toronto (including some of my own relatives) returned to Italy. Some of them went back and forth numerous times, rightfully earning the title “birds of passage.”²⁸ The vast majority who remained, however, used a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with the stress, anxiety, and pressures of the Italian immigrant experience in postwar Toronto, particularly those that involved social, cultural, and religious practices. At the very core of these coping mechanisms, however, was music, particularly the *canzone napoletana*.

How Did Postwar Immigrants in Toronto Use Neapolitan Song as a Coping Mechanism?

Narratives I have heard from my parents and other relatives include a sense of guilt and remorse for immigrating to Canada. They abandoned family and friends, and essentially left behind the country of Italy and the Old World in general, creating a patriotic deficit of sorts. Since computers, personal electronic devices, and online access did not exist, my own relatives, as well as countless other southern Italian immigrants in postwar Toronto, often used music, particularly the *canzone napoletana*, in order to cope with the guilt and remorse that was associated with immigration. Specifically, Neapolitan music was used to create a sense of community during downtime, particularly on Sunday afternoons after lunch. Neapolitan songs, many of which

²¹ Kevin Plummer, “Historicist: Orangemen and The Glorious Twelfth of July,” *Torontoist*, July 5, 2008, accessed July 7, 2015, http://torontoist.com/2008/07/historicist_orangemen_and_the_glori/.

²² Myer Siemiatycki, Tim Rees, Roxana Ng, and Kahn Rahi, “Integrating Community Diversity in Toronto,” in *The World in a City*, ed. Paul Anisef and Michael Lanphier (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 389.

²³ Ken Bagnell, *Canada: A Portrait of the Italian Canadians* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1989), 147.

²⁴ Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, 103.

²⁵ Michael Buzzelli, “From Little Britain to Little Italy: An Urban Ethnic Landscape Study in Toronto,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 27, no. 4 (2001): 579.

²⁶ Franc Sturino, “Post-World War Two Canadian Immigration Policy towards Italians,” *Polyphony* 7, no. 2 (1985): 67–72.

²⁷ Siemiatycki et al., “Integrating Community Diversity in Toronto,” 389.

²⁸ Frasca, *Italian Birds of Passage*, 1.

directly addressed the immigrant experience through their lyrics, were a personal form of storytelling that many southern Italian immigrants intimately understood. In addition, “musicking”²⁹—particularly through singing along with music from radio and television broadcasts, or with accompaniment by the resident family musician—was a participatory phenomenon, making it the quintessential medium for immigrant social gatherings. In fact, collaborative musicking allowed immigrants to establish personal connections, cultivate relationships, and create a support network of like-minded individuals who shared similar experiences. In essence, the collective musicking of Neapolitan song for many southern Italian immigrants in postwar Toronto cultivated a sense of healing and catharsis.

In centering on nostalgic themes, the plots of Neapolitan song reaffirmed the value and worth of being Italian. In fact, as Luisa Del Giudice argues, “the immigrant wants to hear the music of the past and loves those songs which speak of Italy in nostalgic terms.”³⁰ Salman Akhtar also claims that nostalgia plays a powerful role in the fragile psyche of immigrants.³¹ Furthermore, music can also help people create a sense of identity, and can be “used and experienced in a way which positions people in relation to time and place, other persons or transcendental values.”³² Given the innate ability of music to heal, restore, console, comfort, and evoke positive thoughts, feelings and emotions,³³ it is not surprising that southern Italian immigrants used Neapolitan music as a support and coping mechanism for integrating into a new country.³⁴

Moreover, southern Italians “developed a distinct identity by turning to those things that they could control in order to cope with change, namely their families, households, neighborhoods and communities.”³⁵ Neapolitan music clearly fit this mandate, as it permeated families, households, neighborhoods, and communities. As my own relatives have recounted many times over, it was not uncommon in the 1950s and 1960s for southern Italian immigrants to sing Neapolitan songs at social gatherings in the home and even in public spaces such as parks. I have personally experienced these vocal gatherings, many of which were impromptu, as both participant and observer/listener. In addition, Del Giudice contends that “through discourse about music and song, one in fact touches attitudes and issues centering on the immigrant experience: inter-generational communication, private and public behaviour, [and the] relationship between cultural leaders and community.”³⁶

²⁹ Any activity involving or related to music performance. C. Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 1.

³⁰ Luisa Del Giudice, “Italian Traditional Song in Toronto: From Autobiography to Advocacy,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 29, no. 3 (1994): 79.

³¹ Salman Akhtar, “The Immigrant, the Exile, and the Experience of Nostalgia,” *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 1, no. 2 (1999): 123–130.

³² Even Ruud, “Music and Identity,” *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy* 6, no. 1 (1997): 3.

³³ Annemieke Van den Tol and Jane Edwards, “Listening to Sad Music in Adverse Situations: How Music Selection Strategies Relate to Self-Regulatory Goals, Listening Effects, and Mood Enhancement,” *Psychology of Music* (2014): 473–494; Suvi Saarikallio, Sirke Nieminen, and Elvira Brattico, “Affective Reactions to Musical Stimuli Reflect Emotional Use of Music in Everyday Life,” *Musicae Scientiae* 17, no. 1 (2013): 27–39.

³⁴ Joseph Pivato, “The Music of Immigration,” *Accenti: The Magazine with an Italian Accent*, September 6, 2013, accessed July 12, 2016, <http://www.accenti.ca/news-archives-issue-29/special-section-italian-music-the-music-of-immigration-by-joseph-pivato>.

³⁵ Buzzelli, “From Little Britain to Little Italy,” 579.

³⁶ Del Giudice, “Italian Traditional Song in Toronto,” 79–80.

Looking Through the Lens of the Italian Diaspora: The *Canzone Napoletana* as the Metaphorical Voice for Southern Italian Immigrants

Neapolitan song has acutely impacted the Italian diaspora, becoming the metaphorical voice for the majority of southern Italian immigrants the world over. This phenomenon can be better understood by exploring the following three questions, namely: (a) How did the history and geography of Naples and southern Italy help create a *lingua franca* for the majority of southern Italian immigrants? (b) How did the lyrical themes imbued within the *canzone napoletana* specifically appeal to the majority of southern Italian immigrants and the overall immigrant experience? and (c) How did the singing style and dramatic actions associated with Neapolitan song create a communal ownership of the music?

The History and Geography of Naples and Southern Italy

From a simple statistical perspective, the majority of people within the Italian diaspora (approximately 75%) are from southern Italy.³⁷ Poverty was the engine that drove southern Italians out of Italy for two chief reasons. First, land management practices made it difficult for farmers to work the land and earn a good living.³⁸ Absentee land ownership typical of medieval feudal practices prevailed in southern Italy well into the mid-20th century.³⁹ Hence, the lure of earning a better living through the possibility of land ownership was a driving force for many southern Italian immigrants. Even for the lucky few who owned land, the size was often not large enough to earn a subsistent living. In fact, these small plots were the result of generations of inheritance practices that divided land equally amongst all heirs.⁴⁰ Second, the birth rate in southern Italy, particularly after unification in 1871 when access to better medical care and nutrition improved, soared to unprecedented levels, eventually creating too many people for the land to sustain:

The birthrate in Italy, particularly southern Italy, was one of the highest in Europe and was reduced only marginally in the late nineteenth century. In northern Italy the population pressure was relieved by industrialization; in southern Italy there was no relief except by migration and “the south” sank into the overpopulated, underdeveloped region.⁴¹

Another factor that contributed to southern Italian immigration well into the mid-20th century were the stories and accounts of land ownership and economic independence from earlier

³⁷ Dino Cinel, *From Italy to San Francisco: The Immigrant Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982), 21; Alexandra Molnar, “History of Italian Immigration,” December 15, 2010, accessed August 5, 2016, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/~molna22a/classweb/politics/Italianhistory.html>; Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*, XXI.

³⁸ John S. McDonald, “Some Socio-Economic Emigration Differentials in Rural Italy, 1902–1913,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 7, no. 1 (1958): 55–72.

³⁹ Manlio Rossi-Doria, “The Land Tenure System and Class in Southern Italy,” *The American Historical Review* 64, no. 1 (1958): 46–53.

⁴⁰ Sydel Silverman, “Agricultural Organization, Social Structure, and Values in Italy: Amoral Familism Reconsidered,” in *Man in Adaptation: The Institutional Framework*, ed. Yehudi A. Cohen (London: Aldine Transaction, 1971), 322.

⁴¹ Norman J. Pounds, *An Historical Geography of Europe Abridged Version* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 368.

generations of immigrants. This was coupled with the romantic and utopian notion that the streets of Canada (and of the Americas in general) were paved in gold.⁴²

Since the majority of peninsular southern Italy speaks a form of Neapolitan (right into the deep south of Puglia and Calabria), many of these immigrants could readily understand and easily relate to the Neapolitan tongue. As Neapolitan writer and columnist Angelo Forgione maintains, Neapolitan is a Romance language with variations that extend well beyond the city of Naples into the regions of Lazio, Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Molise and Puglia.⁴³ Although Neapolitan is considered a dialect of Italian, UNESCO recognizes it as a distinct language.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Neapolitan has a rich history and tradition stemming from the ancient language of Oscan, which was very similar to Latin.⁴⁵ Additionally, Naples has always figured centrally as a major cultural center of Southern Italy from its Greco-Roman beginnings over two thousand years ago to the end of the Bourbon regime, just before Italian unification began in the mid-19th century. Hence, the Neapolitan dialect became a *lingua franca* of sorts for the majority of southern Italians. As Simona Frasca has stated:

The borders of the old Bourbon kingdom and its capital Naples prevailed, and the emigrants identified above all with Neapolitan repertoire. South of Rome the lyrics of the canzone Napoletana were understood by nearly all Italians, including those who migrated, bought records, and went to the theater to listen to Neapolitan artists on tour. All of this allowed for widespread penetration of Neapolitan song among the emigrants.⁴⁶

Moreover, Del Giudice states that “Naples had for centuries been the capital of the south, radiating its influence from Abruzzo to Palermo to Lecce and Otranto.”⁴⁷ Although southern Italian immigrants came from different regions, most of these immigrants, especially in peninsular Italy, considered Naples to be the cultural capital of the South even after unification in 1871.

Lyrical Themes Imbued within Neapolitan Song

The stories embedded within Neapolitan song were imbued with a number of themes that specifically appealed to southern Italian immigrants. One major theme is the daily struggles and hardships that southern Italian immigrants faced living in a foreign land. This is clearly evident in the lyrics themselves, and in how they are set to beautiful and transcendent melodies. A notable example is *Lacrime Napoletane*, which quickly spread beyond the Neapolitan cultural hearth to become the unofficial anthem for all southern Italian immigrants. Composed in 1925 by Libero Bovio and Francesco Buongiovanni, the song lyrics take the form of a letter written at Christmas by a southern Italian immigrant in New York to his mother in Naples. In the letter, the

⁴² Vesely, “Industrious Italians,” 368.

⁴³ Angelo Forgione, “La lingua Napoletana, patrimonio dell’Unesco,” *Napoli.com*, July 14, 2010, accessed August 5, 2016, <http://www.napoli.com/viewarticolo.php?articolo=34942>. Both of my parents come from northern Calabria (not far from the Basilicata border) where the local dialect of “Cosentino” is remarkably similar to Neapolitan.

⁴⁴ Forgione, “La lingua Napoletana,” par. 1.

⁴⁵ Brian Joseph and Rex Wallace, “Latin sum/Oscan sým, sim, esum,” *American Journal of Philology* 108, no. 4 (1987): 675–93.

⁴⁶ Frasca, *Italian Birds of Passage*, 11.

⁴⁷ Del Giudice, “Italian Traditional Song in Toronto,” 89.

immigrant claims that America has cost Neapolitan immigrants many tears (“E nce ne costa lacreme st’America a nuje Napoletana”), making the bread in America taste bitter (“comm’è amaro stu ppane”). In addition, the music supported an ironic and paradoxical plot line—a New World that provided an abundance of bread (both literally and metaphorically in terms of economic success), but still created a sense of poverty, loneliness, and longing for family and homeland. These sentiments truly emerge in the line “Mo tengo quacche dollaro e me pare ca nun so’ stato maie tanto pezzente” [“I have many dollars and I feel completely impoverished, more than ever”].⁴⁸

This genuine inner conflict and struggle melodically manifests itself in the opening line of the chorus (“E nce ne costa lacreme st’America a nuje Napoletana”), which is set to a melody rooted in an oriental minor scale⁴⁹ (sometimes referred to as a Hungarian gypsy scale) by composer Francesco Buongiovanni. This scale includes two interesting interval sets within it, including (a) a one and a half semi-tone jump between the third and fourth and sixth and seventh notes, which creates a lot of movement and space within the scale’s tones, and (b) three consecutive semi-tones between the fourth, fifth, and sixth notes, which creates an abundance of tension and conflict. Ultimately Buongiovanni used this scale to create a chorus melody that is both longing and yearning (with the one and a half semi-tone jumps), yet decisively incongruent and antagonistic (with the three consecutive semitones). The end result is a melodic and lyrical phrase that is instantly recognized and venerated by millions of southern Italian immigrants, and is perhaps the best known line in the entire canon of Neapolitan song after *O Sole Mio*. Moreover, this line has been immortalized in a number of films, most notably in Mario Merola’s *Zappatore (The Digger, 1980)*, in which Merola’s character sings the song with the Brooklyn Bridge and the New York skyline in the background.⁵⁰

Nostalgia toward the motherland is a second major theme found in Neapolitan song. One of the ways that songwriters cultivated a nostalgic feeling was in describing the aesthetic appeal of the southern Italian landscape. Imagery of the sun, sea, and exotic flora were often the subject of many Neapolitan songs.⁵¹ *Torna A Surriento* is the definitive example, as the first four stanzas of the song illustrate:

Vide ’o mare quant’è bello
 spira tanta sentimento
 Comme tu, a chi tiene mente
 ca, scetato, ’o faje sunná

Guarda guá’ chistu ciardino
 Siente sié’ sti sciure ’arancio
 Nu profumo accussí fino
 Dint’o core se ne va

⁴⁸ Libero Bovio and Francesco Buongiovanni, “Lacrime Napulitane (Neapolitan Tears),” *Lyrics Translate*, trans. Evfokas, June 8, 2010, accessed August 5, 2016, <http://lyricstranslate.com/en/lacrime-napulitane-neapolitans-tears.html>.

⁴⁹ Oriental Minor Scale in “A”: A, B, C, D#, E, F, G#, A.

⁵⁰ Please see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLJNILvSOXA>.

⁵¹ Del Giudice, “Italian Traditional Song in Toronto,” 6.

E tu dice: “Io parto, addio!”
T’alluntane da stu core
Da la terra de ll’ammore
Tiene ’o core ’e nun turná?

Ma nun mme lassá
Nun darne stu turmiento
Torna a Surriento
Famme campá⁵²

[Look at the sea, how beautiful it is,
It inspires all kinds of emotions.
Like you with people who care,
You make them daydream.

Behold, look at this garden,
Sense, smell these orange buds!
There isn’t a perfume so fine,
Going straight to your heart.

And you say, “I’m leaving, goodbye!”
You’re walking away from this heart,
From this land of love.
Do you have the heart not to return?

But don’t leave me,
Don’t give me this torment.
Come back to Sorrento,
Make me live.]

For southern Italians who migrated to cold cities in the northeastern United States and Canada, where olives and citrus fruit did not grow, this imagery was a sentimental and nostalgic connection to their homeland.

The Singing Style of Neapolitan Song

Neapolitan song is typically sung in a *bel canto* style, which originated from Italian opera and focuses on breath control, resonance, and a natural approach.⁵³ In the *canzone napoletana*, however, the singer also has total control of the performance. In fact, the singer is much like a conductor who provides his or her own interpretation of the music and also improvises the melody line while performing, particularly during the verses. Supporting musicians follow the singer and every singer offers unique nuances and distinctions, much like a jazz performer. Even

⁵² Ernesto de Curtis, *Torna a Surriento* [Come Back to Sorrento], *Lyrics Translate*, trans. Evan, July 5, 2012, accessed July 14, 2015, <http://lyricstranslate.com/en/torna-surriento-come-back-sorrento.html>.

⁵³ Philip A. Duey, *Bel Canto in Its Golden Age: A Study of Its Teaching Concepts* (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1951), 03; James Stark, *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 102.

the same singer can carry out different renditions of the same song from performance to performance. This is where the artistry and personality of each Neapolitan singer come into play, creating a personal connection to the listener. These varied singing styles and listening preferences are typical of folk music, where the music belongs to all singers and all people, and it is expected that songs will go through a communal re-creation: “the gradual and accepted reworkings of songs by individuals other than the original creators.”⁵⁴ This was especially true for southern Italian immigrants who participated in musical recreations of Neapolitan song through singing and other forms of informal musicking. Hence, the *canzone napoletana* had a communal sense of ownership throughout much of the Italian diaspora, creating a collaborative solidarity and ultimately helping to remedy the hardships faced by southern Italian immigrants around the globe. This phenomenon simultaneously increased the worth and value of Neapolitan song, creating a positive and self-sustaining relationship between the music and the immigrants who practiced it that bridged generations.

Dramatic Actions Associated with Neapolitan Song

In addition to musical improvisation, each singer also incorporated a type of scripted acting (the *sceneggiata*) into the performance. The *sceneggiata* was known as a type of mini-drama combining speech and song that commonly revolves around domestic grief, deception, infidelity, and the anguish of leaving home.⁵⁵

The *sceneggiata* first emerged just after the end of the First World War and was regularly performed in Naples and in other southern Italian cities. Moreover, it also had roots in the United States, particularly in the New York area. Though it faded just after the Second World War, the *sceneggiata* did have a resurgence in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s through a number of Neapolitan films such as the aforementioned *Zappatore*, a popular and well known *sceneggiata* within the southern Italian community in Italy and abroad. For southern Italian immigrants, the *sceneggiata* was a mini-opera of sorts, conjuring up images, moods, emotions, and feelings that spoke to their hearts and souls, allowing them to better cope with the hardships of being an immigrant.

Looking through a Non-Italian Lens: Neapolitan Song and Perceptions about Italy and Italian Culture

It is impossible to overrate the importance of the Neapolitan song, how it became associated, in the non-Italian mind [...] with all those features for which the Italians were famous: passion, sentimentality, nostalgia for the mother (country).
We still live with this legacy.⁵⁶

Since the *canzone napoletana* has become the metaphorical voice for the majority of southern Italian immigrants around the world, it has also gained widespread popularity amongst the general public. In fact, the Italian “diaspora would play a major role in turning Neapolitan tunes into the most internationally recognizable form of Italian music.”⁵⁷ Neapolitan song would play a

⁵⁴ Philip Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 24.

⁵⁵ Alex Marlow-Mann, *The New Neapolitan Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 43.

⁵⁶ Del Giudice, “Italian Traditional Song in Toronto,” 79.

⁵⁷ Christian Bonetto and Josephine Quintero, *Naples & the Amalfi Coast* (Oakland: Lonely Planet, 2010), 234.

major role in shaping and influencing non-Italian perceptions of the country of Italy as a whole and of Italian culture all over the world. Although this phenomenon can be viewed as an anticipated correlation, many northern Italians (who are fiercely proud of their own cultural heritage) are vexed by the fact that many people outside of Italy consider Neapolitan song to be a symbol for the country as a whole. This situation is further intensified considering the persisting prejudices between north⁵⁸ and south.⁵⁹

To further elucidate how Neapolitan music has influenced non-Italian perceptions of Italy and Italian culture, let us explore what has been going on in the northern Italian city of Venice for the last several decades. Venetian gondoliers consistently serenade their paying customers with Neapolitan songs—especially *O Sole Mio*—since these are the songs tourists associate with Italy and want to hear while being rowed through the canals of Venice. This unusual coupling between a northern Italian city and southern Italian music has become a sore spot for the gondoliers themselves, as well as local politicians. Venice councilor Alberto Mazzonetto (who is also a member of the Northern League) was quoted in a *Daily Mail* article as saying, “it is an insult to our heritage and a real punch to the stomach to have Venetian gondoliers singing songs from southern Italy,” calling Neapolitan music “culturally deficient.”⁶⁰ In fact, Mazzonetto’s use of the term “culturally deficient” further perpetuates the divide between northern and southern Italians, as cultural deficit models stem from “negative beliefs and assumptions regarding the ability, aspirations, and work ethic of systematically marginalized peoples.”⁶¹

However, Neapolitan singer-songwriter Nino D’Angelo retorted by defending the music of southern Italy, particularly *O Sole Mio*:

O Sole Mio is a famous Neapolitan song that’s known all over the world. It’s one of the most beautiful songs and I don’t believe anyone has forced gondoliers to sing it. On the contrary, I think tourists request it—it’s not just a Neapolitan song but a world anthem.⁶²

Prior to this story being published in the *Daily Mail* in 2010, a similar story appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* on August 7, 1986, reporting that Venetian tourism official Augusto Salvadori “sent a letter to gondoliers, parking lot attendants and agencies that organize singing gondola tours ordering them to cut out such standard Italian favorites as *O Sole Mio* and *Funiculi*,

⁵⁸ The current existence of the Northern League (a northern Italian separatist political party) is evidence of the prevailing tension between northern and southern Italians. Recently, the Northern League has earned 16–17% in nationwide polls, with much higher numbers in selected northern Italian cities. “Pd stabile in testa, battuto solo dall’astensione al 40%: vola la Lega,” last updated January 13, 2016, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.ilsussidiario.net/News/Politica/2016/1/12/SONDAGGI-ELETTORALI-2016-Ixe-fiducia-nei-leader-vince-Sergio-Mattarella-oggi-12-gennaio-2016-/669515/>.

⁵⁹ Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2002), XIII; Beverly Allen and Mary Russo, eds., *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 23.

⁶⁰ “Venetian Gondoliers Complain after Tourists Continually Request Ice Cream Jingle *O Sole Mio*” *Daily Mail.com*, last updated October 4, 2010, accessed June 11, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1317623/Venetian-gondoliers-upset-tourists-ice-cream-jingle-O-Sole-Mio-request.html>.

⁶¹ Jason Irizarry, “Cultural Deficit Model,” *Education.com*, last updated December 23, 2009, accessed January 12, 2016, <http://www.education.com/reference/article/cultural-deficit-model/>.

⁶² “Venetian Gondoliers Complain.”

Funicula.⁶³ Moreover, a quick search on YouTube will reveal dozens of videos that associate *O Sole Mio* with Italy as a whole.⁶⁴

The events that transpired at the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp, Belgium, however, gave *O Sole Mio* the official title as Italy's unofficial national anthem. During the medal ceremony in fencing, where Italy won most of its gold medals, the band lost the sheet music for the Italian national anthem, and so played *O Sole Mio* instead when the flag was raised.⁶⁵ This episode is a testament to the widespread popularity and availability of the song at the time, as well as the connection that many non-Italians drew between *O Sole Mio* and Italy as a whole.⁶⁶ Moreover, *O Sole Mio* has also been referenced to Italy in other forms of popular culture, including the 1980 film *The Big Red One*, written and directed by Samuel Fuller,⁶⁷ as well as *The Revolt of Gunner Asch* (1955), a book by Hans Hellmut Kirst.⁶⁸ According to the *Internet Movie Data Base* (imdb.com), *O Sole Mio* has also been the title for a number of films and television episodes over the years.⁶⁹

In addition, the association of Neapolitan song with many things Italian is also rooted in the history of music publishing. Considering that Naples was “one of the greatest centers of national music publishing” during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it is not surprising that Neapolitan music was widely distributed and helped shape non-Italian perceptions about Italy.⁷⁰ Mark Rotella references how Neapolitan sheet music traveled on ships from port to port alongside olives, olive oil, and dried pasta in the first decades of the 20th century.⁷¹ This age of sheet music exportation from Naples helped to satiate the demand created by piano-owning audiences who were enamored of Neapolitan music, particularly in North American cities.

Moreover, gramophones became commercially available at approximately the same time, and the *canzone napoletana* made noise both literally and figuratively. In fact, in 1902, *Vesti la giubba* (a tenor aria from the opera *Pagliacci*, composed by Neapolitan Ruggero Leoncavallo)⁷² became the first ever recording in history to sell a million copies,⁷³ and set a standard for how music was recorded and purchased by the general public.⁷⁴ Enrico Caruso, the singer of this historic recording, was a native Neapolitan and is still regarded as one of the greatest tenors of all time. In fact, Caruso “presented himself as a champion of Italian music, and for this reason, he

⁶³ “Venetian Gondoliers Get An ‘Oh No’ To ‘O Sole Mio,’” *Chicago Tribune*, August 7, 1987, accessed June 11, 2015, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1986-08-07/news/8602260879_1_gondoliers-mio-tourists.

⁶⁴ Even Walt Disney has chimed in on this phenomenon in an animated short titled *O Sole Minnie*, where Mickey Mouse is a gondolier who serenades Minnie Mouse through the canals of Venice. Please see “O Sole Minnie | A Mickey Mouse Cartoon | Disney Shorts,” uploaded by Disney/ Mickey Mouse (October 21, 2013), accessed January 12, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iatk0hUDoY>.

⁶⁵ Bonetto and Quintero, *Naples & the Amalfi Coast*, 234.

⁶⁶ Jeff Matthews, “Text and Audio to Some Canzone Napoletana,” *Naples: Life, Death & Miracles A Personal Encyclopedia* (blog), 2010, accessed June 12, 2016, <http://www.naplesldm.com/napsongtexts.html>.

⁶⁷ *The Big Red One*, directed by Samuel Fuller (Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1980), DVD.

⁶⁸ Hans Hellmut Kirst, *The Revolt of Gunner Asch* (New York: Little Brown and Co., 1955).

⁶⁹ “O Sole Mio,” *IMDB*, accessed August 5, 2016, http://www.imdb.com/find?ref_=nv_sr_fn&q=O+Sole+Mio&s=all.

⁷⁰ Frasca, *Italian Birds of Passage*, 7.

⁷¹ Marc Rotella, *Amore: The Story of Italian American Song* (New York: Macmillan, 2010), 46.

⁷² See “Vesti la giubba – Roberto Alagna (DVD Pagliacci),” uploaded by RobertoAlagnaChannel (September 16, 2011), accessed November 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NVRhgOFDvM>.

⁷³ “First Million Seller Record,” *Guinness World Records*, accessed August 6, 2016, <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/first-million-seller-record/>.

⁷⁴ Rotella, *Amore*, 46.

became a universal emblem of it and of everything positive that Italian immigrants could represent.”⁷⁵ Through millions of records sales and worldwide performances, Caruso’s influence on the general public cannot be underestimated. In fact, this world famous Neapolitan became the poster boy for perceptions of Italy among non-Italians at the beginning of the 20th century.⁷⁶

Caruso became an inspiration to his immigrant audience—big city Italians who were stereotyped as poor and sloppy as well as knife-wielding thieves. They were dirty ragpickers and obedient seamstresses. Caruso, though, represented to all Italian immigrants the one who had made it. And he also showed to the outside world that southern Italians could be cultured and creative.⁷⁷

As media technology developed throughout the 20th century, other famous singers also introduced Neapolitan song to the silver screen and to national television broadcasts, catapulting it into mainstream popular culture around the world. Perhaps the most notable singer was Elvis Presley, who had two big hits based on Neapolitan song: *It’s Now or Never* (based on the melody of *O Sole Mio*) sold 25 million copies worldwide and was Elvis’s biggest international single;⁷⁸ *Surrender* (based on the melody of *Torna a Surriento*) became a number one hit in the US and UK and is one of the biggest selling singles of all time.⁷⁹ Elvis also recorded *Santa Lucia* in Italian for his 1964 film *Viva Las Vegas* (co-starring Ann-Margret), and was eventually released on his 1965 album *Elvis For Everyone*. Other notable American singers of the *canzone napoletana* were Mario Lanza, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Perry Como. In fact, “Elvis Presley once acknowledged Lanza as having had the greatest influence on his own singing style.”⁸⁰

Conclusion

Writing this article has been very cathartic for me. It has allowed me to appreciate and contextualize the struggles and successes of the southern Italian immigrant experience in postwar Toronto, Canada, and what it meant to be raised as the child of southern Italian immigrants. Most importantly, writing this article has allowed me to revisit and reflect on the role that Neapolitan music has played in my own upbringing, as well as in the lives of extended family, friends, acquaintances, and *paisani* (fellow countrymen and countrywomen). In sum, the beautiful melodies, sublime lyrics, and mandolin-drenched instrumentation of the *canzone napoletana* has had a profound effect on my life, touching the very core of my being spiritually and connecting me to the homeland of my ancestors despite being born and raised in Canada.

⁷⁵ Frasca, *Italian Birds of Passage*, 45–46.

⁷⁶ Despite his untimely death at age 48 in 1921, Caruso’s fame and influential artistry was recognized in the United States many decades later. He was posthumously awarded a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1987 and, in the same year, had his image emblazoned on a 22¢ U.S. postage stamp. He was also voted into *Gramophone Magazine*’s Hall of Fame in 2012. “Lifetime Achievement Award,” *Grammy.org*, accessed August 6, 2016, <https://www.grammy.org/recording-academy/awards/lifetime-awards>; “Born Feb. 25: Enrico Caruso,” *Linn’s Stamp News*, February 25, 2015, accessed August 16, 2016, <http://www.linns.com/news/us-stamps-postal-history/2015/february/born-feb-25-enrico-caruso.html#>; “Gramophone Hall of Fame,” *Gramophone: The World’s Best Classical Music Reviews*, 2016, accessed August, 6, 2016, <http://www.gramophone.co.uk/halloffame>.

⁷⁷ Rotella, *Amore*, 46.

⁷⁸ Please see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkMVscR5YOo>.

⁷⁹ Please see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7O8UuleVhA>.

⁸⁰ Armando Cesari, *Mario Lanza: An American Tragedy* (Fort Worth: Baskerville Publishers, 2004), 287.

Naturally progressing from my personal experiences, writing this article has afforded me the opportunity to research and explore the critical role that Neapolitan music has played within the southern Italian diaspora. For several generations, the *canzone napoletana* has become the metaphorical voice for millions of southern Italian immigrants in multiple countries. As a professional musician who has performed Neapolitan music at a multitude of international venues, I can personally bear witness to the sheer and steadfast importance of Neapolitan music for southern Italian culture throughout the world.

Finally, this article has allowed me the possibility of investigating the role that Neapolitan music has played in shaping non-Italian perceptions about Italy and Italian culture. In sum, “the music of the southern Italy had greater visibility vis-à-vis the Neapolitan song.”⁸¹

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⁸¹ Marion Jacobson, “Valtaro Musette: Cross-Cultural Musical Performance and Repertoire among Northern Italians in New York,” in *Italian Folk: Vernacular Culture in Italian-American Lives*, ed. Joseph Sciorra (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 140.

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