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Neapolitan Music as an International Image of Italy

Italy is by no means a military or political power, but one can say that it exerts significant global influence stemming from contributions to culture, lifestyle, and the arts. One of Italy’s greatest contributions to the world is its music, especially its invention of opera and Neapolitan songs, as well as its more recent creation of classical crossover. Traditional Neapolitan repertoire, which originated in early 19th-century Italian opera, is a collection of expressive songs discussing the themes of love, beauty, and longing in Naples, and telling the emotional tale of Neapolitans leaving their city as immigrants. Classical crossover, on the other hand, involves classically-trained performers singing popular music (AllMusic). Classical crossover draws much inspiration from its Neapolitan predecessor, and these interconnected genres have had large roles in creating the modern face of Italy and rejuvenating opera.

This paper will attempt to prove that Neapolitan music has become the global face of modern Italy. This point is illustrated by the efforts of four Italian singers. Enrico Caruso and Mario Lanza were interpreters of Neapolitan songs who helped to make this repertoire famous outside of Italy and establish a path for the classical crossover movement. Luciano Pavarotti was a founder of classical crossover, a champion of Neapolitan songs, and an instrumental figure in broadening the appeal of Italian music. Andrea Bocelli, a classically-trained singer and pianist, has become one of the most famous contemporary stars of crossover. Examples of Neapolitan songs are *O Sole Mio*, a piece about the bright sun shining on Naplesand *Torna a Surriento*, a song about a man longing for his lover who left the town of Sorrento, near Naples.

This paper will also attempt to prove that Neapolitan music was instrumental in creating the predominately Italian genre of classical crossover, and that crossover, in turn, rejuvenated opera for modern audiences. Prior to the creation of classical crossover, opera audiences in Italy and elsewhere had been aging and shrinking for decades, creating a risk that the operatic art form would eventually be lost (Pavarotti 1997).

I believe that Neapolitan music deserves special attention and research. While immigrants from Naples and its region represented a fraction of the approximately fourteen million Italians who came to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they sported perhaps the most prolific tradition of song in a regional vernacular and one that was tightly connected with opera. Thus, Neapolitan music has acted as a fundamental ingredient of classical crossover, which has rejuvenated opera, as well as an effective vehicle for exchanges and migrations of culture, establishing it as the face of modern Italy.