The Global Influence of Twentieth Century Italy: Musical Culture and Immigration

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France, Spain, and Italy in the 20th Century

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In *Italian Birds of Passage: The Diaspora of Neapolitan Musicians in New York,* Simona Frasca informs her readers of the history of Neapolitan songs in Italy and New York, as well as successfully persuading readers of the genre’s continuing significance and popularity worldwide. Frasca believes that Neapolitan popular music saved the Italian-American immigrant community, and the Italians’ image in America as a whole, from ferocious racial prejudice – it showed Americans not only that Italians were not backwards, violent, or incompetent, but also that the Italians had a colorful culture and a natural talent for producing high-quality, charming art.

Frasca starts her book by explaining the context of Italian immigrants to New York at the beginning of the twentieth century, comparing Italians to migrating birds. This sets the scene for her readers, clarifying the how and why of this mass immigration movement, and showing the conditions in which the Italian-American culture was created. Many, although not all, of the Italians who came to America in this period were from the south of Italy, because that was a region persistently plagued by a lack of economic opportunities – a trend which sadly continues to this day. “In most cases, they were very poor people lured by economic potential and the desire for social emancipation available to them on the American continent.[[1]](#footnote-1)” These people had often worked in agriculture, lacking the skills required for the high-paying professions in American society. There were also, however, a fair amount of artists among the Italians – particularly musicians, actors, and dancers.

With the background in place, Frasca moves on to describe the typical experience of an Italian-American in this new country. She writes that many Italians had to deal with extreme hate and racial discrimination coming from more established segments of American society at the turn of the twentieth century. In recent decades, we have come to think of Italian immigrants, and Italians in general, as warm, friendly people (although a bit loud) with an interesting language, delicious food, and a uniquely fascinating culture. So, one might wonder, what caused Americans to finally change their minds about Italians? Actually, the answer is not a ‘what,’ but a ‘who.’ The captivating arts that the immigrants brought with them, of course, were a large part of the answer, but one person in particular helped save the image of the Italian immigrant by popularizing Neapolitan music with mainstream New York society – Enrico Caruso.

“The man who played a fundamental role in defining the positive prototype of the Italian immigrant as one who achieved social status and was self-determined… was Enrico Caruso.[[2]](#footnote-2)” Caruso was born and raised in Naples, a southern city brimming with artistic flair and musical traditions. The great tenor sang opera and traditional Neapolitan pieces, developing acclaim in Europe. However, he was attacked by the Neapolitan press for his unusually intimate, emotional singing style, so he left for New York City and its Metropolitan Opera.

“Caruso remained at the Metropolitan Opera until 1920, the year before his death. He received fabulous offers, lived a comfortable life, and all of this was extraordinary because it was the life of an Italian who continued to define himself as an immigrant.[[3]](#footnote-3)” Caruso had officially changed the image of the Italian immigrant for the better, but he did not stop there. He was immortalized as a musical star by recording opera and Neapolitan music on the gramophone. This new technology proved to be the most effective tool in making these musical genres popular with Americans across the nation, and, eventually, listeners around the world; this also proves Frasca’s claims that Neapolitan song was the saving grace for immigrants, is one of Italy’s most important exports, and became one of the first modern styles of music to transcend national borders.

Throughout this novel, Frasca writes with clarity and attention to detail, as well as providing an intimate look at examples of important people, making it easy to understand and agree with her central argument. I enjoyed reading this story of Italian-Americans, and I believe that it is also relevant to Italy as a whole in the twentieth century. This book helped me to form my own main argument about Italy in the twentieth century – that Italy’s greatest source of international diplomatic ‘power’ is also its greatest export: the ‘soft power’ of culture, and that the Italian culture’s greatest, most successful contribution to the international community is its popular Neapolitan and operatic music.

Of course, it is common knowledge that, at least since the fall of the Roman Empire, Italy has never really been militarily or politically significant. Unlike France or Spain, it never created a glorious medieval or Renaissance empire, it never won major wars for territory, and it often chose not to participate in the bloody political games of the rest of the continent (as much as those could be avoided). In fact, Italy was not even Italy until the latter half of the nineteenth century; it was a collection of distinct, contentious city-states, and it proved an epic challenge to unite these factions into a single nation.

The true significance of Italy has always been cultural. Italy was the birthplace of the Renaissance, and it has created some of the most important art, architecture, and literature in the West since Ancient Greece and Rome. These are impressive achievements. Even when American opinions of Italian immigrants were at their most hateful, these same Americans (grudgingly) admitted Italy’s cultural importance.

Music, however, is the crowning jewel of the Italian culture, as Frasca’s book helps demonstrate. It is difficult, if not impossible, for a foreigner to think of Italy and not think of opera arias, like ‘La Donna e Mobile’ (‘The Woman is Fickle’) from *Rigoletto,* or classic Neapolitan songs, like ‘Torna a Surriento’ (‘Return to Sorrento’), or ‘O Sole Mio’ (‘O Sun of Mine’). That has only become true in the twentieth century, as a result of widespread recordings from famous live performances, as well as artists like Caruso and Pavarotti, who became famous for studio recordings in addition to live concerts.

I believe that Italy’s music is its most important form of international influence, because it is a cultural feature that is universally admired, and that brings people together. This is evident in the story of the Italian immigrants, whose music over time fostered strong Italian-American relations. While this may not directly, and on its own, get other countries to agree with Italy on policy issues, it will make people understand and appreciate Italy more, and that will foster mutual cooperation. It can be one of the most critical tools for promoting Italian agendas, and simply the appreciation of such an art will encourage positive developments like free trade, globalization, and cultural relativism.

*Italian Birds of Passage* by Simona Frasca is an engaging novel that describes an important chapter in both Italian and American history. The book also served as an ideal launching pad for me to develop my argument that Italian music is the country’s greatest export, and its biggest source of soft power, or influence, in international matters.

Works Cited

Frasca, Simona, and Inc. Ebrary. 2014. *Italian Birds of Passage: The Diaspora of Neapolitan Musicians in New York.* First Edition. Ed. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

1. Simona Frasca, *Italian Birds of Passage: The Diaspora of Neapolitan Musicians in New York* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Frasca, *Italian Birds of Passage,* 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)