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Migrations of Culture Conference

31 March 2017

Neapolitan Music Presentation: Speaking Notes

Let me ask you: What are the first things that come to mind when you think about Italy? Would they be food, wine, natural beauty, and music? Along with pizza and pasta, when people think of Italy, what often comes to mind is the rich musical tradition. We think of those classic operatic and popular songs with unforgettable melodies, and we think of the soaring Italian voices that sang them, like Pavarotti or Caruso.

What’s one of the first songs that people think of when they think of Italian music?

(sing or play audio/video clip of O Sole Mio)

That is a classic Neapolitan song, and it’s called O Sole Mio, My Sunshine, by the Neapolitan composer Da Capua. As you can tell, it’s famous for its memorable melody and emotional story-telling. We all connect with expressive music like that, regardless of the language that we speak!

Now, I would like to start by saying that Neapolitan songs have really become an international image for the Italian nation – a modern face for Italy. That’s largely thanks to songs like O Sole Mio and Santa Lucia, which are instantly recognizable and widely admired.

The Neapolitan musical tradition is one of great melodrama, emotion, story-telling, and beautiful melodies, all nicely-designed and wrapped up in a pleasant and approachable package, like any good Italian product. Traditional Neapolitan music 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.

Some of Italy’s most famous voices, from Caruso, a Neapolitan by birth and a hero among Italian-American immigrants, to Pavarotti, a legend of opera and one of the greatest Italian divas, to Bocelli, a modern rock-star whose musical style crosses between classical and popular, have sung Neapolitan music. These singers have all sold high-profile renditions of Neapolitan songs, increasing the international fame and appreciation of the Neapolitan musical tradition.

So, you may be asking, why does Neapolitan music matter?

There’s a few reasons why it matters. First, Neapolitan music is borne from one of Italy’s other greatest inventions, opera, and it has come full circle from that point. It branched out from roots in 19th-century Italian opera, becoming part of the popular music scene for some time. Then, riding on its new commercial success, it returned in recent decades to help modernize and rejuvenate opera. Second, Neapolitan music has helped to vastly improve the image of Italian-American immigrants, especially when sung by the legendary tenor Enrico Caruso. Third, Neapolitan music has grown so famous and so beloved by audiences around the world that it has become one of the most important and recognizable international images, or faces, of modern Italy.

This presentation will demonstrate how Neapolitan music has become a global face of modern Italy. This point is illustrated by the efforts of four Italian singers, of Elvis Presley, and of numerous Italian-American and American 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. Elvis Presley, despite not having Italian heritage or a connection to Italy, enjoyed and promoted Neapolitan songs, demonstrating their increasing international popularity and profile. Artists like Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, and Perry Como, a native of the Allegheny, Pennsylvania area, increased Italian music’s popularity in the US and expanded the repertoire of fellow Italian-American musicians.

This presentation 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. As confirmed by Pavarotti, opera audiences in Italy and elsewhere had been aging and shrinking for decades prior to the creation of classical crossover, creating a risk that the operatic art form would eventually be lost.

Listed here are the focal points of this presentation, from the origins of Neapolitan music (list them all) to how Neapolitan music has become a vehicle for cultural exchange and understanding. These sections will support the overall argument of Neapolitan music being an international image of modern Italy and a force of rejuvenation for opera.

Neapolitan song is influenced by 19th century Italian opera and classical art songs, including the works of famous opera composer Donizetti. However, there was also influence from the popular and folk music traditions of Naples and the greater region of Campania, especially the pieces of music coming from the working class. These inspirations were combined to form a new blended style, the Neapolitan song musical tradition, which at different points throughout its history, has catered to both the working class and the upper echelons of society.

Neapolitan song has somewhat vague or ambiguous origins, but it is often said to have come into its popular modern form in the 1830s, with the help of a music festival and competition. This event was an annual song-writing competition and performance series called the Festival of Piedigrotta. The festival was popular and continued through the 1950s. The first piece to win this competition was the song *Te voglio bene assaje,* which means ‘I love you very much’ in Neapolitan dialect. The author of the song is unknown, but traditionally, authorship has been attributed to Donizetti.

Neapolitan music was and still is enjoyed for its melodrama, storytelling, and beautiful melodies. However, another important part of the Neapolitan song tradition is the mandolin. The mandolin has always been an integral component of this music, and the instrument is often considered to be of Italian origin. It was common to play this instrument as an accompaniment for the vocal melodies of Neapolitan songs.

Now we will move on to the second section of the presentation, dealing with Italian immigration, especially to the United States of America, and the Italian image abroad.

There have been several waves of Italian immigration, particularly to the US. The first great wave of Italian immigration came after the *Risorgimento,* the unification of Italy, during the 1860s and 1870s. There were large subsequent waves of Italian immigration through the post-World War II period, and Italian immigration to the US continues to this day, albeit in smaller numbers and in a different way. However, these wave of immigrants, particulary the first wave, came primarily from the north of Italy. The majority of the immigrants were from Piedmont, a northern region bordering France that includes the city of Turin. The number of immigrants from the South of Italy, and from Naples in particular, was a significantly smaller proportion of overall Italian immigration than the proportion from Piedmont. 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, the population of Italian-American immigrants from Naples gained outsized influence, while the groups from Piedmont and elsewhere did not. Neapolitan culture and life styles, from Neapolitan foods like pizza and pasta with tomato sauce to music, theater, dialect, and social customs came to be associated with Italians in general.

Unfortunately, when the first waves of Italian immigrants came to the US, their stereotypical characteristics were not looked upon very fondly. In fact, at one point in the late 19th and early 20th century, Italian-Americans had a very negative image and suffered a high level of discrimination. The lack of economic opportunity in Naples at the beginning of the twentieth century was what led many people to emigrate to the United States, and when these immigrants arrived, they faced severe racial discrimination from mainstream American society. Americans viewed them as violent, backwards, and unskilled, sometimes even referring to them as brutes and depicting them in drawings in mainstream publications as aggressive, animal-like caricatures.

However, many Americans at that time also recognized that Italy was a country of natural beauty, important history, and amazing artistry. Therefore, watching and listening to charming performances of great Italian-American art eventually persuaded Americans to adopt a friendlier view of Italian-American immigrants. As the music journalist and academic lecturer on Italian migration Simona Frasca confirms, “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 – within the dimensions that define the model of an immigrant ‘self-made man’ – was Enrico Caruso.”

This leads us to the next section of the presentation: How Neapolitan Music Became Popular. As mentioned before, Enrico Caruso was a hugely popular and successful Italian-American musician from Naples who sang both Neapolitan and operatic music. Caruso also became a major star for the Victor Talking Machine company, an organization that sold recordings on gramophones. These were devices through which an ordinary person could listen to performances, like having a concert in his or her own living room. Mainstream Americans heard Caruso’s performances in this way as well as in live concerts. Gramophone recordings increased the popularity of Neapolitan music.

More Italian musical and theatrical stars exploded onto US stages and screens. These performers included the great Mario Lanza, a major celebrity in the 1950s who made good use of a well-trained voice that was perfectly suited for the melodrama of opera and Neapolitan music. He was an Italian-American tenor continuing in Caruso’s tradition, who began his operatic career in the thirties and forties. By the 1950s, however, he began singing material outside of the operatic canon to great acclaim, particularly Neapolitan songs and musical theater.

 Mario Lanza was the first opera singer to branch out from operatic literature and Neapolitan songs to other repertoires. His forays into musical theater and popular American music of the time were very lucrative, helping him gain a large following. He became a star not only on the operatic stage, but also on the big screen, for his roles in famous movies, and on Broadway for his musical theater performances. Lanza starred in the 1950 movie The Toast of New Orleans, and sang the song *Be My Love*, which became his first hit song to sell a million copies. He went on to star in The Great Caruso a year later, playing the role of the legendary Enrico Caruso. That movie became the year’s top-grossing film, and it gave him his second million-selling hit song, *The Loveliest Night of the Year*. Lanza made significant contributions to both Italian and American music and cinema.

Pavarotti, considered by some the greatest classically-trained tenor of the 20th century, and arguably even the best classical tenor of all time, followed Lanza. He helped further popularize Neapolitan music. Pavarotti loved Naples, and recognized the huge gifts which the city had given to opera and Italian music in general. According to Pavarotti in his biography *Pavarotti: My World,* “not only are Neapolitans extremely proud to have given the world Caruso. They are proud, too, to have given the world so much of the music he sang, especially the traditional Neapolitan songs.” Pavarotti’s personal fame was partially built on his excellent interpretations of beautiful Neapolitan classics, especially his favorite Neapolitan songs Santa Lucia and Santa Lucia Lontana, which are about the Santa Lucia harbor, just outside of Naples. This repertory helped him sell more records, but more importantly, it became a launching pad for his efforts to increase the visibility and appreciation of Neapolitan music, and to rejuvenate the opera world.

Following the trajectory of Pavarotti’s career, especially his work with Neapolitan and popular music repertoires, brings us to the subsequent section of this presentation, How Neapolitan Music Encouraged Crossover.

Pavarotti said this about classical crossover in his biography: “When Placido Domingo, Jose Carreras, and I did the first Three Tenors concert at the Baths of Caracalla in Rome in 1990, none of us had any idea how popular it would be.” Carreras had originally proposed the idea of getting the three together for concerts. Domingo and Pavarotti liked this idea, but could not manage to find a time or occasion. After Carreras, who was very young at the time, was diagnosed with leukemia, the other two tenors thought more about his proposal, and when he recovered from his illness, they decided that a Three Tenors concert would be an excellent celebration. The concert, held during the World Cup for soccer, became a huge success. This encouraged them to have more performances. The Three Tenor’s repertoire did include a number of popular songs, Broadway showtunes, and classical crossover arrangements specifically made for them, but Neapolitan music continued to be a prominent feature of the musical catalogue. O Sole Mio was the favorite and one of the go-to songs for the Three Tenors in many of their global performances. They sang a beautiful arrangement of Santa Lucia Lontana, since it was one of Pavarotti’s favorite Neapolitan pieces, along with O Sole Mio and the other ‘Santa Lucia.’ They also sang the piece Core ‘Ngrato (Catari). Today, all of these songs have become legendary, elevated in status, visibility, and mainstream popularity by the performances of Caruso, Lanza, Pavarotti, Bocelli, and the Three Tenors.

While the Three Tenors performances are great examples of Pavarotti’s outreach and marketing for opera, the international vocal competition which he founded is an excellent example of the other side of his work to rejuvenate opera – the recruitment of promising young singers. Pavarotti said: “By the end of the 1970s I had achieved more than I ever thought I would as an opera singer… I could tell myself that I had really achieved something, but what to do with that something? …I also wanted to try to do something that might help young singers.” This, of course, was a very important part of his overall plan, because opera, like other art, needs fresh talent to sustain itself in the future.

Pavarotti remembered how everything had changed for him when he won a vocal competition in Reggio Emilia in 1961, because that was what helped him start his career. He wanted to repay the favor, so he created a vocal competition of his own in Philadelphia, a city he liked because it reminded him of his city Modena in northern Italy. The event would be under the umbrella of the Opera Company of Philadelphia. In this competition, young singers were invited from around the world to perform for Pavarotti and other judges. The winners would then have the opportunity to sing with Pavarotti in an opera production. This competition started in 1980, continuing through 1981, and many of its winners went on to very successful careers in opera.

After Pavarotti had become a well-established artist, classical crossover had finally become an official genre used to facilitate outreach and recruitment, and Neapolitan music had been cemented as an integral part of classical crossover and opera recruitment efforts, the impact started to show. Opera’s trajectory had been changed for the better, from a fate of dwindling, old audiences, to an era of growth – one could finally see youthful, new faces at the opera, and the number of people in attendance was growing steadily.

Andrea Bocelli, a young blind tenor from Lajatico, in Tuscany near Pisa, would be the man to take classical crossover to its greatest heights. While he was not the titan of opera that Pavarotti had been, he quickly became the ‘rock star’ of crossover, achieving levels of mainstream fame and appeal that were previously unimaginable.

His first album, *Il Mare Calmo della Sera*, went platinum within weeks and entered the Italian Top Ten. Bocelli then went on to become the best-selling Italian artist of all time, in any genre, with his Romanza album. Luciano Pavarotti had passed the torch to Andrea Bocelli to increase the worldwide appeal of classical music, and this strategy worked, as there were now more people getting interested in classical music and attending classical music concerts than ever before.

The impact of Neapolitan music, opera, and classical crossover on people everywhere has been immeasurable, and Pavarotti wrote about it, in the context of his voice competition: “I know that to people outside of the world of opera, this sort of classical singing seems a small, very special world that interests only a few people. But when you sit there day after day, as I did, and listen to hundreds of young singers from all over the world who have sacrificed so much to come here to face maybe discouragement or embarrassment, you get a different idea…you begin to think that opera and singing are not such small matters. You get a strong feeling that this sort of music goes very deep in the human and will be with us for a long time.”

That brings us to the last section of this presentation: Neapolitan Music as a Vehicle of Cultural Exchange and Understanding.

Italy invented opera. It then refined this invention with the works of Puccini and Verdi. As Pavarotti wrote, “opera is the blood of Italians…” Finally, Italy rejuvenated and changed opera in recent times, modernizing and bringing it into the twenty-first century, ready for the future. Opera has played a major role in the evolution of Western music, and it has always been a fascinating blend of many art forms – not just vocal music, but also acting, visual art for the sets and costumes, and great instrumental music. Neapolitan song and classical crossover are even more diverse and composite genres, because they take elements from the operatic form and add influences from popular and folk music. The fusion of forms encompassed by Neapolitan music, opera, and classical crossover reflects the nature of Italy, a colorful country which combines everything – good and bad – from lifestyle to culture, food and drink to language, and music to visual art, among other features.

Italy is a country of international importance, and much of that has always stemmed from its art and culture. There are multitudes of Italophiles in the world; it has always been an appealing place to go, an intriguing subject to study, and a nation with many enticing exports. Italy, in spite of criticism for its faults, has won the respect and admiration of countless people around the globe, which goes a long way towards fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. In this way, Italy should be a model for others.

Italy wields very little direct power in world affairs; however, its culture and art wield a great deal of ‘soft power’ with which to influence the world order, and to make an impact, at a more personal level, on the cultures and populations of many nations. That is a power that can last through the changing tides of political and economic hegemony, outlive wars, and maintain a space reserved for it in history. One of Italy’s greatest contributions to the world in the periods is Neapolitan music. Neapolitan music has helped create classical crossover, rejuvenate opera, and establish a popular international image for Italy, promoting understanding and Italian ‘soft power.’