

Linda Barwick and Marcello Sorce Keller, eds

Italy in Australia's Musical Landscape

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Reviewed by Roland Bannister

The core of this new volume in Lyrebird Press's Australasian Music Research series is a set of case-study essays on aspects of Italian music made in Australia, or, perhaps, Australian music with Italian characteristics (labelling here is fraught). The quality of the research, analysis and writing is first class, and, dare I say so in a scholarly journal, a joy to read. Each of the case studies documents wondrous music traditions whose stories might otherwise be lost. I look forward to the day when research of this nature is published in books for interested general readers. There seems to be a core constituency of people hungry to learn of Australia's past, and I'd expect that they would find our musical past interesting.

Although the editors have used a familiar structure of introduction, case studies, responses and summary, they employ it particularly well. While each of the case study chapters presents valuable new research, and the responses present cogent commentary from North America and Italy, it is in the final chapter, the summary, that a larger view is posited: the editors address questions on the nature of music experience, the nature of migrant experience, and the relationship between the two. Elegant writing is a feature of the book, and this elegance is exemplified in the summary. Here the depth of thought and clarity of expression is set at a level to which humanities scholars might aspire: see, in particular, the first page of the summary. Writing is, I believe, a fundamental part of research: careful attention to expression and the honing of phrases, sentences and paragraphs is in fact part of the analytical process. Writing is thinking, and the refinement of writing is a refinement of that thinking.

Central to the book is the large theme—implicit for the most part—of the basic human need for a sense of belonging and acceptance, and the role of music in this quest. Conversely, this theme is a constant reminder that while music may effectively draw people together, it just as effectively excludes some. Other themes explore how music changes when it is made in new contexts. What happens to the music when the musicians and their audience move to a new place? When and why and how does music cross boundaries or, conversely, remain within boundaries?

Music's meaning depends on the context in which it is made and heard. Such meaning is bound to reflect—and shape—group and individual identity. Such identities provoke diverse

power relationships and contribute to flux in social relationships. Thus Linda Barwick and Marcello Sorce Keller's introductory overview of the place of Italians in Australian history and of aspects of Italian history and culture provides a context in which we might understand the music. The editors note the importance of regional cultures in Italy and the tendency of Italians to identify with *paesani*—people of their own *paese*: their village, town, region or general locality—rather than with 'Italy.' The concept of 'Italy' is a work in progress, and this progress meets with more success in Australia where Italians from various communities come together, as Italians. Music is central to this process.

In the first of the case-study chapters, Kay Dreyfus and Kerry Murphy posit the term 'passionate paradox' as they explore the seeming contradiction between the appetite of Australians for Italian culture and the disdain for Italians that has often plagued our national discourses. This exploration illuminates the conundrum of Australia's xenophobia in the face of its dependence on immigrants. Dreyfus and Murphy's discussion centres on this 'ambiguity of attitude' in the stories of three musicians who came to Australia with Italian opera companies in the 1920s and sought to settle here. In a way that reflects current debates in Australian society, there was a fear that foreign musicians would swamp the labour market. Evidence of the paradox is present throughout the book, just as it is present throughout our history.

Policies and practices of the Musicians Union of Australia embodied this paradox: in the context of the White Australia Policy and widespread community prejudice, the union fought to limit the number of overseas musicians allowed to settle here. Dreyfus and Murphy make the point that while ordinary Italian immigrants were treated with suspicion, cultured Italians—and here we mean 'high culture'—fared better because they were protected by a protective carapace of class. For example, the wedding of visiting opera star Toti Del Monte in Sydney in 1928 attracted a crowd of 25,000. Fuelling the lack of trust of Italians was the dichotomous nature of their allegiance to their country of origin—often expressed in the form of fascism—and their loyalty to Australia. Throughout the book we see the 'passionate paradox' played out in the lives of individuals.

Life stories of individual Italian musicians in Australia are a highlight of the book. Alongside Dreyfus and Murphy's three musicians, there are accounts in John Whiteoak's chapter of the work of professional accordion players, fascinating accounts of the lives of harpists from Basilica by Frances Thiele, and of Italian festival entrepreneurs by Aline Scott-Maxwell. Here, lived experience illuminates questions about migration and music.

The life of Antonio Comin, as told by Comin to Barwick, demonstrates the impact that a single individual can bring to culture, and the power that academics might be able to exercise. Comin, born in Cornuda, Treviso, and brought to Griffith in New South Wales as a boy, became foundation professor of Italian at Flinders University where he fostered Italian culture through writing, theatre and song for three decades. A salutary feature of Comin's work was his brave stance in presenting politically contentious material. He was a scholar with strong social convictions.

Barwick was student of Comin's at Flinders and she herself has played a key role in Italian-music studies in Australia. She is part of Comin's legacy. Barwick documents Comin's work systematically in three appendixes to the chapter. But I, too, have benefitted from Comin's generous mentorship. In the preparation of my book *Music and Love: Music in the Lives of Italian Australians in Griffith, New South Wales*, I approached Comin on Barwick's recommendation and he generously offered to read my work and assess my use of Italian language. This he did, and

to my delight—and chagrin—he also offered pertinent advice on my use of English. Comin is a dialectologist and brings a deep understanding of language to his writing and teaching. Comin launched *Music and Love* in Griffith in 2007 in front of a large audience of Italian Australians who greeted their long lost Griffith *paesano* with ebullient warmth that was a joy to witness.

In a later chapter, North American scholar Luisa Del Giudice attributes to Comin the impetus for this current volume. She wonders what might have happened had there been more Comins throughout the diaspora. I wonder whether the academy would allow a Comin—with his emphasis on community activity and art-making—to flourish today, when high student-to-staff ratios, objectively measurable assessment criteria and a happy financial bottom line are of such importance.

Barwick, in a chapter about her involvement with Italian traditional music in Adelaide in the 1970s and 1980s, takes as her subject the effect of ‘Australia’ on Italian traditional culture. ‘Unification’ of Italy in 1861 was a political unification. Despite unification, diverse and distinct cultural groups across Italy persist to this day, and these groups foster their own forms of traditional music. In Australia local group divisions are challenged: here people from a range of Italian communities might come together as an audience, and this audience’s taste and experience are not like those in Italy. Beyond this, factors such as the acoustic properties of buildings here, and even the weather itself impinge on music-making in ways unlike those in Italy. While Italian traditional songs were often about profound social issues and could be characterised by anger and sadness, this was not always appealing to Australian audiences, of Italian or non-Italian backgrounds, who knew nothing of these issues. In Australia, audiences were more interested in entertainment, so there is a convergence towards the musical character of pop songs. Barwick explains that it is more productive to examine how the dominant culture shapes the less dominant one because the impact of immigrant musics is not readily identifiable.

The diverse experience and sensibilities of the co-editors enrich the book. While Barwick is an Australian scholar steeped in Italian language, music and culture, Sorce Keller is a musician and academic working from the University of Malta and living in Switzerland. He takes a broad humanistic approach to his work, and his delight in storytelling is obvious. In his case-study chapter, Sorce Keller acknowledges the difficulty of gaining a comprehensive overview of Australian music cultures, given the breadth of our immigrant music and the range of ‘socio-musical’ behaviours. He notes that the Italian traditional music scene is ‘diverse and fragmented,’ and suggests that interest in regional musics is greater here than in Italian cities. He identifies Neapolitan song as the only regional music enjoyed by Italians from across Italy, and suggests that it has become a pan-Italian and international identity genre for Italians, and perhaps a surrogate for opera.

So, why do some musics transplant more readily than others? Despite contextual circumstances that might, on the face of it, ensure its decline, the Maggio ritual in the Tuscan village of Garfagnana flourishes. Yet, despite the immigration of more than three thousand Garfagnini to Australia, they did not practice the Maggio here. Barwick asks why the tradition flourishes there, but not here. She seeks her answers in the Garfagnana’s long history of emigration; the close connection between performance variations in both the sound and the stylised sword play and individual *paese*; a detailed analysis of several versions of arietta melody drawn from the Maggio ritual in different localities; and the continuing enrichment of the tradition by ‘the diaspora effect’—the constant stream of emigrants returning to live in

Tuscany, or visiting there in search of their cultural roots. Garfagnini in the diaspora maintain an interest in Maggio via recordings and visits home. In Australia, work patterns do not allow appropriate times slots for Maggio performance. Our weather is too hot for outdoor performance and our venues unsuitable. Earlier, and sadly, restrictions on the practice of Italian culture during the wars had served to suppress the tradition.

Italian Australian *fisarmonica* (accordion) virtuosi of the 1930s to the 1960s became familiar to a wide Australian public. John Whiteoak explores the importance of the accordion to Italian identity-making in Australia and posits a 'Golden Age' of accordion playing. The influence of American accordion professionals on this age was strong. For example, Pietro Deiro's and Pietro Frosini's recordings, accordion schools and educational publications shaped accordion playing in Australia. Frosini's compositions and arrangements were particularly influential. Whiteoak traces the careers of Gus Merzi, Lou Campara, Lou Toppano and a number of other prominent accordionists, and explores the role of the accordion in community-hall dances and social evenings in communities across Australia. Here, Italian music elements melded with more generic Latin styles, especially Hispanic musics, and the tango, mazurka, paso-doble, polka, waltz and later the mambo and the cha-cha-cha. Despite its adaptability to numerous genres, including hillbilly, Hawaiian and even early rock and roll, the accordion could not find a place in pop music from the 1960s forward. Today it serves to link our imaginations and memories to earlier times and places. The professionals found prosperity via public and media performance, teaching, publishing and instrument demonstrations for music retailers. In doing so they created a stereotype: the Italian accordionist. Wherever there are accordions, Whiteoak says, there are likely to be accordion competitions. Competitions have a festival-like character, and festivals are a prominent phenomenon of Italian life.

Italian festivals and contests in Australia from the mid-1960s forward are the subjects of a detailed analysis by Scott-Maxwell. She is interested particularly in the festivals that sought to promote the writing of new songs and fostered, in the main, songs of the *canzone* tradition. Italian festivals in fact usually included contests, sometimes of music performance, sometimes of song writing. Some festivals set out to discover new stars, and they served to promote radio stations, record companies and entrepreneurs. Italian music festivals are modelled on the Sanremo Festival in Italy, the festival that became the model for the Eurovision Song Contest. Melbourne concert promoter Johnny Gattuso toured stars from Sanremo across Australia. Italian Australians perceive Sanremo as a symbol of, and a link to, contemporary Italy, a connection the strength of which is demonstrated by Scott-Maxwell. Eventually the festivals began to characterise themselves as 'traditions.' They made references to previous festivals, and broadcast details about their links to Sanremo from the stage and in the written programs. There is, too, a growing concern on the part of festival organisers to pass Italian culture to younger people. The links to Italy and the promulgation of Italian consciousness is fostered by offering a trip to Italy as first prize in some festivals.

Herself a harpist, Frances Thiele writes a case study about a number of harpists who came to Melbourne from Basilicata in the late nineteenth century. She places the instrument at the centre of a discussion on the changing relationships between popular and folk and classical styles, as she explores how different types of harps are closely allied to different types of music. Economic imperatives shaped the music. In Melbourne the harpists changed the music to meet the demands and interests of their audience, and in the process blurred distinctions between

genres. The harpists worked as street buskers at first, and in this context brought classical and folk styles together. Later, the harpists worked on radio and television and in theatre and classical orchestras. As World War I prevented wide travel in Europe, so the harp tradition was suppressed in Italy, while it flourished in Melbourne. The harpists link twentieth-century practice in Melbourne to a long tradition in Italy.

The responses from overseas scholars find parallels and divergences between Italian experiences in Australia, North America and in Italy. Luisa Del Giudice, writing from North America, identifies chain-migration patterns leading to *paese* formations, hostility towards Italians from non-Italians, song festivals in the Sanremo tradition, government policies on multiculturalism, the growing 'clout' of Italians, growing recognition of the value of Italians to the society, and a favouring of Italians language over dialects. The 'passionate paradox' is evident in North America too.

Racism inevitably attends immigration, and it manifests itself in the passionate paradox, not only here, but elsewhere in the Italian diaspora. Franco Fabbri responds to the book's accounts of challenges and travails experienced by Italian immigrants to Australia by arguing that Italians in the past believed that Italians were not racist, but other people were. He demolishes this belief by citing the case of songs used by fascists in the creation of the myth that Italians were always the victims. He shows, too, how the folk revival of the 1960s and 1970s contributed to a new political awareness, and especially how song reflected the move away from fascism. Italians have harboured anti-immigrant sentiment, but the experience of Italian emigration has become an argument in favour of support for immigrants to Italy. Empathy and solidarity with immigrants continues as a theme in songs of the 1990s.

Paolo Prato, writing from Italy, argues that it is inevitable that music culture among immigrants will 'crystallise' Italian culture in the new place, while in Italy cultural change moves towards pop music. Transplanted music might contract towards its essential features and become more like itself, or alternatively it may adapt sounds from the new cultural setting and grow in directions quite unlike the untransplanted music back in Italy. Italian songs and performance practice in Australia changes in its own direction as noted in several chapters in this book. Music changes as people search for identity and acceptance in changing contexts.

In the final chapter, Barwick and Sorce Keller present a beautiful affirmation of the values of music in human society, and in the lives of individuals and groups of individuals. They emphasise that music, like society, is forever in a state of flux. They go on to affirm that the study of music will enhance our understanding of the forces of assimilation, co-habitation, and the retention and loss of cultural traits. The study of music transplanted, they argue, is perhaps more likely to show how music works than would a study of music in its original context.

This volume provokes the question of what a wider study of Italian music in Australia would entail, recognising as it does that there are numerous 'diverse and fragmented' *paesani* groups in Australia, and hinting at an endless stream of traditional musics that ought to be recorded. This thought provokes the further question of what shape a comprehensive history of music in Australia might take. A single volume general history of music in Australia would be so general that it would be bound to leave out the best bits. And the best bits are to be savoured in the close-grained, nuanced and literary accounts of music-making like those that we encounter in this volume.