

Roland Bannister, *Music and Love: Music in the Lives of Italian Australians in Griffith, New South Wales*

Macleod, Vic: Italian Australian Institute, La Trobe University, 2007
ISBN 9780977500956, 304 pp. : ill., music, ports, index, bibliog.

Reviewed by Marcello Sorce Keller

This is quite an original book and, therefore, difficult to classify into any pre-existing category or genre. In reading its subtitle, *Music in the lives of Italian Australians in Griffith*, one is immediately reminded of the classic study of music in a small community by Constantin Brailoiu, *Vie musicale d'un village: recherches sur le répertoire de Dragus (Roumanie) 1929-32* (Paris, Institut Universitaire Roumain Charles Ier, 1960). Ronald Bannister's contribution is, however, in many fundamental ways different. It is not a study of a musical tradition *per se* but, rather, the study of the role of music in the lives of the Italian Australians in Griffith, of the space it occupies in their life (mental and physical) and, ultimately, of what music means to them. Here we have therefore not just the description of the functioning of music in a community (of a *Gemeinschaft* as Ferdinand Tönnies described it, that is, of a group of people united by feelings of togetherness based, in this case, on a common origin) but, also, more intriguingly, that of a community of immigrants in Griffith, a town of about 24,000 people, of which a substantial proportion of them have an Italian background (both from the North and the South).

An interesting case study the book certainly is, but it also is, in a way, an autobiographic work, a passionate and empathetic narrative, telling us of the author's fascination, throughout the course of his life, with the 'otherness' of these Italian people who were so very much present and visible in this town where he himself grew up. In other words, while 'Music and Love' is of special and immediate relevance to scholars dealing with music and migration, the book also has an additional literary quality, that makes it an excellent read even for the general reader who likes 'stories' dealing with the lives of real people experiencing the adventure of leaving for good their land of origin.

Music-making is an especially significant part of the story of the Italians in Griffith (as it should be of any story), because it can be quite revealing of overall culture patterns in a given defined population or group. It has as much to do with their past as it does with their present and their expectations for the future. Even more so, in the case of an immigrant group that finds itself in a condition in which traditional forms of behaviour are challenged by the new environment. That is precisely when it becomes apparent (as people themselves grow aware of) what elements of their original culture are regarded as essential and what can be negotiated or even abandoned. Music is often one of those elements, because transplanted people may not have been able to carry much of their personal belongings from home, but they certainly carried along in their mind the weightless personal collection of sounds and musics, which constitute a significant element of their personal, family and national history and, with them, of their sense of identity.

Bannister tells us that in Griffith a considerable amount of Italian music is still performed, especially—but not solely—by older people. It is music which, as far as this writer can tell, is for the most part no longer current in Italy itself, where it is out of fashion, forgotten, or

occasionally listened to just as an object of historical curiosity. This is then a case of what in our business is called 'marginal survival': when immigrants reconstitute a community in some way similar to the one they came from (that is, when they are not just scattered about as single, isolated individuals), then they are likely to retain culture and behavior patterns (language, music, cuisine, et cetera) even longer than their fellow countrymen will do at home, and in older forms not influenced by the evolutionary process taking place in the land of origin; another interesting Italian-Australian case was described by Linda Barwick in 'Italian Traditional Music in Adelaide' (*Australian Folklore* 1 (1987): 44-66). 'Marginal survival' mostly occurs in what anthropologists call a 'defined' population, like the Italians in Griffith are: a group of people geographically somewhat self-contained. To be sure, other factors besides geographical isolation may contribute to 'marginal survival,' for instance intermarriage and/or a strong sense of ethnic/national identity. When this happens, then it is especially interesting to find out exactly what is retained and what not; and this is precisely what Bannister tells us about, and in his narrative we come across both expected and unexpected information. A comparison comes to my mind between Griffith, where a substantial part of the population is of Italian origin, but not the entire population, and Daylesford-Hepburn Springs (Victoria) where also a significant part of the population, but not the entire population, is of Italian and Swiss-Italian origin. In the latter case, and this goes to show how complex social realities are, little if anything at all was retained of the musical traditions of origin. This writer found in Daylesford-Hepburn Springs more an intriguing case of 'reconstruction' than of straightforward memory.¹

The music remembered and mostly practised by the Italians of Griffith turns out to be made up largely of World War I songs (Alpini songs), and popular songs of the early twentieth century—among them, fascist as well as anti-fascist songs (these last ones are today never heard in Italy at all, except when revived in historical radio or TV programs dealing with Fascism and World War II). All of these are popular genres, and from Bannister's account one does not get the idea that much of the 'other music,' that developed in the oral environment (what with a term charged with Romantic and Marxist overtones, is often still referred to as 'folk music'), or of opera has survived (opera was so thoroughly disseminated throughout the Italian territory that operatic melodies often filtered down into the oral environment). For instance, not one of the songs remembered by the Colla Family (commented and transcribed at the end of the book) is a narrative song or an operatic aria; and rather little experience and memory of opera is present in the rest of Bannister's narrative. Of course this one provided by the Colla Family is only a small sample of just nineteen songs, handed down in one single family tradition. Still, the case is intriguing. One would hope the author might in the future engage in further research that might provide information in that direction (and, by the by, an examination of the passive musical horizon of the Griffith Italians—music known and appreciated but not practiced—would be an interesting endeavour as well). Manner of performance, on the other hand, appears to be quite in keeping with the traditional Northern Italian tradition (the Colla family originated in the province of Treviso, in the larger Venetian area): part-singing in thirds and sixths.

¹Marcello Sorce Keller, 'Transplanting Multiculturalism: Swiss Musical Traditions Reconfigured in Multicultural Victoria,' *Victorian Historical Journal* 78.2 (2007): 187-205.

I find especially fitting how Bannister takes into consideration different manners of music-making, their different venues, contexts and functions. For instance: music-making in the home and family, in schools, in the church choirs and in the Griffith Italian Choir, in the community at large: at festivals, national celebrations, parties, and weddings (one chapter is entirely devoted to the latter). And then, of course, musical genres practiced and not necessarily traditional ones but, also classical, jazz, and rock. This is quite appropriate since whenever the musical behaviour of people is observed, it is always worthwhile to gain a notion of their entire musical horizon, so that one may gauge what different genres and styles co-exist in their consciousness; how multi-musical or, on the contrary, mono-musical people are, tells us something on how open they are towards other people and the world. And then Bannister gives attention to some especially significant musical instruments in the Italian tradition (accordion, bagpipes), to a number of musicians, and to their musical training. Here and there considerations are to be found, dealing with the interaction between the written tradition and the oral-aural. Moreover, not only live music-making is considered by the author, but considerable attention is devoted as well to the role played by the radio in the life of the people he studies, and by the old recordings they treasure and cherish (78 rpm, 45rpm, 33rpm vinyl sound supports).

The Italians of Griffith are both Northern and Southern Italians. And yet the idea one gets from the entire narrative is that the musical ambience in that town is largely that of Northern Italian music-making, which considerably differs from that of Mediterranean Italy (that is, South of the Apennines, and the islands). In the North, unlike the South, choral singing is predominant, and solo singing is syllabic rather than melismatic. Intriguingly, it seems as if even Southern Italians living in Griffith were, so to say, drawn into a dominant Northern Italian musical atmosphere (participating, for instance, in choral forms of music making which are largely alien to their original concept of music).

Now, is this book beyond criticism? No human endeavour ever is (including, of course, the present writer's). Minor flaws in this work, from the point of view of the specialised reader, are the following: when the term 'ballads' is used, it is not always clear whether narrative songs are meant by that, *canti epico-lirici* that is (the Italian equivalent of what are the 'Child' and 'Broadside' ballads to the English-speaking world, where the term 'ballad,' is also used in a confusing number of different meanings); and the description of the SAT Choir as that of one whose principal objective is that of spreading Trentino folk songs is not entirely accurate: the SAT Choir, and its very many imitators practice, for the most part, a repertoire of music composed by highly skilled, literate musicians, who try to give their music a 'folkish' tinge. Finally, the Italians of Griffith come through as an especially musical community, in fact more musical than most people are in Italy itself. On the one hand, one wonders whether Roland Bannister is giving us a rather idealised, romanticised picture; on the other, the point could be made (and if that is the case it might have been made more explicitly) that it is precisely the experience of migration that emphasises people's need for remembering the music of their past and practicing it in their new Australian environment (even to the point of overestimating the role it played in their previous life). Music-making is, after all, a very effective way of celebrating and performing identity.

In connection with feeling and perception of identity by the Italians of Griffith, Bannister shows all along throughout his book a keen interest in their past as well as in their present. One could therefore say that *Music and Love* is just as much about memory, longing, and nostalgia

(a few interesting pages are devoted to how many Griffith Italians people felt in visiting their land of origin: emotion, pleasure, disappointment, puzzlement), as it is about the way people live their present condition and look to the future.

Many important themes come to the surface, recurrently, in the course of the volume. Some of them, because of the narrative effort made by the author, in giving us a sense of what each single informant told him, reappear here and there and are not easy to rapidly locate and put together, without reading or re-reading the whole book: themes such as, for instance, nostalgia, musical tastes, and memories of the town of origin. An index of names is provided; an index of the themes touched upon would have been very useful.

In conclusion, this is a book I read with great interest and pleasure, a book I recommended to anybody interested in music at large, in migration, in Italian and Australian cultural history.

David Tunley, *William James and the Beginnings of Modern Musical Australia*

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Reviewed by Kathleen E. Nelson

The name of William James recurs through Australian musical history of the early to mid-twentieth century. Nevertheless, his work is now little known, and understanding of his contribution is often hazy. As this paperback book makes plain, William Garnet James (born in Ballarat in 1892; died in Sydney, 1977) made a great contribution to Australian musical history through his career as a music administrator, composer and pianist. For many years he was one of those working more or less 'behind the scenes' so his contribution can be overlooked. On the other hand, in studies of Australian music involving the Australian Broadcasting Commission, his name will often surface. For those of us who have worked with the archival materials of the ABC from the 1930s through to the 1950s, the name and signature of William James have become familiar and prominent. Appointed as Federal Controller or Director of Music for the ABC in 1936 he held that position until his retirement in 1957. He was already involved with radio in the late 1920s and was present in the earliest days of the ABC. As the ABC's Director of Music his contribution was both crucial and pioneering. He was one of those influential in shaping the musical life of the nation, although his presence was not always a public or visible one. His early years based in London as a pianist, and the connections developed there, gave him a fine background for his long Australian career. Putting the focus on James himself, this book on his life and work comes as a very welcome and needed addition to the published literature of Australian musical history.

Many Australians will have had some familiarity with one or more of James's *Australian Christmas Carols*, but few will now know that he was the composer of these attractive songs, or indeed of his greater role in our musical history. It might be said that it is these carols