

Voices from Tuscany

*My childhood is linked to the countryside.
Under certain hills where the fatigue and the wind never rests;
where farmers took over the land piece by piece, clod by clod. (...)
A lazy and sensitive land, that when productive,
had to share the harvest in three parts:
the largest part to the seasons, the second part to the master
and the last part to our misery. [1]*

This collection of songs is an act of love for my land, Tuscany, a region that has retained over time its classic icons in: the cities of art, the rolling hills, ancient villages, rural homes, the countryside painted with olive and cypress trees. Perhaps it would be more correct to speak of “several Tuscany” in which everyone can realize their cultural and sentimental journey.

The journey we have chosen is a musical one, trying to find the songs that were sung in those old houses, sunny hills and, a time rich in souls and voices. The rediscovery of traditions and Tuscan folk poetry has ancient origins. In the years of the “Pre-Risorgimento” (period before Italian Unity) Niccolò Tommaseo, with his *Tuscan folk songs (Corsican, Illyrian and Greek)*, published in the years 1841-42, and Giuseppe Tigri, with his *Tuscan Folk Songs* of 1856 had taken the first serious look and investigation into these popular expressions of sentiment. This research represented a civil commitment to awaken a sense of Italian national unity through the exaltation of certain values such as purity of the Tuscan language, and also represented in an idyllic and romantic key, the candor of the people.

The main forms of folk poetry, treated in those works were: the “rispetto” (short composition of usually six verses) and the “stornello” (usually of three lines) which, as Giuseppe Tigri wrote, «they sing verses and the voices almost bounce, parting from one hill to another» (...) for the love songs and love ‘battles’ in two or three verses. [2]. Many of these forms of expression, especially popular in central Italy, have come down to us today:

*And I know many of them ditties
I've got to load six ships:
anyone who wants to profit, step right up.*

*Peppery flower
I turn around you as does the bee,
Turning 'round the flower of the hedge [3]*

One must await the Sixties before leading researchers resume the systematic collection of songs and folk traditions (Roberto Leydi, Diego Carpitella and, for Tuscany – in addition to folk singers Caterina Bueno and Riccardo Marasco – Paolo De Simonis, Alessandro Fornari with his numerous publications, only to name some of the best known). But this time the research was carried out, not only as a lyrical expression of love for the beauty of the countryside, but also and primarily as the documentation and reconstruction of a socio-historical alternative to the official one. This huge undertaking of a survey in the field made the results known to a wider audience: the wealth of folk traditions before then virtually unknown or considered, reductively, as an expression of folklore.

In Tuscany popular music lacks the richness and rhythm of the “pizziche tammurriate” of Southern Italy, and even the polyphony typical of the more erudite music, but is instead characterized by melodies of a Renaissance or even Carnival origin. The most popular poetic form, which survives today in many areas of Maremma and Siena, is the “ottava rima”. [4] Improvisation in octaves (eight lines of eleven-syllables with the scheme ABABABCC) is a cultural tradition that dates back to the fourteenth century and is found in the poetry of Boccaccio, Ariosto and Poliziano. This formula has reached its highest levels in the interpretations of many extemporaneous “poets”, tales by storytellers (as, for example, the tragic story of Pia de' Tolomei) or in singing “challenges”, so-called “disturne”, in squares, fairs or large country kitchens during which the poets challenged each other in the popular singing competitions on various topics (farmer versus citizen and city dweller, marriage and bachelorhood, proprietor and farmer). Roberto Benigni often uses this form of improvisation in his performances. Here is an example of a song in “ottava rima”:

*In the neighborhood of Peccioli and Casciana
there near the hills of Pontedera
a peasant of the Garfagnana
goes to ask for land which was there.*

*Goes to the master and all goes fairly
Back in March with the whole family
and all is well with the famers' life
the hunchback master and deaf wife. [5]*

Today, we are experiencing a major return of interest in folk music. Academics, researchers and performers, particularly in the south, draw inspiration from folk songs to develop new sounds through new interpretations of ethnic, Mediterranean music or even blues. In fact, to propose today the ancient folk songs so nostalgic for “the good old days” becomes a dangerous archeological endeavor because these Italian traditions were based on a predominantly agricultural society erased by industrialization in the Sixties and the resulting mass emigration from the countryside to urban factories in the city. The important thing is always to be aware of these “arrangements” and not pass off as traditional music, all reinterpretations.

Today it is virtually impossible to realistically recreate the atmosphere and spirit of the “evening” in Tuscany when «on the hearth, grandfather asleep next to be burning logs, (...) women mending and knitting and (...) chanting the latest songs of love and betrayal, expiation, abandonment and crime, fear and betrayal [6]», or bring to life the very personal memories of my mother who sang *Clurinda* accompanied by the slow dripping water while washing the dinner dishes, or even to revive the joyous feast of the boys on the last day of Carnival, roaming the fields with torches to “give light to the grain.”

Starting from this premise we have faithfully reproduced the original recordings of performers to better understand the reality of yesterday through the beautiful voice of Stefania and original arrangements. Listening to these songs, chosen to recall the most significant moments of life (seasonal holidays, love, lullabies and children’s games, work, war, religion), we should not be overcome by nostalgia for “the good time that was” because those were tough and dramatic times, accompanied by pain, great misery and suffering. But instead, it is important to have nostalgia for the feelings and real values that filled the hearts of people both in the country and the city and that today, unfortunately, are few and far between.

Good listening!

Alberto Paoletti

Notes

[1] Evaldo Cacelli, *Toscana contadina*, p. 19, Lucio Pugliese Editore, Firenze 1990.

[2] Giuseppe Tigri, *Canti popolari toscani*, Ed. Barbera, Bianchi e Comp., Firenze 1856.

[3] Referred by Antonio Giusti, Legoli-Pecciolli (PI).

[4] It was founded in 2006, by Davide Riondino “L’Accademia dell’ottava” to promote the art of poetic improvisation in Toscana.

[5] Referred by Erino Baragatti, Legoli-Pecciolli (PI).

[6] Evaldo Cacelli, *Toscana contadina*, p. 24, Lucio Pugliese Editore, Firenze 1990.