

Cultural Activism, World Music and Cosmopolitan Mentalities in Corsica

My work on popular music in Corsica is informed by a move in ethnomusicology away from a preoccupation with “traditional” or locally contained musics towards an attempt to document transnational trends as individual musicians embrace the new opportunities offered by the world music market. As René Lysloff notes, these new musical realities challenge us to adapt to “changing ideas of musical authenticity, cultural representation, and intellectual authority” as we analyse “the cultural negotiations involved with the global intersections of traditional musics, popular desires, and technological possibilities” (1997, 218). Corsica offers itself as an ideal candidate for such an analysis as political tensions resulting from the island’s present status as a *département* of France have combined with the attractiveness of the indigenous multi-part singing style to world music audiences to create a particularly fertile ground for musical activity. My aim in this paper is to explore ways in which Corsican musicians might be seen to be acting out their own brand of rooted cosmopolitanism, both in their musical products and interactions and in the discourses that accompany them.

Over the past decade, several Corsican groups have made their mark in international festival and concert tour circuits as well as producing a series of award-winning CDs, and some have worked in collaboration with artists, composers and producers from outside the island. Yet many of today’s most successful performers did not begin by viewing themselves primarily as creative artists. Musical evolution in Corsica has, since the 1970s, been uneasily but inextricably tied to the concerns of the separatist movement, with music offering a prime platform for the working out of both personal and collective identities and with many singers initially finding their voice in the framework of cultural nationalism.

The First World War had set in motion an incremental decline in traditional practices. The indigenous singing style with its labile pitches, untempered intervals, irregular rhythms and rurally marked styles of voice production was rejected by a newly urbanised middle class eager to cultivate a modern, Continental identity. This they found in a new style of *chanson* whose syrupy melodies were interpreted by lyrical artists with clean-cut voices and whose predictable Western harmonies were dictated by the addition of a guitar or mandolin. With the revitalisation of the autonomist movement, however, young people identifying themselves as “cultural militants” turned back to the older traditions as part of their search for their “true” heritage. In particular, the old polyphonic or multipart songs came to be seen by many as iconic of insular identity. As Patrizia Gattaceca expresses it, “To sing polyphony is to affirm oneself as a Corsican; it is to say ‘I exist’.”

Polyphonic songs of the oral tradition – of which the most commonly heard today is the *paghjella* – are sung by three male voices (one to each part). Patron saints’ days and the seasonal fairs continue to provide opportunities for a feast of *paghjella* singing. These songs might also be sung by groups of men gathered together for sheep-shearing or hunting, as well as informally in the bars. In Lissandru Bassani’s words, the *paghjella* was, in past times, “the sweat of men”, sung after a hard day’s work (interview 2004). Only in recent years have women begun to claim a share in this polyphonic heritage and, in the process, take it out to a wider audience.

Traditional polyphonic songs are characterised by their spontaneity, the need for close interaction between the singers, a degree of improvisation within relatively fixed parameters, and the overriding notion of a song being created anew in the moment of each rendition. In the autonomist context, these features mapped on to notions of self-determination, while the sound itself, together with the use of the Corsican language, was a clear statement of non-Frenchness.

Initially the so-called *groupes engagés* or *groupes culturels* who emerged in the context of the cultural revival or *riacquistu* conceived of their appearances as meetings with the public, rather than performances: their mission was to ensure that the old songs were sung again. Then as the political situation deteriorated they began to stage benefit concerts for political prisoners. The Corsican nationalist movement drew inspiration from developments in the Pays Basques, Northern Ireland and Chile, at that time often making news headlines. And soon encounters with musicians who were already using their art as a more direct vehicle for political assertion awakened Corsica's cultural militants to the fact that "the *chanson* could also carry a message". Their repertoire of traditional songs was now supplemented by a new genre of protest song, baptised *cantu indiatu*. Lyrics were often inspired by events in the struggle - clashes with the security forces and assassinations - as well as voicing support for comrades-in-arms elsewhere in the world. The music itself took on new dimensions under the influence of Latin American *nueva canción*, Greek *rembétika* and Portuguese *fado*, from which musicians borrowed the rhythms missing from indigenous styles but deemed necessary for the engagement of a non-Corsican audience unable to comprehend the lyrics.

With the arrival of a new Socialist government under François Mitterrand in 1981, political tensions began to ease. Devolution for Corsica was seen as a pilot scheme for subsequent decentralisation throughout France and in 1982 the island was granted a special statute. Mitterrand's victory was also good news for popular culture. In his 1981 budget speech, Minister of Culture Jack Lang made a case for increasing state investment in culture even at a time of recession, arguing that "a society that does not create dies". The principle of "the right to culture" was soon joined by "the right to difference" as Lang delivered speeches the world over, "proclaiming every country's right to 'cultural self-determination' and to freedom from the sinister ... influence of the United States" (Forbes 1995, 259). The embracing of cultural diversity now became inscribed in government policy, promising a significant break both from the earlier monolithic view of national identity and from the conservative view of culture as high art and "works". Generous funding was made available to local associations involved with the promotion of regional languages, traditional music or other manifestations of the cultural heritage.

At the same time, Corsica's *riacquistu* was seen to have progressed beyond the period of reacquisition into a new phase, born of the realisation that it was no longer sufficient simply to continue to reproduce the same well-rehearsed repertoire. The way forward was seen to lie in the creation of new work which, while keeping faith with the traditional expression of past generations, could reflect a more contemporary ethos as well as satisfying the market's demand for originality and constant revitalisation. The new climate of thinking in which tradition, authenticity and identity were viewed not as static, monolithic entities but as constructs that are multifaceted, relational and always in movement likewise supported creative transformation as opposed to a more cautious reproduction. The singer's role was no longer conceived of as being solely in the service of rejuvenation at insular level: the notion of cultural militant now gave way to a new concept of cultural ambassador as those who embraced a new identity as performing artists welcomed the opportunity to operate in a more international frame of reference but without entirely breaking free from the discourse of cultural nationalism.

The French term most often used as an equivalent of the English "world music" is *musiques métissées* or *métissage*. Usually rendered by dictionaries as "hybrid," "cross-breeding," "cross-fertilization," *métissage* indicates an understanding of world music as a transcultural neo-genre that derives its identity from being a collage of different styles, rather than a meta-genre embracing any number of unadulterated local musics that might otherwise be referred to as "traditional," "folk," or "roots." The word goes further than indexing a simple act of cross-breeding, however. As Daniel Brown points out, it encompasses the word *tisser*, meaning to interweave: "It denotes the interplay

of different elements of culture, language and populations, the intertwining of people and their identities” (2004, 207). In one sense, then, *métissage* reflects the multi-cultural turn within France itself, the interweaving of different musical styles being symbolic of the tapestry of regional and other ethnic identities now included in the identity of the French state.

In Corsica, the concept of *métissage* already had its parallel in that of polyphony. Polyphony is a *musique métissée* par excellence - an interweaving of voices defined by different timbres and obeying different rules of musical syntax. And it was, it would seem, only a short step from a preoccupation with polyphony in a musical sense to the adoption of the post-modern usage (following Mikhail Bakhtin) of polyphony as a rhetorical strategy accommodating multiple discourses. At a musical level, polyphony was increasingly used as a synonym for plurality and dialogue, whether between different musical languages or between the different vocal and instrumental textures employed. The musical stage and recording studio now presented themselves as transcultural spaces where harmony could be created out of difference.

These different readings of polyphony as a concept underpin the phenomenon of Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses (The New Corsican Polyphonies), established in 1989 by Patrizia Gattaceca and Patrizia Poli. Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses was both the name of the group and the title of its first album; by implication it also referred to the new style of arrangement and composition that they introduced. Released by Philips in 1991, the album *Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses* was produced by Hector Zazou, France’s answer to Peter Gabriel. The disc features four traditional polyphonic songs and thirteen new compositions. An impressive line-up of international artists put in an appearance, including Manu Dibango (saxophone), Ivo Papasov (clarinet), Richard Horowitz (ney), Jon Hassell (trumpet), Shaymal Maltra (*tabla*, *djembe*, and *ghatam*), John Cale (piano), and Ryuichi Sakamoto (piano), with “electronics” by Zazou himself. The vocals were recorded *a cappella* at the church of St. Dominique in Bonifacio. The instrumental lines, largely improvised, were recorded later in the studio, the majority in Paris and Sakamoto’s in New York.

Following the album’s release, the group was selected to perform at the opening ceremony of the 1992 Winter Olympics, televised to an audience of millions across the globe. The disc had initially received a mixed reception in Corsica itself – traditionalists were unsettled by the idea of women singing polyphony together with men, while others were ambivalent about the instrumental component. Outside the island, however, it rapidly achieved cult status. The song “Giramondù” (as sung at the Olympics) was subsequently used in a Philips advertisement that appeared worldwide and the disc was voted best album of the year in the “traditional music” section of the 1992 Victoires de la Musique (the French equivalent of the Grammy awards).

The song “Giramondù” features the familiar arrangement of three voices found in the *paghjella*. The timbres and placement of the voices and the melismatic treatment of the two upper lines are also recognizably traditional, their solid, earthy qualities suggesting echoes of ancient times. The airy and expansive character of the electroacoustic backdrop is redolent of the sense of openness to which the song makes reference, while also, by its markedly technological character, indexing modernity and progress. The vocal and instrumental components respectively can thus be seen as iconic of local and global, past and present, providing an acoustic image of the place of ancient roots in a contemporary environment and of Corsica’s place in the modern world.

Part of Poli and Gattaceca’s motivation lay in the desire to place Corsica on the global musical map and by so doing to inject a new vitality into the tradition back home. “If we shut ourselves away here,” says Gattaceca, “we’re going to die. If we want our song to live, we have to make it known outside. We want to export our culture so that everybody will know that we are a living people.”

This, in her view, was achieved by their Olympic appearance: “When we are engaged for the kick-off of the Olympic Games ..., it is evident that the Corsican people exists” (*Kyrn*, 24-30 January 1992, 16).

Poli also argued that Corsican music had a part to play in the new culture of *métissage*: “I like the expression Musics of the World (*Musiques du Monde*) because it implies *métissage*. Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses are *métissage*” (*Kyrn*, 24-30 January 1992, 16). Ideologically, this fashion for cross-cultural collage relates to the ecumenical notion of a shared humanity and the impulse towards global co-operation that was gaining ground at the time. Much of this import is captured in Michel Codaccioni’s celebration of Patrizia Poli as “the magnificent prowhead of a Corsican culture nourished by modernity, by *métissage*, by questioning, by respect for the other, by exigency, and by self-confidence” (*Kyrn*, January 1993, 13).

I Muvrini is the group that has made the greatest inroads into the popular music scene, regularly playing sell-out concerts at major Paris venues such as the Zénith, the Olympia and Bercy. They have twice won the best album award in the Victoires de la Musique’s “traditional music” category, now renamed “reggae/ragga/world music”. The brothers at the centre of the group, Jean-François and Alain Bernardini, were initiated into the *paghjella*-singing tradition of their home village of Tagliu by their carpenter father. The family trio features in the field recordings made by Wolfgang Laade in 1973. By the late 1970s the brothers were among the most active of the cultural militants and the authorities frequently banned their concerts, which they viewed as breeding grounds for insurrection. Today I Muvrini is one of the island’s most visible exports with a dedicated fan base both in France and overseas; a recent Google search threw up 43,000 references.

A prominent theme in I Muvrini’s discourse is again that of music as a tool for promoting global harmony. “We want to make our concerts into places of meeting and dialogue,” Jean-François once said. “To show, certainly, our face, our identity, and our differences ... But what we want to say most of all through our songs is that we are all citizens of the same love!” (*Corse-Matin*, 30 May 1994). This humanistic turn is reflected in the album titles *Noi* (“Us”) and *Umani* (“Humans”).

With *Umani*, award-winner in the 2003 Victoires de la Musique, the group appeared as the ideal embodiment of *métissage*. Several other regional languages - Breton, Catalan, Occitan, and Basque, and even French itself – are employed alongside Corsican in some of the song lyrics and there are guest appearances from Andalusian singer-guitarist Josefina Fernandez, hip hop artist MC Solaar and two female Afghan singers. “A Jalalabad”, dedicated to the women of Afghanistan, is the song that currently welcomes the visitor to the group’s website.

The directions taken by these groups clearly reflect more global trends. At the same time they have been underpinned both by new emphases in cultural policy and by changing ideologies regarding Corsica’s relationship with the outside world. Since the early 1990s significant funds have been injected into development plans for the island by central government and the European Union. The Development Plan adopted by the Corsican Assembly in 1993 notes that the cultural domain covers several other areas of activity to which the plan gives priority, including revitalisation of the interior and the reorientation of tourism. Emphasis is also placed on the need to integrate cultural activity more closely with economic activity by developing an approach to cultural output in terms of “products”. This has contributed to a further explosion in the number of performing groups and to an increase in live performance and record production.

By the late 1990s, the principles of *échange* (exchange), *rencontre* (encounter), and *ouverture* (opening up) that had already been embraced by many musicians had assumed a key position in

official policy; the commitment of the Corsican Assembly to what it terms *l'ouverture sur l'extérieur* (opening up to the outside world) was officially inscribed in the 1999 update of the Development Plan. Jean Baggioni (former president of the Executive Council) expresses his conviction that: "Above all, we must not be afraid of opening ourselves up more, of fertilising our roots and at the same time accepting modernity. Tradition is indispensable; nothing but tradition is conservatism" (*Corse-Matin*, 6 June 2004).

Another significant development of the 1990s was the establishment of the EU's Interreg programmes to support collaborative projects between different "fringe" regions of the EU from the structural funds. The current Interreg IIIA programme provides for three-way partnerships between Corsica, Sardinia and Tuscany. IIIB focuses on the Western Mediterranean, including the Maghreb. IIIC includes parts of France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece, also extending to the Azores, Madeira, the Canaries, and the *départements d'outre-mer* of Guadeloupe, Martinique, Réunion and French Guiana. In promoting Mediterranean alliances in particular, these programmes have allowed Corsicans to re-embrace a broader identity with its roots in the more distant past in preference to a present-day national identity, thus diverting attention away from the Corsican-French impasse. The Mediterranean itself has been represented as syncretic by nature, so that the hybrid musical forms resulting from these collaborative projects can be interpreted as inherently authentic. Engaging with those styles seen as more Oriental allows musicians to be progressive and cosmopolitan while resisting the hegemony of Western cultural forms.

The opportunities available to the present generation of musicians clearly place them in a different league from those whose voices can be heard in field recordings of the 1960s. Yet the journey is not unidirectional, a sequence of predictable and finite moves from one state to the next. When A Filetta took the decision to "go professional" in 1994, they feared that the pressure to perform more regularly and more widely might alter the spirit in which they worked and also conflict with their deep-rooted involvement in the local community. They therefore attempted to establish control over their work patterns by retaining the group's status as a cultural association. They also set up their own production company, rather than sign to a continental company that would expect them to produce a new album every year. In their local area, they continue to operate outside a business economy, regularly singing the mass for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. When they give concerts on their home ground, the proceeds invariably go to an array of good causes, from the League of Human Rights to the provision of sports facilities for village children. At the same time they have become international stars as a result not only of their concert appearances the world over but also of their part in a series of film scores by composer Bruno Coulais, including *Himalaya*, *Comme un Aimant* and *Serial Lover*.

The type of musical evolution discussed here is in many ways consonant with Bruno Nettl's notion of "modernization" (as opposed to "Westernization"), which he defines as "the adoption and adaptation of Western technology and other products of Western culture, as needed, simultaneously with an insistence that the core of cultural values will not change greatly and does not match those of the West" (1983, 348). Some of the most successful discs to emerge from Corsica in recent years have been products of meetings between singers still rooted in a local community in possession of novel raw material and experienced outside producers who could help them adapt to the global languages of commerce and technology. Once "modernised" in this way, groups like Les Nouvelles Polyphonies, I Muvrini and A Filetta would seem to fit Jocelyn Guilbault's depiction of world music artists as "cosmopolitans who function in and out, at will, of what has been traditionally perceived as the totalizing 'system,' that is, the system controlled by the dominant cultures" (1993, 39).

In this paper I have attempted to sketch out the way in which world music tendencies as they pertain to Corsica have emerged as a product of multiple, intersecting ideologies, where the transnational fashion for syncretic styles has met with the more specific French notion of *métissage*, the trend towards multiculturalism within France, the trope of Mediterraneanism, interregional alliances promoted via the programs of the EU, the humanistically-inclined post-nationalist spirit in Corsica itself, the Corsican Assembly's official promotion of a policy of *ouverture*, and the mapping of postmodern notions of polyphony and intertextuality onto the indigenous *paghjella* style. Globalising trends have, at the same time, been held in check by a strong sense of insular identity and deep-seated allegiances that ensure a continued dedication to local community. As a presenter at Radio Corte put it, "Globalisation isn't a virus – you don't have to catch it!" Today's music-makers have become agents of their own transformation as, in Max Peter Baumann's words, they "individually select, newly configure, historicize, sample, innovate and synthesize from the diverse possibilities and work out their own musical narrative constructs" (2001, 14). While they draw on new idioms, however, the old paradigms are not simply overwritten or abandoned. Rather, the musicians encountered here might be said to have "successful[ly] hijack[ed] ... the twin Enlightenment ideas of the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular" (Appadurai 1990, 308). They have become skilled at controlling the interface between indigenous ways of being in the world and more cosmopolitan modes of operation, their negotiation of the delicate balance between culture as everyday life and culture as transnational commodity being informed by a sensibility that is both aesthetic and moral – the sensibility, perhaps, of the cosmopolitan patriot.

References

- Appadurai, Arjun. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Theory, Culture and Society* 7, no. 2 (1990): 295-310.
- Baumann, Max Peter. "Festivals, Musical Actors and Mental Constructs in the Process of Globalization." *The World of Music* 43, no. 2+3 (2001): 9-29.
- Brown, Daniel. "Rap and Censorship in France." 197-207 in *Shoot the Singer: Music Censorship Today*, edited by Marie Korpe. London and New York: Zed Books, 2004.
- Forbes, Jill. "Popular Culture and Cultural Politics." 232-63 in *French Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, edited by Jill Forbes and Michael Kelly. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Guilbault, Jocelyne. "On Redefining the 'Local' through World Music." *The World of Music* 35, no. 2 (1993): 33-47.
- Lysloff, René T. A. "Mozart in Mirrorshades: Ethnomusicology, Technology, and the Politics of Representation." *Ethnomusicology* 41, no. 2 (1997): 206-19.
- Nettl, Bruno. *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-nine Issues and Concepts*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983.

This paper draws on material from my forthcoming monograph Transported by Song: Corsican Voices from Oral Tradition to World Stage, which is to appear in The Scarecrow Press's new series Europea: Ethnomusicologies and Modernities.

Caroline Bithell
University of Manchester
April 2006