

Contemporary Music, Unofficial Languages, Subaltern Voices: Composing Musical Pieces on Sicilian Texts

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Abstract: This paper documents the composition and performance of two rare examples of musical pieces that use Sicilian poetry as their textual material, namely, Emanuele Casale's *Composizione per voce* (1997), written on a contemporary poem by Catanian poet Biagio Guerrera, who also premiered the piece in 1998; and my own composition *Senza cialoma*, on a selection of 19th century Sicilian street poems, premiered in 2013 by the Gnu ensemble. A variety of materials, ranging from interviews with the composers to programme notes, weblogs and personal correspondence, is used as evidence alongside the content of the musical works, in order to explore the political implications of composing music in Sicilian.

Keywords: Sicilian language, Composition, Contemporary music.

This paper takes as a starting point the denunciation of the subordinate status of Sicily within the Italian political, economic, social and cultural context, produced in turn by the persistence of a de facto ethnocentric and monoglottic regime in the country, which subordinates Sicily and the South of the country to the Centre-North (Dickie, 1994; Dickie, 1997; Pugliese, 2008). The various by-products of this situation range from the island's political and economic marginalisation in the context of national and continental interests, to several social problems, such as ever-growing unemployment and mass emigration. As evidence of this status-quo, it is sufficient to mention the recent investment gap in key areas such as railways and kindergartens, both in the range of more than 95% for the North against less than 5% in the South (Cannavale, 2014). The emigration from Sicily is massive, and around 70.000 people left between 2012 and 2013 (Tondo, 2014). Sicily is also the poorest Italian region in terms of average income (Corriere del Mezzogiorno, 2015) and the unemployment rate in the island is 21.0%, against the national Italian average of 12.2% and the Southern Italian average of 19.7% (Sicilia Informazioni, 2014).

To these issues, one needs to add the partial and north-centric historical narratives, endorsed by the national institutions as to two of the founding historical moments of the Italian nation, i.e. the 1861 Unification and the second post-war period; and, complementary to this, the continuous defamation and criminalisation of Sicilian identity, not only in national media, but also diffused in every strata of society; finally, it is necessary to mention the violent hegemony exerted over Sicilian territory by the Mafia (or the mafias), who are often colluded with national institutions, and whose profits are often utilised elsewhere in Italian and European territory – the criminal organisations' military domination over the island appears, at least, bizarre when one thinks about the intense deployment of the Sicilian territory for NATO and US military installations. All these elements combined together can help visualise the picture of Sicily as an oppressed territory.

The Status of the Sicilian Language

Sicilian is not recognised officially as a language despite possessing a large amount of oral and written traditions. Its non-recognition is also arbitrary if contextualised within the Italian legislation, which recognises other regional languages such as Sardinian or Friulan (Cravens, 2014, 211). Furthermore, while being still regularly spoken by a relatively high

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portion of the population, Sicilian is slowly becoming at risk of extinction, especially among new generations, to the point of being classified as “vulnerable” in the 2010 edition of the UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger (Table 1) (Moseley, 2010; Morreale, 2012).

In this context, the use of Sicilian in creative cultural production could represent an open political act, according to Rancière’s formulation of the concept of politics, namely the deliberate disruption of the logic that governs the established order:

Egalitarian effects occur only through a forcing, that is, the instituting of a quarrel that challenges the incorporated, perceptible evidence of an inegalitarian logic. This quarrel is politics. [...] Politics is not the general art of governing human assemblies by virtue of some principle inherent in the definition of a human being. It is the accident that interrupts the logic by which those who have a title to govern dominate – a title confirmed only by the fact that they do dominate. (Rancière, 2004, 5-6).

| ID | Name | Country | Country code | Language code ISO639-3 | Degree of endangerment |
|-------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 2268 | Sian | Malaysia | MYS | spg | Severely endangered |
| 1430 | Sibe | China | CHN | sjo | Severely endangered |
| 680 | Siberian Tatar | Russian Federation | RUS | tat | Definitely endangered |
| 1023 | Sicilian | Italy | ITA | scn | Vulnerable |
| 1504 | Sierra Puebla Nahuatl | Mexico | MEX | | Definitely endangered |

Table 1. A snapshot from the dataset of the UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger (Moseley, 2015), showing the status of Sicilian as a vulnerable language.

In a study on Fabrizio De André’s album *Indiano*, Riccardo Orlandi unveils an important connection between the use of Sardinian and Rancière’s concept of politics. He argues that, while songs such as *Ave Maria* do not convey explicit political messages, they “forc[e] us to acknowledge the presence of a whole section of society” (Orlandi, 2015). Thus, the Sardinian language, while not used denotatively to describe “the social situation of Sardinian people”, is employed to force the listeners to “experience its sound, its musicality, and its unsolvable difference with the national language” (Orlandi, 2015). The same observations made by Orlandi about Sardinian can be applied to the use of

Sicilian in creative cultural production. The purpose of this paper is documenting two attempts to set texts in Sicilian within the context of contemporary classical music, namely Emanuele Casale's *Composizione per voce* (1997) and my own composition *Senza cialoma* (2013). In this work, I will seek to explore the political implications of setting Sicilian texts to music, and in particular, I will discuss whether contrasting approaches to the recurrent textual *topoi* of the Sicilian/Mediterranean tradition can converge towards comparable emancipatory narratives.

Emanuele Casale's *Composizione per voce*

Composizione per voce for solo voice was written in 1997 by Emanuele Casale, on a text by Catanian poet Biagio Guerrera, who also premiered the piece at the Catania Fish Market (*Piscaria* or *Pescheria*) in 1998. Guerrera wrote the poem after Casale had already composed the music (Messina & Casale, 2014). They chose to use a poem that does not follow any particular narrative structure:

"In our intentions it was written almost as a stream of consciousness, in which the meaning of each sentence has no connection with what comes before and after. Biagio tried to avoid clichés as much as possible" (Messina & Casale, 2014).

The poem, however anti-narrative, still seems to refer to some recurrent *topoi* of Sicilian/Mediterranean culture, such as emigration, oppression, lamentation, revenge, to the point that "one can still perceive some sort of rhetoric, especially in the passages about death" (Messina & Casale, 2014). Thus, the poem's *incipit* seems to narrate the aftermath of a massacre, with references to dead bodies, still haunting the memory of one person, in the middle of general indifference:

Comu paroli

*i corpi ri sti carusi morti,
s'assicutunu,
girunu ccà e ddà.*

*Like words,
the bodies of these dead boys,
chase each other,
hang around, here and there.*

*Je nuddu chiangiu,
je nuddu capiu.
Sulu idda sa,
janca facc'i luna.*

*And nobody cried,
and no-one understood.
Only she knows,
with her moon pale face*

The poems continues by accumulating images that apparently evoke a very recognisable narrative, namely the story of someone who emigrated and then died, together with other people: the story seems to be deliriously told by this person's mother, who has gone insane and blames people's indifference towards the tragedy, to the point of contemplating committing suicide, or taking revenge, by means of a bladed weapon. Even the most hallucinated passages seem to be coherent with this hypothesised storyline. For instance, the passage below, that mentions a red bat that flies away, seems to be a metaphorical reference to emigration:

*Taddarita russa,
vula via.
Lassa la terra ppo mari.
Ai ai addiu.*

*Red bat,
fly away.
Leave the mainland for the sea.
Alas, farewell.*

The music is characterised by a wealth of microtonal inflections and vocal glissandos (Example 1), which, in Casale's intentions is not meant to "sound like our traditional songs, neither in terms of interval nor in terms of formal structure" (Messina & Casale, 2014).



Example 1. Microtonal inflections in excerpt from *Composizione per voce* (bar 2).

However, I have argued that the microtonal inflections might recall the intonation of some Sicilian accents – Catanian in particular – and that the use of a solo voice might be associated to the funeral lament typical of the Mediterranean. Casale agreed with my points:

“There are in fact some deliberate references to traditional culture, such as the use of solo voice and the marked expressiveness of the piece as a whole. Biagio and I were also thinking about funeral laments when I was writing the piece. The Sicilian speech inflections were definitely less intentional: surely I have listened so many times to the cries of the peddlers in the street – especially when I was I child, in the 70s and 80s, I was exposed to so many of these things, which later

must have been processed unconsciously by my mind.” (Messina & Casale, 2014).

My interpretation appears to be coherent with those of the authors of some programme notes that were used at public performances of the piece: Gaetano Mercadante connects the piece with traditional music, and interprets the poem as a “funeral lament for the son’s death” (Mercadante, n.d.); while Andrea Agostini focusses on the reformulation of the traditional as a ritual (Agostini, n.d.).

To summarise, despite Casale’s declared intentions, *Composizione per voce* seems to evoke a clear narrative, with clear cultural references to specific Sicilian traditions and *topoi*. On the contrary, Casale maintains that he and Guerrera agreed on the need to avoid a narrative structure in order to elude the construction of a Sicilian rhetoric, or rather to avoid any implicit self-orientalism. While acknowledging that the work can actually direct the reader/listener towards similar interpretations to those identified here and in the programme notes by Mercadante and Agostini, Casale finally objects that the construction of a precise narrative could depend on the semantic connotations that are commonly associated to the use of Sicilian:

“I wonder if it’s the reader/listener who tends to construct some sort of ‘Sicilian rhetoric’ on the basis of common linguistic/semantic associations... I mean, would the same poem evoke the same things were it written in German?” (Messina & Casale, 2014).

Casale went on to argue that this tendency to imply specific semantic associations is probably at the basis of his choice of not using Sicilian again in compositions (personal conversation, 2013). While this is certainly a shame, *Composizione per voce* remains an extremely successful piece.

My piece Senza cialoma (2013)

In many ways, my approach to setting Sicilian texts was the opposite of Casale’s: I deliberately chose to set poems whose content was consistent to some of the recurrent Sicilian topics avoided by Casale. In doing so, I ran the obvious risk of perpetrating the same rhetoric that Casale tried to avoid, as if using Sicilian as a language necessarily had to involve the choice of a selected number of particular topics, all connected, eventually, with the subordinate condition of the island. *Senza cialoma* (“noiselessly”) for flute, clarinet, percussion, piano 4 hands, soprano, violin and violoncello, was premiered in Rio de Janeiro on 1 December 2013, as part of the Festival Internacional Compositores de Hoje.

I looked at poems and songs collected in Sicily between 19th and 20th century by Lionardo Vigo, Salvatore Salomone Marino and Antonino Uccello. The latter’s work, in particular, reunites some of the poems collected by the former two intellectuals into a single volume, *Risorgimento e società nei canti popolari siciliani* (1978), which is totally dedicated to the reactions to the events occurred immediately before and immediately after Italian Unification. The authors of the poems are street poets, people of the lower classes, who express mixed feelings about the historical events: some of them see glorify the new rulers for having liberated them from the Neapolitans; some of them idolise the figure of Garibaldi, the military leader that conquered Sicily and the continental South; after the initial glorification, some express disillusionment towards the new rulers and describe them as new tyrants and oppressors. These fragmented, and often contradictory, voices are ordered by Uccello in chronological order, with the result of narrating a collective story that begins with hope and enthusiasm for the Unification and ends with dissatisfaction, disillusionment, and despair precisely towards

the Unification. In other words, it could be argued that the choice of texts and their chronological arrangements creates a very specific narrative, as if Uccello himself wants to direct the reader towards a determined view of the Unification.

I decided to set three poems from the collection. The first, *Traseru e sunnu ccà* (“They got in and now they’re here”), written by an unknown author and transcribed by Salvatore Salomone-Marino, expresses discontent towards the 1949 invasion of Palermo by the Neapolitans, who suppressed in blood a revolution started the previous year. The second poem, *Lu sissanta* (“The ’60”), written by Andrea Pappalardo and transcribed by Lionardo Vigo, expresses dissatisfaction about Garibaldi’s 1860 landing and conquest of Sicily. Finally, *Ntra setti jorna e menzu* (“In seven days and a half”), written by S. Di Maggio and collected by Antonino Uccello, narrates the 1866 bloody suppression of the 7 and half days revolt of Palermo.

The three texts to narrate the history of Sicily as a land perennially oppressed by various invaders, the Neapolitans first, and the Italians later, in line with various political agendas that look at independence or strong autonomy for the island. In the piece, I deliberately take the narrative already proposed by Uccello to a further level, with the consciousness that the subaltern voices here are forced under my particular vision of the issue. Surely, there is no intention, on my side, of proposing this as an absolute truth, but rather of proposing a possible alternative to the official historical narrative.

The piece is based on an alternation between three main instrumental sections, a very short instrumental intermezzo and the three songs set from the three poems mentioned earlier (Table 2). While the instrumental sections/intermezzo are composed following generative compositional methods, the songs are characterised by a freer choice of intervallic material, aimed at intuitively evoking Sicilian traditional music.

| | Instrumental section | FIRST SONG <i>Traseru e sunnu ccà</i> | Instrumental section | SECOND SONG <i>Lu sissanta</i> | Intermezzo <i>Cialoma</i> | Instrumental section | THIRD SONG <i>Ntra setti jorna e menzu</i> |
|----------|----------------------|--|----------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|---|
| Soprano | | Soprano | | Soprano | | | Soprano |
| Flute | | | | | Flute | | Flute |
| Clarinet | | | | Clarinet | Clarinet | | |
| Perc. | | Perc. | | | | | |
| Piano 1 | | | | Piano 1 | | | |
| Piano 2 | | | | Piano 2 | | | |
| Violin | | | | Violin | Violin | | |
| Cello | | | | Cello | Cello | | |

Table 2. The alternation between instrumental sections and songs in *Senza cialoma*.

There is another substantial difference between the instrumental sections and the songs: while the former use the entire ensemble (except for the soprano), each of the songs employs a different instrumentation. In a way, this configuration reproduces the aforementioned idea of fragmented subaltern narratives collated under the unifying ideology of the composer. On the other hand, the three songs (and the brief intermezzo) are also completely independent from the piece, and could be performed separately by different ensembles. Therefore, to a certain degree, these pronounced differences between the instrumental sections and the songs are intended to highlight an existing tension between the subaltern narratives and my attempts to unify them. In other words, my aim is making it somewhat recognisable that these are independent voices unified a posteriori by my own work, which can nevertheless return to be independent at any moment.

Final remarks

I have presented two examples of contemporary classical music pieces that use poetry in Sicilian as their textual material, namely, Emanuele Casale's *Composizione per voce* and my own piece *Senza cialoma*. Casale's intention was to set a completely surreal text, devoid of any reference to Sicilian tradition, in order to avoid rhetoric and clichés. I, on the other hand, set text that pointed exactly to the issues that Casale sought to avoid, in order to denounce Sicily's condition as an oppressed territory. It is already possible to recognise that the use of Sicilian is, in both cases, connected to some form of emancipatory politics, either aimed at liberating the language itself from being permanently associated with a number of specific topics, or focussed on the use of these same topics as arguments to demand a renegotiation of the condition of Sicilians.

Both works, in different ways, entail some contradictions connected the content of their textual material. The text set by Casale seems to refer to topics such as emigration, oppression, lamentation, revenge, that were to be avoided in the composer's original intentions, while my work forces three different 19th century texts into a specific ideological framework, which does not necessarily reflect the views and aspirations of the original authors. The two works, despite their contrasting approaches to textual material, seem to converge towards similar narratives, ultimately pointing at Sicily's condition as an oppressed and subaltern land. At least part of this is due to the inherent political implications associated to the use of the Sicilian language, coherently with Rancière's formulation of the concept of politics and with Orlandi's argument on the use of Sardinian, as seen above. While I acknowledge that this issue can be highly problematic, to the point of persuading Casale to stop setting texts in Sicilian to music, I claim that it opens up a wealth of creative possibilities.

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