
This version (22 November 2011) has been lightly edited for formatting.
'Scolpire le parole' [Sculpting the words]: Context sensitivity in vocal and movement performance style of the Tuscan maggio

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Abstract

In the maggio (sung popular theatre) of the Garfagnana valley north of Lucca, the main dimensions open to improvisation, and thus to context sensitivity, are music and movement.

The song session, lasting about three hours, is defined by the enactment of a written text, consisting of about 170 stanzas and read to performers a line at a time by an on-stage prompt. The same text is presented on a number of occasions through the summer months in a number of different outdoor venues. Whether performances take place in a clearing in the chestnut forest on a Sunday afternoon or, at night-time, in a piazza within one of the many small towns in the Garfagnana valley, the audience members who surround the performance space are vociferous in their applause and shouted encouragement for particularly appropriate and/or well-executed embellishments to the vocal line and movements (including stylised gestures and sword-fights).

Within the Garfagnana, particular characteristics of music and movement have been traditionally associated with different localities. These days, the situation is considerably more complex, as massive emigration and other social changes have decreased the pool of performers and necessitated the formation of companies comprising members from a number of different localities. In addition, improved transport networks have meant that companies from the neighbouring Emilian area occasionally perform in the Garfagnana, so that performers and audiences are exposed to a much wider variety of performance styles than would have been possible in the past.

Analysis reveals that rather than singing a fixed melodic contour, singers enjoy a considerable degree of flexibility in performance of the standard stanzaic melody. While most stanzas will be performed in a style associated with the singer's place of origin, other possibilities are available, which may be exploited depending on the contour being used by the other singers (some of whom may come from distant localities using a different style), on the place of performance (and thus the style most appreciated by the local audience), and, importantly, on the context within the narrative. Unusual contours and exceptionally elaborate ornamentation may be used to mark particularly important dramatic or emotional points in the text. Musical and movement aspects of the performance are thus responsive to the performance group, to the dramatic text, and to the audience.

Introduction

This paper, originally delivered at the European Seminar in Ethnomusicology conference (Oxford, August 1994) under the theme 'Vocal performance and its social context' responds to the conference organisers' request for discussion of examples of context sensitivity occurring in non-verbal parameters of song performance. In fact, in the Italian genre of sung popular theatre called 'maggio' that I will be discussing here, the verbal parameters of the performance are largely fixed by a script, and it is
only the non-verbal parameters of the performance that are open to improvisation and hence most liable to change in response to contextual factors.

The written text, read to performers a line at a time by an on-stage prompt, is treated by performers and audiences as fixed, although considerable changes (re-elaborations) to the original script are routinely introduced in pre-production and rehearsal stages, as the capomaggio (company leader), the author (if available) and the performers negotiate changes necessary to fit the number and vocal capacities of the singers (Barwick, 1994). This process of fitting the text to the performance occasion may continue during the performance itself, when the prompt may omit a stanza here or there due to constraints of time or temporary absence of a performer from the performance space. Most other deviations from the written script in performance are unintentional, due to performers' mishearing the prompt, and/or introducing (perhaps subconsciously) minor syllabic adjustments to fit the prosodic metre (Barwick and Page, 1994). Although Venturelli claims that in the past a higher level of textual improvisation by individuals was common (Venturelli, 1992:61), I never encountered this in the forty-five maggio performances I attended and documented in the period 1992-96. Rather, improvisation takes place in the unscripted domains of music and movement.

The maggio, a genre of sung popular theatre today confined to a restricted area of north central Italy (provinces of Lucca, Massa, Reggio Emilia and Modena) is one of several Italian genres of sung theatre that depend on the use of a written text. The song session consists of a complete presentation of one text, which typically narrates a complex story of conflict, thwarted love and eventual reconciliation between two kingdoms, one of which is usually Christian while the other is pagan. These texts, which are still being written today, often based on pre-existing models such as Ariosto's Orlando Furioso, are structured in verse as a series of stanzas. In the Garfagnana valley (province of Lucca), where I have conducted my fieldwork, the same text is typically presented at a number of different venues.

The on-stage prompt typically stations him or herself closely behind the performer due to sing the next line. The line of text is then read aloud in a quiet voice by the prompt, and immediately set to a conventional melodic contour by the performer. Although there are certain characteristics, notably the overall range and contour of the melody and the invariant cadential notes of each line, that tend to remain stable in performances by the same singer, in practice the performance process never reproduces exactly the same result. The extremely melismatic singing style, in free rhythm, depends on the performer's vocal ability and on his or her state of mind at the time of the performance, so that the details of how the performer articulates and decorates the conventional melodic contour in the moment of performance are extremely variable. Movement and gesture employed to support the singing of the text also draw on a range of conventional possibilities that are open to considerable improvisation.

One of the best singers in the region, GM, told me recently that the most important aspect of maggio performance was to make the audience think about the text by the singer's 'sculpting' of the words (scolpire le parole) (personal communication, 9 August 1994). The art of the maggiante (the maggio singer) lies in combining the elaborate and virtuosic vocal style with phrasing and gesture that signal the character being played and the meaning of the text. Through sculpting—shaping, making beautiful—the raw material of the text (an apposite metaphor in this valley of marble quarriers), the singer's use of movement and melody attracts and concentrates the attention of the audience. GM's statements were corroborated by
another experienced singer, AB, who stated that he would use any performance means possible to attract the audience's attention and force them to concentrate on the unfolding of the text in the moment of performance (personal communication, 14 July 1994). The element of unpredictability in the exact form of the vocalisation of the melody is clearly used by experienced performers to surprise and delight audiences, to take them out of the everyday world and transport them into the fictional world being enacted.

The singer's performance thus mediates between the text and the audience through drawing attention to what we might call the histrionics of the moment of performance, to the experiential qualities of the visual and aural media. This focus on particularities, on the flavour and the texture and the timbre of the particular moment of utterance, means that contextual factors, such as the singer's relationship to other performers in the group and the arrangement of the performance space, become an integral part of the meaningfulness of the performance. In other words, the sounding of the text, its real-isation in a particular context, is always geared to a particular performance context.

**Discussion**

To give some idea of the extent to which performances of the same text can differ, I discuss two video examples. These two performances of the same text, *Leonildo e Irene*, a traditional story reworked from an anonymous hand-written manuscript by the then leader of the Piazza al Serchio group, Andrea Bertei, were presented a year apart by the Piazza al Serchio company of the upper Garfagnana valley, in two different locations in their home town, Piazza al Serchio (Provincia di Lucca).

The text we will focus on presents a particularly dramatic scene (stanzas 146-8) in which the Turkish king Artabano, having been defeated and taken prisoner by the Christian king, curses the Christians and their religion, and is then stabbed by his own daughter, Irene, whose baby he has previously murdered. He dies, and after Irene sings a lament explaining the sad necessity for her actions (it was God's will), she is approached by the prince Tirone, who, seeing her alone and in distress, assumes she is in the mood for a little dalliance. This extract also contains examples of the three main melodies used in performances: the standard stanza 'a maggio' (used by Tirone), which is used for about 95% of the text, in this case is the *quartina*, composed of four octosyllabic lines (but in other texts may consist of the five-line *quintina*). Two special metrical forms, the *ottava* and the *arietta* (sung in this example by Artabano and Irene respectively), occur relatively rarely in the script, and are placed at points of dramatic tension and sentiment. They are seen as a chance for the singers to show off their vocal skills and are usually especially applauded by the audience.

**ARTABANO** (ottava)

Anche se sono avvinto da catene
privato della forza mia d'offesa
non creder di vantarti delle pene
tu non hai reso alla maestà mia lesa
non chiedo a te perdono nè a mia figlia
del male che le recati con tanta voglia
certo crudele morte mi si aspetta
sia maledetto tu con la tua setta
[Even if I am bound with chains
deprived of my power to attack
don't think you can boast of the pains
that you have caused to my injured majesty
I do not ask your pardon nor that of my daughter
no doubt cruel death awaits me
curse you with your religion]

Artabano muore e viene portato via da Leonildo e Giliante. Intanto Tirone e Irene rimangono soli

Artabano dies [is stabbed by Irene] and is taken away by Leonildo and Giliante. Meanwhile Tirone and Irene are left alone together.

IRENE (arietta).

Perdona o caro padre
quest’atto tanto estremo
il giusto Dio del cielo
per te volle così

[Pardon oh dear father
the extremity of my actions
the just God in heaven
wanted this for you]

TIRONE (stanza a maggio)
Quant'è bella in afflizione
questa nobile donzella
poichè è sola e tanto bella
gli vo' far dichiarazione

[How beautiful in her affliction is this noble damsel
Because she is alone and so beautiful
I want to make her a declaration of my love]

In the first video extract, recorded by me in 1992, the part of Irene was played by the then youngest maggio performer in the region, a 21-year-old who was in her first year of singing. Not only were her movements very restrained, but her voice was not powerful and she had not yet achieved the gorgheggio ('warble', the term used by performers to describe both vibrato and rapid and elaborate melisma). In the absence of any formal training, it can take many years for singers to achieve expertise, and indeed not all do. But on this occasion, all other performers in the company were older expert singers in the age range 40–60, which highlighted even further the young singer's deficiencies. Her performance of the arietta received little or no applause, in contrast to the clamorous reception of the following stanza 'a maggio' sung by another local singer renowned throughout the area for the power and beauty of his voice.

[Video example 1 was shown]
After Irene stabbed Artabano, and before her arietta, there was some confusion as the actor playing Artabano got up and left the performance space almost immediately after his 'death', a pause filled by a repeat of the musical ritornello by the ensemble of violin, guitar and accordion.

In the second video example, recorded and broadcast by the local TV station 'NoiTV' in 1991, the parts of Irene and Tirone were played by different performers from those taking the roles in 1992 (membership of the company changes to a certain extent from year to year depending on the availability of performers). In this instance, Irene was played by an experienced singer in her forties, who came from the village of Roggio, some distance away to the south. Her arietta, which used a different melody said to be characteristic of the town of Roggio, was sung as she knelt by the side of her dead father. The fact that the setting of text to melody is indeed improvised at the moment of performance was in this instance made particularly evident: the singer mistakenly started setting the arietta text to the ottava melody, then realised her mistake, and aided by the violin, recommenced the stanza with the correct arietta melody.¹

[Video example 2 was shown]

As in video example 1, the departure of the 'dead' king from the performance area (here after rather than before the arietta) was accompanied by a double instrumental ritornello. The excited talk and applause from the audience suggested that they were engaged in the drama to a far greater extent than in the 1992 performance. The more vociferous the audience, as a general rule, the better the singers perform, and vice versa, in a mutually reinforcing spiral of focus on the performance.

I have already mentioned some melodic differences associated with different locations within the maggio area (the characteristic arietta melody from Roggio). I turn now to an example of one performer consciously varying his performance to incorporate melodic characteristics associated with different locations, thus expressing a complex relationship to particular audiences and to the maggio tradition.

First, a brief geography lesson is in order. The maggio is today performed in three contiguous areas of Central Italy, each using quite different melodies and movement styles.² The Pisano-Lucchese and Emilian areas lie to the south and north respectively of the Garfagnana-Lunigiana area in which my research is based.³ The Piazza al Serchio company comprises members from both the Garfagnana valley, situated to the northwest of Lucca between the Apuan Alps and the Appennines, and the neighbouring Lunigiana valley, which extends westwards into the province of Massa. There are significant dialectal and cultural differences between the Garfagnana and Lunigiana valleys despite their contiguity.

Because of massive emigration and other social changes in recent times, the pool of performers is ever contracting, and as I have explained elsewhere (Barwick and Page, 1993), the tradition is both threatened by and precariously dependent on modern technology, especially the car, which enables performers from a wide area to travel extensively. Both the Piazza al Serchio company and the Gragnanella-Filicaia-

¹ I have recorded several other examples of singers confusing arietta and ottava texts and melodies; both metrical forms are introduced by the same instrumental ritornello.
³ Tullia Magrini has published on the Emilian maggio, e.g. Magrini 1992a, 1992b.
Casatico company of Central Garfagnana draw performers from a wide area. The Piazza al Serchio company draws some performers from the west, in the Lunigiana valley, who use a different melodic contour and performance style from those in the Garfagnana. Both companies also perform in an extensive area, especially the Piazza al Serchio company, whose eleven performances in 1994 took place in numerous venues outside the catchment area for their performers. Note especially the numerous performances to the west, further down the Lunigiana valley and in neighbouring mountainous areas of the province of Massa, where, although local companies are no longer active, there is still a large pool of interested audience members.

The present cultural landscape of the maggio is in considerable contrast to that of the past, when each town had its own company, which maintained a relatively homogeneous local tradition (Venturelli, 1974). My example concerns a leading member of the Gragnanella-Filicaia-Casatico company, who on one occasion (9 August 1994) agreed to sing for the Piazza al Serchio company when one of their usual performers was unable to sing due to a family emergency.

The singer in question, GG, is one of the most prolific contemporary maggio authors, and prides himself on his knowledge of the maggio tradition in the Garfagnana-Lunigiana area. In 1992 I recorded a long interview with him in which he demonstrated the various musical characteristics associated with different locations. Before examining one of the musical changes he made when singing with the Piazza al Serchio company, let me run through the usual melodic contour for the stanza 'a maggio' (here the five-line quintina) sung by him and various other members of the Gragnanella-Filicaia-Casatico company. I have divided each line into two parts, labeled A and B, according to the caesura.

**Figure 1: Melodic outline of the usual quintina melody sung by GG.**

Stanza 10, *Re Alfonso d'Estonia*  
Performed by the Gragnanella-Filicaia-Casatico company at Varliano (LU) 21/8/94.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>final</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Franco dorme</td>
<td>nostro padre</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3)5 5 6 6 5~4</td>
<td>(5)6 5 5~1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>anche noi</td>
<td>possiamo stare</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5)6 5 5</td>
<td>5 5 6 6 5~2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[VIOLIN RITORNELLO]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>per un poco</td>
<td>a riposare</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3)5 5 5 5~4</td>
<td>6 5 5 5~1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>son calmate</td>
<td>le sue pene</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 5 5 5</td>
<td>6 54 3~1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>sembra che</td>
<td>riposi bene</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 6 6</td>
<td>6 5 5 5<del>3</del>1</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

[Franco, our father is sleeping / we too can stay / a little to rest / his pains have calmed / it seems he is sleeping well]
Let me draw your attention to the beginnings of the first and third lines (boxed in Figure 1). In each case the first stressed note, the fifth of the scale, was approached via a very brief slide from the third or thereabouts, and finished with an ornamented descent from the fifth to the sharpened fourth characteristic of the Tuscan maggio. The cadential tones (indicated in bold at the end of each line) are the only aspect of the maggio melody not subject to variation between performers.

In his performance with the Piazza al Serchio company, which took place in the town of Metra, just over the crest into the Lunigiana valley but still within the province of Lucca, GG made a conscious attempt to adopt the characteristic Lunigiana singing style. I know this because he approached me during the interval to explain that he had tried to change his melody out of respect for the local tradition when singing in the Lunigiana as well as to fit in with the Lunigianese performers within the group. He said it was important to maintain local distinctions, as this diversity was what kept the tradition alive. I might also speculate that another factor influencing GG’ s performance was my own presence in the audience, as someone he knew to be interested in and aware of such musical differences. I don't want to exaggerate the importance of this factor, however, as there are numerous examples of other singers adapting their performance to copy other performers and to please different audiences.

We can identify one locus of change in GG’s performance of the beginning of the first and third lines. In the Lunigiana these sections of the melody are usually performed with an arpeggio from the tonic via the third to the fifth, after which there is an ornamented descent to the second degree. At Metra, GG conformed to the Lunigianese pattern to a certain extent: he usually approached the fifth via a measured arpeggio (see boxed sections of Figure 2), but we can see that he treats the internal cadence differently in lines 1 and 3: in line 1 he cadences on the Lunigianese second while in line 3 the internal cadence is on the fourth, as in his own usual style exemplified in Figure 1.

Figure 2: Melodic outline of the quintina melody as performed by GG when singing with the Piazza al Serchio company at Metra (LU), 9 August 1994.

Stanza 26, Re Filippo d’Egitto

1. Dio del cielo ti ringrazio
   135 5 4~~~2 5 5 5~3~1

2. e proteggi la sua sorte
   6 5 5 5 5 6 6 5~~~2

3. con prudenza torna in corte
   135 5 5~4 5 6 5~3~1

4. sospettar non può di niente

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4For example, in the 1991 performance of Leonildo e Irene, two performers from the Piazza al Serchio company who usually sang melodies characteristic of the upper Garfagnana valley (one from Piazza al Serchio and one from Roggio) also sometimes sang the Lunigiana style melody when singing scenes with performers from the Lunigiana.
4 5 5 6 5 5~ 3~~~1

5. se all'appello io son presente
5 6 6 5 543 2 3 4 5~~~~1

[God in heaven, I thank you / may you protect his fate / I will carefully return to court / he won’t suspect anything / if I am present at the call]

Although GG was able to articulate quite clearly his intention to change his singing style, in fact his performance did not always agree with his intention. Collating information on all eleven stanzas sung by GG in the course of this performance (Figure 3), we can see that GG’s performance was quite variable.

Figure 3: Variability in 11 versions of the melodic contour of the first phrase of line 1 of the quintina melody as sung by GG at Metra 9 August 1994, compared with the usual melodic contour performed by this singer with the Gragnanella-Filicaia-Casatico company (in bold) and the usual melodic contour sung by performers from the Lunigiana (in italics).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GG with Gragnanella-Filicaia-Casatico</th>
<th>Usual Lunigiana contour</th>
<th>GG singing with Piazza al Serchio co. at Metra</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(3) 5~4</td>
<td>135~~~2</td>
<td>3 5~4 (5 times)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>135~2 (3 times)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>135~4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 5~4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 5~1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In contrast to the relatively stable melodic contour used when singing with his own company, at Metra GG produced a variety of contours. The most common outcome, performed five times, was very similar to his own usual style, beginning on the third and cadencing on the fourth. A more or less straight copy of the Lunigiana contour was the second most common outcome (performed three times), but he also produced a number of hybrid contours combining elements of his usual style (shown in bold) with the characteristic arpeggio of the Lunigiana style (shown in italics). In this way GG himself is contributing to the continuing diversification of the tradition, although other performers criticize him on occasion for this inconsistency.

Conclusion

The question then arises of what GG was communicating to the audience, most if not all of whom knew that he was not from the Lunigiana. That he was aware of the musical differences between his usual style and the Lunigiana tradition, that he had sufficient vocal control to attempt the adaptation of his usual style, that he admired the virtuosic Lunigianese performers in the group, that he wanted to please the audience by presenting the melodic contour they best knew and loved. In this

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5 The fifth is common to both styles, and is accordingly shown in regular font.
particular case, it could be argued that GG's 'sculpting of the words' served a metatextual function, drawing attention to the performance qua performance rather than to the text itself. The openness of the musical practice to melodic and movement improvisation thus allows the performance to be sensitive to context in a number of ways: it makes possible the adaptation to different performance spaces and the incorporation of performers with different levels of expertise; it allows performers to respond musically to particular social situations, to negotiate a particular social role with the performance group and the audience; and in the most intense and moving moments of the performance, it unites performer and audience in their shared focus on the unfolding of time through performance.

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