Transcription as deflowering: collection practices in Italy, pre-1939

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the interaction between transcribers and performers of traditional songs before the ready availability of sound recording. What acts did the collectors perform to produce the written documents that are our only record of the performing traditions of that time? How did they represent their activity to themselves and others? Although the purposes for which these documents were made may be no longer relevant, exploring how they were shaped by the historical context of their collection may enable contemporary researchers to re-value a more neglected resource, as well as reminding us that our own work is shaped in similar ways.

Quando la ressa li tace la rama
da tutti quelli l’è visiva
Quando la ressa li tace c’è un vera
giù pianissim di la sera
gauda

Ethnomusicology, like other ethnographic practices, concerns itself with social performances. But, as James Clifford has pointed out, ethno-ethography can itself be considered as a performance (Clifford 1988:98). Anyone concerned with what might be termed historical ethnomusicology, the application of ethnomusicological procedures to documents of now vanished musical performances, recognises that the documents do more than simply record those overtly signalled musical performances; they also embody documentary performances by the transcribers. Both these performances need to be taken into account in assessing and understanding the document. I propose to take this approach as a body of documentation of Italian traditional song “collected” in written form before 1939. I ask what acts did the collectors perform in order to produce such documents? How did they represent this activity to themselves and others? How does this affect our understanding and use of the documents today? In taking this approach to the writings of others, I am aware that my own writing is rendered ironic: my discussion of writing as performance is itself to be considered as another performance. I will return to the implications of this at the end of the paper.

Over the past one hundred and fifty years a huge body of documentation of European traditional songs has been assembled. The following discussion draws on my analysis of a corpus of 478 versions of one ballad, Donna lombarda, collected mainly in Italy, but also in France and Canada, over the period 1840 to 1910. The corpus (extensively analysed in Barwick 1985) included 120 musical transcriptions, and the aim of my research was to place the textual and musical documents in an historical context that would allow me to understand what was occurring in the process of oral transmission. I had to identify how the documents had been shaped by the literary processes of transcription and publication in order to arrive at an adequate definition of traditional song centred in performance practice. My concerns in this paper will be with the interaction between transcribers and performers of traditional songs in Italy before the ready availability of sound recording technology, that is, before World War II, with the conditions of production of musical transcriptions, and with the implications for researchers wishing to use these historical documents today.

Transcribers and performers

The first thing that needs to be said is that transcribers and performers belonged to mutually exclusive social groups. Transcribers were literate members of the upper classes, usually men, interested in “collecting” what they called “popular poetry”, while performers were mostly illiterate peasants, usually women. What we can know about the interaction between these two groups is limited, firstly because the performers did not have the means to record directly their own perspective, and secondly because the collectors were mostly uninterested in performers, focussing instead on particular song items, the essential qualities of which they assumed to be transparently “captured” in writing. We can however glean a certain amount about the practical details of collection from the collectors’ writings.

In the Preface to his Canti popolari del Piemonte (1888),[1] the Piedmontese diplomat and song collector Costantino Nigra considers only briefly the ways in which he had obtained the traditional song texts he published, devoting most of his attention to more abstract argument on the songs’ supposed historical origins. In one of the few references to documentary practice, he tells us that the songs were “transcribed from singing or from dictation, mostly from peasant women, and whenever possible, I had them repeated three times and on different occasions” (Nigra 1974:xxxii). He goes on to mention by name only four performers, all women (three of whom were his family servants) but cedes “the better part of
to understanding of the songs, which their theories named as "representations of Italian nationalism." Collection activity intensified from the time of Italy's political unification until the end of the 1800s. The songs were viewed as an implicit denial of the validity of their meanings for performers) with the assertion that they were composed by the original textual antiques (Nigra, for example, thought that the ballads were archaic remnants of late Roman times). The collection could discern in these songs the archaic treasures of the Italian people, passed down unthinkingly by generations of performers. The remaining traces of the original creation, thought to have arisen from the action of inspiration on the racial genius of the Italian people (Nigra, xliii), could only be recovered by understanding of philology and the classics. Since the songs were the result of the action of inspiration on the ethnic genius of the Italian race, common membership of that race gave the collector authority to appropriate the performers' songs. Furthermore, Nigra argued that within the Italian nation the racial superiority of the Piedmontese (demonstrated by the sturdy masculine character of their popular songs as opposed to the feminine weakness displayed in the popular songs of the southern Italians) meant that they were the natural governors of the Italian nation (it may come as a surprise to learn that Nigra, a member of the Piedmontese nobility, was a leading figure in pushing the claims for Turin as national capital, rather than Rome). The relationship between collector and performer was represented by collectors as a joint enterprise in recovering and naming these songs. Membership of the Italian nation, the performer's part in the enterprise was limited to acting as an unselfconscious and passive vessel for this great truth that could only be named by the collector.

Nigra further glorifies the role of the collector by emphasizing performances' resuscitation, which is a function of the social usefulness of songs. The collectors' attitude toward the traditional ballads was therefore much as if they had come across priceless manuscripts, as a duty as well as a hobby. The collector placed himself in an adversarial relation to the performer by claiming that only he could truly preserve her traditional songs.

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with the ‘other’ of popular culture. The questions they asked about the songs were generated by their own concerns with the nature of artistic inspiration, the formal nature of nationalism, and the justification of political and social inequalities.

Echoing of the tropes and formulae used by travel writers, and later ethnographers, to describe the strange customs of inhabitants of foreign lands were employed to describe the culture of the lower classes. Mary Louise Pratt, in her discussion of the conventions and commonplaces of ethnographic description, identifies two major silences in these texts: the “inexpleability and unjurisdictions of the ethnographer’s presence”, the “large agenda of European expansion in which the ethnographer, regardless of his or her own attitudes to it, is caught up, and that determines the ethnographer’s own material relationship to the group under study”. She goes on to argue that “[I]t is this relationship which is one of the great silences in the midst of ethnographic description itself. It is the silence that shapes the traditional ethnographic project of trying to describe the culture as it was before Western intervention” (Pratt 1986:42). Similarly, the nineteenth century Italian anthropologists present the colonists as occupying the social and cultural inequalities inherent in the then almost feudal social organisation. This is done by presenting only the similarities between the colonist and performer, and on the other by appeal to an abstract and ahistorical cultural essentialism. In the song texts (and transcription) in favour of more general ideological themes that were thought to characterise the ethnic genius of the whole race. In these song collections, as in the foreign ethnographies, the unattainable ideal of recreation of the “pure” pre-contact culture serves to draw attention away from the political and social ramifications of contact, as do the simple presentation of the documents. The seeming objectivity of the texts (and transcription) film, that embody the authenticity of the truth they are not allowed to speak, the truth that can only be produced by the discursive power (Fiske 1987:6). In the same way, the collectors used transcription of traditional songs to establish the “truth” of Italian nationalism, a “truth” that was not directly available to performers. But the sheer peculiarity of the orally transmitted popular culture that the collectors were trying to use, the ways in which they refused their theories by throwing up, for example, variations and cross-fertilisations inexplicable in terms of the collectors’ understanding of their artistic and social universe, eventually forced far-reaching re-evaluations of both theoretical frameworks and collection practices.4

Conditions of production of musical transcriptions

In the next section of this paper, I will be concentrating on what is known, or can be reconstructed, about the conditions of production of the musical transcriptions of Italian traditional songs that appeared in publications.

Because the primary focus of collectors’ interest was the words of the songs, when melodies were published they tended to function as “local colour”, confirming the authenticity of the documents; musical transcriptions thus were present primarily as tokens of the ovality of the songs. Their status as information was only secondary, since comparatively few consumers of the published documents were capable of deciphering the transcriptions. Yet the presence of musical transcriptions in the published documents made it clear that the songs were not “captured” by the textual transcriptions, and today it is possible for other meanings to be extracted from them, meanings that were not a part of the critical discourse and transmission of the songs. But before we can use these musical transcriptions we need to understand how they were created.

The fact that the musical element of song was presented as an adjacent to its primary constitution as a verbal text is an index of the secondary status of the songs within the mass production of audio recordings, the experience of a given traditional song as a musical performance was available only to those present; the greater part of the upper-class educated elite who formed the collectors’ public could know only those aspects of the performance that lent themselves to transcription and publication. For this audience, to all practical intents, the verbal text was all there was. It was the textual body that allowed the critical recognition of the importance of musical aspects of traditional song coincided with the availability of composers’ scores. The years has accompanied a rising critical interest in gesture and other non-verbal features of performance.

Recognition of the process of production of the documents (recording or transcription) is an essential prerequisite for their ethological evaluation. Unfortunately, the main focus of interest has been the relationship between collectors and performers, because most nineteenth century collectors believed that the recording captured the performance, transcription was thought to be transparent in terms of the information conveyed, so the process of interaction between performer and collector in producing the transcribed documents was rarely if ever addressed in print. A degree of care was exercised in explaining the conventions followed for linguistic transcription, but the secondary status of the token musical transcriptions meant that their main function was the published record of how they were obtained. However, information gleaned from incidental comments and private letters may help us to evaluate the effect of assumptions of transcription and publication on the shape of the documented melodies.

How were the melodies of songs elicited and transcribed before the ready availability of sound recording technology? Some idea may be given by the following extract from a letter written by a collector, Brunetta Bianchi, who was one of a network of schoolteachers cooperating in Michael Barbi’s compilation of a huge collection of traditional songs. After Barbi had written to her asking her to obtain melodies for the songs she had previously collected, she had cooperated with the school’s music teacher to transcribe the music.

The sweet old ladies, Giuseppa Verrucci and Almerinda Fini, both died in the space of two months, but I have found others who sing the same songs. ... A cheeky little five-year-old came to sing at Maestra Franceschi, who had no one to look after her at the school, because—as usual—her mother was too ashamed. You have no idea how strange some people can be! They sang from morning to night while they were doing the housework or nursing the baby, but if I show them any interest they are timid and want to write down the songs, they start pretending that they don’t know them properly, that they make too many mistakes, etc. and when I bring them to see Maestra Franceschi to come and sing for Franceschi, but I couldn’t persuade her; at the thought of coming to sing at the piano she laughed and said: “Oh, ma’am, you are asking her to dress up as a clown! The little girl, however, came willingly, and we were the ones to laugh at her air of importance. ... (From a letter Brunetta Bianchi to Michele Barbi, dated 10.3.1932, found among the papers attached to the Raccordi Barbi at the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. The translation is mine.)

In this case at least the collection and transcription
were performed on the collector's terms and for the collector's convenience; the process of transcription of the song rather than the performance of the song, is the focus of the transaction between performer and collector. As far as this collector was concerned, and there should have been no difference between singing in the usual context of home and hammer, as any one will readily acknowledge, the art music the work's identity lies in its notation, which is the touchstone for later interpretations in performance. Collector's neglect of the task of transcription of orally produced song with these preconceptions about the nature of melody that are unlikely to have been aware of the distortion caused by adjusting variation in rhythm and pitch for easy notation and reading, and may even have believed that in regularising the melody they were giving a truer picture of the song. Although the simplicity of many of these oral recordings and the inaccuracy of transcription of traditional song may be attributed to the inability of untrained amateur transcribers to "hear" and note the variations in pitch and time (a difficult enterprise even with modern sound recordings), there is also evidence that even highly trained musicians who were technically capable of accurate transcription were reluctant to publish such documents. For example, J.-G. Péněvaire, who transcribed the melodies for Millier's collection of French Névérain traditional songs: It is not always convenient to note with care these small, often amusing popular melodies, and to transcribe their exact rhythm. I have tried to do as simply as possible. Some collectors, wanting to convey to the public, instead of the sounds of the singer, write with frequent exaggerations of rhythm, where 5/4s and 5/5 melodic turns are written as 6/8 or 6/6, write only note values without bar lines, tempo rubato, as in plainsong; this style of transcription, where it is not obligatory, seems to me too little pretentious for a poor little folksong. (Péněvaire writing in Millier 1960:65. My translation, author's emphasis.)

It is evident that the complex graphic realisation of the oral song resulting from exact transcription conflicts with the literary definition of the traditional song as "simple". In this instance, we have particularly clear evidence that the transcription and notation function as a tokenistic representation of the collector's idea of traditional music rather than as an accurate record of performance. The small percentage of songs collected with music was even further reduced in the published collection. The transcription process involved a large amount of cross-referencing and the cost of transcribing was prohibitive. For example, as recently as 1951, a collector was discouraged by his publisher from including musical transcriptions in a publication of his field work (Vidossi 1951). Even when musical transcriptions were published, their marginality

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found a physical expression in the relegation of melodies to a musical appendix. The form of transcriptions tended towards the idealised abstraction (exemplified by the transcription of one verse only, lack of ornamentation, and use of repeat marks) as much for reasons of economy in the process of publication of the collector's literary conception of the song.

The detachment of words and melody produced by the different systems for words and music was sometimes compounded by editorial practices. The music was often transcribed on a different occasion from the words because of the necessity of finding a specialist transcriber when the collector of the words was not musically literate, and in some cases the collection of melodies appear to have taken place many years after the collection of the words (see Barwick 1985: 52 for detailed documentation of this and the following points). We have already seen that on such occasions, different performers may have given words and music, since many collectors assumed the equivalence of different versions of a song from the same place. An even greater disjuncture between words and music is represented by the infrequent editorial juxtaposition of words and music from different times and places; it is not unusual to find that songs collected in one region of Italy are published in conjunction with melodies collected in another place. An extreme example of this editorial distortion of the relationship between text and melody is found in a French Canadian publication in which the words of one song were compiled between collection and publication to resemble another so that the melody could be included in a list of variants of the second song (Harcourt 1956:75; see also Barwick 1985: 1065).

Transcriptions as historical documents

The above considerations of the notational system and its application by collectors, transcribers and compilers mirror a number of changes in background of the analysis of nineteenth and early twentieth century musical transcriptions. Although the information conveyed by the transcriptions is limited, it is nevertheless the only available history of these songs' musical evolution, and comparison of the manifest changes in the collection may provide a basis for the analysis. The melodies provides another perspective on the mechanisms of variation in oral transmission. The surviving documents of this period of "deflowering" were shaped and changed by the parameters and processes of transcription and publication, rather as a collection of pressed flowers is changed by the processes of preservation. From such evidence, it is still possible to make some accurate comments and observations about how the originals might have looked and functioned, even though one cannot truly re-create the original context.

With documentalities, this is its power, and in some cases its weakness. The historically determined social context of the performance practices can never be elucidated because it was unwritten or unreadable. It has been comparatively easy to talk about the history of collection practices because it is a phenomenon of literate people who did write things down, even if they didn't publish the details that interest us today. But the history of the performers and the community is another matter.

This history is personal and domestic: the history of an orally transmitted song is the history of the lives and the experiences of the people who performed it. The song documents represent only random moments in a constantly varying process of growth and adaptation of oral traditions and communities. If the song varied in the way it did because of that unwritten history of the performers, then the study of the variations between the written documents of the song goes some way to reconstructing, albeit indirectly, and inevitably incompletely, that lost history. This approach to historiography is the one that must be adopted by some scholars in the past, which was to "historicise" the documents by looking for history in their contents (that is, in the songs themselves as works of art) and not in their context of the historical events such as wars and political upheavals; see, for example, Santoll 1949). The narrow definition of history and the acceptance of the document as an object ultimately leads to a dead end, to the asking of questions that the documents in isolation cannot answer. What needs to be a formalised is the space between the documents, the circumstances of their performance. In the popular tradition there are a number of songs about encounters between roaming knights and vulnerable shepherds, which provide a kind of reverse viewpoint on the literary pastoral scenario, but that served as a foil for the objects of the knight's attentions. Many are tragic stories of rape, shame, and pregnancy, but there is also a strong tradition of comic songs in which the young woman outwits the knight's intent on taking her virginity. At the end of one such song (in the strope at the head of the present piece), she tells the knight to be a fool, of course.
When the rose is attached to the branch everyone comes to see it but when the rose has fallen to the ground no one wants to look at it anymore (Ferraro 1977:390).

It seems to me that these words of wisdom, talking about the loss of virginity, also have an application to the decontextualisation of songs transcribed from the popular tradition. As ethnomusicologists today, our main interest is in the living tradition, in full flower, and how the music that forms the focus of our inquiry is related to other aspects of the lives of the people who perform it. In this process, the poor dead documents of previous research are often rejected, because of their inevitable decontextualisation, and because the purposes for which the records were made, and the questions that were asked of them, are no longer relevant. I have been trying to show that coming to terms with the ways in which these documents have been shaped by their historically determined cultural context is of use to contemporary researchers in two ways. Firstly, it enables one to use these documents against the grain, to recontextualise in the light of contemporary experience something of what the original performances might have been like, and in so doing gives a valuable historical perspective on present-day performance practice. And secondly, it should alert us to the ways in which our own research is shaped by our experiences and education.

This brings me back to the question raised in my first paragraph about the implications for my own writing position of the approach to the writings of others as performances. If at times I have seized on the inconsistencies of earlier researchers as indicative of attitudes that are now outdated, this is not intended to bolster my own position by ridicule of others, nor is it to claim that my own work is free from influence from currently accepted ideas that will, I imagine, be equally out-of-date in a century's time. Rather, I see the exploration of the contradictions or the quirks of earlier work as often the best way of uncovering the attitudes and ideas that shaped the documents in ways that I need to understand today. In so doing, I am quite willing to locate the mode of production of the present article, in its turn, "within investive culture and historical change" (Clifford 1986:120).

REFERENCES


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