

also vivid, intense, and fulfilling. This scene is followed by one with Graziella Pogolotti who typewrites a comment that we read on screen:

Dino founded a working-class neighborhood.  
 Marcelo devoted himself to the building of a new culture.  
 All of us claimed the right to establish and dream.

She is writing about her family. But also, like Chiezzi, she is invoking the transformation of Cuban society since 1958.

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*The Italian Character—The Story of a Great Italian Orchestra.*

By Angelo Bozzolini.

An Alpenway Media Production Film, with Accademia di Santa Cecilia and RAI Tre, 2013.  
 100 minutes. Streaming format, color.

*Little Opera.*

By Louis Wallecan.

A Bel Air Media Production Film with France Télévision, 2012.  
 53 minutes. Streaming format, color.

National character, according to Silvana Patriarca, is an objective disposition of a people, that is, its consolidated moral and mental traits (Patriarca 2010). No doubt music, and opera especially, has contributed to shaping the Italian character long before Italy existed as a nation. Before cuisine, wine, luxury cars, and fashion—widely recognized as arts and industries in which Italians are prominent—exists opera, a kind of prototype of those “made in Italy” products that have been accompanying the fame and fortunes of Italians everywhere, almost like trademarks so much needed in the age of globalized competition.

These two films share the idea that music not only is a form of art or entertainment but that it also maintains a deep relationship with the people and place where it originated or developed. Even if its language has become somewhat universal—as has been the case with classical and operatic music for centuries now—there remain particular features that associate a single style or genre to a historical experience rooted in a specific area or culture.

When I was a graduate student in New York City, in the early 1980s, I once attended a conference at which a group of eminent Italian philosophers challenged U.S. colleagues to a debate over what is really meant by the term “the Italian difference” (from Mario Perniola’s seminal essay of 1976). A few years later Peter Carravetta launched the academic journal *Differentia*, subtitled *A Review of Italian Thought*. Now that the times seem to have relegated Jacques Derrida’s popular notion of “différence/differance” to merely academic matters, the phrase *la differenza italiana* resuscitates old

feelings and stereotypes about what might be seen as authentically Italian. These two films offer a partial response.

*The Italian Character* is a French documentary film about the Orchestra of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia that has been awarded several honors including the Platinum Remi Production Award at the World Fest Houston (2014) and the second-place prize for best documentary at the Globo d'Oro (2014). Based in Rome, the orchestra is one of the most renowned symphonic institutions in Europe. Part of a prestigious academy that was established in 1585, the orchestra was first formed in 1908 and has attracted major conductors and composers, from Mahler to Strauss, from Stravinski to Toscanini, from Karajan to Solti. Leonard Bernstein, who liked the Italian flavor of the orchestra, was honorary president for a few years, and other contemporary baton icons have been often invited to conduct, as testified by filmed interviews with Georges Prêtre, Carlo Maria Giulini, Valery Gergiev, and Yuri Temirkanov.

Designed to present the orchestra to those who do not know it already or who do not have a complete understanding of its role in the world of music, the documentary has an inevitable propagandist touch, although it lets the subjects (famous directors and lesser-known players) speak without a narrator's voice to tell the story. This approach makes the film a bit confusing at times. While the film aims at being something more than journalistic reportage, it is difficult to understand its structure, as it lacks an obvious internal organization or, for that matter, even a chronological development. The role of the protagonist is assigned to its current director, Antonio Pappano, who is also the one who relaunched the orchestra to unprecedented levels of celebrity. Pappano, who speaks in flawless standard Italian, is a Londoner born of Italian parents (from Castelfranco in Miscano, Benevento province, Campania). While playing the Neapolitan standard "O surdato 'nnammurato" on the piano, he describes the many people who left his parents' small town to start a new life in England. He defines himself as a workaholic and recognizes that he got his work ethic from that village. "The Italian character in music," he says, "is about singing, about passion, about theatricality, nerve, drive, romance, intimacy, mystery: All music benefits from this." In this way, then, the film is a declaration of love to the fascination surrounding symphony orchestras and the music they make.

The magic of music is something that can only be felt inside, as one of the interviewees (an unidentified musician) suggests in relation to two performances of the same piece (Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*) by the Chicago Symphony orchestra conducted by Riccardo Muti followed by Pappano leading the Santa Cecilia Orchestra: "The first performance was perfect, nothing was out of place" says this musician. "The second wasn't perfect but sent shivers down my spine, which was not at all the case in Chicago." Thus viewers are left asking themselves: Is imperfection a secret feature that makes art great or just a basic ingredient of the Italian character? Pappano offers an ambiguous answer: "That's my job to give them what the real character of the piece is, not that everything is clean, *tutto a posto*, neat and tidy, but what are we trying to say, what are we trying to express really?" In other words, he aims at getting to the heart of the matter, which is not simply technical, as he implies.

*Passion* is another often overused, even abused, word when speaking of the supposed Italian way of life. An outcome of centuries of rhetoric and self-indulgence

in trying to represent the spirit of a people, passion has long been accepted as a basic feature of the Italian national character, especially when seen from an outsider's perspective. In the film, the stereotype of a passionate people is indeed underlined by a foreign orchestra player who is incapable of explaining it but who nevertheless strongly believes that it is what differentiates the Italian character in music more than anything else. However, this notion is misleading and consolatory, supported by an ideology that flirts with an old-fashioned view of music, people, and the nation.

Further, this stagnant notion of passion fits well in the world of Neapolitan song—see John Turturro's musical homage *Passione* (2011), where an oleographic approach overrides a realistic perspective—but also in the field of opera and classical music, as shown in both films reviewed here. Moreover, the discourse of art is indeed more ideologically permeable than others, such as the discourse around Italian transnational corporate machinations (no one brought up Italianicity when FIAT bought Chrysler, under the direction of Italian Canadian CEO Sergio Marchionne). For this reason, it becomes easier to rhetorically identify Italian culture when talking about opera, the focus of the second film.

From Enrico Caruso to the film directors Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese, who made use of famous Mascagni and Leoncavallo arias in their soundtracks, opera stands out as a substitute for national folk music (a thesis claimed by nonmainstream observers such as ethnomusicologist Roberto Leydi and poet Edoardo Sanguineti), given that no authentic folk music was able to speak to the Italians who emigrated from different regions, each of which had its own tradition. With this in mind, *Little Opera* brings the viewer directly into a particular Italian American culture, where opera and Neapolitan song are associated with nostalgia for one's lost country.

The first verse of "Core 'ngrato" is the soundtrack accompanying the appearance of the New York City skyline as approached from an oceanliner at the turn of the century (the effect produced by the camera panning an old photograph), while the opening credits run, bringing us back to the epoch of the Great Migration. It is widely accepted that "Neapolitan songs are what half the world thinks of as Italian music" (Rosselli 1991, 117), so it is not so unusual that *Little Opera* begins with an homage to this tradition. The first scenes are set in the Amato Opera Theatre in New York City's East Village, probably the smallest such theater in the world (hence the documentary's title), with just 107 seats, and they immediately evoke an interest in and love for opera shared by Italian artists and those of Italian descent. The founder of the Amato Opera exemplifies this perspective; Tino Amato, totally committed to bel canto, still believes that its tricks and secrets are worth being handed down to the next generation, notwithstanding his own advanced age (he was about ninety when interviewed; he died in 2011). With a dreamy and eccentric demeanor, making him akin to a Fellini character, he continuously switches from English to Italian (his native tongue and opera's chosen language) while teaching singers how to approach the characters in *La Bohème*.

Amato's story is indeed one of many that can be told about Italian immigrants who were successful in the world of music. Amato's father and his four brothers were all musicians when they arrived in the United States, and they continued to do what they had been doing at home (Salerno province)—practicing and playing music, but in a more professional fashion. In the new country Amato "learned the

business,” he says, when as a twenty-five-year-old singer he turned into an entrepreneur and co-founded a theater and opera company with his wife Sally. At that time Italy was more associated with opera than it is today, but that association was also more stereotypical.

In this documentary, what elderly musicians like Amato (born in 1920) and Anton Coppola (born in 1917) have to say about their initiation into opera left this viewer breathless—listening to their memories about singers and performers that made history, one travels through the decades and between the continents, following the migration of determined people from Southern Italy, Sicily in particular. Coppola (uncle to film director Francis Ford Coppola) underlines how for migrants listening to music, and opera especially, made them remember their homes and the Italy they had left.

The association between music and nostalgia is made evident by almost all those interviewed in the film, especially those who express their feelings from the perspective of second- and third-generation Italian Americans: younger stars such as tenor Roberto Alagna (French with Italian citizenship) and directors such as Michael Capasso and Lorenzo Mariani. Mariani—perfectly bilingual and self-defined “atypical Italian American”—in fact provides the most moving story at the very end of the film. He quotes the last scene of *The Godfather Part III*, which was set on the steps of Teatro Massimo in Palermo, where Mariani currently holds the position of director. In relating the scene, he recounts his father Adolfo’s decision to remain in the United States at age sixteen, without telling his grandfather, with whom he had come and who then had to sail back home alone, leaving his son on the banks of the New York City harbor.

Compared to *The Italian Character*, *Little Opera* has a stronger architecture, and its narrative is more consequential. Both are excellent products from a technical and artistic point of view, enjoyable musically and extremely appealing for the stories they tell. But their respective messages are not convincing: The notion of “Italian character” is an abstraction, an ideal type that has one meaning in the Risorgimento, another meaning during the Fascist regime, another one during the “economic miracle” of the 1960s, and different meanings for Italian Americans of other eras. In both instances, these two films highlight a distillation of an idea that may make sense to non-Italians but with which natives do not necessarily identify. There is a promotional flavor in the first movie and a kitsch atmosphere in the second, inasmuch as the latter tends to exaggerate the effects of art in a social direction, with the result of mixing up the ethic element with the esthetic (a basic feature of kitsch, according to philosopher Abraham Moles). This is not so unusual, however, if one considers that opera is a genre tied to intense emotions, and thus it can evoke a sense of kitsch. Nonetheless, stereotypes often contain elements of truth. And this is precisely why I love to hear stories like the ones narrated in *Little Opera*: They describe authentic experiences and at the same time they are narrated and edited within an ideological frame that ends up underlining what viewers already presumed they knew about Italy, opera, creativity, and the like. What ultimately emerges from this documentary, and that has an extra oomph with respect to *The Italian Character*, is a feeling of pride or sense of belonging to a tradition, one so embodied by the nation itself that it has made a trademark of a broader cultural language (opera) that has long been universal. Ultimately, though, opera still bestows on Italians and their descendants

all over the world an aura of refinement, much like products stamped *denominazione di origine controllata* (DOC), the government certification of local food and alcohol production.

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### *Made of Limestone.*

By Andrea and Marco Nasuto.

Self-produced, 2013.

63 minutes. Streaming format, color.

*Made of Limestone* is the debut film by two brothers, Andrea and Marco Nasuto, who have utilized a shoestring budget and the power of new technologies to create and distribute a documentary on the hemorrhage of young people emigrating from contemporary Southern Italy. Starting from their own personal dilemmas—"to stay or to run away?"—the Nasuto brothers put together a provocative and thoughtful portrait of their hometown of Manfredonia (Foggia province, Apulia) and the wider area of the Gargano peninsula, a spur on the Italian boot along Apulia's Adriatic coast. At the same time, the film equally describes much of Italy's south today. The film presents the ambiguities and tensions facing youth in Manfredonia through a series of interviews with young adults, asking them to reflect on the positive and negative things about their hometown and whether they themselves intend to stay or leave. These interviews are interwoven with some statistical information and other factual data about the area, dreamy long shots of a Mediterranean seaside town, and the directors' personal commentaries. The portrait that emerges from the interviewees' descriptions and comments is reminiscent of the well-known "paradise inhabited by devils" motif of past descriptions of the Mezzogiorno: postcard-like landscapes, but at the same time, practically all of the themes described in the classic social science literature, from envy to fatalism, from sexism to low political participation, and from poor urban planning to environmental disaster. At the same time, the various interviewees cite the food, the warmth of human relationships, hospitality, and *l'arte dell'arrangiarsi* (the "art of making do") as if taking a cue from Franco Cassano's *Pensiero meridiano* (1996). One barber interviewed even proudly claims that the locals have an ethos of laziness with regard to work.

Here as elsewhere throughout the Meridione (Southern Italy), many of those young people who seek work are currently leaving the area in droves. Compared to the