



# Anchors and Sails: Music and Culture Contact in Corsica

## Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

## Citation for published version (APA):

Bithell, C. (2005). Anchors and Sails: Music and Culture Contact in Corsica. In D. Cooper, & K. Dawe (Eds.), *The Mediterranean in Music: Critical Perspectives, Common Concerns, Cultural Differences* (1 ed., pp. 155-177). (Europe: Ethnomusicologies and Modernities; Vol. 3). Scarecrow Press.

## Published in:

The Mediterranean in Music

## Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

## General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

## Takedown policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [<http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo>] or contact [uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk) providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.



---

## **Anchors and Sails: Music and Culture Contact in Corsica**

**Caroline Bithell**

**University of Manchester, UK**

---

NOTE: This is a post-print (Author's Accepted Manuscript) for:

'Anchors and Sails: Music and Culture Contact in Corsica', in David Cooper and Kevin Dawe (eds.), *The Mediterranean in Music: Critical Perspectives, Common Concerns, Cultural Differences*, pp. 155–177 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005).

### **1 Introduction**

The unique situation of the Mediterranean as a culture area that touches on three continents - Southern Europe, North Africa and Asia Minor - and whose central mass is defined by water rather than land has historically allowed ample scope for culture contact. In the case of Corsica, references can be found both in the literature and in accounts given by contemporary musicians to one or other feature of the island's musical heritage having its roots in other times and places - a notion that has in some ways served to add a somewhat romantic or refined patina to the island's complex and frequently troubled past. In the first part of the present discussion I offer a brief examination of the types of influences and affinities that have been postulated for Corsica's musical evolution. It is only in the island's more recent history, however, that it is possible to document with a surer confidence instances of direct intercultural contact on a specifically musical plane and it is to an exploration of some of the most recent cases that I turn my attention in the second half of the chapter. In the course of this discussion with its more "global" frame of reference, I aim to offer an insight into the motivations behind contacts that have been actively courted and the implications of both literal contacts and perceived affinities at both a practical and a politico-philosophical level. Finally I refocus on the question of "Mediterranean" music as I examine the impulse on the part of contemporary Corsican musicians to explore the specifically Mediterranean roots of their island's music and, in some cases, to forge links with musics and musicians from other Mediterranean traditions based on a perception of shared heritage.

### **2 The historical jigsaw**

The main aim of the present discussion is neither to attempt a reconstruction of the island's musical development based on verifiable historical "fact" nor to seek to prove the legitimacy or otherwise of the various claims that have been made regarding origins and influences from across the sea. I begin, nonetheless, with a brief foray into Corsica's tangled history and, more specifically, the types of observations and speculations that have been generated regarding the island's musical evolution.

## **2.1 Corsica at the crossroads of the Mediterranean**

As a result of its strategic position in the western Mediterranean basin, Corsica has always been caught in the crosscurrent of peoples and powers that have conducted their business, legitimate or otherwise, by means of the Mediterranean. Over the centuries, the island has been occupied in turn by Greeks, Etruscans, Carthaginians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Ostrogoths, Lombards and Saracens, subsequently coming under the control of Pisa, Genoa and Aragon, before finally being ceded to France in the Treaty of Versailles (1768). The fact that the island might now count for many as "French" should not therefore be allowed to obscure the fact that the sphere of influence in which Corsica existed in past times owed as much to cultures emanating from, or passing through, North Africa and the Near East as it did to continental Europe. The island has its own language, Corsican (Corse), which is still in use today despite having suffered serious displacement in favour of the official French language, and many aspects of the traditional culture and lifestyle continue to relate closely to those of the neighbouring island of Sardinia, now part of Italy.

## **2.2 Roots and relations**

Sporadic, largely unsubstantiated but much-quoted references to the supposed origins of some part of the Corsican musical canon in other lands in or bordering on the Mediterranean can be found in the semi-scholarly literature as penned by folklorists, amateur cultural commentators and others in the 19th and 20th centuries. Mathieu Ambrosi, for example, was able to write in 1938 (27) that "Corsican song is an African song" (Note 1), while the disc notes to Maurice Bitter's collection *Musique Folklorique du Monde: Corsica* (n.d.) state, with reference to a *paghjella* (a polyphonic song for three voices) from the village of Isulacciu, that: "The *paghjella* plunges its roots into the most distant past. A Spanish past moreover and more specifically, it is said, a Majorcan one." A second *paghjella* from Castirla is referred to as "...this

*paghjella* which our ancestors brought from Kabyle". The reference to Majorca echoes a similar reference in a footnote in Austin de Croze's *La Chanson Populaire de L'Ile de Corse* of 1911 (6), although here - confusingly - it is appended to a description of the *paghjella* as monodic song, occurring in the context of a discussion of serenades, election songs and laments. The description given appears to be simply that of the old indigenous style of singing - incantatory, long drawn out and often highly melismatic, with frequent use of quarter-tones and other reduced intervals, extended finals, and a tendency towards nasalisation (sometimes with an element of glottal constriction) - a style that has traditionally been used for original compositions and improvisations as well as characterising the upper voices in polyphonic singing. (Note 2) This style certainly resembles singing styles found in other parts of the Mediterranean: similarities with flamenco, for example - chiefly with respect to voice placement, timbre and vocal impulse - have frequently been noted. It is also this style that is often popularly perceived as having "Arabic" overtones, an association that is not restricted to Corsica alone. Sorce Keller, for example, comments that "... by the time Sicily is reached the embellished character of the melodies and the nasal quality of voice production are strongly reminiscent of Arabic music" (1994, 44-45), going on to propose that "this is not surprising, since southern Italy was once ruled by Spain (which has had close contact with the Middle East), and Sicily, in particular, was once ruled by the Arabs (ninth and tenth centuries A.D.)." This leads him to portray the Italian peninsula as "a bridge between the European mainland and the Middle East". Meanwhile, parallels in terms of the characteristic posture adopted by the singer whereby one hand is raised to the ear have also been widely noted, as has the antiquity of the gesture as evidenced by iconographical representations dating from ancient Egypt.

Allusions such as those found in Ambrosi and de Croze might be tantalising but they are disappointingly imprecise and remain unsupported by any hard evidence or detailed comparison. Laade (1981 vol. 1, 137) reports that, despite the regularity with which the claim that the *paghjella* originated in the Balearics is reiterated throughout the literature, his own investigations revealed no obvious parallels. He also makes the observation (133-4) that, in the case of writers such as these whose musical perception as well as direct acquaintance with many of the traditions they invoke was often limited, any music that was unfamiliar would automatically have been seen as "archaic" and, as such, assigned uncritically to the same box as "oriental" and other supposedly "primitive" musics. In a similar spirit, the "archaic" modalities of old folk melodies would immediately have suggested an association with Gregorian chant - hence the equally frequent proposals that Corsican melodies

are derived from, or at least have been substantially influenced by, Gregorian chant. (Note 3)

Nonetheless, in view of the island's location and history and the relative ease of mobility in the Mediterranean region as a whole, it should not seem unlikely that we should find echoes of, if not direct borrowings from, the musical cultures of some of Corsica's Mediterranean neighbours. Many of the island's former occupiers have conspicuously left their mark on the landscape in the form of megaliths and stone statues, other prehistoric stone-works offering links with Sardinia, Malta and the Balearics, Greek and Roman remains, Pisan churches, Genoese watchtowers and bridges and the great citadels of Bastia, Calvi and Bonifacio. Place names such as Morosaglia, Campu Moru and Muratu offer continuing testimony to the Moorish presence of the 9th to 11th centuries. To assume that some, at least, of these peoples would also have left traces of their musical practices would not seem unreasonable, although the extent to which occupying forces would have penetrated into the more isolated and inaccessible interior regions of the island has also been questioned. (Note 4)

## **2.3 Reflections on the archaeology of music**

All that we can perhaps say with complete impunity is that the types of resemblances that have been noted do point to what we might conceive of as a shared portfolio of cultural practices and a wide diffusion of stylistic traits across the Mediterranean region as a whole. Such resemblances do not of themselves, however, justify seeing the *paghjella* or any other manifestation of Corsican song as being specifically *derived from* another similar style. In particular, I would argue that we should remain wary of the ease with which the older singing style has often been so readily identified simply as "Arabic". One must, moreover, treat with due circumspection any approach that appears to view "Corsican music" as a unified entity that can be conclusively defined. Clearly there are different layers to any culture, both vertical and horizontal, across time and space, and across professions and social classes, which, where music is concerned, will point towards different lines of kinship for different genres.

### **2.3.1 Temporal stratification**

Within the Corsican musical canon as represented by the field recording collections made by Félix Quilici and Wolfgang Laade between 1948 and 1973 (some genres

having since fallen into disuse), a number of different styles can be identified that clearly relate to different historical layers. (For a broadly chronological overview of the most important genres, see Laade 1981 vol. 1, 41ff.) In terms of shared Mediterranean roots, it is the oldest layer that is potentially of the greatest interest. Given that most forms of musical expression have specific functional determinants or ritualistic associations, however, stylistic resemblances may be accounted for by the fact that they are to some extent determined by the situation itself and by the emotions that give impulse to the “performance”. At a broader level, what might strike the observer primarily is the similarity of the situation as a whole, including the ritualistic use of music and aspects of performance practice, rather than a more specific similarity at the level of melody and other strictly musical components.

Perhaps the most obvious case in point is that of laments, which occupy a position of prime significance in many Mediterranean societies. The extemporised laments for the dead (*voceri*), which belong to the oldest extant layers of Corsican song and continued to be “performed” into the middle decades of the 20th century, have clear parallels in the Sardinian *attitu* as well as further afield in the Greek lament tradition. (It is relevant to note here that Sorce Keller (1994, 43), citing De Martino (1908), sees the funeral lamentations as still practised in the South of Italy as offering tangible proof of the fact that, in antiquity, “Southern Italy was an integral part of the Greek world ... indeed ... in all respects part of Greece.”) This is not to say that the laments “sound the same” - even if Iannis Xenakis, listening to recorded musical examples while writing the preface to the first volume of the *Antulugia di u Cantu Nustrale* (de Zerbi & Raffaelli 1993), did claim to detect specifically musical resemblances between a melody used for “A nanna di u Cuscionu” (“The lullaby of the Cuscionu”) and recently deciphered ancient Greek melodies - but rather that they are performed in consonant circumstances and share many similarities in terms of function and motivation, particularly when they are associated with deaths resulting from the vendetta, and that this in turn accounts for certain resemblances in aspects of vocal production and the patterning of the vocal line.

The sung improvised debate known as *chjam' è rispondi*, which is still practised in Corsica today, similarly has parallels in the Sardinian *gara poetica*, the *ottava rima* found in mainland Italy, and the Maltese *spirtu pront*. (Note 5) While these forms diverge in terms of musical detail - the melodies themselves are in each case quite distinctive, often relating to other genres in the same culture, and while the *chjam' è rispondi* is unaccompanied, the singers' stanzas in a *gara poetica* are punctuated by a small polyphonic ensemble and the *spirtu pront* singers are usually accompanied by

guitars - the different manifestations share certain paramusical traits that can in some cases be linked to the circumstances of performance, as well as undeniable commonalities in terms of function.

Genres belonging to later strata reveal quite different lines of kinship. As Corsica has been increasingly assimilated into the modern Western European world, the effects of contact with the western musical system and aesthetic have inevitably been felt, the strongest pull being exerted by the equal-tempered scale, functional harmony and rhythmic regularity. Even before widespread diffusion of “western” styles via the media, the introduction of the guitar and mandolin as accompanying instruments had heralded significant changes at the level of modality and rhythm. It is, perhaps, not surprising that the barcaroles and accompanied serenades that became popular from the 18th century betray Italianate influence. Moreover, these songs were associated primarily with the culture of the larger towns and coastal ports, pointing also to the geographical and social stratifications to which I will return below. Songs from this layer, together with a number of dance tunes, have been preserved in the repertoires of the folkloric ensembles that are still active in the main towns of Bastia in the north and Ajaccio in the south.

Clearly, the styles involved in the different genres alluded to thus far are widely divergent, yet they are all seen as part of Corsica’s musical heritage. It is also the case that the different temporal strata referred to do not equate only to different genres. Within the polyphonic *paghjella* in the form in which it exists today, for example, there are clearly different layers, with what might be assumed to be the latest accretion being the addition or modification of a bass line (*bassu*) operating along functional principles and offering harmonic support to the more tightly fused pair of the two upper voices (*secunda* and *terza*) with their vibrant timbres, narrow range and intersecting melismatic figures. In the case of the *terza*, the now distinctive *tierce de Picardie* type final cadence would likewise appear to be a feature acquired at a relatively late stage, the overall character of the voice with its extremely restricted range, incantatory quality, ringing timbre and role of assuring continuity of sound pointing to more “archaic” roots. The prototypical melody underlying many variants of the *secunda* line, meanwhile, bears an uncanny resemblance to what would appear to be the oldest type of lament melody. Meanwhile, the two other types of polyphonic song found in the secular tradition, the *terzetti* and *madrigale*, have much in common in terms of musical style with the *paghjella* but at the level of the textual format and language they betray a more literary influence. The *terzetti*’s stanzaic format of three lines of (nominally) eleven syllables is usually identified in

the literature as being based on a form found in classical Tuscan poetry of the 14th century onwards, as represented by Dante, Tasso and Arioste (Note 6), while the language used for the texts of the small body of pieces commonly referred to as *madrigali* has been designated “u cruscu”, a Corsicanised form of Tuscan (the latter having functioned as the island’s official language during five centuries of Genoese control).

### **2.3.2 Geographical and social stratification**

The long-standing division of the island into two quite distinct halves (essentially north and south) must also account in part for the different lines of musical development. From the end of the 13th century until the middle of the 15th, Corsica was in dispute between Genoa and Aragon and at this time the natural division of the island into north - referred to by the Genoese as *di qua da i monti* (“this side of the mountains”) - and south - *di là da i monti* (“the other side of the mountains”) - was reinforced by a divergence in their political orientations, with the village communities who controlled the ancestral lands in the north enjoying the protection of the Genoese while the south remained in the power of the feudal lords who relied for their support on Aragon. (Note 7) In this context it is interesting to note that, while the historical record is by no means complete, polyphonic singing has been attested mainly in the central and northern parts of the island, the south showing a greater predilection for monodic song and solo improvisation.

In Corsica’s more recent history, musical practices in the coastal towns - with their growing concentration of professional and commercial activity and their greater openness to outside influences and changing fashions - have inevitably developed along very different lines to those of village and mountain populations who have continued to pursue more “traditional” pastoral lifestyles and retain more of the old “folk” rituals. Musical styles relating to a more refined “art” tradition were favoured by the quasi-urbanised educated classes whose offspring would often be sent to complete their education in Italy.

In the early decades of the 20th century a significant influence in terms of vocal style was exerted by opera singers whose performances could be heard at Ajaccio’s San Gabriel - considered to have one of the best acoustics in Europe prior to its destruction by fire in 1927 - and whose voices found their way even to the more remote villages via the gramophone. A new, continentally inspired lyrical style was epitomised in the singing of Ajaccio-born star Tino Rossi (1907-1983), king of the so-



called *chanteurs de charme*, who in addition to recording over a thousand songs also starred in twenty-four films and four operettas. In the post-war years, broader contact with a more modern, urbanised, and supposedly civilised European culture was to account in large part for the rejection of traditional singing styles and in particular those traits that were seen as “Arabic”, as is made explicit in the types of responses that greeted radio broadcasts of field recordings made by Félix Quilici in the late 1940s - epitomised in the wail “whatever will the Continentals think of us?” (Note 8)

### **3 Culture contact in the post-modern era**

I turn now to a consideration of the musical world occupied by those of my own generation in Corsica and of the more conscious choices that have been made with regard to the directions taken by their music. In many senses, the gulf between the world of today’s musicians and their audiences and that of the previous generation is wider than it has ever been. That the mobility of musics and musicians at a global level has brought profound changes not only in terms of the available musical palate but also with respect to musical behaviour hardly needs restating. A striking feature of the music scene in Corsica since the 1970s has been the number of young people who have constituted themselves into formalised “groups” against the backdrop of the cultural renaissance that has gathered pace over the past three decades. For many of these groups now operating at a professional and semi-professional level, international mobility has become part and parcel of the lifestyle. Those who helped pave the way in the late 1980s and early 1990s included the group Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses whose early career was given a kick-start when, on the strength of their first disc (*Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses*, 1991), they were chosen to perform at the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics at Albertville in 1992. More recently, a number of Corsican groups have been engaged to lend their distinctive vocal style to film soundtracks. Recent successes include A Filetta’s performance in several of Bruno Coulais’s film scores, including *Don Juan* and *Himalaya*. I Chjami Aghjalesi added to their portfolio a performance in the soundtrack for *La Reine Margot*, while I Surghjenti featured in the soundtrack of José Giovanni’s *Mon Père*. As a result of the experience and discipline of working with continental composers and directors, some have now learnt to read music while also adding a greater degree of sophistication to their own composing skills. One of the undisputed masters in this respect is Jean-Claude Acquaviva of the group A Filetta who, by his own admission, has found himself moving in a more ‘classical’ direction (*Corse-Matin* 21 Aug. 2001). Many groups now have continental agents and have notched up a steady stream of

successes with tours and festival appearances all over the world. I Chjami Aghjalesi, for example, have recently toured South America, while Jean-Paul Poletti and his male voice choir from Sartène have performed in countries as diverse and far-flung as Hong Kong, Iran and Mexico.

Physical appearances by the various groups outside the island have played an important part in introducing Corsican music, together with the language and aspects of the island's political concerns, to a wider audience. At the same time, they have served to bring Corsican musicians into direct contact with fellow musicians from other cultures, allowing them to undertake what one group member referred to as "un collectage à l'extérieure" (the opportunity to "collect" music outside the island), from which they can then draw additional inspiration for their own arrangements and compositions.

### **3.1 Musical meetings and political affinities**

One of the most interesting stories of recent times is undoubtedly that of the musical encounters that occurred in the 1970s, primarily as a result of political affinities. This decade – which provided the main impetus for the cultural revival or *riacquistu* - was one of particular turbulence in Corsica as a new surge of nationalist activity inspired by the reinvigoration of the movement for autonomy met with increasingly heavy-handed suppression by the French state. (Note 9) At a time when events in the Pays Basque, Northern Ireland and Chile were making international headlines, the young Corsican militants were to draw ideological as well as moral support from the struggles of other minorities and, where politics led, music was often not far behind. Corsican singers had already begun to form themselves into groups, motivated by an urge to safeguard the island's cultural heritage and to breathe new life into the musical traditions of the older generation, which were perceived to be in danger of dying out. The seminal *groupe engagé* of this period, *Canta u Populu Corsu*, is still active at the time of writing after a break in its activities from 1984 to 1994. A number of groups were to follow the lead of *Canta* in aligning themselves with the aims and ethos of the autonomist movement and adding to the growing body of newly composed *chansons engagées* - referred to in Corsican as *cantu indiatu* - that commented on and responded to political events of the time.

One of the most significant and more lasting influences was that exerted by the *nueva canción* ("new song") movement that had evolved in Latin America as part of the resistance to the corrupt and oppressive totalitarian regimes of countries such as

Chile and Argentina, where a parallel resistance to US hegemony had led to the adoption of indigenous musical styles and genres - embraced as authentic forms of expression of the "folk" - as vehicles for the call for justice and democracy. Canta and others drew inspiration in particular from the Chilean group Quilapayún who, at the time of the military coup that prematurely ended Salvador Allende's rule in 1973 and heralded a period of unprecedented terror under Pinochet, were on tour in Europe where they then remained in exile. From their base in Paris, they performed thousands of concerts all over Europe - including Corsica - as a means of mustering support for human rights in Chile. It was largely the example of the *nueva canción* artists with their notion of the song as bullet and the guitar as gun that brought Corsican militants to the realisation that songs could be used to spread a political message and musical performance could be embraced as an extension of militant activity. Following in the mould of *nueva canción*, Canta's early "creations" featured new topical texts set to melodies that resembled those of traditional songs of the oral tradition. At the level of the musical fabric itself, the South American influence was to find joyous expression in Natale Luciani's song "Compañero" (featured on the disc *Ci hè dinù*, 1982), where the distinctly Andean rhythmic coloration is reinforced by the use of *charango* and panpipes - instruments that reappear today in the line-up of the young group Vaghjime, whose members met at Luciani's *scola di cantu* in Ajaccio. (Note 10) Meanwhile, as recently as August 2002, Canta and Quilapayún once again shared the stage for a concert in Ajaccio, a testimony to the strength and depth of their affinity.

Elements from other song traditions were appropriated for purely aesthetic reasons as part of a conscious attempt to make Corsican music more comprehensible and palatable to a wider audience. As Corsican groups were increasingly invited to perform outside the island, they realised that the way in which they were received by their new audiences would, in the absence of an understanding of the song text which hitherto had been privileged in the urgency to "pass on the message", be dependent on the musical element alone. A number of musicians have commented on their intimation that the musical component in isolation was not overly stimulating and ran the risk of becoming monotonous or soporific: one musician characterised the typical Corsican song as "sad and heavy". In particular, the rhythmic aspect was not high on the agenda where most traditional Corsican genres were concerned; indeed, the majority of traditional songs were unaccompanied. This led to a deliberate "borrowing" of rhythms and of instrumental accompaniment in general from other Mediterranean traditions of popular song: Portuguese *fado* and Greek *rembetika* have both been cited as examples. These various influences

combined to form a new style of *chanson* that continues to thrive and that is now seen by many of the younger generation as “traditional”. (Note 11)

### **3.2 Encounters performed: polyphony, world music and fusion projects**

An event that proved decisive in terms of the directions taken by Corsican music in the 1990s - with respect to both performance and composition - was a visit by the so-called “Bulgarian voices” (as featured on Cellier’s discs issued as *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares*, 1988, 1989 and 1990). I have discussed elsewhere (Bithell 2003) the way in which the Bulgarian phenomenon offered some of the inspiration for the internationally successful career of the group Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses (formed in 1989) and its importance in fuelling the more progressive stage of Corsica’s polyphonic revival. The Bulgarian encounter and the whole “world music” wave of which it was a part also stimulated a more intense interest in other polyphonic traditions: just as the cultural militants of the 1970s had established contacts with musicians from other parts of the world who shared a similar political history, so those of the 1990s were to seek out singers from other cultures with whom they had the phenomenon of polyphony in common. The annual *Rencontres Polyphoniques* that takes place in Calvi in the Balagne serves as a meeting point for diverse polyphonic traditions, invitations being extended each year to a number of ensembles from various parts of Europe and beyond, but with Sardinia, Bulgaria, Albania and Georgia featuring on a regular basis. (Note 12) Corsican groups in their turn receive regular invitations to appear at similar festivals overseas. Such encounters and exchanges, together with the relatively easy availability of recordings of other musical traditions via world music distribution networks, have again led directly to musical influences. Some groups happily acknowledge that one or other of their new compositions has been inspired by, or consciously incorporates elements from, other polyphonic styles: Cinqui Sò’s song “Com’a Acqua Linda” on the disc *Chants Polyphoniques Corses* (1992), for example, is listed as “inspired by a traditional Albanian song”. Others import songs from other traditions directly into their own repertoire. Members of the group A Filetta have, over the years, developed a particularly close association with Georgia and regularly include one or more Georgian songs in their concerts. The ensemble Soledonna (a latter-day incarnation of Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses) has similarly developed contacts with Georgian singers and musicians, several of whom feature on their 2001 disc *Isulanima*; the disc itself was recorded in Tbilisi.

Perhaps the most literal form of culture contact in the present age, sometimes appearing as a natural extension of the festival ethos, is the semi-composed, semi-improvised fusion project, which offers a literal re-enactment of a meeting between two or more quite distinct musical cultures ("ethnic" or otherwise). The 1995 Calvi Jazz Festival, for example, ended with a performance appositely entitled *Encontra*, which featured the Corsican female vocal group Donnissulana together with Andy Emler's jazz ensemble. (Note 13) The performance was based on a score by Emler himself who, in an article in *Corse-Matin* (1 July 1995), defined "the unexpected mix jazz/polyphonies" as "a living European music of the end of the century". This was, however, not the first meeting between Corsican polyphony and jazz. Tavagna's 1983 disc, with the similar title *Incontru*, was a collaboration with the André Jaume Quartet that grew out of the meeting of the two ensembles the previous year when they had shared a stage at Seyne-sur-Mer. Subsequent discs that have resulted from performance projects inspired by a similar ethos, exploring traditional songs in an experimental manner with input from musicians from outside the island, include *Trà Ochju É Mare* (1991). Conceived and directed by Mighèle Raffaelli with arrangements by David Rueff, the disc features a selection of traditional monodic songs, including several laments, a lullaby and a threshing song, overlaid with instrumental lines played on saxophones, trombone, *berimbau* and synthesizer. Other groups such as Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses and I Muvrini have used synthesized and electroacoustic input to situate their product more firmly in a "world music" framework.

I have commented elsewhere (Bithell forthcoming) on the way in which this fashion for cross-cultural fusion and collage can be understood in part as belonging to a new climate of supposedly global dialogue. Indeed, the symbolic link between cross-cultural musical fusion and a post-modern ethic of intercultural understanding was explicitly encapsulated in Michel Codaccioni's portrayal of Patrizia Poli (who, together with Patrizia Gattaceca, is the inspirational mainstay of Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses) in a brief profile in *Kyrn* magazine (no. 396, Jan. 1993) as "the magnificent prowhead of a Corsican culture nourished by modernity, by crossbreeding, by questioning, by respect for the other, by exigency and by self-confidence." In the case of I Muvrini, a similar sentiment of "opening up" to the rest of the world is reflected tangibly in the group's instrumental line-up, which now typically includes hurdy-gurdy, bagpipes and a variety of percussion, including African drums, while lead singer Jean-François Bernardini has described the group's concerts as "places of meeting and dialogue" (*Corse-Matin* 30 May 1994). In similar vein, a more recent Canta concert (Ajaccio, August 2001), which included three

songs performed by a trio of young Basque women, was commented upon in the press the following day in these now familiar terms: "It's also that, *Canta u Populu Corsu*: openness to others and a sharing of the heart" (*Corse-Matin* 20 Aug. 2001). Meanwhile, an enduring connection with other oppressed minorities that is expressed both literally through the song lyrics and metaphorically through musical references is made explicit in a press report on a performance by the group *L'Arcusgiu*, which states that "*L'Arcusgiu* sings the struggle of the Corsican people but also that of all oppressed peoples", going on to note that the group's latest album, *Testimone a Veternu*, "crosses the musicality of other cultures" (*Corse-Matin* 22 Aug. 2001).

## **4 Returning to the Mediterranean source**

A renewed interest in exploring ways in which traditional Corsican music might be directly related to the musics of other cultures (as opposed to lending itself to a more or less comfortable alliance with an apparently unrelated idiom) has equally been facilitated by the ease of dissemination and mobility in the post-modern era. The surge of interest in polyphonic singing traditions has already been noted. Of central interest in the context of the present volume is the way in which a number of musicians in Corsica itself have, in recent years, begun to turn their attention to exploring the specifically Mediterranean roots of their music.

### **4.1 Mediterranean identity and oriental overtones**

Quite apart from the nationalist impulse which, as we have seen, has played a significant role in the renaissance of interest in traditional musical styles in Corsica in recent decades, increased contact with - some might say invasion by - the musical products of an ever more homogenised global culture has in its turn served to refocus attention on older indigenous styles and has even resulted in a conscious resistance on the part of some musicians to what was commonly referred to in the 1990s as the "colonisation of the ear". While this culture clash is by no means particular to Corsica, it has been thrown into particularly sharp relief by the island's ongoing problems with its French surrogate parent. The rejection of a French identity and the need to establish a clear difference between Corsican and French culture has forced a certain amount of musical reflection that has resulted in a rudimentary system for defining difference via a set of oppositions such as tempered/non-tempered, regular/irregular, syllabic/melismatic, tonality/modality, harmony/polyphony. (Note 14) At the same time, it has added further fuel to a

specific interest in exploring the pre-modern and non-western roots of Corsica's musical heritage. Among those most dedicated to this line of enquiry is the musician, composer and director Mighele Raffaelli. The disc *U Cantu Prufondu* (1993), conceived and directed by Raffaelli, is subtitled "Presence of the Middle East, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Corsican traditional music." The disc features a range of traditional monodic songs performed by the singer Mighela Cesari, accompanied on a variety of instruments by Raffaelli himself, and sets out to explore and demonstrate possible ways in which the material might have been performed in the past with respect to the style of instrumental accompaniment, and at the same time to highlight features that are suggestive of Oriental, Medieval and Renaissance traditions.

In particular, Raffaelli has been keen to site Corsican music within a Mediterranean as opposed to a Western European lineage, with the Mediterranean itself occupying that privileged, pivotal, intercontinental position on account of which its islands have long been viewed as such desirable vantage points. In the disc notes to *Di li Venti, a Rosula* (Cesari and Raffaelli 1997), the island is imagined as being located at a cultural crossroads with the winds that have fertilized its music blowing over it "from the four points of the compass". Embracing a specifically "Mediterranean" identity allows today's musicians to exist in the tension between - or simply the meeting place of - east and west. Explicit reference to this liminal position is, in fact, found in many of the groups' edicts and reproduced in disc notes and press reports. A recent report on the ensemble Soledonna, for example, speaks of the group's music being an expression of "the Latin and Oriental Mediterranean" (*Corse-Matin* 10 Aug. 2001).

#### **4.2 Mediterranean past and future**

This interest in Mediterranean affinities is not solely backward looking: it encompasses an intention not only to reconstruct the routes of the past but also to forge new pathways for the future. The song "Rosula d'Orienti" from Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses' first (eponymous) disc of 1991, for example, is described in the disc notes as "a song which uncovers and projects connections past and to be tied by the roots of the Mediterranean". A similar search for connections both past and future throughout the Mediterranean basin is intrinsic to the identity of the group Cinqui Sò. The disc notes to their 1994 disc, *Com' Acqua Linda*, state that: "Since its creation, the group Cinqui Sò!, taking as its starting point traditional Corsican music, has tried to integrate into its musical research the traditions of other Mediterranean

peoples, while not being content to reproduce but adding a sensitivity which is its own." When asked to comment specifically on the features that they saw as being common to different Mediterranean musics, group member Ghjuvan Petru Godinat referred to resemblances "at the level of the instruments, at the level of the voices, ... at the level of the *rioucate* (melismas), at the level of the intervals between the voices" (interview 1995). In particular, the group's adoption of the *darabuka* lends many of their songs a quasi-Arabic coloration (see, for example, the group's arrangement of the "Lamentu di Tramoni", a traditional bandit's lament, on *Com' Acqua Linda*), at the same time as shifting the music towards a more rhythmic, upbeat style (recalling the earlier "borrowing" of Portuguese and Greek rhythms for similar ends). Cinqui Sò's next disc, tellingly entitled *Tarraniu* ("Mediterranean", 1996), featured the Sardinian singer Elena Leda, the Occitan singer Miquèla Bramerie and the Catalan musician Pedro Aledo, with the disc notes stating that "with *Tarraniu*, Cinqui Sò strives to envelop the plurality of identities defined by the Mediterranean". (Note 15)

## 5 Conclusions

Though ideas about the way in which Corsican music may have been influenced in the early stages of its evolution by styles from other parts of the Mediterranean may be based more on conjecture than on demonstrable fact, and, in particular, attempts to find the "origins" of a specific genre outside the island may be misguided, suggestions of lines of kinship with other musical traditions from across the sea continue to fire the Corsican imagination. Perhaps more than ever before, we have the opportunity today to witness links being forged in the present and to observe the effect not only of literal contact but also of ideas about musical kinship and commonalities on evolving musical practice. In the case of Corsica, we have seen how some groups have deliberately looked to North Africa, the Levant and other parts of the Mediterranean, both in an attempt to rediscover musical affinities and in their search for artistic inspiration. What is most interesting about this trend, I propose, is the power of suggestion, particularly when this has very tangible results in terms of the way in which it colours both the interpretation of traditional material and the style of new compositions.

Whereas in the past culture contact might have been seen as either accidental or naturally occurring (or, in some cases, imposed from the outside), in Corsica today a more conscious process of selection would appear to be at work – at least on the part of professional and semi-professional musicians - with some forms of contact and opportunities for cross-fertilization being actively courted. In the foregoing



discussion I have alluded to the different motivations and rationalisations behind different attempts to draw attention to cultural similarities or differences. In some cases, as we have seen, this impulse is part of a broader political agenda - whether this be in terms of expressing solidarity with other oppressed minorities, paying homage to a putative universal brotherhood, or simply drawing attention to the complex of roots that lie outside the Western European frame of reference.

Of particular interest in the context of the embracing of a Mediterranean identity has been the changing attitude towards the perceived presence of "Arabic" overtones in Corsican music. In the period immediately following the Second World War with its modernising, urbanising ethos, supposedly Arabic overtones in the "old" style of singing were seen by the upwardly mobile sectors of Corsican society as an embarrassment, a kind of blot on the copybook that betrayed Corsica's distance from the more civilized culture of the Continent to which many people now aspired. We have seen how in latter years, however, the impulse to establish Corsica's difference from French/Continental culture has combined with a more academic line of enquiry to fuel exploration of the oriental side of the island's heritage, and this has led some musicians to place particular emphasis on those features of the music that are identified as being resonant of Arabic music and, in some cases, to reinforce the Arabic coloration through the use of instruments such as the *darabuka*, the *ud* and the *ney*. From the point of view of insular audiences, a new appreciation of Arabic resonances has no doubt been aided by broader exposure to the realities of music from Arab countries and in particular to the relative sophistication of the more classical traditions.

At a broader level, it has been interesting to observe, over the past 20 to 30 years, the shifts in attitude on the part of Corsican critics towards the adoption of "foreign" musical elements. In the early years of the *riacquistu*, culture contact was often seen in terms of contamination. The author of a review of L'Albinu's first disc in *Kyrn* magazine (no. 167, Jan. 1986, 39) repeats doubts expressed in several previous reviews with respect to "the difficulties presented by the evolution of the Corsican *chanson*" and in particular by the "integration of melodic, rhythmic and harmonic elements that come from other sources". By the late 1990s, such integration was being positively celebrated in the daily press (*Corse-Matin* and *La Corse*) as a manifestation of Corsica's engagement both with world music as the new genre and with the much-vaunted age of so-called global dialogue that appeared to be the next

step for a post-nationalist Corsica. This is not to say that any sense of caution has been thrown to the winds. Outside the culture of promotion of which the press is very much a part, some continue to voice their unease at the precipitous rate of acculturation in modern times (see e.g. Salini 1996). Older people in particular tend to be sceptical about the current vogue for “fusion” on the grounds that the distinctive character of the indigenous tradition is in danger of being swamped. A decade ago, Ghjacumu Fusina countered similar criticisms with the argument that: “The exchanges allowed by modern means of communication impose a permanent mixing of ideas and of signs that no-one can now claim to avoid, whether he wants to or not. ... What counts is not the source, but rather what one is capable of creating on the basis of that source!” (1993:184). It is certainly the case that, as individual musicians become more competent as practitioners and become conversant with a more professional mode of operation, they enter into what is perhaps a natural process of evolution whereby they develop into more sophisticated performers and composers with the urge to experiment and to explore their own creativity as they fine-tune the tools of their trade in terms of both practical agility and theoretical understanding – a development that is as much a result of the increased time and focus invested in their musical activities as it is a corollary of some all-embracing notion of “westernisation”. It would, however, be misleading to suggest that the groups themselves have simply traded the Corsican elements of their music; on the contrary, a concern that their music should “sound Corsican” is as strong as ever and in many cases a group’s style is composed of a judicious and conscious mix of both local and imported ingredients. (Note 16)

The recent and contemporary developments that I have described in this chapter do, it must be stressed, relate primarily to the culture of the “groups” and other professional or semi-professional musicians, and as such they are, perhaps, of a different order to questions of culture contact at a more comprehensive level in former times. That said, the new hybrid styles that have evolved have inevitably been assimilated more broadly into Corsican society to the extent that the songs of the current groups can be heard emanating from sound systems on almost every corner (at least in the towns) – they constitute the music of choice in many bars, hypermarkets, open-air markets and fairs, and hits both new and old are played on the radio on a daily basis. Every year, a new crop of amateur groups appears on the scene, typically beginning by performing covers of the songs of their favourite

groups before graduating to their first attempts at composing songs in a similar style. At the same time, however, traditional rural genres such as the *paghjella* and the *chjam' è rispondi* continue to be sung by ordinary people in their natural settings, apparently in much the same way as they have been for generations. And while they might resemble, at one level or another, similar genres found in neighbouring parts of the Mediterranean, they retain their own distinctive sound that is, in the soundscape of today's world music, indisputably and intrinsically Corsican. As far as contemporary styles are concerned, many of the practitioners themselves are of the view that creative experimentation is not in danger of provoking irrevocable change or lasting damage to the culture as a whole: in the longer term, they propose, it is only the more logical developments that will be acceptable and thereby prove tenacious. As Mighela Cesari and Mighele Raffaelli express it in their introduction to their 1997 disc, *Di li Venti, a Rosula*, 'time will tell whether or not the compass has indicated the right direction.'

## Endnotes

\* All translations from non-English sources are my own.

1. For a fuller discussion of Ambrosi's proposals regarding the history of Corsican music, see Laade 1981 vol. 1, 105ff. It is interesting to note that Ambrosi treats musical evolution as being inseparable from the evolution of the language, with the implication that evidence that points to, for example, a strong Berber element in the language at a particular point in time would suggest that there might have been a similarly significant influence on the music. This perspective is also informed by the notion that the melodic line would be shaped by the rhythms and stresses of the language.
2. Numerous examples can be found in the field recordings of Quilici and Laade, copies of which are available for consultation at the Phonothèque of the Musée de la Corse in Corte. A well-known and particularly florid example is the 'Lamentu di Filiccone', a lament for a hunting dog composed by the dog's master, Pepedru u Barbutu, in the 1920s; a rendition by the composer's son, recorded by Quilici in the early 1960s, can be found in the collection *Musique Corse de Tradition Orale* (1982).

3. Laade notes elsewhere (1990, 4) that: 'The very active amateur folklorists of the late 19th and early 20th century saw the roots of Corsican song and poetry in the ancient Greek and Roman cultures, while the singing style was supposed to be distinctly Arabic. None of this is acceptable.' He goes on to dismiss their proposals regarding the origins and history of Corsican folksong as 'pure speculation and romantic mystification'.
4. Since the 16th century immigration has also been a significant factor as Corsica has offered refuge to political refugees and has imported workforces, mainly from the North African countries and mainland Italy. While these incomers, too, would presumably have brought their own musical repertoires with them, little study has been done concerning their possible interaction with indigenous styles.
5. It should be noted that similar traditions of improvised debate are also found in more distant parts of the world.
6. The disc *Polyphonies Corses* by Jean-Paul Poletti and Le Choeur d'Hommes de Sartène does in fact contain stanzas from Dante's *Divine Comedy* sung as *terzetti* ("U Purgatoriu"). The disc notes comment: "In this form, Dante's *Divine Comedy* has been peddled from mountain to mountain by Corsican shepherds during their peregrinations. It is remarkable that a corporation should thus pass on one of the major works of Italian literature in the form of a very ancient three-part polyphonic song."
7. The present-day partition into the two *départements* of Haute Corse and Corse du Sud respects roughly the same boundary.
8. For further examples see Musée de la Corse 1997, 68-73. For further discussion of changing perceptions, values and motivations at both an aesthetic and a political level, see Bithell forthcoming.
9. The establishment of the Front Régionaliste Corse and the Action Régionaliste Corse, in 1966 and 1967, was followed by the Front Populaire Corse de Libération in 1973 and the Front de Libération Nationale de la Corse in 1976.
10. A number of *scole di canta* ('singing schools') were established by members of *Canta* and other groups from the 1970s onwards as a vehicle for transmitting

musical repertoire and technique to other young singers, particularly those who were growing up in the towns and so did not have direct contact with, or experience of, traditional practices. A number of these schools - which usually take the form of a weekly or bi-weekly class or rehearsal, using a church, schoolroom or other community venue as a base - continue to flourish.

11. Meanwhile, the inclusion in *Ci hè Dinù* of a Basque song ("Haika Mutil"), a Catalan song ("Rossignol"), and an adaptation of Paco Ibanez' "A Galoppar", as well as a Sardinian "Dio ti salve Maria" and an adaptation of a George Brassens song, bears witness to the widening of Canta's contacts and the way in which this led not only to stylistic influences but also to direct exchanges of songs.
12. The *Rencontres Polyphoniques* are hosted by the cultural association U Svegliu Calvese, together with locally based group A Filetta, and take place each September. Other established festivals that feature ensembles from overseas, in addition to a number of insular artists, are *Festivoce*, a festival of the performing arts held in July of each year under the auspices of the association Festivoce (part of the federation E Voce di U Cumune, based in the village of Pigna in the Balagne) and *Settembrinu in Tavagna* ('September in Tavagna', the Tavagna being a region on the edge of the Castagniccia near the island's east coast), a festival that is deliberately held slightly after the main summer tourist season as part of a politic that involves bringing cultural animation to regions of the island's interior for the benefit of the inhabitants themselves.
13. Donnisulana, under the direction of Mighèle Raffaelli, was first given exposure to non-insular audiences via their appearance at the 1989 Festival de Musique Contemporaine at Lille, which in turn led to their being chosen by Xenakis to perform in his production of *Hélène* at the Opéra Bastille.
14. For a more detailed exploration of the import of such oppositions, see Bithell forthcoming.
15. The explicit situating of the disc in a Mediterranean as opposed to a specifically Corsican frame of reference via the album title recurs in Giramondù's 1999 disc, *Mediterraniu*.

16. For an analysis of the way in which Corsican groups today combine traditional and contemporary elements in their own compositions, together with discussion of the way in which articulate their relationship to the tradition, see Bithell 2001. For a discussion of the way in which traditional material has evolved in their arrangements, see Bithell 1996.

## References

Ambrosi, Mathieu. *Le Chant Corse*. Nice, 1938.

Bithell, Caroline. "Polyphonic Voices: National Identity, World Music and the Recording of Traditional Music in Corsica." *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 5 (1996): 39-66.

Bithell, Caroline. "Telling a Tree by its Blossom: Aspects of the Evolution of Musical Activity in Corsica and the Notion of a Traditional Music of the 21st Century." *Music and Anthropology* 6 (2001). [www.muspe.unibo.it/period/MA/](http://www.muspe.unibo.it/period/MA/)

Bithell, Caroline. "A Man's Game? Engendered Song and the Changing Dynamics of Women's Musical Activity in Corsica." In *Music and Gender: Perspectives from the Mediterranean*, edited by Tullia Magrini, 33-66. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Bithell, Caroline. "Shared Imaginations: Celtic and Corsican Encounters in the Soundscape of the Soul." In *Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe*, edited by Philip V. Bohlman and Martin Stokes, 27-72. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, forthcoming.

de Croze, Austin. *La Chanson Populaire de L'Ile de Corse*. Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1911.

de Martino, Ernesto. *Morte e Pianto Rituale*. Turin: Boringhieri, 1958.

de Zerbi, Ghjermana and Mighele Raffaelli. *Antulugia di u Cantu Nustrale* vol. 1. Ajaccio: La Marge, 1993.

Fusina, Ghjacumu. "C'hè Dinù." In *Canta u Populu Corsu*, Ghjermana de Zerbi et al, 178-86. Levie: Editions Albiana, 1993.

Laade, Wolfgang. *Das korsische Volkslied: Ethnographie und Geschichte, Gattungen und Stil*, 3 vols. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1981.

Laade, Wolfgang. Disc notes for *Corsica: Traditional Songs and Music*. Jecklin-Disco, 1990.

Musée de la Corse. *Cahier d'Anthropologie no. 4: 100 ans de collecte en Corse*. Corte: Musée de la Corse, 1997.

Salini, Dominique. *Musiques Traditionnelles de Corse*. Ajaccio: A Messagera / Squadra di u Finusellu, 1996.

Sorce Keller, Marcello. "Reflections of Continental and Mediterranean Traditions in Italian Folk Music." In *Music-Cultures in Contact: Convergences and Collisions*, edited by Margaret J. Kartomi and Stephen Blum, 40-47. Basel: Gordon and Breach, 1994.

## Discography

L'Albinu. *Albinu versu tè*. Kallisté KA JC 35, 1985.

Bruno Coulais/A Filetta. *Original motion picture soundtrack Don Juan*. Naïve K 1610, 2002.

Canta u Populu Corsu. *Ci hè dinù*. Ricordu CDR 037, 1982.

Cinqui Sò. *Chants Polyphoniques Corses*. 7 Productions WMD 242 040, 1992.

Cinqui Sò. *Com' Acqua Linda*. Ricordu-Planett 242069, 1994.

Cinqui Sò. *Tarraniu*. Albiana CDAL 003, 1996.

*Corsica: Traditional Songs and Music*. Jecklin-Disco JD 650-2, 1990. Field recordings by Wolfgang Laade, 1958 & 1973.

Giramondù. *Mediterraniu*. Altugiru/Warner Music France (no ref.), 1999.

Jean-Paul Poletti/Le Choeur d'Hommes de Sartène. *Polyphonies Corses*. Auvidis Ethnic B 6841, 1996.

*Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* vol. 1. Nonesuch 79165, 1987.

*Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* vol. 2. Nonesuch 79201, 1988.

*Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* vol. 3. Polygram/Fortuna 846626, 1990.

Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses. *Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses*. Philips 848515-2, 1991.

Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses/Trio Soledonna. *Isulanima*. Philips 014 791-2, 2001.

Mighela Cesari & Mighele Raffaelli. *U Cantu Prufondu*. Ricordu CDR 088, 1993.

Mighela Cesari & Mighele Raffaelli. *Di li Venti, a Rosula*. Auvidis Chorus AC 6458, 1997.

*Musique Corse de Tradition Orale*. Archives Sonores de la Phonothèque Nationale, Paris APN82-1/3, 1982. Field recordings by Félix Quilici, 1961-1963.

*Musique Folklorique du Monde: Corsica*. Musidisc 30CV 1385, n.d. Recordings collected by Maurice Bitter.

Tavagna. *Incontru*. Nato 194, 1983.

*Trà Ochju é Mare*. Silex Y425004, 1991. Conception and direction: Mighele Raffaelli.