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## A Man's Game?

### Engendered Song and the Changing Dynamics of Musical Activity in Corsica

Caroline Bithell

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In the words of the Corsican singer Patrizia Gattaceca, “to sing polyphony is to affirm oneself as a Corsican, it is to say ‘I exist’.”<sup>1</sup> Certainly it is the human voice that has traditionally served as the privileged means of musical expression in the island, with the traditional polyphonic singing styles occupying pride of place. Only in recent years, however, have women been free to affirm themselves in this way. In former times, to sing in public and certainly to sing polyphony was - with rare exceptions - strictly a male prerogative. In this paper I aim to offer an insight into the way in which questions of gender have articulated both with song traditions and with singing activity, and to explore aspects of the changing dynamics between the sexes in relation to singing. I begin with a brief discussion of the traditional “gendering of the field” before going on to consider the different ways in which male and female forms of musical expression were affected during the period of social change and cultural decline which the island entered into in the early decades of the 20th century. I then move on to a more detailed exploration of the musical revival which has been gathering pace since the 1970s, focusing in particular on the new possibilities and identities which have most recently presented themselves to women singers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Patrizia Gattaceca, personal communication.

<sup>2</sup> The present article has grown out of fieldwork carried out in Corsica from 1993 onwards. An extended stay of 15 months in 1994-95 was supported by the British Academy; grants towards a series of shorter visits were received from

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## Music and Gender in Traditional Corsican Society

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In traditional Corsican society as it existed at least up until the time of the First World War and to some extent through into the second half of the 20th century, male and female singing practices were clearly differentiated with respect to genre, social context, function and motivation. As far as the range of genres customarily sung by the different sexes is concerned, a glance at the table reproduced in fig. 1 will immediately show that the vocal field has traditionally been heavily weighted in favour of men. While women's repertory has consisted mainly of laments and lullabies, men's repertory has featured polyphonic songs (*paghjelle*, *terzetti* and *madrigale*), the *chjam' è rispondi* (improvised debate), improvised 'songs of circumstance' (*currente*), threshing songs (*tribbiere*), muleteers' songs, ballad-like bandits' laments, laments for animals, serenades and, more recently, soldiers' songs and election songs (although the latter might also be composed and sung by women). Polyvocal settings of the Latin mass and other liturgical and paraliturgical material (particularly in connection with Holy Week) are also sung by all-male *équipes*.

Most striking is the fact that polyphonic singing has traditionally been absent from women's musical practices, although in the case of paghjella-singing there have been notable, if rare, exceptions. Félix Quilici's extensive collection of field recordings, for example, includes a recording of paghjella-singing made in the village of Pié D'Orezza in the Castagniccia in the early 1960s which features the voice of the wife of one of the male singers. In another case that was brought to my attention, three sisters living in a village in the hinterland of the Balagne had been taught to sing "in polyphony" by their father, who had no sons to whom he could pass on his repertory. Such cases of women actually singing polyphony should, however, be seen to represent circumstantial rather than customary practice. (Men, when asked why women do not sing

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*Music and Letters* and from the University of Wales, Bangor. In addition to those mentioned by name in the present article, together with those who have contributed anonymously to my research, I would like to thank Line Mariani for her continuing encouragement and ever-welcome "feedback," Midi Berry for updating me on recent CD releases and for sending me post-haste at the last minute one of the latest new publications, and Jochen Eisentraut for commenting on an earlier draft. All English translations appearing in the article are my own.

polyphony, might assert that it is simply “too difficult” for them, an explanation I have also encountered in neighbouring Sardinia; otherwise the explanation given is simply that “it is not part of our tradition”).<sup>3</sup>

The opposition “monody - polyphony,” together with other aspects of the contrasting singing styles of women and men, for example, timbre and tessitura, can be seen to reflect to some extent other familiar oppositions such as “indoor - outdoor” or “private - public.”<sup>4</sup> In general terms, men’s songs have traditionally belonged to, and have been organized in accordance with, a more outdoor, communal lifestyle while women’s musical activity was historically, as in many other parts of the Mediterranean, largely centred on the more intimate world of home and family, where it was also closely linked to women’s role as guardians of the individual’s rites of passage, most notably birth and death. This is not to suggest, however, that past generations of women did not enjoy any kind of collective activity, musical or otherwise. As Salini (1996, 65) has remarked, it is difficult to imagine that, in a society which drew all of its resources from the earth, women would have been excluded from any kind of work outside the home - even if Carrington does speak of some women, especially in the south, as being “virtual prisoners in their homes,” being allowed out only in order to attend funerals (1984, 43). The Abbé Galletti (1863) reports that women would practise lament-singing during the hours spent on communal tasks such as picking olives or chestnuts. They might also sing when gathered together at the village washhouse. Nor is it the case that monodic songs were heard only in the home. They were also sung in company, for example, at *veillées* or *veghje* (informal social gatherings of friends and neighbors, featuring singing and storytelling) or at the fairs (although in the latter case they would almost invariably be sung by men, female singers in

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<sup>3</sup> The exclusive identification of polyphonic singing with men, as found in Corsica and Sardinia, recurs in some other parts of the wider Mediterranean region but is by no means symptomatic of the Mediterranean as a whole. In Bulgaria, by contrast, polyphonic singing is a strictly female activity, while the Prespa Albanians offer an example of a culture where both men and women sing polyphonic songs but in distinctive styles which can be seen to reflect cultural ideologies regarding gender differences and notions of appropriate behaviour (Sugarman 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Laade (1981, vol. 2 , 3) emphasises the difference between the male and female song repertoires in terms of tessitura and voice placement: men’s songs are generally sung with a high tessitura and “forced” voice, while the women he recorded (in the late 1950s and early 1970s) used a middle tessitura and more normal vocal production.

such public places again being the exception).<sup>5</sup> The point to be made about the contrast between collective and individual, communal and domestic, polyphony and monody, male and female is perhaps a more subtle one and concerns the circumstances and assumptions which generate the songs and determine the form they take. Essentially, the prototypical male genres, namely the *paghjella* and the *chjam'è rispondi*, to which I will return below, have an in-built need for other singers: they cannot simply be sung solo.

The scope of the present article does not allow for a discussion of all song genres or for a detailed musical analysis of individual genres.<sup>6</sup> In the following sections I take as my focus the *paghjella* and the *chjam'è rispondi* as the most representative examples of male genres - both of which have survived in the living tradition into the present day - and the lament or *voceru* as the correspondingly representative female genre (with brief reference also to the lullaby). In association with these selected singing traditions, a number of observations can usefully be made with the aim of contributing to a deeper understanding of male and female singing practices and drawing attention to the sometimes surprising insights that they can offer into the question of gender identity and the balance of power between the sexes in traditional Corsican society.

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### **Men's Songs: The *Paghjella* and the *Chjam'è Rispondi***

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The *paghjella* (pl. *paghjelle*) is sung by three voices, *secunda*, *bassu* and *terza*, and can be defined as a musical rendition of a series of octosyllabic couplets in a characteristic polyphonic arrangement, three of these couplets, each sung to the “same” musical *versu* (pl. *versi*), making one complete stanza, and each village typically having its own *versu* or variant of a basic musical

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<sup>5</sup> Through such events women would, of course, have been familiar with much of the male canon of monodic song. Past (male) researchers making field recordings in singers' homes often had the experience of the women prompting their husbands and filling in textual lacunae. Otherwise, they remained a discrete presence, appearing to view singing, in these circumstances at least, as a male prerogative (Laade 1981, vol. 2, 72).

<sup>6</sup> Extensive ethnographic documentation relating to the different genres of song, together with a survey of the relevant literature, can be found in Laade (1981). Examples of the different genres can be found on the discs *Musique Corse de Tradition Orale* and *Corsica: Traditional Songs and Music* (see discography).

prototype. The style might best be described as “drawn-out,” with overlapping melismatic meanderings in the two upper voices alternating with long sustained notes. While each of the three voices has its own specific timbre and role within the overall structure of the piece, making a vital and individual contribution to the multi-dimensional polyphonic texture, the interaction is essentially democratic with the individuality of each singer being subsumed in the service of the collective endeavour. Laade (1990) notes that the paghjella was in former times the favourite musical form of the shepherds, sung on occasions when they met and spent a night together in the mountains. It belongs to the realm of conviviality, hospitality and relaxation: meals and family gatherings, evenings around the fire or at the bar, village patron saints’ day celebrations, sheep-shearing parties, transhumance, hunting parties and the mountain fairs.

Some stanzas which appear as paghjelle are in fact extracts from longer well-known monodic songs such as laments, lullabies and serenades: essentially, any text in the traditional form of the octosyllabic six-line stanza can be resung “in paghjella.” In this way, texts pass from one singing context to another - and significantly from women’s repertory to men’s repertory - and many stanzas from monodic songs which are no longer heard in the living tradition have been preserved in the paghjella repertory. An interesting parallel can be drawn here with the process described by Magrini (see the introduction, and Magrini 1995) with respect to the ballad tradition in Northern Italy, whereby female ballad-singing with its educative and moral function has died out as women’s lives and identities have changed, while polyphonic arrangements of the ballads as sung by men (often in a fragmentary form) have exhibited a greater tenacity which can be explained by the fact that the context in which they are sung and the function which they serve still have a relevant part to play in men’s lives. In this connection it is also interesting to note that the secunda line of many paghjella versi is remarkably similar to the monostrophic melody type of what appears to be the oldest layer of women’s laments, a curiosity that has been remarked upon in the literature but not as yet satisfactorily explained.

While in the past a paghjella might have consisted of several stanzas, so retaining the original narrative structure of the text, it is sometimes only a single stanza that “becomes” a paghjella.<sup>7</sup> This stanza then assumes a microcosmic quality, serving as a type of “soundbite” in the

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<sup>7</sup> Parigi’s recent collection of paghjelle texts (1995) consists entirely of single stanzas.

form of a self-contained statement, often of a proverbial or formulaic nature. As one singer of my own acquaintance commented, “All one needs for a paghjella is thirty seconds of good poetry out of several hours of improvisation.” At one level, any stanza will serve the purpose as long as the text “fits well in the mouth” or “is easily singable.” At times it would appear that the words are appreciated more as sound units than as lexical units, to the extent that the text can be seen almost as a pretext - an impression that is certainly reinforced by the way in which the text is treated in performance, with phenomena such as breaths being taken in the middle of words, voice entries occurring in the middle of words, words being broken across the caesura, and the bassu on occasion intoning the vowel sounds alone resulting in an almost calculated obfuscation of the lexical sense. This circumstance would again appear consonant with Magrini’s observations concerning the way in which in men’s polyphonic ballad renditions the emphasis is on sonic interaction and the “affirmation of the members’ ability to merge into a collective action,” rather than on transmitting any message explicitly embodied in the text.

Paghjella singers typically adopt a stance similar to that found among singers of polyphony in other parts of the Mediterranean, forming a tight horseshoe-like cluster and raising one hand to the ear, while often leaning casually on one another’s shoulders. The secunda singer (who launches the song) might appear to withdraw into his own interior world, his eyes closed or glazed over, while the bassu and terza singers focus intensely on his face, following his every movement. Essential to the spirit of the paghjella is an element of spontaneity: the song is born of an inner impulse and is created anew at each performance as the singers interweave their voices, adapting one to another as their musical lines unfold. Equally vital is a sense of complicity: musical harmony can only be successfully achieved if the singers are in a state of spiritual harmony. Polyphonic singing is often described by singers within the culture as “un état” (“a state”) and indeed the intensity of the experience appears to have an almost mesmerising effect on the participants. The overall impression is that the singers are singing into one another, penetrating one another’s song, creating a sense of intimacy and spiritual bonding which is often further intensified by the effects of alcohol. Even when the singing is at its most animated and vigorous, there is no sense of competition between the singers within the équipe: any imbalance would be contrary to the spirit of the paghjella and would threaten its successful execution.

Sessions of paghjella-singing, once under way, can continue for hours into the night. Once men are seduced by the spirit of the song, it is as if they enter a time-warp which leaves them oblivious to the rest of the world and in particular uncomprehending of the need to return to the demands of an orderly domestic routine which might ever more urgently beckon any wives present. For the latter, paghjella-singing counts as part of “men’s business” and, for some at least, as a manifestation of typically incorrigible male behavior. Indeed, the risk of female disapproval might be one of the reasons why men sometimes appear to be inhibited about singing paghjelle in mixed company, preferring to wait until the women have gone home or are preoccupied with domestic tasks. (I am reminded here of an occasion in Malta when I met a singer who was overjoyed to learn that I, like himself, had been at the Imnarja festival - an annual event attracting singers from all over the island - the previous evening. In response to my prompt “And did you sing?”, he surprised me by replying, “Me? Sing? But I was with my wife! I had to behave!”)

Such singing can, then, be seen primarily as a celebration of male togetherness, the sense of intimacy which is both cause and effect being underlined by the body language. It would be possible to see here aspects of the “homoerotic” (Gilmore 1987, 10) undertones which can be read into certain aspects of Mediterranean gender relations and are addressed in some of the contributions to the volume *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, albeit with respect in this case to male rivalry as opposed to male bonding. One of my Corsican informants did in fact comment, somewhat mischievously, that singing paghjella was the only time in Corsica when men made love together; another similarly remarked that it was the only time when men danced together. This sense of intimacy would again explain in part why men are often reluctant to “perform” in public, often preferring, even at fairs and festivals, to wait until late in the evening when the crowds have gone home and they can create their own more private and intimate space. It is also one of the reasons why some of the present generation of men feel uncomfortable about singing paghjelle on stage.<sup>8</sup> I hasten to stress, however, that despite this aura of liminality

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<sup>8</sup> Even when paghjelle are sung on stage, they are performed in a manner that contrasts sharply with the way in which the more contemporary *chansons* are performed. Two concerts by different groups stand out in my mind. In each case, the evening began with a short program of traditional polyphonic songs for which the singers grouped themselves in the typical horseshoe formation towards the back of a dimly-lit stage where they almost appeared to be singing for



surrounding paghjella-singers which might be seen to equate to the “gender-identity ambivalence” discussed by Gilmore (1987, 12) - although again Gilmore uses the notion in a rather different context, that of an often “vehement abhorrence” and repudiation of feminine traits - it would, of course, be incorrect - and, as Gilmore points out, impertinent and offensive - to gloss “homoerotic” as latently homosexual, just as it would be culturally naive and short-sighted to interpret the interaction of male singers in terms of “feminine” behaviour. Giacomo-Marcellesi, with specific reference to the Corsican paghjella, speaks rather of “an erotico-musical function connected with the pleasure of singing, of singing with others, of singing in harmony with nature” (1982, 27). It is nonetheless noteworthy that much of the imagery encountered in connection with paghjella-singing takes a feminine form. The circle or horse-shoe formed by the singers - popularly known as *a conca* (“the conch [shell]”) - is, for example, often referred to as being womb-like: the circle gives birth to the song.

Despite my earlier observations regarding the way in which the text often appears to serve only as a pretext in paghjella-singing, it does nevertheless appear to be significant that the greater proportion of texts which are sung as paghjelle are in the voice of the first person. There is a high incidence of texts that take the form of a message or letter to a loved one: the speaker might be a shepherd away with his flocks, a conscript or a prisoner in foreign lands. The texts themselves often begin with a reminder that the poet is illiterate, as in the line “S’eo sapissi leghje è scrive” (“If I knew how to read and write”), or with a reference to a letter that the speaker would like to send. Songs of frustrated love can also be addressed directly to the loved one, for example: “S’è tù sapissi lu male / Chè tù faci à u mo core” (“If only you knew the harm / That you are doing to my heart”). Such texts, with their roots in the world of orality and improvisation, are closer to spontaneous personal utterances than to formally constructed poetry. At the same time, the speaker’s situation or dilemma is immortalized as his verse passes into the common repertory where the emotions expressed appeal to a sense of shared experience or sympathetic identification. The fact that these

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themselves in what was evocative of a quasi-ritualistic gesture. For the remainder of the program, which consisted of their own *chanson* compositions, they moved to the front of the stage where they adopted a linear formation in front of microphones. When groups such as A Filetta present programs consisting entirely of a cappella polyphonic songs, they adopt a position centre-stage but retain the horseshoe format, even when they are obliged to use microphones.

songs are often sung away from the company of women (in the village bar or up on the mountain) would seem to be significant. Sentiments which cannot, perhaps, for reasons of distance or decorum be addressed directly to their object are instead expressed in the company of other men who offer harmonic as well as moral support.

Chjam' è rispondi (literally "call and response") is the term used to refer to an exchange, or more often a type of debate or verbal joust, between two or more poets who improvise stanzas taking the traditional format of six octosyllabic lines, sung to variants of a single melodic model.<sup>9</sup> The melody itself, which is also used for many other genres of monodic song, both improvised and precomposed, can be seen as one of the prototypical male melodies: it is often referred to as *u versu corrente*.

Chjam' è rispondi is customarily sung at the fairs, during saints' day festivities, or among friends gathered to share in pastoral tasks such as sheep-shearing. More spontaneous exchanges might also take place in bars or over the supper table. In the case of a semi-formal gathering of poets (as opposed to a chance encounter), a session of chjam' è rispondi will typically begin with all manner of courtesies: a welcome to those present, an acknowledgement of the hosts and an appreciation of their hospitality, an elaboration on any special reason for the present gathering, expressions of homage to the great poets of the past and to others not present on this occasion, and invocations to the muse to inspire the poets and thereby to facilitate a harmonious and successful evening. After these preliminaries, which serve in part for the poets to "sing themselves in," a topic gradually defines itself and the debate proper gets under way. If the atmosphere and general conditions are propitious (i.e. the poets are in a good mood, there is not too much interference in the form of other extraneous noise, the temperature is pleasant, there is good food and drink), the exchange is likely to continue well into the night, if not until dawn.

The chjam' è rispondi provides a platform for challenge as well as praise and a witty retort, often reaching a triumphant climax with an ingenious pun, is highly prized. As the poets warm to their subject, they will often begin to gibe their opponents, casting aspersions on aspects of their

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<sup>9</sup> Parallel practices to the chjam' è rispondi are still to be found in many other oral cultures, both in the Mediterranean region and beyond, the nearest being Sardinia, where the individual poets in a *gara poetica* are often backed by a *concordu* choir, and Tuscany with its *ottava rima*.

general behavior and integrity of character as well as on their present argument and making ever more outrageous jokes at their expense. While such teasing can be taken further in this context than it could in a normal verbal encounter, so allowing for a healthy venting of grudges which might otherwise accumulate to the point of becoming damaging, the ritualized framework ultimately offers a safety net against the exchange becoming too offensive or malicious while the group as a whole ensures that the appropriate etiquette is observed.

As in the case of the paghjella, there have always been exceptions to the norm of male exclusivity, with one or two women in each generation being renowned as improvisers. In my own research, I have encountered two women singers who readily join in *chjam' è rispondi* sessions with the men, although one complains that she is frustrated by what she perceives as the men's frequent refusal to take her seriously in terms of the debate itself. Part of the problem is that a female presence can be seen to interfere with the element of male bonding which is also inherent in the practice of *chjam' è rispondi* and which is expressed in part through the recurrence in the debate of the theme of "women," in itself an expression of a distinctly male ethos and one to which it is obviously difficult for a woman to contribute.<sup>10</sup>

While the *chjam' è rispondi* and the *paghjella* differ in a number of essential ways - one is monodic, syllabic, excessively logogenic and demands the singers' acute concentration while the other is polyphonic, melismatic, excessively ecstatic and induces in the singers an almost hypnotic state - they are commonly interwoven in the same singing session or event and are, on occasion, sung by the same people (although the *chjam' è rispondi* requires an advanced degree of linguistic skill and tends to appeal to a different temperament). In both cases, the emphasis is on process rather than product (a *paghjella* is "made" rather than "sung"), on participation and communication between the singers rather than performance. The circular or inward-looking formation adopted by the singers in each case, together with their body language, serves to emphasize the sense of togetherness. Attention is strictly focused on the others in the circle, all of whom are participants. Any listeners or audience are firmly located - both physically and in terms of the singers'

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<sup>10</sup> While listening to old field recordings I encountered the interesting example of an exchange between a man and a woman where the man sings his stanzas to the standard *currente* melody while the woman uses a very different, "female" melody type (such as would normally be used for a lament or a lullaby).

awareness - outside the group: only rarely will a singer make any physical reference to the wider circle of onlookers. Both of these genres, in their different ways, appear to be born from a natural urge to communicate through song and can be seen to fulfil the function of maintaining peaceful relations among the men, each serving to release tension in different but complementary ways. Together, they offer a view of the Corsican male which is the antithesis of both the stereotypical image of machismo-infused bandit and outlaw with which Corsican men have been unfairly burdened for centuries and the more recent ideal of manhood as embodied in the new politically-inspired *chansons* with their militant associations.

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### **Women's Songs: Laments and Lullabies**

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It is in the practice of extemporizing laments for the dead that women's improvisational skills have conventionally been deployed to greatest effect. These laments, known as *voceri* (sing. *voceru*), constitute one of the most substantial categories of traditional Corsican song as reflected in the inordinate amount of space they fill in the numerous song collections published in the 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>11</sup> The majority of these anthologies feature the texts only. Many of the "songs" have, however, lived on in memory even though the ritual itself is no longer found in the living tradition, while others can be found in collections of recordings made earlier this century (although these are invariably cases of the lament being re-sung "after the event": I do not know of any recordings made *in situ*).

The lament tradition in Corsica, which clearly has its roots in ancient pre-Christian practices and has proved itself to be remarkably tenacious despite being severely at odds with Christian morals and ideals of appropriate behavior, shares many features with lament rituals found in other parts of the Mediterranean. Lamenting would take place at the home of the deceased, prior to the funeral: the body could not be removed from the house until the *voceru* had been sung. Sometimes

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<sup>11</sup> Studies and collections of song texts devoted almost exclusively to the *voceru* include Fée (1850), Ortoli (1887) and Marcaggi (1898 and 1926). Viale's *Canti Popolari Corsi* (1855) contains 28 songs, of which 23 are laments. Laade's *Die Struktur der korsischen Lamento-Melodik* (1962) is concerned exclusively with an analysis of lament melodies (although not all of the texts featured are laments).

the singing would be resumed as the funeral procession wound its way through the village to the church. The singer could be either a relative or close friend of the deceased or a professional *voceratrice*, a woman set apart in her village by her gift for this type of improvisation.

Within the wider category of *voceri*, a sub-division is generally made into laments for those who died of natural causes and laments for those who died at the hand of violence. The *voceru* for a victim of violent death belongs to the world of the vendetta which dominated village life in Corsica until the 1930s.<sup>12</sup> In stark contrast to the *chjam' è rispondi* with its excess of courtesy, the text of such a *voceru* is full of hatred: it is designed not to make peace but to inspire war. The singer heaps terrible threats and curses upon the family of the aggressor and in some cases positively goads the men of her own family to action, mocking them for their lack of courage and their hesitation in taking up arms and embracing their duty to avenge the death.<sup>13</sup> Thus while women might, traditionally, have occupied a less public world than men - as in the stereotype of the Mediterranean woman - these lament texts reveal that they were far from silent or passive in terms of their political influence. The men, for their part, in rising to the challenge were to some extent defending their own personal honor against the women of the family to whose scorn they would otherwise be subjected. Moreover, the knowledge that the vendetta with its need for immediate and decisive action in terms of exacting retribution might strike at any moment could be seen to render a man's honor and indeed his masculinity particularly fragile. The fact that the vendetta concerns the honor of the whole extended family, past and present, and that any existing credit in the honor stakes might be completely annulled by failure to rise to a new challenge, again means that it is the area in which male honor is most under threat.<sup>14</sup> If we are to apply the proverbial honor and shame model to the vendetta then such a situation reveals a dynamic that is far more complex than the

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<sup>12</sup> As an illustration of the scale of the vendetta in past times, Marcaggi (1898, 35) reports that in 1714 it was established that 28,000 murders had been committed during the preceding 32 years (at a time when the population of the island barely exceeded 200,000).

<sup>13</sup> Di Bella (1992, 155) makes the observation that, in neighbouring Sardinia and Sicily, "the endless ... vendettas invariably conceal at least one woman who ensures that men take revenge on a murder."

<sup>14</sup> My analysis here draws to some extent on Gilmore's more general discussion of the particularly precarious nature of male honor in the Mediterranean region as a whole (Gilmore 1987, 9-10).

assumptions underlying the original Peristiany volume (1966) where shame is essentially seen to appertain to women and honor to men and where the primary male concern is to safeguard the honor of the family as embodied in the behavior and reputation (in essentially sexual terms) of its female members. In the vendetta, the tables are almost turned as women show themselves to be as much concerned with honor as their menfolk and where it is the men who are most vulnerable to being shamed.

Lament-singing in this context - where the lament is perhaps better viewed as incantation rather than song - clearly represents more than an expression of suffering or even a mechanism by which women are able to establish an acceptable form of public expression (Magrini 1998). In some cases the singer would go so far as to name the relative who has been chosen to carry out the vendetta, thereby condemning him - through what might be seen as tantamount to a curse - to the life of an outlaw and ultimately the same fate as has befallen his kinsman who is presently being mourned. The *voceratrice* in this case assumes a quasi-mediumistic role which Carrington sees, together with the trance-like or “possessed” state into which the singer would often enter, as sharing something of the occult nature of the Corsican *mazzeri*, the “night-hunters of souls” who had the power to foresee death. Carrington refers to a *voceratrice* she herself encountered who described her profession in terms of “speaking for the dead” (Carrington 1984, 238).<sup>15</sup> Corsican women of my own acquaintance also referred in more general terms to women’s proximity to “the boundaries between the worlds” in the context of their function as singers.

Lullabies share this mediumistic quality insofar as they can be seen to function as a type of charm aimed at ensuring the child’s future prosperity. In the text, the mother or grandmother typically gives expression to her wishes for the child’s future, envisaging a favorable marriage and a happy and prosperous life. Other (fortunately rarer) examples exhibit a darker character: in the “Nanna di Pallica,” for example, a grandmother recounts the history of the child’s ancestors who have either fallen victim to the vendetta or been lost in the rebellion against the French and looks forward to the child growing up to bear arms and to be a proud bandit (cf. De Zerbi & Raffaelli 1993, 64). Male children might thus be seen to be conditioned even from the cradle for the necessary enactment of honor, while the prospect of assuming the arms of a bandit and taking to the

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<sup>15</sup> Tolbert (1990) has written fascinatingly on the shamanistic aspects of Finnish-Karelian laments.

maquis might be seen as much in terms of a rite of passage as marriage. Meanwhile, the proverbially symbiotic relationship between sons and mothers characteristic of the Mediterranean region as a whole and reinforced by Catholicism is given added pathos by the need for every mother to be prepared to sacrifice her son.

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In my discussion so far I have attempted to show how the different examples of male and female singing events under consideration (even if they are by no means the only types of singing in which Corsican men and women have traditionally engaged) offer insights into the functions of the “songs,” and the motivations of those who sing them, which are in many ways startlingly at odds with the stereotypical images of macho, hot-blooded men and silent, passive and disempowered women. Men have been described as singing paghjelle for the pure joy of singing together. Auerbach’s discussion of “the free exercise of musical joy” in the Epirot villages of northwest Greece as “essentially a male privilege” while women’s musical activity is prescribed by their relation to mourning and is limited, as they progress through their lives, ever more to an expression of grief (Auerbach 1987, 26) can be seen to be applicable to some extent to the Corsican scenario. Certainly the types of male singing discussed here function essentially as an expression of, or means of cultivating, personal wellbeing and collective harmony, playing an important role in terms of male “bonding.” Through singing, and in particular paghjella-singing, men both nurture and exploit a sense of togetherness, the interaction being prolonged for as long as possible in the extended singing sessions which often continue well into the night. The collective nature of the enterprise is underlined by the fact that these encounters are dependent for their success on the amenability and commitment of each individual member of the group: everyone has to be in the right mood, open to the muse and integrated into the overall flow of both physical and emotional energy. By contrast, the voceru is often sited in a climate of intense and bitter conflict, replete with passionate outbursts of hatred and recrimination, where the “song” serves as a direct inspiration to action, affecting the course of individual lives in the most profound way. Through the deployment of what might be described as their lamenting obligations, women are thus able to play an active and indeed decisive part in the direction of local politics. It is, then, not difficult to imagine that women in traditional Corsican society were often very much holding the strings of the “real life” of the community

(Gilmore 1987, 195) while their menfolk were off up the mountain singing paghjelle. Moreover, “in the spiritual sphere,” in Carrington’s analysis, women “rule without question” and it is on account of their privileged position in terms of their access to the other world that what Carrington terms “the autocratic behaviour of men to women” can be seen to conceal, not far beneath the surface, “a deep, instinctive distrust ... akin to fear” (1984, 43-44).

This excursion into prototypical forms of male and female musical expression has of necessity been selective but will hopefully have served to set the genres discussed in their wider cultural and social contexts and in particular to throw light on the differences in pretext which might not have been so apparent from an initial glance which restricted itself to the musical opus alone. The question of pretext will continue to be significant in the next part of my discussion, where I examine the fate of these and other musical practices following the dissolution of the “old” way of life which had engendered them.

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### **Changes in Musical Practice in 20th Century Corsica**

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From the earliest years of the 20th century but even more particularly during the war and post-war years, Corsica was, despite its relative isolation, by no means spared from the onslaught of the forces of so-called progress, which for societies at the periphery have been as likely to bring stagnation as they have regeneration. The island entered into a state of both economic and cultural decline from which it was not to begin to emerge until the 1960s. The story is a familiar one of the depopulation of rural areas associated with rapid urbanization and increasing emigration, accompanied by profound changes in both lifestyle and outlook. Added to this, in Corsica’s case, was a process of ever more systematic integration into the French state (Corsica having “belonged” to France since 1769), with the enforcement of compulsory full-time education in particular posing an increased threat to the Corsican language.

I do not propose to offer here a detailed exposition of the fate of traditional music in general during this period. Suffice it to say that, as the old way of life was abandoned, many types of song were deprived of their function and context and so shared the fate of the rituals and practices they had once accompanied. Within the broader picture, however, there are a range of diverse factors



and details which each in their own way had a profound effect on musical practice, some of which merit elaboration. It will also be pertinent to refer specifically to the type of circumstance which altered the dynamics of customary musical practice from the point of view of the division of labor and balance of power between the sexes.

That the advent of television was hugely detrimental in ousting domestic “fireside” music-making and story-telling and at the same time undermining “community” in favor of a “stay-at-home” culture is self-evident (although Carrington (1984, 285) also reports that “wives rejoice in television as a means of keeping their husbands out of the bars”). Many of my Corsican informants, however, were equally quick to point to the impact of the car. One singer described to me how, in her childhood, people were always walking from one village to the next and the men would sing all the way. In another village, the women spoke of how the men would set off at night to sing serenades in a neighboring village and could be heard singing all the way along the road, forming what one speaker referred to as “a path of voices.” The only occasion now when people make their way singing from one village to another is as part of the Holy Week processions which serve in part to retrace the boundaries of the local community and to rekindle the once vital connections between neighboring settlements.

The effects of the two world wars (and later wars in the French colonies) in terms of the toll they took on the male population of the island cannot be underestimated. The extent of the damage is reflected in the alarming number of polyphonic masses - unique to individual villages and traditionally sung by small exclusive male ensembles - which fell into disuse as a result of the loss of one or more of the singers, so bringing to an abrupt end the chain of oral transmission which had continued unbroken for generations. In some places, priests were quick to seize their opportunity to install women’s choirs (for the most part singing modern French canticles) which would represent less of a threat to their own authority than the typically independently minded male ensembles who had understandably held their own ancestral traditions in greater esteem than the newfangled fashions brought over from the continent by “foreign” clerics.

Some traditional genres continued to find expression through the now somewhat maligned folkloric groups, which thrived particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, with their lyrically interpreted, predictably harmonized and instrumentally accompanied versions of popular songs. It is significant

to note in retrospect that membership of these ensembles was typically open to both men and women. It is also pertinent to my later discussion of the rather different ethos of the groups that were to proliferate in the 1970s to note that the ensemble A Mannella - usually referred to in a class apart as the most authentic of those operating in the folkloric frame of reference, since they drew the greater part of their repertory from that of their own rural village and reproduced it in traditional, unadulterated style - gave as one of their reasons for also including newly composed, “lighter” *chansons* in their programme the need to find material for the women members to sing, other than the laments which were traditionally their domain but which were understandably deemed inappropriate in terms of providing entertainment for continental audiences.

Opera singers and the so-called *chanteurs de charme*, epitomized in the figure of Tino Rossi, also played a part in the continued “airing” and dissemination of the various types of monodic song, but at the same time contributed to a significant transformation at the level of style and interpretation. The popular rendition of certain well-known examples of voceri, for example, does seem to have been heavily influenced by the style of the opera singers who immortalized them in early recordings. De Zerbi, in her collection *Cantu Nustrale*, comments on the voceru *O Mattè di la surella*: “The melody has become theatrical and emphatic due to the fact that it has been sung by opera singers. But other versions of the song also exist which are simpler and closer to the Corsican tradition” (De Zerbi 1981, 320). Women in particular, with their lifestyle focused more on the indoor world of the home, had ample opportunity to listen to these records, whose style they would naturally imitate when they themselves came to sing for a field recording, a circumstance noted by Laade during his fieldwork in the late 1950s. The records found their way into homes throughout the island, to the extent that, even in the remoter areas which have been celebrated in the literature as the last strongholds of authentic Corsican culture, the new *chansons* and the lyrical singing style of the popular artists of the day were preferred by many people to their own village songs and in particular to the rural polyphonic style which tended now to be shunned as “primitive” or “uncouth” (see Bithell forthcoming). People were in general also less inclined to improvise or compose their own songs but were happy instead to reproduce the material which appeared on the early commercial discs. At the same time, even in the late 1950s, gender divisions in terms of repertory were beginning to break down as men now adopted into their monodic repertoires some of the

laments and lullabies which had been popularized via records and journals and now increasingly functioned as “folk songs” (Laade 1981, vol. 1, 80). The male monopoly on singing in company was also to begin to give way. Laade (1981, vol. 1, 94) reports that, when he returned to the island in the early 1970s, he found that women were more easily persuaded to sing than they had been in the 1950s: singing was no longer seen as a male prerogative.

The paghjella and the chjam' è rispondi, being unsuitable material for inclusion in commercial recordings and therefore escaping the process of popularization that threatened to emasculate other traditional genres, remained to all intents and purposes untainted by the changing fashions, even if they were seriously eclipsed by the more popular commercial repertory. Though their practice has undoubtedly declined, it is these two forms - the twin *pièces de résistance* of male musical expression - that can still be found in their natural habitat with their primary functions intact. I propose now to attempt to tease out at greater length the various circumstantial threads which might be seen to contribute to the continued tenacity of these genres - an exploration that will take me into geographical, psychological and political, as well as social realms.<sup>16</sup>

At a broad level, the decline was particularly felt in the realm of women's songs which, being more often tied to particular events or rituals, were affected either by the demise of the ritual practice itself or by a more general change in lifestyle and ethos. While the same is true of some of the men's song types, for example, the *tribbiera* (traditionally sung while threshing with oxen), the paghjella and the chjam' è rispondi have always been less restricted in terms of requiring a specific practical pretext for their performance: they do not need a death or a crop ripe for harvesting. Rather, as we have seen, they are associated with contexts of conviviality, and eating, drinking and making merry have always been less subject to the vagaries of fashion. It is also significant that, while they might on occasion be sung around the family table, these songs are traditionally situated in men's territory, whether it be the village bar or up in the mountains where they have their flocks. Their survival can therefore, I would propose, further be attributed to the fact that aspects of the old way of life still continue in the men's world, particularly if not only in rural areas. In many cases, men have deliberately kept alive the contexts for singing which have always been so important to

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<sup>16</sup> Some of the ideas included in this part of my discussion were first presented in a paper (unpublished) given at the European Seminar in Ethnomusicology meeting in Toulouse, 1995.

them, choosing, for example, to shear by hand because simply bringing in a machine to do the work neither offers the same excuse to invite one's friends nor makes for an atmosphere that is conducive to singing.

To talk simply in terms of lifestyle at a tangible or practical level, however, is not enough. It would seem that women's mentality has developed differently from that of men: they have embraced modernity with perhaps fewer regrets, being only too glad to be relieved of both the relentless domestic drudgery and the oppressive moral codes which had previously dominated (if not blighted) women's lives.<sup>17</sup> Thus while it is true that women and men have always inhabited different geographical planes or loci (in terms of indoor versus outdoor, village versus forest or mountain), it might be proposed that, from a certain perspective, they now also inhabit different temporal planes. The men, when they take off into the maquis to hunt, are metaphorically returning to the past, to an outdoor world that has suffered neglect but has essentially changed very little. The mountain fairs can similarly be seen as doors into a past age offering a refuge for practices and behavior which might otherwise no longer have a place in the modern world. It is the women with their continuing (if less grueling) domestic responsibilities who inhabit the world of modern conveniences and women's traditional songs clearly do not belong in an "American" fitted kitchen in the way that men's songs still do belong in a clearing in the forest.

In the case of the paghjella, political dynamics also came into play. With the renewed impetus given to the move towards cultural revival by the nationalist movement in the 1970s, the old traditional songs came to play a vital part in the reclamation and statement of an identity which was unequivocally Corsican and the paghjella in particular now went through a process of "coming out" as it was adopted by the younger generation as a public statement of solidarity (see Bithell 1996 and forthcoming) to the point where, in Salini's words, "polyphony became synonymous with Corsican" (Salini 1996, 191). The rate at which it continued to spread, following this initial reappropriation, among singers who had grown up in the towns rather than in those remaining areas of the island's interior where they would naturally have been exposed to the paghjella tradition

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<sup>17</sup> Carrington (1971, 285-6) has commented on the remarkable way in which Corsican women have liberated themselves in recent decades, entering into the modern world and assuming professional careers with exemplary competence.

suggests that the functions of this type of singing and the apparent metaphysical benefits derived from it (as discussed earlier) still find a strong resonance in the Corsican male psyche even in a more “modern” frame of reference.

Having sought to elucidate the various circumstances which together might explain the survival of at least some of the men’s musical practices while conversely accounting for the decline in female musical activity which continued throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, I turn now to a more detailed account of the manner in which the revival referred to above has continued to unfold during the past two decades. In particular, I will explore the part played by women in extending the boundaries of the polyphonic tradition and in forging a place for Corsican music in the new global soundscape.

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### **The Female Comeback**

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Beyond the quasi-domestic spaces of the village street or superstore and the more egalitarian sphere of academia, male voices might still be seen to occupy a dominant position in the overall soundscape of public spaces. While many of the male groups have long since won their battle for air space via local radio music slots, women still have some way to go to even out the balance. At village festivities, women work hard in the background - for example, preparing food and decorating the church - but tend to maintain a comparatively low profile, certainly in any collective music-making that might develop after dark. The fairs are amply populated by women and children during daylight hours, when all manner of tradesmen ply their wares and there might also be “rides” for the children or competitions of one sort or another for entertainment, but the night, when only the bars remain open for business, belongs to the men. When women are present, they are invariably quiet and restrained, while the men make most of the noise: my own tapes recorded in fairs feature almost exclusively male voices and other sounds produced by males - the clinking of glasses, occasional gunshots, the distant sound of engines revving.

The fact that paghjella singing in particular often takes place in contexts associated with the consumption of alcohol adds further to the exclusion of women, who are not expected to drink (or indeed sing) with such gay abandon as their male counterparts. Even so, there have always been

exceptions in the form of independently minded women, “impassioned by song,” who have resolutely claimed a place among the men: one contemporary singer talks of having “grown up with the lads” singing at the fairs. Hanging out with the men in decidedly dubious locations can certainly lay one open to doubts about one’s motives and morals - or simply plain common sense. (In Malta I was told of how those few women who were wont to join in the singing - and in particular the *ghana spirtu pront*, the Maltese version of the *chjam’ è rispondi* - at the Imnarja festival would go in disguise in order to safeguard their reputation.) It can also, however, earn one a certain respect, not only for one’s “courage,” but also as a transference of the respect accorded to “the song” (or “singing”) and, more particularly, “passion for the song.” The fact remains, however, that women partaking in what are essentially men’s songs are obliged to negotiate men’s spaces and at the same time to compromise their own gender identity which becomes of necessity ambiguous. In my own case, the fact that, as a foreigner, I was already outside the cultural norm combined with my “passion for the song” (reinforced by the distances I had traveled) to make it less problematic than might have been expected for me to move in men’s spaces. I was also doubtless held to be pardonably naive as far as matters of honor were concerned.

The unease that men feel about women singing paghjelle in particular can nevertheless be seen to go beyond questions of upholding custom and defending one’s territory. Gilmore (1987, 15) has pointed to the lack of male initiation ceremonies in the Mediterranean as a whole and the resulting ambiguity in terms of what marks the passage of a boy at puberty from the female-dominated domestic world to adult male society. The fact that it is usual for Corsican males to become properly integrated into the paghjella-singing tradition at the time of their passage from adolescence to adulthood, as signified by the breaking of the voice (Catinchi 1999, 51), suggests elements of a male rite of passage which, together with the function of male bonding already discussed, makes any female intrusion understandably inappropriate or at least discomfiting.

In the context of the *riacquistu* (cultural revival or “re-appropriation”) of the 1970s and early 1980s (closely connected with the autonomist movement), a new public space presented itself as groups of young singers - with rare exceptions male - took to the stage, initially offering informal “performances” in the villages as part of their mission to re-disseminate traditional material and later taking part in more formal large-scale events which brought together a number of different

groups to perform in support of political prisoners. In the climate of this period, when “cultural” activity was almost inextricably bound up with politics, the association of singing with militancy - essentially a male pursuit which might also be seen to contain elements of a male rite of passage - only added to the symbolic impediments which contributed to women’s relative exclusion from the stage. I have described elsewhere (Bithell forthcoming) the process whereby the seminal “groupe culturel,” *Canta u Populu Corsu*, progressed - in response to the rapidly deteriorating political situation of the mid-1970s - from a position of collecting and disseminating examples from the whole range of traditional musical genres (its first disc, *Canta u Populu Corsu: eri, oghje, dumani*, being very close in conception to an anthology of field recordings) to a more overtly militant stance which found expression in the group’s subsequent discs (the second setting the scene with its unequivocal title *Libertà*, “Freedom”) in a number of original newly composed songs - often referred to as *cantu indiatu* or *chansons engagées* - with such titles as “A rivolta” (“The Revolt”), “Clandestinu” (“Clandestine”) or “Un soffiu di libertà” (“A Breath of Freedom”). Having from the outset conceived of themselves as “cultural militants,” members of the group and others who followed in their wake came to be referred to increasingly in the press as “soldats-chanteurs” (“soldier-singers”). The typical style of the more militant male groups with their somewhat “macho” or at least heroic stance, arms folded or guitars held shield-like across their chests, offered, and indeed continues to offer, a powerful role model for aspiring male singers but was understandably somewhat lacking in appeal to young women.<sup>18</sup>

A notable exception among the many male groups which proliferated in the 1970s was the duo E Duie Patrizie (“The Two Patrizias,” Patrizia Poli and Patrizia Gattaceca, who were later to reform as Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses). The pair first met in 1975 (the year of *Canta*’s first disc) through their Corsican language teacher at the *lycée* in Bastia, Jacques Thiers (a writer and linguist of some stature). As well as using songs in his lessons - they offered accessible and interesting material whilst at the same time introducing an element of animation - Thiers also used to encourage his pupils to write their own poetry in the Corsican language. Recognizing and

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<sup>18</sup> In addition, the tradition whereby only men should sing in public continued to be evoked in some circles even when the material itself was distinctly non-traditional. (The earlier folkloric groups had at least been more democratic in this respect.)

nurturing the complementary poetic and musical talents of Patrizia Gattaceca and Patrizia Poli, he was instrumental in launching them on their singing career as E Due Patrizie and they recorded their first disc, *Scupendu l'alba corsa* (a collection of their own songs), in 1977. In the heady days of the *riacquistu*, they also functioned in the context of the *soirées de soutien* (concerts in support of political prisoners), sometimes appearing on stage together with Canta and later collaborating with the group I Chjami Aghjalesi on the disc *Esse*. As young women, however, they did not have the same emblematic appeal as the larger all-male groups who reflected a more potently militant image.

Nonetheless, they had offered the first proof that, in our more liberated age, women can no longer be relied upon to automatically or subconsciously internalize the gender roles and expectations current in the society in which they are growing up, and throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s Corsican women continued to lay claim to their right to sing in public, even to sing in polyphony as do their counterparts in other parts of the Mediterranean and the Balkans. Indeed, it is significant that my own initial introduction to Corsican polyphony took place at the second Women's Voices Festival organized by the Cirque Divers in Liège, Belgium (1993), which featured a fascinating four-day workshop in Corsican polyphonic singing led by Nicole Casalonga (of the association E Voce di U Cumune, whose activities are associated with the Casa Musicale in the village of Pigna) and a positively stunning evening performance by the all-female group Donnisulana. It was, in actual fact, this intriguing encounter and the myriad of questions that arose in my mind as a result that catapulted me into my research in Corsica itself.

At that time, Donnisulana (the name translates roughly as "island women") was the only all-female performing group in Corsica. The ensemble of E Voce di u Cumune and its alternative incarnation A Cumpagnia had, however, produced albums featuring polyphonic singing by both men and women and the 1987 disc *Corsica: chants polyphoniques*, directed by Marcel Pérès, had already enjoyed a certain success outside Corsica. (ADD NEW FOOTNOTE: 'A Cumpagnia's first disc, *Canti & Strumenti Antichi & d'Oghji* (1978), featured a polyphonic song for three female voices inspired by the singing of the three then elderly sisters referred to earlier. This disc, together with the group's associated public performances, has been cited as representing the first overtly public presentation of what might be referred to as "women's polyphony".) Other women occasionally played the part of what was seen by some as a token female voice in essentially male



groups, having been included for the particular timbre of their voices. Meanwhile, Jacky Micaelli, Patrizia Poli and Michèle Cesari were well on their way to successful careers as solo singers. This development can be seen in the light of a wider assertion by contemporary women of their right to play a more active part in all areas of life, including those that were traditionally closed to them. It is also worthy of note that a number of the women who became active as singers in the late 1980s and early 1990s had spent a period of time “on the continent” (or even further afield), developing a professional career and generally broadening their horizons whilst adapting to contexts where gender roles and expectations were often quite different and where public and professional life, certainly, had a more egalitarian face.<sup>19</sup> Hence the comment of one female singer, with respect to the appeal of polyphonic songs to Corsican women, that, not only are the songs “belles” (“beautiful”), but “it is also, perhaps, a way of occupying a public space.” Curiously to some, no doubt, similar sentiments are expressed by director and composer Michel Raffaelli when talking about his motivation in helping to establish the group *Donnisulana* and in composing new polyphonic material for them. “It’s my taste for justice,” he explains, “my aversion to ‘wastage’ which account for my desire to open up to women access to roles from which they have been excluded” (De Zerbi and Diani 1992, 93). He goes on to describe his work with *Donnisulana* as a way of vicariously restoring the voice of his own mother, whose right to speak had been taken away from her by the patriarchal system she entered into through marriage.

Raffaelli’s establishment, in the 1980s, of the *Teatru di a Testa Mora* (“The Moor’s Head Theatre”) on his permanent return to Corsica following a successful career on the continent is an important landmark as far as the revaluation of traditional song in general is concerned. Prior to this, some singers had had the opportunity to “work on” their voices in association with the *Teatru Paisanu*, led by Dominique Tognotti, and also in the context of the musical-theatrical pieces, based on extended research into the island’s traditional musical heritage, which emanated from the village of Pigna. Raffaelli’s theatre, which had its base in Bastia, inevitably attracted singers and so served as a springboard for his later musical projects which resulted most notably in the disc *Canti Corsi in*

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<sup>19</sup> One spoke of the experience of singing in a group in Paris, where men and women occupied the stage as equals. In Corsica, she explained, it doesn’t work in the same way: you look around and yet again you realize that you’re at the back of the stage without knowing how you got there.

*Tradizione* (1989). Motivated by his desire to make a record of singers - both male and female - who still sang, unaccompanied, in the traditional way, this disc represents an important and readily accessible document of a variety of genres of traditional song and in particular of monodic song, which had been largely neglected since the early years of the revival with its promotion of the polyphonic repertory.<sup>20</sup>

Raffaelli's work with the group Donnisolana also grew out of the activities of A Testa Mora. As director of the group, he put together a programme consisting of both traditional songs (most, but not all, in polyphony) and his own original polyphonic compositions, later to be released on the disc *Per Agata* (1992). Donnisolana's debut appearance at the Festival de Musique Contemporaine in Lille in 1989 brought them to the attention of Iannis Xenakis. Xenakis immediately recognized in the voices of the Corsican women, who sang using the chest register rather than the head register, the more archaic quality now often referred to in terms of "peasant voices" which he had been looking for, and so it was that he engaged the ensemble to perform his *Hélène* at the Opéra Bastille (cf. De Zerbi and Diani 1992, 92-93).<sup>21</sup>

If, by the early 1980s, insular culture had become fused with politics to such an extent that traditional musical expression was for many virtually synonymous with a statement of nationalist sympathies, in the late 1980s and early 1990s a breath of new inspiration once again blew into Corsica in the form of "world music." In the more cosmopolitan climate which was now opening up, the public space which offered itself most readily was the stage, which was clearly easier to access in a bid for public space than, for example, the bar, which remains more firmly a male stronghold. Moreover, concerts and other formal performances can be seen to fall into the category

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<sup>20</sup> Raffaelli has continued to pay attention to monodic song through his ongoing work with singer Michèle Cesari which has resulted in the discs *U cantu prufundu* (1993), *Di li venti, a Rosula* (1997) and, most recently, *U cantu prufundu 2* (1999), each featuring Cesari's vocals with instrumental accompaniment by Raffaelli himself.

<sup>21</sup> Some of the members of Donnisolana have subsequently worked with Marcel Pérès in Paris, together with members of A Cumpagnia (the two groups share some members in common), and also feature, as part of the ensemble Organum, on his recording of Franciscan material, *Chant corse: manuscrits franciscains (XVII-XVIIIe siècles)*. The group as such has now disbanded, although individual former members continue to develop their careers both as solo singers and in other formations.

of extraordinary musical (and public) occasions<sup>22</sup> which offer greater flexibility for departures from the norm while not being tied to a long history of customary practice which might appear sacrosanct. The international stage in particular, which lacks the political ambiguity of the stage in Corsica itself and positions the singer more explicitly in the realm of art and aesthetics, was to offer an important new platform for women's musical activity. Donnisolana, for example, went on to perform widely on the international circuit, their musical peregrinations soon taking them as far as Japan.

Of particular significance to the present account was the impact of the *Mystère des voix bulgares*, the name given to a series of discs compiled by Marcel Cellier in the late 1980s which featured an impressive array of virtuoso Bulgarian singers and musicians belonging to various state ensembles who, in particular, stunned "western" audiences with their characteristic style of polyphonic singing. The *Mystère* phenomenon was freely acknowledged by a number of singers in Corsica as one of the most significant sources of their own inspiration or motivation - not only at a purely artistic level but also by alerting them to the idea that there might be an international market for such traditionally derived musics. When the Bulgarian singers gave a concert in Ajaccio in the early 1990s, the stage presentation of the choir with its rigid choreography appeared to some Corsican singers "grotesque" - "every gesture dictated by a man," as one woman put it - but the musical product itself (as represented by the recordings) had already had a powerful and decidedly positive impact. The discs famously included material which, while drawing on the "folk" tradition and featuring village singers (now in the employ of the state ensembles) who sang in the characteristic "open-throated" style, had been professionally arranged or recomposed by approved composers such as Kutev. The effect that this had in Corsica was to suggest the possibility of generating new polyphonic material whilst maintaining some sense of continuity with traditional idioms. By legitimizing the practice of "arranging" traditional or neo-traditional material for a performance context, it opened the way for a creative as opposed to a purist or conservationist approach to "the musical heritage." Of further significance from the Corsican perspective is the fact

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<sup>22</sup> Auerbach (1987, 31), in her discussion of the musical possibilities open to women in northern Greece, quotes Friedl's observation (1967, 100) that "Festival and therefore extraordinary public occasions are accompanied by a change in the permitted movements and activities of women."

that the *Mystère* recordings featured exclusively women's voices. (In Bulgaria, it is traditionally the women who sing while men play musical instruments). This also had a profound impact insofar as it lent further validation to the practice of women singing polyphony in a culture where this had traditionally been a male domain.

It was partly as a result of the inspiration offered by the Bulgarian voices that Patrizia Poli and Patrizia Gattaceca (formerly E Duie Patrizie) decided in 1989 to form the group Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses. Patrizia Gattaceca refers to “tout ce courant, cette tendance polyphonique” (“this whole current, this polyphonic trend”) which gave the duo the idea of creating their own polyphonic compositions (interview 1994). Their first eponymous disc (1991) included both traditional and original polyphonic songs sung by mixed ensembles of male and female voices, overlaid in the studio with improvised instrumental lines contributed by an impressive line-up of international musicians. Distributed in thirteen countries, the disc was a spectacular success outside Corsica, its initial release leading to an invitation to the group to perform in the opening ceremony of the 1992 Winter Olympics in Albertville.<sup>23</sup> The song *Giramonda* (as sung at Albertville) was subsequently used in a Philips advertisement which appeared worldwide, while the success of the disc itself in the French Victoires de la Musique, where it was voted “best album of traditional music,” further excited interest in Corsican polyphony to the extent that it had soon sold 100,000 copies in France alone.<sup>24</sup>

It is perhaps in part because women singing polyphony have already stepped outside the traditional mould that Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses were able to allow themselves greater liberty to explore new directions and develop new modes of expression. In addition, the fact that

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<sup>23</sup> I have commented elsewhere (Bithell 1996) on the way in which the music of Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses has come to inhabit a symbolic space that is in some respects similar to that occupied by the Bulgarian voices. Just as the latter had offered a rich treasure-trove of material for use as backing music for British television documentaries (and even commercials), so Les Nouvelles Polyphonies' interpretation of the madrigale *Eramu in campu*, with “New Age” sounding synthesized instrumentals added to the more traditional vocals, was used to back an illustration of a 14th century diptych which featured in the opening sequence of part one of the 1996 BBC 2 series “The History of British Art.”

<sup>24</sup> Patrizia Gattaceca, personal communication.

women are not bound by such strong allegiance to the male-dominated nationalist movement and the associated identity of “cultural militant” means that they can more easily assume the role of artist and pursue their chosen craft for its own sake. The tradition now began to be seen as something that should naturally evolve, rather than remain “stuck” in the past. For Les Nouvelles Polyphonies, it was important to “sing polyphony as we feel it today” (Poli interview, 1995).

Les Nouvelles Polyphonies were thus the first to be propelled so dramatically into the global “world music” market, their remarkable trajectory preparing the ground for other Corsican groups, some of whom were still at that time preoccupied with more insular concerns and in particular with their identity as cultural militants. Not that those who have courted a more cosmopolitan career have left their political concerns behind them. Success in terms of international tours and record sales is, they argue, a valid and meaningful way of promoting awareness of the island and its problems at an international level and is no less a proof of their commitment to the cause. Nor is this argument restricted to women alone: male groups have increasingly adopted a similar position as the role of “cultural militant” (seen by some to have become redundant with the passage of time) has undergone a transformation into that of “cultural ambassador.”

The impact of the Bulgarian singers and their subsequent visit to Corsica seems to have unleashed a new wave of intense polyphonic activity among men as well as women, resulting in the appearance in the years 1992-94 of a veritable rash of discs of Corsican polyphony by contemporary groups (including A Filetta, Voce di Corsica, Tavagna, Cinqui Sò and Madricale, as well as Donnisolana and Les Nouvelles Polyphonies), most of which included new original compositions in addition to items from the traditional repertory. As the singer Petru Guelfucci comments, “After the Bulgarian voices, I think there was a desire to go further ... to discover other things ...” (interview 1995). Guelfucci’s own group, Voce di Corsica, went on to produce one of the most acclaimed albums of Corsican polyphonic singing to have appeared in the past decade. With this disc, the group followed in the footsteps of Les Nouvelles Polyphonies by again going on to win the prize for “traditional music” in the 1995 Victoires de la Musique. Meanwhile, the extent to which, at this time, the *Mystère* phenomenon served as a point of reference for polyphonic production in general is reflected in a press review of a concert by the group A Filetta which appeared in a 1992 issue of *L’Événement* under the title “L’événement de la semaine: le mystère des voix corses” (“The event

of the week: the mystery of [the] Corsican voices”). It was the success of these, and other, groups who took Corsican polyphony out to the wider world that finally broke the back of the various stigmas that had attached themselves to paghjella-singing in Corsica itself: “primitive” and “nationalist” associations finally became a thing of the past. At the same time, conventions relating to gender had also been successfully challenged.<sup>25</sup>

Changes were also taking place at a more grass-roots level. One of the by-products of the ardent engagement in “cultural” activity in the 1970s was the proliferation of a number of what are commonly referred to as *scole di cantu* or *écoles de chant* (“schools of song” or “singing schools”). A number of such “schools” are still in operation, most commonly taking the form of weekly classes or rehearsals, using a local church or meeting room as a temporary base. Some of the earliest were established by members of the group *Canta u Populu Corsu* in the main towns of Ajaccio and Bastia as a means of transmitting musical material to young singers growing up away from the villages,

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<sup>25</sup> Having once set foot on the polyphonic path, women have not been content to restrict themselves to material from the profane repertory but have also embraced the sacred. Jacky Micaelli’s disc *Corsica sacra*, which also features the voice of Marie-Ange Geronimi, is devoted entirely to items from the sacred repertory, while Les Nouvelles Polyphonies’ second disc *In paradisu* (produced by John Cale) presented contemporary arrangements of semi-forgotten traditional mass settings from a region of northern Corsica (the vocal arrangements being credited to Poli and Gattaceca and the instrumental arrangements to Cale). New groups and reformations of earlier ensembles continue to appear. The Patrizias Poli and Gattaceca have most recently reincarnated as the group Soledonna, where they are joined by Lydia Poli: a performance by the group in the summer of 2001 in the convent of Morsiglia was heralded in the press as “Exceptional, because for the first time female voices will resound beneath the vaults. The trio will have the heavy task of effacing more than five centuries of male domination.” The group continues to compose their own “new polyphonies”. Nicole Casalonga, Gigi Casabianca and Joëlle Tomasini, under the name Madrigalesca, have recently joined together with four instrumentalists to work on a program of lament arrangements. A recent disc entitled *Corsica: Women’s Polyphonies* by the ensemble Donni di L’Esiliu (“Women of Exile”) has put female artists even more firmly on the map - even, if, somewhat confusingly, the group here presents a range of traditional pieces normally sung by men. In including items from the sacred canon, however, they follow the quasi-revolutionary trend noted above. A Festival of Polyphonic Song held in Cervione cathedral in August 2001 featured another new group, Santavuglia, again composed entirely of young women.

which in the past had represented a natural training ground. At the same time, they served to foster a sense of cultural identity. Some schools devoted themselves more or less exclusively to the previously neglected traditional polyphonic canon (both profane and sacred), while others with a more overtly political identity also taught the new *canzone indiate*.

Many of these schools, in keeping with the performance context out of which they had grown, attracted a predominantly or wholly male membership. In some cases, this was also predetermined by the fact that the main function of the “school” was to produce a group capable of singing the mass in polyphony (which traditionally requires an *équipe* composed exclusively of male voices). Indeed, the material being taught in the majority of schools - whether it be polyphonic songs or *Canta-style* chansons - itself belongs essentially to the male repertory. A significant few, however, have played an important part in helping to open the field of traditional song, and of polyphony in particular, to women. Certain of the women singers now active at a professional level, for example, first worked on the traditional repertory with Jean-Paul Poletti at his original “school” in Bastia (capital of Haute Corse).<sup>26</sup> (One such singer commented that, despite having grown up in Bastia, when she first heard “the village songs” she felt as though she already knew them: it was “as if we had been waiting for one another.”) Others attended the continuing program of workshops and classes hosted by the Casa Musicale in the village of Pigna in the Balagne, where a number of them have also become involved in associated performance projects. A Filetta’s classes in the village of Lumiu, also in the Balagne, led to the more recent formation of the all-female group *Anghjula Dea*, selected to represent Corsica at the 1997 *Printemps de Bourges* festival. The series of A Filetta’s classes that I myself attended in 1994 and 1995 attracted more or less equal numbers of male and female singers, although the first class that I witnessed was attended by nine women and only four men. Some of these same women also took the initiative of forming themselves into an ensemble to sing the mass for the patron saint’s day of a village to which one of their numbers belongs. Some of their sons, who were also attending the “school” at the time, were initially outraged at the prospect, but the women stood their ground, saying, “If the men can’t get it together, then we will do it!”

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<sup>26</sup> Poletti has since moved to the southern town of Sartène where he is director of the Centre d’Art Polyphonique and the choir *Granitu Maggiore*.

Some of the “schools” which operate in the form of extra-curricular activities at the *collèges* and lycées also attract significant numbers of girls, some of whom are then motivated to take themselves off to the fairs in search of the “real thing.” The fact remains, however, that female role models are still relatively thin on the ground, as are women singers who can teach the repertory. A similar position exists with respect to the *confréries*, the (male) lay brotherhoods who typically have responsibility for processions and funerals and have also in some cases preserved in their repertoires unique and valuable musical material, often in relatively “archaic” styles and sung using distinctive methods of voice production. A number of these have been revived in recent years and offer the increasing numbers of adolescent boys that they attract the opportunity both to learn vocal repertory and to develop technique. As one woman singer pointed out, nothing parallel exists for girls and women.

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Inevitably, perhaps, men’s music continues to dominate the public domain in Corsica itself. Even though times have changed and the role and identity of women in particular have advanced significantly, women still report that they are inhibited from singing in public because they feel vulnerable to male criticism: it is not easy to break through this barrier which almost has the force of a taboo.<sup>27</sup> From a certain perspective, this places women themselves in a quasi-militant role, in this case with respect to patriarchal as opposed to colonialist authority. One male singer claimed that it shocked him to hear women singing polyphony, expressing the opinion that women should not try to do what men do. “Why change things?” he objected, “... It is wrong to step outside the norm.” There is also a lingering sense that, for some men, women’s public performance still carries the scent of brazenness. To a very small minority of younger men, such behavior on the part of women apparently remains offensive in the extreme; to the older generation, it tends to be more mildly discomfiting simply on account of its unfamiliarity, although some can still recall cases of

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<sup>27</sup> The issue is perhaps not one of singing in public so much as singing for diversion, as opposed to singing in the service of the community, as in lamenting, which fulfils a ritual need. See Auerbach’s discussion (1987, 31) of the justification of women’s performance of wedding songs and St. John’s Day songs, as well as laments, as “a necessary community service,” such ritual songs being seen as ‘efficacious’ rather than “recreational.”



women joining in paghjella singing with male members of their own family and so find the prospect of women singing polyphony less difficult to countenance. A more generally liberal attitude notwithstanding, then, today's generation of women, even if they have long since dissociated themselves at a personal level from traditional concepts of what constitutes "honorable" behavior (in musical terms or otherwise), cannot fail to remain aware of the ways in which notions still current in society at large, even if they are not universally adhered to, continue to restrict or at least color their activities. Meanwhile, the fact also remains that the relatively scant attention paid to female artists by the media in Corsica in comparison with that accorded to some of the male groups is certainly disproportionate to their obvious talent, the quality of the 'product' and their success at an international level.

Not that male disapproval or disinterest serves as a deterrent for all women: from the perspective of one extremely active and successful woman singer, such protestations of handicap are "a false excuse." It would also be quite wrong to imply that male disapproval was *de rigueur*. As indicated in the above discussion of the *scole di cantu*, a number of male singers have been instrumental in encouraging and nurturing women singers. Most recently, Philippe-Jean Catinchi, in his *Polyphonies Corses* (1999, 141), has spoken in glowing terms of the work of Corsica's female artists, declaring that "women have made a magisterial contribution to the revaluation of traditional song." Notwithstanding, the fact remains that, while today's generation of young men continue to behave as though it were the most natural thing in the world for men to sing - whether this be to sing informally in public places or to go on to form a group - and freely appropriate public spaces (from bars to churches) for musical rehearsals and impromptu singing sessions, for women the act of singing in public, whether casually or professionally, still involves an element of "breaking out." This impression is certainly reinforced by the repetition - in reports which appeared in the daily newspaper *Corse Matin* in April 1995, concerning Canta's "comeback" disc, *Sintineddi* - of the notion that the inclusion of a lone female voice, that of Anna Rocchi singing the song *Più ch'è u sole*, can be seen to bear witness to "une profonde volonté d'ouverture" ("a profound willingness [or desire] to open up"). As one acquaintance (non-Corsican, but presently based in Corsica) commented recently, "girl-power has yet to manifest itself strongly and durably here in public." The international stage, however, has offered women the opportunity to "speak out" in a way that

has not been possible within the confines of the island itself. As one woman artist commented, it was “un grand souffle” (“a blast of fresh air”) to be able to go outside Corsica and to do things which were appreciated at an international level. The broader perspective and opportunities offered by the international stage have also been important in offering the ongoing motivation and inspiration which have allowed women performers to continue to develop their work.

Nevertheless, for those men and women who sing polyphony today in the professional or semi-professional context of the “group,” the act clearly holds different meanings. For men, it still retains the symbolism of male collectivity and operates in part in continuity with past “tradition.” In the case of women, it is apt to operate more as an individual statement. In terms of geography, too, the perspective is different: while Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses, for example, have always looked out beyond the confines of the island (and are not, in any case, expecting any great encouragement from critics on their home ground), many male groups have begun with a more insular point of reference, seeing the island itself as the arena in which to act out their musical evolution. An implication of this is that such groups are subject, initially at least, to the approbation of native audiences who are more likely to look for a style of musical expression that is representative of their idea of “Corsicanness.” International audiences, by contrast, are free from any such prejudice regarding appropriate and traditional behavior, and more particularly from the authenticity controversies which occupy those within the culture. Instead, they evaluate the musical product primarily in aesthetic terms: it is judged on its own merits, quite divorced from its original cultural context, with individual “talent” being recognized and rewarded.

For men, polyphonic singing and improvised debate may still function as a part of everyday life - a spontaneous, unpremeditated act motivated by an inner impulse originating in the circumstance of shared time and experience. Groups such as Voce di Corsica, Tavagna or Madricale might sing a program of prepared repertory, including some of their own arrangements and compositions, in a concert situation, but then afterwards join in a different kind of singing around the bar - one imbued with a collective, almost instinctive spirit and involving an element of improvisation and continuing adaptation to others. Different sets of skills are involved in this type of singing activity, with more “traditional” behavior patterns coming into play: the emphasis shifts back from product to process. For women involved with the polyphonic repertory, such singing is

more likely to retain the aura of an activity apart - self-conscious, planned, and formally worked on. It takes time for them to integrate, through opportunity and experience, a knowledge of the musical language and its parameters which will then enable them to “improvise” and to adapt to the variants of other singers. This is, however, also (if not more) the case with many of the younger generation of male singers who now, initially at least, learn polyphonic songs as “repertory,” relying heavily on recordings made by other groups which might offer them a model (often skillfully reproduced with remarkable accuracy) but which cannot truly teach them “the art of song.”

Ultimately, perhaps the most significant advance as far as women singers are concerned is the way in which they have succeeded in transcending their traditional identification with lamenting and have found a way to sing both for the joy of singing and as an expression of a new-found sense of female togetherness and solidarity. With the help of their excursions into the polyphonic landscape, Corsican women have at last found a way to say “I exist.”

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Fig. 1 *Main genres of traditional song in Corsica, with gender allocations*

SONG TYPE	SUNG BY	
	men	women
<b>MONOPHONIC</b>		
chjam' è rispondi	m	
currente	m	
misc. improvisations	m	m
voceri		m
bandits' laments	m	
laments for animals	m	
lullabies		m
tribbiere	m	
muleteers' songs	m	
serenades	m	
satirical songs	m	
election songs	m	m
<b>POLYPHONIC</b>		
paghjella	m	
terzetti	m	
madrigali	m	
masses & liturgical songs	m	
paraliturgical songs	m	