

Five easy pieces: forty years of music and politics in Italy, from B(ella ciao) to B(erlusconi)

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“O Gorizia” (trad.), Sandra Mantovani, from the album *Bella ciao*, I Dischi del Sole, 1964 (now on cd Bravo Records BR 128553735-2)

“O Gorizia” circulated widely in Northern Italy during the First World War. Based on the traditional modes of expression of Italian storytellers, it was known in different versions even before the bloody battle of Gorizia, a town now on the border between Italy and Slovenia. The song was included in the show *Bella ciao*, ‘a program of Italian folksongs collected by Roberto Leydi and Filippo Crivelli’ that was presented at the Spoleto Festival in 1964. At the première, Sandra Mantovani (who sang for the recording) had a cold, and was substituted by Michele L. Straniero. Straniero sung a different version of one of the verses, which addressed the officers of the Italian army on the battlefield as ‘cowards’, who sent their soldiers to inevitable death. Part of the audience in the theatre, that included army officers, neo-fascists, local authorities and members of Roman aristocracy, rioted against the performers. Straniero and the authors of the show

were accused of public insult to the army. As they objected that the song was a traditional one, offered as a document of popular culture in the past, members of the local neo-fascist party suggested that charges might be lifted if “Faccetta nera” (a well known fascist battle hymn) were included in the show. The left parties and specially the PCI reacted and organised solidarity rallies in Spoleto and in other towns; the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano, until then a group of anthropologists, ethnomusicologists and folksingers known in small specialist circles and amongst militants of the left, ascended to nationwide popularity.

The conservative Spoleto Festival (a creature of Giancarlo Menotti's) had invited Crivelli and Leydi in the spirit of the recently formed centre-left government, where – for the first time after the end of the Second World War, and after years of severe confrontation during the Cold War – the Socialist Party, PSI, was admitted to power together with DC, the Christian Democratic Party, abandoning its alliance with the Communist Party. The idea of a show presenting work songs, religious songs, love songs, jail songs, and even anti-war and political songs (including songs from the antifascist resistance), all of them rigorously traditional, appealed to Menotti and to the authorities of the small mediaeval town in Umbria, not far from Rome, usually a summer resort for members of Roman upper classes, politicians, intellectuals. Probably they didn't know exactly who the members of the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano were, and where they came from. Combining tradition, a slight left shift, an attitude that seemed distanced from the avant-garde as well as from pop culture, seemed a good choice. Reebee Garofalo (2002), commenting the support American record companies provided in the late Fifties to well behaved folk groups like the Kingston Trio, used the expression: ‘They stepped on a tiger's tail.’ Menotti did almost exactly the same thing, about five years later.

Actually, Italian folk revival is to some respect related to the corresponding American and British movements. Roberto Leydi, a journalist and music critic, assisted Alan Lomax during his field recordings in Italy. He wrote a book (Leydi, Kezich, 1954) on American blues and protest songs, that were then little known in Italy, and conceived the idea that a similar repertory was existing

in Italy and had to be discovered: so he started his own research (later he also formed a folk revival group, *Almanacco popolare*, that included his wife Sandra Mantovani). After *Bella ciao* and the following show *Ci ragiono e canto* (directed by Dario Fo) he left the *Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano*, thinking traditional modes of expression to be per se oppositional (while some of his colleagues insisted that within folk culture one should look at the progressive elements derived from class consciousness). He then put together a show similar to *Bella ciao*, where the performers, however, were not folk revivalists, but the original traditional performers. In 1968 he invited to Milan Ewan MacColl and his London Critics Group, for a show that was one of the most influential in Italian folk revival and political song in the late Sixties and early Seventies. In 1972 he was nominated professor of ethnomusicology at the University of Bologna. He died in 2003. Michele L. Straniero, who sang “O Gorizia” at the show, was one of the founding members (in 1957) of *Cantacronache*, a group based in Turin, initially conceived as a workgroup to promote changes in Italian popular song, then subject to the conservative policy of the State radio (Rai), and of the Sanremo Festival. Their models were French chanson (Georges Brassens, above all) and German political songs (Brecht-Eisler). Writers like Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, Franco Fortini contributed with lyrics. Gradually, members of *Cantacronache* became convinced that they should find their models also in Italian traditional music, and started field work to collect work songs and political songs. At some point, the group started collaborating with Milan-based folklorists and revivalists, like Leydi, Gianni Bosio, and others, and in 1963 the *Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano* was born, while *Cantacronache* dissolved. But the following year four of the members (Straniero, Liberovici, Jona, De Maria, 1964) issued *Le canzoni della cattiva coscienza*, an essay on popular song, strongly based on Adornian prejudices against popular music (Umberto Eco, who was asked to write the introduction, had to distance himself from the general attitude of the essay). The book formed the commonsense of Italian left intellectuals on popular music for quite a while.

Bella ciao and *Le canzoni della cattiva coscienza*, in different

ways, mark a new season for Italian political song. The 'scandal' in Spoleto projected the NCI to popularity, and new political songs, conceived on the ideological premises of the book, became popular, at least amongst left-oriented audiences. Even the song "Bella ciao" became a kind of 'official' song from the resistance just then. During the partisan guerrilla another song, "Fischia il vento", was largely more popular. But it was the song of the communist and socialist partisans, based on a Russian melody. "Bella ciao" was of uncertain origin, and known to be sung specially by the regular Italian troops coming with the Allies from the South. During their field work, Leydi and Bosio recorded a different version, that was sung by Giovanna Daffini, a rice weeder ('mondina') who declared that the song had been used as a work song before the war. The story fitted perfectly the ideology: a work song that becomes a battle hymn for the antifascist partisans, revealing the workers' progress towards class consciousness. On this basis, it could be adopted by the left, leaving out the embarrassing Soviet origins of "Fischia il vento", and suggesting a common ground for communists, socialists and progressive Catholics, in view of an enlargement of the centre-left policy.

Later, a trade unionist from the small agricultural village of Gualtieri wrote a letter to *l'Unità* (the newspaper of the PCI), saying that he was the author of the 'rice weeders version'. Daffini had asked him to write something new, as she wanted to please those two kind professors coming from Milan with a tape recorder and microphone. The letter was never published, the embarrassing falsification wasn't addressed until very recently (in a book by another founding member of the NCI, Cesare Bernani, 2003), and still the idea of "Bella ciao" as a partisan song originated from a pre-existent work song is generally accepted. Some evidence indicates that actually the battle hymn was probably derived from a popular song composed in the late Thirties by a fascist carabinieri, but more research is needed.

“La fabbrica” (Franco Fabbri), Stormy Six, from the album *Un biglietto del tram*, l’Orchestra, 1975 (now on cd Vinyl Magic VM CD 096)

“La fabbrica” was composed few days after September 11th 1973, after a concert in Milan of the Chilean group Inti Illimani, that performed in tears commenting the news about Pinochet’s golpe. A couple of weeks before, Umberto Fiori and Tommaso Leddi had sung to the other members of the Stormy Six an unfinished version of “Stalingrado”, a song they had composed recently. Shortly, both songs were completed, put together into a suite, and received the first of about one thousand performances by the group. They are still played by the Stormy Six in occasional concerts, were covered by dozens of other groups, in versions ranging from ska to brass band to a cappella, and are still sung at demonstrations. “Stalingrado” and “La fabbrica”, with their narrative about the spreading of the news of the German defeat in Stalingrad and its influence on the birth of antifascist resistance in Italy, formed the nucleus of a series of songs that were recorded for an album – *Un biglietto del tram* – issued in April 1975, thirty years after the end of Mussolini’s rule. The Stormy Six weren’t a folk or political song group: they started in 1965 as an r&b combo, were one of the supporting acts of the Rolling Stones’ first Italian tour in 1967, recorded covers of pieces by the Small Faces or Creedence Clearwater Revival, and in 1972 released an album (*l’Unità*) with songs on Italian history and current politics, very much in the ways of The Band or CSN&Y. Involved in the students’ movement of the early Seventies, the group members came into contact with the partisan songs and new political songs performed by the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano and its individual members (Ivan Della Mea, Giovanna Marini, Paolo Pietrangeli, Gualtiero Bertelli, Fausto Amodei), and for a while abandoned rock (including the group’s own material, except for very few pieces), turning to Italian and international topical songs. They released an album with a few traditional songs and songs by Mikis Theodorakis, Woody Guthrie, Ewan MacColl, Fausto Amodei, etc., not very much unlike the mood that is familiar these days to the listeners of Bruce Springsteen’s *Seeger*

Sessions, though of course largely more amateurish. Members of Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano (namely Michele L. Straniero) were disappointed by the renditions of the folk material, but liked the 'classical' string arrangements of "Per i morti di Reggio Emilia", a song by Amodei based on a theme by Musorgskij. 'Classical' suggestions, Mediterranean melodic lines influenced by Theodorakis, and more than an ear offered to English progressive rock (Jethro Tull and Gentle Giant, specially), form the basis for the style of *Un biglietto del tram*, an unusual combination (at least for Italy) of political poetry and fairly complex music (Theodorakis' song cycles based on poetry by Ritsos or Elytis being the most reasonable comparison). Some militants dismissed it as 'formalist', other called it 'zdanov-rock'.

Un biglietto del tram was a deliberate answer to the poetics of musical pauperism implicit in the production of the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano, and its combination of Adornian and Lomaxian prejudices according to which 'good' songs should be accompanied by one or maybe two acoustic instruments, avoiding the 'tricks' of arrangement and – specially – of recording technology (like multitracking, editing, sound processing). The album was the first issued by l'Orchestra, a cooperative that involved musicians from various genres: folk, political song, rock, jazz, classical music, electronic music. Later, musicians from other European countries (including the English group Henry Cow, or German musicians like Heiner Goebbels) would join the cooperative for plans of reciprocal distribution of records and concerts, that culminated in the activities of Rock In Opposition or in tours by the main Italian groups in the cooperative – Stormy Six and Gruppo Folk Internazionale – specially in Germany (both GFR and GDR), France, Belgium.

The idea from the Sixties that 'political music' be either music by (belonging to) the working class or music presenting the highest degree of class consciousness, or even a combination of the two (like in the exemplary case of "Bella ciao"), changed in the mid Seventies into the idea that as music (of any kind) is a metaphor of reality, any music can be 'political', if it addresses political change or progress. This ideological change, well represented in the Seventies by the great attention reserved by large

Italian audiences to jazz and classical avant-gardes, is exemplified by l'Orchestra's record production (about fifty albums, from *Un biglietto del tram* to an exoteric performance by Giancarlo Schiaffini, a jazz soloist and one of Luigi Nono's collaborators), and by the evolution of the cooperative's schools of music: started in 1974 basically as places where amateurs could learn the best known political songs, only three years later included classes of music theory, history of music, composition, ensemble improvisation, and were part of a national network, represented by the journal *Laboratorio musica*, published jointly by Ricordi and by the cultural association Arci, and edited by Luigi Nono.

Extract from *Suite da Prometeo*, from Luigi Nono's *Prometeo*, 1984, Lucerne Festival Orchestra, Claudio Abbado (dir.), Rachel Harnisch, Juliane Banse, Susanne Otto, Marek Torzewsky, Caroline Ghanoiolleau, Mathias Jung (voices), live recording (20.8.2005)

Luigi Nono's *Prometeo* was first performed in 1984 in Venice. Subtitled *Una tragedia dell'ascolto* ('A tragedy of, or about listening'), it isn't a tragedy – in terms of a drama – at all. There isn't any visible action, and there shouldn't be one. Nono's (and his librettist's, philosopher Massimo Cacciari) declared effort is to take music – dramatic music, but not just that – away from the realm of the eye, and bring it back to the ear. Whatever happens in *Prometeo*, it must be heard, not seen. So, it can't be performed in a traditional opera theatre, but in a special place, custom built, where members of the audience are not 'spectators', tied up in chains to the linear perspective of the theatre, but 'auditors', listening to sound sources all around them. The venue for the première was a church in Venice, with its internal space filled with a wooden 'ark', designed by Renzo Piano, where listeners would sit facing each other in two groups, while orchestra players, singers and loudspeakers (performing sophisticated spatial effects) were distributed around and above. Some cynical commentators (including myself) noticed that the disadvantage – according to Nono's intention – of looking at a traditional scene was largely compensated by the unexpected side-effect of having

to look at other members of the audience, in a sort of waiting room embarrassment; but the main ideological issue of the work was well received, as well as the desperately rarefied music, superbly performed under the direction of Claudio Abbado. It was a gigantic production by La Scala and the Venice Biennale, and there were protests for the enormous cost of Renzo Piano's 'ark', that hosted a few thousand listeners in just a couple of performances. The 'ark' was then dismantled, reassembled partially a few years later in a former factory in Milan (the entire 'ark' would be too tall for the ceiling) for some concerts (*Répons*, by Pierre Boulez), and never again used for Nono's work. It went lost in the flooding of the warehouse where it was stored. For a strange coincidence, Milan's Sports Palace, the venue of another gigantic production by La Scala in 1984 (Stockhausen's *Samstag aus Licht*), was destroyed by a huge snowfall at the beginning of 1985. The snowfall, and the devastating effects it had on the city's life for about a week, marked the end of the local government, that had been ruled by the left (PCI and PSI) for ten years. It was also the end of the left's hegemony in Milan's cultural policy. Since 1983, the national government had been in the hands of Bettino Craxi, the leader of the PSI, allied with the Christian Democrats in a new version of the centre-left partnership, now with a much more anti-communist orientation than it had in the Sixties. Enrico Berlinguer, the leader of the PCI, died in 1984. At the beginning of 1985 the *giunta rossa* in Milan was an anachronistic remnant of the past, like some of the cultural institutions or policies from the Seventies. A campaign was raised against the artistic direction of La Scala and against Claudio Abbado as principal conductor, criticising big expenses for contemporary music productions and accusing Abbado for his allegedly excessive attention to modern repertoire. Abbado left (he would become later director of the Berliner Philharmoniker and of the Wien Modern Festival) and never conducted again at La Scala; Riccardo Muti replaced him. During the same months, a similar campaign was set up against *Musica nel nostro tempo*, a season of contemporary music started in 1976 by the collaboration of almost all Milanese music institutions. It had been an astonishing success in the Seventies, in the climate of ideological support to

music 'progress' commented above. Its origins can be found in *Musica/Realtà*, a program of concerts, discussions, guided listening sessions, exhibitions, established in Reggio Emilia in 1973 (see Pestalozza 1980a and 1980b) by a group of musicians and music critics including initially Luigi Pestalozza, Maurizio Polini, Luigi Nono, Claudio Abbado, Giacomo Manzoni, Armando Gentilucci, Piero Santi, Vittorio Fellegara. *Musica nel nostro tempo* was, in a way, a slightly more conservative version of *Musica/Realtà*, where some of the most radical aspects of the Reggio Emilia programme (discussions in factories, the participation of the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano) were removed in view of the less advanced environment in Milan (it must be noted, though, that the promoters were almost exactly the same). However, soon musics other than the classical avant-gardes were included (one can mention classical Indian music, Cecil Taylor, Giovanna Marini, Père Ubu, Peter Hammill), also under the pressure of l'Orchestra, which in 1977 organised a *Jazz nel nostro tempo* festival (with Anthony Braxton, Steve Lacy, Globe Unit, many Italian performers) as a polemic complement to *Musica nel nostro tempo* which was, in its first edition, limited to contemporary classical music. With its more than a thousand subscribers for almost twenty concerts a year dedicated to modern and contemporary compositions, *Musica nel nostro tempo* was, for a few years, a wonder amongst classical music supporters and organisers in Europe. But in 1984 the number of subscribers had dropped, in the Reagan-era rush to other pleasures. Moreover, it wasn't easy to maintain the exceptionally high and well balanced level of the early years, while the programme turned to a succession of many first performances of works by radical and often little known composers, and very few expensive premières by big names. Some composers (like the then flourishing neo-romantics) felt they were excluded, protesting publicly and accusing the season's consultants of insisting on the old avant-gardes, while avoiding composers, styles, schools that tried to address the audience with an aim to please, rather than to shock. Political alliances were soon established; under a new local government more homogeneous with Craxi's policy, the season's direction was entrusted to the leader of the neo-romantic composers, and finally

Musica nel nostro tempo disappeared before the end of the decade, after the number of subscribers (notwithstanding all efforts to please) had fallen to less than two hundred.

“Inno di Forza Italia” (Anonimo italiano [Silvio Berlusconi]-Renato Serio), 1994, as extracted from Forza Italia’s website

In November 1993, few months before the start of the 1994 edition of the World Cup, big posters appeared in Italian cities, with the payoff: “Fozza, Italia!” It sounded like ‘forza Italia’ as pronounced by a little kid, and though no product was advertised, most people understood the poster as an early encouragement for the Italian football team (or soccer team, as the World Cup was to take place in the Usa), that might be followed up by a clearer advertisement, probably from one of the sponsors. Few people have visual memories of that poster, also because it disappeared soon, and it’s impossible to find a photograph of it (as far as I remember, there were children on a vividly coloured background). Years later, various sources (both in favour and against Silvio Berlusconi as a politician), suggested that the posters were part of an astute subliminal campaign, announcing the birth of Forza Italia, Silvio Berlusconi’s political party, officially founded in 1994.

According to the author of that campaign, Maurizio Sala, this is not true (see Barbacetto 2004). The campaign was aimed at reintroducing the poster as an advertising medium to investors affected by the economical crisis, who usually chose television as the main medium, with an encouragement to grow (like the children portrayed on the poster), and win (like the country or its football team).

As a matter of fact, however, the campaign was launched by Publitalia 80, Berlusconi’s own advert collecting agency, and after few months the new party – that was initially based on the workforce of some of Berlusconi’s companies, specially Publitalia – got the same name. The best explanation for the coincidence, unless we distrust Sala (who would probably get more rewards as the inventor of the name of Forza Italia and the shrewd instigator of such subliminal campaign) is that the new party, its

name, its symbols, the very idea of Berlusconi 'entering the field' (*la discesa in campo*), were planned with the same aims and methods of a good advertising campaign, addressing Italians on the basis of their irresistible passion for football and the national team. The repertory of images, symbols, sounds articulating this passion had been revived recently – at that time – by Italy's victory at the 1982 World Cup in Spain, by the 1990 edition (that took place in Italy) and by the success of the team owned since 1986 by Berlusconi himself, Milan AC (winner of both the Italian championship and the Champions Cup – over Barcelona – in 1993-1994). The suggestion that Forza Italia's hymn, composed by Renato Serio (a composer and arranger for tv variety shows) to lyrics written by Berlusconi himself, sounds like a football team hymn or like a tv title tune (or a combination of the two, like the title tune for the broadcast of a football cup), isn't surprising. It may be a little more surprising to know about other relations amongst Berlusconi's various interests in the media, in football, in politics, in music.

After his early accumulation in the real estate business, Berlusconi's fortune was mainly based on television. It is known that he was able to exploit the void in Italian legislation, after the Constitutional Court between 1974 and 1976 abolished the monopoly of Rai and allowed local tv stations to broadcast, until in 1990 a new law (under a *pentapartito* government and with the protection of Craxi)¹ substantially sanctioned the status quo. During that period, Berlusconi's three networks were gradually built on the edge of legality: for example, as the Constitutional Court's decree allowed the existence of privately owned local stations, but no commercial networks, Berlusconi's Canale 5, Italia 1 and Rete 4 worked as networks sending cassettes to local stations, that would broadcast them at the same time of the day, avoiding air interconnection – that was prohibited!

For quite a while, however, Berlusconi's televisions (i.e. the Fininvest group) didn't pay any license for the usage of the musical repertoire they broadcast. The first license agreement was

¹ *Pentapartito* means (of course) 'formed by five parties'. The expression was preferred to 'centre-left', acknowledging the right shift of the PSI.

signed in 1985 with Siae, Italian performing right society, and was based on the 2.5% of the total income from advertisements (Rai paid 4.75%). In 1987 Siae fixed a new amount (about 11 billion lira, 9.8 million euro at today's value), again largely inferior to the fee paid by Rai (about 54 billion lira, 48.0 million euro at today's value), but based on a similar percentage of the advertising income (Rai's income includes subscriptions from tv set and radio receiver owners, and the total sum includes also radio broadcasting). Fininvest stations appealed to the Constitutional Court, maintaining that Siae shouldn't be allowed to establish the cost of licenses, and that this should be the result of a commercial dealing. The Court rejected. The next year, Rome's Court of Justice raised the amount (solicited by Siae) by 5%, according to inflation rate, while Rai's fee was increased by 19%. And so on. If one sums up the amounts of the license fees Fininvest never paid (before 1985), with the difference between the fees the company should have paid – if the criteria for establishing the sum were the same applied to Rai – and the fees actually paid by Fininvest, one very easily gets to the sum of about 43 billion lira (38.3 million euro at today's value) that Berlusconi spent in 1986-1987 to get the control of Milan AC (about 20 billion lira, 17.8 million euro at today's value) and to buy new players (about 23 billion lira, 20.5 million euro at today's value). In November 1989 – long before Berlusconi established Forza Italia – I wrote an article (now in Fabbri 2002, pp. 197-199) where I suggested that all authors, composers and music publishers should be supporters of Milan AC, as the team was totally financed by (unpaid) performing rights. Was I wrong?

“Mi sono fatto da solo” (Biglioli-Camponuovo-Rota), *La famiglia Rossi*, 2004, from the album *Mantova Musica Festival*, cd UPR 0154662UPR

Rossi is the most common surname in Italy. ‘Famiglia Rossi’ means the real average family, with the added connotation that ‘rossi’ means reds. “Mi sono fatto da solo” – a summary of Berlusconi's career – was a success in the winter between 2003 and 2004, and *La famiglia Rossi* was amongst the groups invited to

the Mantova Musica Festival, from March 1st to March 7th 2004.

Italy has a long tradition of song contests and festivals. The first was established in Naples in 1839, and went on until 1861, when the Regno delle Due Sicilie was defeated by Garibaldi, and the Festa di Piedigrotta, as part of the *panem et circenses* policy of the kingdom, was abolished. It started again in the eighteen eighties, and was the centre of the flourishing of the Neapolitan song. The Sanremo festival (*Festival della canzone italiana*) was established in 1951, and for almost the whole decade was dominated by lyricists, composers, singers, conductors who started their career during the fascist rule: a good example about how the Christian Democrats – during the Cold War – recycled people, institutions and symbols from the fascist era in the effort to keep the left away from power and from the media (another excellent example being the struggle that the DC fought against neo-realist cinema). When Domenico Modugno won the contest in 1958 with “Nel blu dipinto di blu” (“Volare”), a crack was open through which new styles (influenced by French chansonniers, by bossa nova, by rock ‘n’ roll) had a chance to filter and have access to monopoly-ruled radio and television. But Sanremo remained the sanctuary of Italian melodic tradition, where occasional participations of musicians from different styles, genres or nations (from Louis Armstrong to the Yardbirds, from Gene Pitney to Wilson Pickett – and I mean artists actually taking part in the contest) were generally dismissed as exotic suggestions. A real fracture in Italian popular music took place in 1967, when Luigi Tenco, one of the best known singer-songwriters, committed suicide after his song was eliminated from the contest. Few years later, in 1974, another festival was started in Sanremo (not a contest, in this case), the *Rassegna della canzone d'autore*, promoted by the Club Tenco, an association of ‘quality song’ supporters. The two festivals remained separate (one at the end of the winter, the other at the beginning of autumn), though in some cases there were attempts to organise alternative festivals during (and against) the *Festival della canzone italiana*.

In September 2003, Rai – then finally and firmly in the hands of the centre-right government – entrusted the direction of the Sanremo festival to Tony Renis. Renis, winner of the contest in

1963, a songwriter of some international fame (“Quando, quando, quando”), is definitely a champion of conservative interests in Italian popular music industry. But someone knew more about him. Nando Dalla Chiesa, a senator for the centre-left party Margherita (the same as Romano Prodi), son of Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa, a general of the carabinieri who was killed together with his wife in an attack by the mafia, had a memory of having seen Renis’ name in the proceedings of the parliamentary anti-mafia commission. It was proven that Renis had contacts with some of Cosa nostra leaders; he was even a guest of one of the best known mafia families, the Gambino, at the same time when Michele Sindona (a banker that later would be killed while in prison) was simulating a kidnapping, hiding himself in the same villa where Renis was staying. Dalla Chiesa protested, but Rai directors stuck to their decision (one of the ministers of the Berlusconi government in August 2001 declared: ‘One must co-exist with mafia and camorra’; alleged dealings with the mafia are at the origin of many of the trials that involved Berlusconi himself). So Dalla Chiesa, with a group of intellectuals, proposed to organise another festival, to be held exactly in the same dates as the Sanremo festival, but in Mantua.

The *Mantova Musica Festival* was immediately received by many as a chance to renew the Italian music scene: it was open to all popular genres, access was granted to all artists, even if they had no recording contract, and no distinction was made amongst participants, who were allowed the same time on stage (not just a song, like in Sanremo, but a quarter of an hour), with no exception, even for the invited stars. There was no contest, though in the end a jury gave a number of ‘critics’ prizes’. The ‘listening commission’ that had to evaluate participants received over 800 proposals, out of which 30 were admitted. Boycotted by almost all media, except for *l’Unità*, a few independent radio stations and one of the small tv networks – which broadcast the shows in the middle of furniture sales, soft-porn movies and even the election of ‘Miss Lega’, the beauty queen of the xenophobic party led by Umberto Bossi – the *Mantova Musica Festival* started disastrously on Monday, but on Friday and Saturday it reached a national audience of three million, while some newspapers were

forced to cover it as it became one of the main topics of discussion amongst people in Sanremo. The Festival managed to become the musical outcome of the vast movement started by the so-called *girotondi*, that brought a million and a half people to a demonstration in Rome on December 5th 2003. The triple cd including one song by each of the participants entered the compilation charts, and even in the music industry there were signs that MMF might become as important as the other event taking place in Mantua (in September), the *Festivaletteratura*, one of the most successful Italian book fairs (but, more than that, a place where writers and readers meet).

But it didn't happen. The 2005 edition, that took place in June (avoiding direct competition with Sanremo), was a flop. Contrary to the spirit of the first edition, mainly for economic reasons, the programme was focussed on the 'big names', reintroducing (instead of reducing further) the differences between unknown artists (who had proven to be exceptionally good, and sometimes supported by a huge local following) and alleged 'stars', pushed by managers and record companies. But it was clear, at some point, that political choices were no less important: neither Dalla Chiesa (a member of a moderate party, with his parliamentary mandate to expire after less than one year), nor the local authorities (worried by the impact of the festival on a traditionally left-oriented town, which however happens to be one of the richest in Italy), nor the artistic management of the festival (professionals who deal with a politically varied clientele for most of the year, organising festivals and seasons all over the country) wanted to commit to a strongly oppositional image. The enthusiastic support of the independent music community was discouraged, but on the other hand the appeal to moderates didn't work. A perfect anticipation of the outcome of national elections in April 2006, that some read as the result of a country divided in two, between supporters of Berlusconi and Prodi, but that might also be read as the result of the shyness, division, lack of clarity, inability to frame discourses that affect the Italian left, preventing it to win even over an opponent who became an object of ridicule all over the world.

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