

Vittoria Pietropaoli, An Appreciation

Joey Skee (June 29, 2009)



A contadina performer of musica popolare is a constant companion.

There are a few artists I always keep on my 4GB iPod Nano, with its circa 1,000 song maximum, regardless who I have to delete to make room for new music: jazz great [John Coltrane](#) [2], the encyclopedic Afro-Latin ensemble [Grupo Folklórico y Experimental Nueva Yorkino](#) [3], Chicago bluesman [Howlin' Wolf](#) [4], '60s rock band [Jefferson Airplane](#) [5], and contemporary Sardinian rappers [Malos Cantores](#) [6]. These musicians never fail to surprise and please me when they pop up in a shuffle. And then there's Vittoria Pietropaoli, a contadina from Lazio.

I don't know much about this singer of musica popolare. I first came across her voice in 1977 when I purchased the LP "Il Lazio, Vol.1, I canti e le zampogne/La mietitura, i pastori e le zampogne" (Albatros, VPA 8314) while in Italy. [Ettore De Carolis](#) [7] made these field recordings the previous year. As the album's subtitle indicates, these are work songs of reaping and herding, including that



of the zampognaro (bagpiper). The LP included three songs song by Pietropaoli. In 2006, the [Finisterre label](#) [8] reissued the music as a CD "[È](#) [9] [tanto tempo che non recantavo](#) [9]" (TTCD35), with additional songs including four new (non-work) tunes sung by Pietropaoli. Her music totals less than fifteen minutes.

I'm not a musicologist and ill equipped to describe the formal elements of Pietropaoli's singing style. Her voice, with its slight rasp, has the broad open tone approaching the wail of more southern Italian vocal techniques, but not quite the same as you find in Sicily or Calabria (listen to the polyphonic duet with Fabbi that is "E metete metitori").

There's a playful intimacy to her singing, especially on the songs "E gliu pecuraru che. . ." and "E se m'ascolter(r)ete." This artistic mix is especially appealing in the love song "Amore mio nun r'ammalà":

Fiore de menta, rosa senza spina
e de baci n'ho composti una corona.
Voi del mio cuore siete la meglio rama.

Quantu me piaci!
Me pari una minestra pasta e ceci,
io me 'tte magnerìa a forza de baci.

I have crafted a crown for you made from
mint flowers, a thornless rose, and kisses.
You are the finest branch of my heart.

Oh, how I like you!
You are like a minestra of pasta and chick peas.
I could eat you with the force of kisses.

But there is something else that attracts me to Pietropaoli's voice. Her phrasing, the articulation, her tone, the lyrical rhythm are intimately familiar, sounds from the recesses of infancy. Is this the voice of my immigrant mother, singing ninne nanne (lullabies) to me as a child? I played the Pietropaoli songs for my mother, Anna, who was raised in Maranola, a hamlet of Formia (Latina province), at the opposite end of Lazio. While she fondly reminisced about listening to contadine perform similar work songs during harvest time, there was no indication that she sang such songs. There is no way of retrieving the half melodies my mother hummed or the inflection she gave a tune half a century ago, leaving me to wonder if my emotional response to Pietropaoli's voice is a buried aural memory or deluded fantasy. Either way, this Latium contadina's haunting voice will remain in my musical rotation for years to come.

"Il ricco e il povero"

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