

# MUSIC AND HUMAN MOBILITY I

Edited by

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“Henri Coanda” Air Force Academy Publishing House

## URBAN SOUNDSCAPES. MULTI-ETHNIC ORCHESTRAS IN ITALIAN CITIES

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**Abstract:** *Migrations are a profound social and cultural change in the context both of the country of origin and of the country of arrival. The perceptions of Europe and of Italy in relation to the so-called "immigrants" become metaphors with which to think about the social changes that characterize cities themselves. Migration becomes a lens to interpret the actions, the behavior and the choices of individuals, revealing a real cultural question, a symbolic framework through which it is possible to process the social changes.*

*In the case of itinerant migrant musicians, through contact, brings cultural change, often accompanied by fear and fascination, in a kind of uncertainty that characterizes many forms of exchange. The encounter offers a possibility for a new social life that often tell us new stories of present-day experiences and brings sounds and performances in different and more unusual venues.*

*Musicians on the move bring their music with them to a new place and often the meaning of music changes. Sometimes it is used for other purposes and it can become a tool for bringing people together.*

*In this paper, which is based on fieldwork carried out in Italy during the last year, I would like to reflect on music transformation in a globalized urban context and in particular on the phenomenon of Multi-Ethnic Orchestras, originally formed in Italy in 2000, and how these musical activities created an effective vehicle for comparing differences, forms of contact, knowledge, integration, and solidarity.*

**Keywords:** *music, human migration, Italy, Multiethnic Orchestras, ethnomusicology, world music*

### 1. Introduction

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4. and enhanced their musical quality (Côte-Real, 2010).
2. In recent decades city soundscapes have changed radically, reshaping the meaning of live music in the context of urban spaces. While previously oral traditional music was exclusively performed in rural surroundings and barely existed in cities, nowadays *self-made music* can be heard in streets, on buses and underground stations, in markets, in churches and even in schools. In the context of world-wide globalization, music venues have changed from rural to urban and from typical to more unusual spaces (Chambers, 2012). This trend is also due to the increasing mobility and the growing presence of foreigners. In recent decades we observed, as well, a substantial increase in the number of foreign musicians that incremented the number of orchestras and music groups performing throughout the country,

present-day experiences. This happens because the strong feelings caused by the experience of migration are translated into music, in such a way that mobility becomes a modality of knowing and being in the world (Cresswell, 2006). On the other hand music also evokes emotional connections with homelands while searching for a new home. As professor Portelli assert, it has to be found that contrary to the term “diaspora”, the word itself describing the phenomenon of a unit of experiences that scatters outwards from a source, the neologism to be coined would be rather as the convergence towards a meeting point (Portelli, 2014).

Throughout Europe as in Italy the arrival of foreign musicians improved the production of music in categories such as world music, popular and even folk music. It is also important to point out that the Western concept of *folk music* changed in the last decades. While the Euro-American definition of *folklore* is strictly linked to the idea of authenticity that denies any hybridization in music (Portelli, 2014), the immigrant’s musical culture to be found in Europe currently is already a hybrid. When migrants who come to Europe talk about *folklore* they mean something that is mixed with *popular music*, that concerns *popular culture* or rather pop and commercial music, ultimately that still has its roots in history and popular cultures and gets its lifeblood from the revitalized connections with them (Portelli, 2014). Migrants from the very moment they decide to travel, also renew their cultural references even when trying to maintain their own backgrounds as strongly as possible (Côte-Real, 2010:17).

In urban area the impact of large population movement is most immediately felt and cultural heterogeneity is also more clearly in this particular context; mobility characterizes much of urban life and musical activity depends also by population distribution and to the public spheres, as work or a celebration-day for example. The resultant musical product may begin partially or utterly from musician’s origins cultural forms (Reyes-Schramm, 1979) and the procedure

by which they select and adopt their music and how the musical transformations occur, constitute a challenge for my research. For the purpose of understand migrant music and musician’s encounters and interactions related to music, I take the perspective of the Multi-Ethnic Orchestras, an Italian phenomenon rose up during the last fifteen years.

## 2. MULTI- ETHNIC ORCHESTRAS IN ITALY

The main topic of this ethnographic study is Multi-Ethnic Orchestras and musical hybridization. The project focuses on the musical production of multicultural orchestras paying specific attention to migrant musicians, their performances and recollections. The research aims to understand the current problems concerning music and intercultural processes with regards to the key influence of migration.

Multi-Ethnic Orchestras is an Italian phenomenon born in urban areas during the last fifteen years. These orchestras were mainly developed as a collaboration between Italian musicians and social workers who saw this cultural activity as a means towards the effective integration of migrants perceived culturally and ethnically far removed from the home culture. These social initiatives eventually found the support of cultural institutions.

Limiting ourselves to orchestras that are making records today, our country has fifteen musical *ensembles*, and this makes Italy the European nation with the largest number of multi-ethnic orchestras (Polchi, 2012), which play a major part in promoting activities that preserve the migrant memory and promoting integration with the local culture.

Most of these music bands keep the name of the square (*piazza*) where migrant communities usually meet in Italian cities like The Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio from Roma, which is the most popular and oldest Italian Multi-Ethnic Orchestra. It was founded in 2002 as a socio- cultural project supported by artists, intellectuals and cultural

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groups to reconceive Esquilino, a district of Rome where Italians are in minority. The orchestra consists of eighteen musicians who come from ten different countries. It was the first orchestra that, besides enhancing the different musical cultures, has created jobs and residence permits for migrant musicians who were living in conditions of social exclusion. Additionally, in 2006 a documentary film was made detailing the origins of the famous orchestra which now performs in major theaters around the world, promoting reinterpretations of the most famous classical operas like Mozart’s *Magic Flute* and Bizet’s *Carmen* (Fiore, 2014).

Following the example of Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio, in just a few years similar projects started up throughout Italy and nowadays there is at least one multi-ethnic ensemble in each Italian region. Every orchestra is distinguished by its own unique characteristics. Most orchestras have an institutional origin: they were born as part of a Festival, or through social and educational projects promoted by local authorities through the collaboration between musicians and social workers, mostly Italian (Polchi, 2012).

The Multi-Ethnic Orchestra of Arezzo, Tuscany, for example, focuses on the training of young musicians, promoting workshops on world music in high school and is distinguished by its research into the traditional music of the ancient Mediterranean diasporas. The Multi-Ethnic Orchestra Mediterranea in Naples, founded during the North Africa emergency in 2012, is both a music workshop and a social project involved in anti-racism awareness, the repertoire consists of original and traditional music from around the world. The work of La Piccola Orchestra di Torpignattara from Rome is very important due to the fact that it involves Italian and second generation immigrant minors, most of whom live in difficult situations, and it is conceived as a permanent workshop open to all and it is constantly evolving<sup>1</sup>.

Other orchestras have instead a less pronounced social dimension and refine the aspect of music production. I am referring to the Brigada Internazionale of Naples, the Banda di Piazza Caricamento from Genova, and the Orchestra di via Padova in Milan. In these cases the musicians are almost exclusively professionals and the role of director takes on more importance. These bands perform at the highest fee and offer an original repertoire.

In parallel with the Orchestras, Multi-Ethnic Choirs were also founded and currently I have discovered five in Italy. Romolo Balzani Choir of Rome, for example, started up in the context of “Gianni Bosio” cultural association, one of the most important cultural and political center in Roma. The Choir performs an interesting repertoire including protest and works songs from many different cultures, promoting cultural and social activities, working to ensure economic support and occasionally assistance with documents for singers. Another example of a choir that stands out for its work on promoting integration through musical activities is Voci dal Mondo of Venice. Founded as a social- cultural project in a high immigration urban area out of Venice city, the choir consists of sixty people, 30% of whom are not Italian. They perform a repertoire of traditional music that the choir director herself has called “songs of new migrants”<sup>2</sup>, usually performed at popular events as a conscious presence within the urban city.

### 3. MULTI- ETHNIC ORCHESTRAS’ MUSIC PRODUCTION

Most of the Orchestras and Choirs pursue a study of non-European music and the different traditions of Mediterranean countries. The musical production is achieved following suggestions from each musician – who propose a traditional or popular song that represents or has particularly significance for their own musical culture- and together with the band

they arrange the music and blending the different elements. During the rehearsals musicians work on migrant recollections, in some cases their nostalgia could become a creative engine to integrate cultural diversity in a delicate way. In this way, the intercultural dialogue takes place more quickly, the encounter initiate a creative process.

To describe the attitude of cosmopolitan man Ernesto De Martino suggests that those who have no roots and are cosmopolitan, must possess a living homeland in their memory, which the imagination and heart can return to again and again (De Martino, 1975). With the image of a homeland carried within, migrant musician's compositions does not speak about the past, as the sound moves an emotional bond, it describes their new life-personal event in seeking for a temporary home-place.

Another element that influences Multi-ethnic band's music is the city environment. A director of an orchestra, who was interviewed during the fieldwork, defines their musical style as "urban ethnic music"<sup>3</sup> to emphasize how the city context has influenced their work. In fact many of these orchestras offerings have in common sounds from *jazz*, *salsa*, *cumbia*, *reaggae* and other rhythms that have found their way into the big agglomeration, where people mobility is more clearly and easily felt (Reyes-Schramm, 1979).

I observed in my fieldwork that one of the peculiarities of these orchestras is the experience of *musical encounter*: musicians merge their musical backgrounds and experiences, while still holding on their original cultural roots. For example in this context it occurs that Albanian musicians come close to the Bengali musical structures, or a Cuban pianist performs with a professional Oud musician (and many more such examples could be listed). Except for rare cases, the result is a juxtapose of various musical characteristics of diverse cultures, so in the whole compositions the output of the different traditions can be clearly recognized.

The process of *musical encounter* seems to be heterogeneous in the Italian context due to the fact that Italy has experienced a recent immigration, therefore the ethnic communities are not very well rooted. With regard to the abovementioned issue it is also important to point out that this process is not spontaneous but promoted by an external cause. To summarize Multi-Ethnic Orchestras are important in order to understand the transformations of musical production of the cities where they appear, moreover they are undoubtedly an extraordinary enrichment as well as to the culture of Italian musicians. Finally Multi-Ethnic *ensemble* do constitute a challenge for my research project in relation to music and intercultural processes.

#### 4. IMMIGRATION IN ITALY

In which social context, in relation to migration flows, were the Orchestras and multi-ethnic Choirs born? Italy as a migration destination is distinct for a number of reasons. It became a country of net migration (Schuster 2005) later than Britain, France or Germany, for example. Schuster suggests that many of the migrants arriving in Italy still intended to travel onwards to other wealthier European states with more established migrant communities, more of them were remaining in Italy because it was difficult for them to move further north (Schuster 2005: 759). This situation refers to the beginning of 2000, when most of the multi-ethnic orchestras were born, nowadays it is also different because of Syria's emergency and refugees. However, Italy has never been solely a transit country.

What Polchi called "polycentrism" refers to a migrant population in Italy that has tended to be much more heterogeneous than in the traditional immigration states (Polchi, 2012; Caritas, 2003; Fondazione ISMU, 2003: 33), and they had not found an effective integration in Italy.

In the beginning of 2000, although there are significant communities of Moroccans, Albanians, Romanians, Filipinos and Chinese

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in Italy (Caritas, 2003), these populations are dispersed throughout the country and are not as numerically strong or consolidated as the communities formed by people from the former colonies of Britain or France or, for example, by the Turkish and ex- Yugoslav communities in Germany (Schuster, 2005: 763). The lack of the formation of communities means that there is a growing population in Italy, but I suggest also in Europe, whose interests are under-represented in a public forum. This segmentation makes it difficult for migrant communities to speak up for their rights, for example, and to be represented in some capacity other than their nationality.

Maria Sao Côte-Real wrote that urban social problems have in some way been helped by music practices and migrant music has been used as a strategy for organizing people’s participation in urbanization (Côte-Real, 2010: 16), and that is what Multi-Ethnic Orchestras and Choirs still try to do, as social service programs, give a voice, a musical education and even help with documents, for migrants in Italy.

My research points to migration of musicians in particular, heavily influenced by social and cultural factors, such as cultural and linguistic connections between the departure and the arrival countries. The categorization will be further explained by distinguishing between temporary migrant musicians, who move for registration purposes or to take part in a project, and musicians who are permanently located in the host country. Of further interest is the situation of those musicians who migrate to practice their profession abroad but, having moved with that intention, they have accepted unskilled jobs to survive and are only able to perform together with other professionals in their spare time.

On the other hand migration is not just a simple trajectory, some migrants relinquish the dream of returning home and marry, settle down and start a family, other migrants leave their home country temporarily as

seasonal or “guest” migrants (Schuster, 2005: 766). This continuing mobility seems to be stronger in Italy than in Britain, France or Germany. Italy continues to be a way- station on journeys further north and west.

What impact does this continued mobility in and out of different countries have on musicians or performances themselves? I have no firm answers to these questions yet but in future papers I will try to prove how musicians meet, motivated by various reasons, influence the combination of sounds and performances, demonstrating how the type of hybridization in Multi-Ethnic Orchestras’ music can really be a starting point for a development of intercultural interactions.

### 5. CONCLUSION

To summarize, multi-ethnic groups are unusual in that they are in a state of continuous change in a permanent and public experiment. This is also the case for migrant musicians who are always on move, but it is important to point out that some of those interviewed have found a job in Italy via these projects and decided to stay. These Orchestras have problem to remain stable also for economic reasons, since they have found institutional support only few can subsist through their music production alone and, because of problems with costs, it is always more difficult for them to perform on tour. From the early 2000s until today many Multi-Ethnic Orchestras have disbanded, are on stand-by or are simply reducing the number of musicians and performing a different repertoire.

In my opinion the Multi-Ethnic Orchestras’ phenomenon is changing radically both because of the economic crisis in Italy and because of the social changes in relation to migration flows.

It is important to remember that, since they appeared, Orchestras and Multi-Ethnic Choirs have modified the soundscapes of Italian cities and raise awareness amongst the locals. Musicians involved in these projects

intend to re-imagine the whole Mediterranean basin as that ancient land where the value of cultural hybridizations have existed throughout all its history, drawing on the rich tapestry of human existence, which can only help to dispel the negative vision of coexistence and migration.

This peculiarity carry on the world music's celebratory narrative (Feld, 2011) that sees hybridity and musical fusion as cultural signs of an action that convey the desire for cultural respect, tolerance and integration. In my opinion, this kind of approach could open the way for a different intercultural connection, a comparison and exchange seeking a recognition of musical encounters. Eventually, during the last fifteen years, Multi-Ethnic Orchestras made an effort and contributed concretely to bring new and complex challenges of inclusion, citizenship and peaceful coexistence in a urban context.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Massimo Ferri from Orchestra Multietnica di Arezzo (Arezzo, 17 March 2015), Romilda Bocchetti from Orchestra Multietnica Mediterranea (Naples, 29 May 2015), Domenico Coduto from Piccola Orchestra di Tor Pignattara (Rome, 20 April 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Meeting with Coro Voci dal Mondo, 12 November 2014, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Massimo Latronico director of Orchestra di Via Padova (Milan, 29 April 2015).

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