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Ethnomusicology in Audiovisual Time

音像时代的民族音乐学

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Filming a Vocal Contest in Context: A Case Study on a Form of Extemporary Sung Poetry in Tuscany (Italy)

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Abstract

The *contrasto* is a traditional performance practice widespread in some rural villages of Maremma, southern Tuscany, Italy. It consists of a vocal challenge between two or more traditional extemporary singer-poets called *poeti in ottava rima*. The *contrasto* was traditionally performed in informal convivial gatherings *a tavolino* (at the table) in peasant societies, but in the last decades it has become a theatrical performance in which the *poeti* increasingly perform *sul palco* (on stage) in front of an audience, in planned festivals.

My paper is intended to highlight the relevance of the visual dimension in a vocal extemporary performance whose codes are orally-aurally-visually transmitted, in which the interaction between the extemporary poets and the audience tend to condition, influence and sometimes determine, the development of the performance. In such a case, the audiovisual recording becomes an essential research tool allowing to "catch" the visual dimension of this context-sensitive performance in its multidimensionality and with all contextual dynamics that it implies.

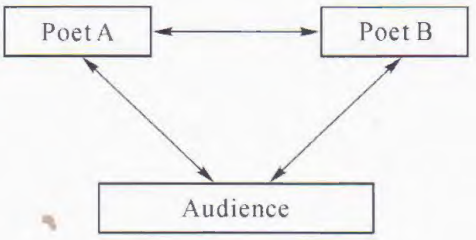
Keywords: extemporary poetry, audiovisual ethnomusicology, performance practice, research film, Tuscany, Italy

This research, based on the assumption that music is a form of communication,

is oriented towards an ethnography of musical performance. In the theoretical framework traced by Bauman (1975), the quality of the performance "resides in the interplay between communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of the participant, within the context of the particular situations" (Bauman 1975:302). Moreover, his viewpoint considers performance as offering "to the participants a special enhancement of experience, bringing with it a heightened intensity of communicative interaction which binds the audience to the performer in a way that is specific to performance as a mode of communication" (Bauman 1975:305). Communication in a "musical occasion" (Herndon 1971) implies interactions between individual singers, as well as between performers and listeners who, in certain circumstances, have an active role. For Herndon, "the occasion may be regarded as an encapsulated expression of the shared cognitive forms and values of a society, which includes not only the music itself but also the totality of associated behavior and underlying concepts. It is usually a named event with a beginning and an end, varying degrees of organization of activity, audience, performances, and location" (Herndon 1971:340).

Music making is above all a performative process in which motor behaviors, as well as social interactions, are involved in the musical action. Instrumental music is necessarily associated with musician's movements, since the musical instrument can be conceived as an extension of the musician's body. The relevance of the visual dimension is less evident, but equally important, in the case of apparently static performances, as in the case of vocal practices *a cappella* with the participation of two or more singers. In this form of vocal contest, interactions between the two singers and between the singers and the audience attending the performance usually occur, especially if improvisation plays the major role. The audience's behavior—through gestures, words, applause and laughter—is then an integral part of the performance context. These triangular interactions (see Scheme 1) in which the audience becomes a co-protagonist of the performance, tend to condition, influence and sometimes determine, the development and outcome of the performance.

Scheme 1. The triangular interaction between the two singer-poets and the audience during the *contrasto*



The use of audiovisual tools to carry on research oriented to an ethnography of musical performance can bring light to the ways non-musical elements in a performance occasion influence the outcome of a performance. In context-sensitive performances, such as in the present case study of the *contrasto*, film has contributed to the revealing of meaningful information related to the processes of interaction between performers and audience during an event with "dramaturgical" connotations. Regula Qureshi used the method of videographic notation to conduct a contextual analysis of the interaction between audience and musicians during the Pakistani *qawwali* performance and its impact on the musical structure (Qureshi 1986). According to Qureshi, music can be analyzed both in terms of sound structure and in terms of social and cultural context that gives meaning to that musical system. Therefore, it becomes a priority to observe and analyze all the contextual components of a composite musical performance, through which a social group enacts specific forms of interaction that give meaning to music.

An interesting case study is represented by the improvised singing of the Italian *poeti in ottava rima* (poets in octave rhyme) in which the interaction between two or more singer-poets, and between performers and listeners, becomes an essential part of the musical performance. The general term of *ottava rima*(octave rhyme) refers to both the poetic literary form and the folk tradition of singing improvising lyrics. The *ottava rima* is a rhyming stanza of Italian origin, consisting of a verse form of eight lines of hendecasyllables. Each stanza consists of three alternate rhymes and one double rhyme, following the scheme ABABABCC. The *ottava rima* is a challenge in which the singers must respect

strictly rules. The main rule concerns the structure of the poem that should follows the *obbligo di rima*(rhymes obliged) or *ottava incatenata* (chained octave): the first verse of the following octave must rhyme with the closing couplet of the previous octave, according to the rhyme scheme ABABABCC/CDCDCDEE, etc.

The *ottava rima* is not only the name of the metrical structure or rhyme scheme but also a form of extemporary sung poetry of oral tradition belonging to the agropastoralist culture of central Italy. Though today, the new generations of *poeti* are also artisans and merchants coming from the urban areas. *Cantar l'ottava*(singing the octave) by the *poeti a braccio* (extemporary poets), is a traditional vocal practice widespread in some rural communities in Tuscany, Lazio and Abruzzo.

In Ancient Greece, convivial competitions took place in which the poetic improvisation was expressed in *agoni* (challenges) during the *simposi*; the *simposio* was a convivial practice, which followed the banquet, during which diners drank and sang extemporary poems (*skólia*), a sort of call-and-response in which a banqueter improvised verses to which another replied. In China, most of the poets, including one of the most famous of them, the "immortal poet" Lǐ Bái (李白, 701—762, Tang Dynasty), used to practice poetic improvisation.

The octave poetry has been persisted, basically unchanged for seven centuries, from the Middle Ages to the present day: the *ottava popolare*(folk octave) preserves, intact, the metric structure of the *cantari* of the itinerant *cantambanchi* (charlatans) of the 14th century and the epic chivalric of the 16th century, such as the *Orlando Furioso* (1532) by Ludovico Ariosto and the *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581) by Torquato Tasso. The *ottava rima* is the product of a cultural exchange that occurred through the centuries between the "hegemonic" and "subaltern" cultures (Gramsci 1947), or what are called "great tradition" and "small tradition" (Redfield 1956, Burke 1978), referring respectively to oral and literate cultures in European history. The language used is basically the Italian language with a mixture of Tuscany dialect and courtly

terms derived from the archaic epic chivalry. A transcription of a Florentine *ottava was published as "Ottave alla Fiorentina" in Les consolations des misères de ma vie ou recueil de romances* (1781) by Jean Jacques Rousseau.

The folk octave, always sung, is presented in two forms: (1) the narrative *ottava*, performed by a single poet, focused on a story or an epic poem, and it is characterized by an unchanged text (often a broadside ballad) sung on stereotypical melodic formulas; (2) the improvised *ottava*, performed by two or more poets in the form of *contrasto* (poetry contest), in which the versification on a stereotypical melodic formula is extemporaneous. Traditionally, the *contrasto* was performed *a tavolino* (at the table) during the *veglie*, evening gatherings held in the farmhouses till the 1970s, or during convivial gatherings in the taverns or during the wedding dinners (now rarely) in the countryside. In recent years, these contests have been organized in the *casa del popolo* (lit. People's house) of some rural villages in Maremma, southern Tuscany, in which the poets perform on a stage in front of an audience. The place of the performance is significant. The *case del popolo*, widespread in almost all urban settlements in Tuscany, are social community centers which were created at the end of 19th century by the socialist party. Culturally, the *casa del popolo* represents the visibility of the socialist movement, its stability, unity and popular solidarity, a public demonstration of its ethical and technical capacity, the sense of deep local roots and memory retention. The *casa del popolo* also represents the secular counterpart of the catholic oratory host by the churches.

Other social occasions in which the performances of the *poeti in ottava rima* take place, but not in the form of *contrasto*, are the calendrical festivities such as the *Maggio* (lit. May). The *Maggio* or *Maggiolata*, taking place in the country villages around the cities of Grosseto, Siena and Arezzo, in Tuscany, is an itinerant ritual festivity whose origins date back to the ancient propitiatory rites, with apotropaic connotations, celebrated for the arrival of Spring. Between April 30th and May 1st, the *squadre* (teams) of *maggerini* (singers of *maggio*),

usually made up of 10/20 singers and musicians, all of them adorned with flowers and colors, roam the farms bringing their best wishes. The composition of the *squadre* has changed significantly over time, allowing the integration of women only in very recent times.

The ritual practice of the *Maggiolata* strictly follows some rules. The songs are performed outdoors at the farm by the *maggerini*, in front of the host family's house. In the *maggio*, the *poeta* (usually a male singer, but nowadays could be also a female singer) plays a central role. When entering the farm, the *poeta* sings in octaves asking for *permesso* (permission) and then, before leaving, they sing the *ringraziamento* (thanksgiving). Besides the *poeta*, the other two characters of the *maggio* are: the *alberaio* (tree man), who brings the blooming laurel twig symbol of *maggio*, and the *corbellaio* (basket man), who is committed to collecting and keeping the gifts and offerings made by farmers that will be later consumed in a common meal called *ribotta*.

We will analyze the form of the *contrasto in ottava rima* as a model of interaction between the singer-poets and these *poeti* and audience during the extemporary performance. The object of analysis will be not only the sung "text" but also the "context" with all those elements that are part of the performance poetry. To analyze the *contrasto* means considering the actions and interactions of all the subjects involved: the poets as well as the audience. The interaction between two poets (the proponent and an opponent) and between the poets and the audience is crucial to understand the interactive dynamics. The audience, in fact, participates actively at the performance with comments, clapping or laughing, determining the outcome of the challenge.

The *contrasto* is a theatrical performance in which the poet, as well as having vocal competence and mnemonic capability, is requested to have the histrionic ability to capture the attention of the audience, engaging them emotionally and appealing their sympathy. The involvement of the spectators is obtained by trying to establish a relationship with the public through gestures that

amplify the expressive potential of the word, marked by a declamatory vocal style. The main quality characterizing an experienced poet is dramatic ability and his poetic skill in keeping the audience as attentive as possible, and also satisfying their expectations.

The *contrasto* is a poetry contest in octave (*ottava rima*) between two or more singer-poets (*poeti a braccio*) in which it is the audience who propose a theme to develop based on two opposite characters that each poet should impersonate. The topic can be political (as communist vs. capitalist), satirical (as mother-in-law vs. daughter-in-law) or epic (as Dido vs. Aeneas).

The skill required to be a *poeta in ottava rima* is two fold: (1) comply with the formal rule of *ottave incatenate*(chained octaves): the poet who responds to his challenger is obliged to rhyme according with the last rhyme of the other poet (the scheme will be ABABABCC, CDCDCDEE, etc.) and (2) each poet must support his arguments on the topic assigned by the public.

All the *poeti in ottava rima* sing a fixed melodic formula, whose range is usually within a fifth (but always within an octave) of the diatonic scale, slightly differentiated according to the style of each singer. The performance alternates syllabic and melismatic sequences; the rhythm is free and follows the metric of the text, and the literary form (ABABABCC) does not match the musical form (ABCDA'B' C'D'). The improvisation is realized mainly in the verbal text level and only to a lesser extent in the musical form. An experienced singer-poet must master a personal stock of line and half-line formulas to use when needed.

From this point of view, the contrast in octave rhyme cannot be read only as an oral text, but must be considered more properly as a "dramatized" interactive extemporary performance. In the staged performance, the protagonists are both the poets and the audience having an active value in proposing and implementing the theme, and expressing their appreciation by clapping, laughing and commenting. In extemporaneous improvisations, the audience has the dual role of proponent of themes and (implicit) judge of the poetic duel.

In the light of these observations, therefore, we believe there are not two generative components of the *contrasto*, as suggested by the duality of opponents, but actually three, because there is no *contrasto* without the presence of an audience, not as indifferent, neutral, or merely a passive element, but also strongly involved in the generation and development of the performance.

In my research, the analysis of these interactions was conducted by the method of videographic transcription, which involves not only the transcription of the lyrics but also the most significant images of the poets and the audience and the description of their behaviors.

My field research was conducted mainly in Ribolla, a small village in Maremma (southern Tuscany), that hosts, each year, the *Incontri di poesia estemporanea*, a meeting of the most acclaimed *poeti in ottava rima* of central Italy. I had the opportunity to attend this festival in 2011 and in 2016, in which some of the most renowned poets of different ages, gender and social status took part. On those occasions, I made some video footage using two cameras, one fixed camera positioned at the center of the hall, shooting in front of the performers, the other placed on the stage, behind the poets, facing the audience. These two angles allowed the filming of both the *poeti* in "action" and the "reaction" of the audience (mostly composed of aged local people).

The staged performance of the *contrasto* in its theatrical dimension shows some codified rules and behaviors that govern the conduct of performance. Each contest starts with some required conventional procedures, starting from the singing of *ottave di saluto* (greeting octaves) used by all the participant singer-poets to greet the public and pay homage to the other poets. Sometimes, the poet pays tribute to the town that hosts him/her, praising the virtues of the citizens. The *ottave di saluto* mark the opening of the performative act.

The poetry contest is preceded by a selection of topics on which the poets will compete in *ottava rima*. It is the audience who chooses the topic that the poets will address in their poetic duel. This topic must include two (or more) opposing

characters that the poets must impersonate. The topic can be political (as America vs. Russia), satirical (as farmer vs. landowner) or epic (as Dido vs. Aeneas). A person of the organizing committee passes in the audience with a piece of paper and a pen to collect the proposals suggested by the audience (Figure 1-3).

Then, a person of the organization staff, acting as presenter, will draw the paper and announce to the public and the challenging poets the opposing characters they are demanded to impersonate during the poetic contest (Figure 4-6).



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

Domenico Gamberi, organizer of the festival of Ribolla, collects the proposals of the theme of poetic duel among the audience viewers (Figure 1-3). Then, a person in charge of the lottery reads to the contenders (Pietro De Acutis and Enrico Rustici) the piece of paper that reports the contrasto' s theme proposed by the public and assigns the roles to the singing challenge (Figure 4-6).

The following film excerpt shows the *contrast* "War and Peace" between two poets belonging to two different generations and from two distinct regions: the young Enrico Rustici (that represents the "pacifist") from Tuscany and the elder Pietro De Acutis (representing the "warlike") from Lazio (Figure 4-6). Once the role is attributed to the poets, the challenge begins with singing; as

reflected in the frame, the two contenders look at each other (Figure 7) and determine who should start: in this case the younger (Enrico Rustici) invites the opponent to start the *ottava* (Figure 8), but the elder (Pietro De Acutis) declines the offer and beckons him opponent to start (Figure 9).



Figure 7



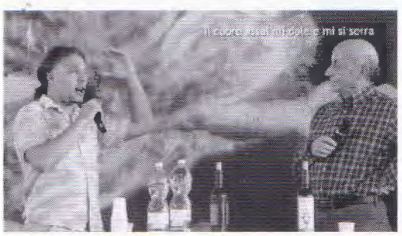
Figure 8



Figure 9

The following is a partial videographic transcription of the *contrasto* "War and Peace", by the *poeti* Enrico Rustici (ER), who personifies the "Peace", and Pietro De Acutis (PD), who personifies the "War", using an excerpt from the documentary *Cantar l'Ottava* shot by the author of this paper. ①

Table 1 Partial videographic transcription of the *contrasto* "War and Peace"

Timing	Images (frames)	Text (sung)	Text Form
12′37″		ER: *Il cuore assai mi dole e mi si serra* *il sentimento davanti al tuo arsenale* *tu che sei un cultore-e della guerra* *la porti nel confin 'nternazionale* *Ma il mio intuito vedete che un'erra* *dice che lui è uno schiavo del capitale* *la guerra rende i popoli più tristi* *ed è un bengodi per i capitalisti.* ②	 A B A B A B C C

① Note to the videographic transcription: in the "Text (sung)", I differentiated the transcription of the lyrics sung alternately by the two poets through the use of two different characters (normal and italic).

② My heart aches and closes/my feeling in front of your arsenal/you who are a lover of war/you bring the war in the international boundaries/But my intuition, you see, is not wrong/when I say he is a slave of the capital/The war makes sad the people/and is a bonanza for the capitalists.

(Continued)

Timing	Images (frames)	Text (sung)	Text Form
	applause		
13′17″		PD:	
		I risultati già la storia li ha visti	C
		la guerra forte sai è la panacea	D
		la Francia che ha vissuto giorni tristi	C
		quando il nemico in casa essa v'avea.	D
13′21″		*Reazionari quei preti quelli misti*	C
		scateronno la guerra di Vandea	D
		se avesser visto co' la lor'azione	E
		avremmo ancora il Papa ch'è padrone. ③	E
	applause-bravo!		
14′12″		ER:	
		Ma il risultato di quell'equazione	E
14′18″		*vinsero altri ma non cambiò il vento*	F
		*guarda all'Italia, tricolore in azione*	E
14′39″		*che'l Papa regna dentro il Parlamento.*	F

③ History has seen the outcomes/Sometimes, war is the panacea/France, which has experienced sad days/when it had the enemy at home/Reactionaries with the priests, those mixed ones/They have sparked the war of Vendee./If they had won by their action/we would still have the Pope as the ruler.

(Continued)

Timing	Images (frames)	Text (sung)	Text Form
	Laughs-applause		
14′45″		*Questa per noi è una costernazione*	E
		io nella pace invece mi ci metto	F
		pace in Italia, i preti assai lontano!	G
14′56″		*rompin le palle dentr'al Vaticano!* ④	G
	Bravo! prolonged applause		
15′07″		PD:	
		Tu metti all'ateo il ramo in mano	G
		ma quest'Italia che un tempo fu insana	H
		anche quello credente non fu vano	G
		che in un momento è uscito dalla tana.	H
		*Anche lui ebbe quel fucile in mano*	G
		ti parlo della guerra partigiana	H
		pur se passata, pur se è vetusta	I
		io la ritengo ancor una guerra giusta. ⑤	I

④ But the result of that equation/Other ones won, but the wind did not change/Look at Italy! its flag in action/but the Pope still reigns inside Parliament./This, for us, it is a constriction/I instead will seek peace/Peace in Italy, priests far away!/Let they break the balls inside the Vatican!

⑤ You put the branch in the hand of an atheist/but that Italy was once insane/also (the sacrifice of) the believer was not in vain/who in a moment came out of the den./He also had that gun in his hand/I speak of the partisan war/even if it is passed, even if it is antiquated/I still think it was a right war.

(Continued)

Timing	Images (frames)	Text (sung)	Text Form
15′50″	Thunderous and prolonged applause. 		

The improvisation technique of the two poets is very similar: the singing of couplets in alternating rhyme is done rather slowly and, at the end of the verse, the last syllables are prolonged. The video-recording highlights the technique used by both poets to expand the lapse of time between the fourth and the fifth verse of the stanza, prolonging the duration of the final tones, to save time in creating new lines; then there is an acceleration of time in rhyming couplets (called "*martellata*", lit. hammer blow), which is released at the close of each verse. The vocal style of De Acutis is highly melismatic, unlike the vocal style of Rustici, characterized by a syllabic style, with long pauses at the end of each sentence. Each *ottava* is sung in less than one minute, but during the performance, as the climax is growing, the tempo gradually increases like an *accelerando*. As the performance progresses, the involvement of the performers and the audience grows, communication takes place, and various level of interaction usually result (clapping, laughing, praising the *poeti*, etc.). The two contenders communicate among themselves through cues to coordinate their performance, especially at the end when glances and nods between them indicate the ending of the *contrasto*, when they sing alternately the two last stanzas.

As can be seen from the frames, the two opponents are watching each other with a sense of challenge, but then they turn to the public for a *captatio benevolentiae*. In cases like this, the singer relies on the feelings and some "resentments" of people. The critique of capitalism and anti-clerical sentiment,

for example, are some of the recurring literary *topoi* of the Tuscan *poeti in ottava rima*. Poets, in fact, are aware that these political issues collect the consent of "their" audience, made up mainly of people with a strong social connotation (proletarians) and political orientation (communist or social-democratic), who have experienced in first person the painful experience of the resistance and partisan struggles of the World War Ⅱ. As stated by Giovanni Kezich, "oral improvisation of the individual poet is nothing more than the focal point where memory content and collective travails emerge" (Kezich 1986: 24; translation by the author).

The contest generates a sort of complicity between the improvising poets that can be seen as a kind of "antagonistic cooperation" (Agamennone 2002: 200). The loser poet is the one who "lascia cadere la rima" (lit., drops the rhyme), but on stage this situation almost never happens. In fact, during their poetic challenge, the two opponents collaborate to support each other: if a poet realizes that the opponent is in trouble, he leaves rhymes easy to create (or in some cases he suggests the rhyme whispering it to the challenger), in order to have an immediate response by the opponent, but also to stimulate the public's attention that needs to be involved and urges the increasingly tight poetic dialogue. At the end, it will be the audience to judge which of the poets has better played the role assigned to him.

It is remarkable that, although it is a poetry contest between two (or more) contenders, the winner is not publicly declared at the end of the performance. In fact, the winner remains implicit: it is left the audience to decide who the winner is through his reactions (applause, laughs, comments, shouts, etc.). All these dynamics of *interactions* and *reactions* become "visible" at the eye of the camera.

Conclusions

The *contrasto in ottava rima* is a performance that has a certain physical and psychological effect on the audience, and a kind of interaction takes place. The

sound recording and verbal description show their limits to depict a living and "alive" tradition such as the *contrasto in ottava rima*, that is configured not only as a form of "oral literature" but as a performance practice in which different involved subjects could be observed. The concept of "text", both verbal and musical, becomes complementary to a poetic-music performance that tends to take a dramatic form in which the social "actors" are both the extemporaneous poets and the audience. An audiovisual record as a methodological choice and not simply a technical device for fieldwork, allows to conduct an ethnography of performance in which it makes visible the actions of both performers and audience and the interaction between them.

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拍摄歌唱比赛的语境：以托斯卡纳省（意大利）的一个即兴诗歌演唱比赛为例

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【摘要】“*Contrasto*”（粗俗闹剧）是一种意大利的传统表演形式，在托斯卡纳南部的马里马乡村地区广为流传。这种表演由一种被称为“*poeti in ottava rima*”的声乐对抗赛构成，通常在两个以上的传统即兴式歌手兼诗人之间进行。在农民社会中，“*contrasto*”一般以一种名为“*tavolino*”的、传统的、非正式的愉悦性聚餐形式进行。但在过去的几十年中，它已经逐渐演变为一种在节日里向观众展演的舞台戏剧表演。

本文旨在强调一种存在于“视听说”三维传送信息的声乐即兴演唱中的视觉导向性关联。在这种关联中，即兴诗人与观众间的互动关系既取决于环境，也影响着，有时甚至还决定着表演的发展进程。在这种情况下，视听记录就成为一种可以在多维度中通过使用一切潜在的语境动态，来捕捉连续性表演中视觉部分的基本研究工具。

【关键词】即兴诗歌；影像民族音乐学；表演实践；科研影片；托斯卡纳；意大利