“O’ Giglio e Paradiso”: An Italian-American Musical Classic

Joey Skee (July 09, 2008)

What the Brooklyn giglio feast and an obscure musician might tell us about Italian-American culture.

Today is the opening of the annual Brooklyn giglio feast in honor of the fifth century bishop St. Paulinus of Nola (Naples province, Campania), introduced by Nolani immigrants to the United States in 1903. The contemporary Williamsburg festa features approximately 125 men lifting and carrying a multi-storied tapering spire, known as the giglio (lily), or, more accurately, u’ gigl’, consisting of a painted papier-mâché façade attached to an aluminum frame. The feast’s dramatic climax is the meeting of the tower and a second ceremonial structure—a boat, complete with mast, sail, and

rigging—at the intersection of Havemeyer and North 8th Streets in an enacted evocation of a mytho-historic moment when the jubilant townspeople welcomed home their manumitted bishop by waving lilies.

Music is a vital component of the Brooklyn celebration, so much so that it is said the giglio tower is “danced.” A singer and brass band ride on the tower platform and inside the boat, respectively. The “lifters” carry the giglio and boat down the streets not in a continuous parade but in a series of approximately three minute “lifts” led by a capoparanza (crew leader). The signal for the men to lift the structures in unison is encoded in a seven note crescendo of the song “O’ Giglio e Paradiso [2]” (The Giglio of Paradise).

Trumpeter Phil Caccavalle and clarinetist Antonio Rosalia (1895-1970) composed the music in 1957, and Pasquale Ferrara wrote the Neapolitan lyrics the following year. The new song made its début in 1959. Up until that point, a new feast song was composed annually, in keeping with the tradition introduced by immigrants in 1903. Inventing a new tradition of a single, familiar song played from year to year occurred as the neighborhood was experiencing a series of dramatic changes (see my article for more on this topic).

The song was transformed into an auditory symbol for the community, summing up in a concise and emotionally charged way a series of associations and memories about the feast and, by extension, the imagined community. As one man told me:

You get a feeling when you hear the music. When they play the giglio song [2], you start bouncing with the music. It goes through you. You can’t fight it. It’s a feeling that automatically comes to you. It gets in your blood.

All this can be achieved with just a few notes, as when people beep on their car horn the seven note crescendo as they drive by or when trumpeter Joe Speruta had the song’s musical notes tattooed on his arm a few years ago.

The song soon traveled beyond the neighborhood. In the early 1960s, Ferrara’s son, singer Salvatore “Tutti” recorded the song on a 45 RPM (Variety Records, #856, MTC-1) with the Ralph Tuorto Orchestra. In 1964, the song traveled to Italy, where Neapolitan singer Gino Maringola [3] cut his own version (Universal, PH 103), which was, in turn, sold in New York City. WMCA-AM deejay Joe O’Brian gave the song considerable airplay on his popular radio show before and during the feast, subsequently re-releasing the original recording on his collection Joe O’Brien’s All-Time Great Italian Hits (Baci Records, CS 1691). As an instrumental, “O’ Giglio e Paradiso [2]” has entered the religious processional repoitoire for festa bands throughout the New York metropolitan area, and as far west as Chicago.

As the two performing ensembles ensconced on the ceremonial structures move closer, the joyous cacophony that is the soundtrack of public display events of this size fills the Brooklyn streets like a dissonant summer symphony scored by Charles Ives. I can’t help but imagine what guitarist Marco Cappelli or Vinicio Capossela, whose concerts last week in New York reworked folk and pop musics from the Italian and Italian-American repertoires, would make of “O’ Giglio e Paradiso [2].” Imagining the sounds in my mind’s ear reminds me of a forgotten version of giglio music that remains shrouded in mystery.

When I was researching “O’ Giglio e Paradiso [2]” in the mid 1980s for my master’s theses, I was given the 1983 album “Giglio Carnivale” (United International Records, SUI 2003) by Damian and the Criterions. The liner notes (penned by a Salvatore Carino of the National Association of Italian-American Artists) were pure hyperbole, crediting “Damiano”—“a product of New York’s Italo-American community, [who] grew up with the Giglio”—with creating “an instant ethnic hit” with the 1963 “modernized Giglio song called Giglio 108, also known as Giglio Wobble.” The same—“an instant ethnic smash”— was said to be true of two other songs on the album.

The music was certainly like none performed at any American giglio feast, or, for that matter, in Nola. The music obviously did not emerge out of the Italian-American giglio tradition and was not suited to “dancing” the structure. The liner note’s incessant hype billed the album’s first song “Gee Leo USA (Giglio USA)” as a “blend of new-wave punk-rockabilly rock Italian style” and, I might add, just a tinge of schlocky Italian wedding band music.

Nobody I interviewed about giglio music in the States and Italy knew anything about Damian and the Criterions. I had collected scores of American giglio sheet music dating back to the 1920s and never came across them. I couldn’t even figure out a suitable footnote for the group in my thesis. I always wondered who they were.

A quick google search revealed that Damian and the Criterions was a one-man band—Damian Vecchioli of New Jersey—and that his 1982 album “Avant Garde” is a cult classic. Not much info on “Giglio Carnivale.” The meager information found on the Net leaves Damian’s story relatively untold.

Yet his somewhat messy intrusion in the history of the giglio feast and its music alerts to the simple fact that “Italian-American culture” is not some static entity hauled over in suitcases by mythic immigrant nonni and preserved in musty curio cabinets in the Italian-American museum of nostalgia and lethargy. It has always been an impure hybrid transformed, subverted, forgotten, and reclaimed by the likes of film directors and academics, street corner gavons and boardroom CEOs, Italian musicians and bloggers, so that we see ourselves as refracted reflections in funhouse mirrors of the mind.

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