

Book Review

Simona Frasca. 2014. *Italian Birds of Passage: The Diaspora of Neapolitan Musicians in New York*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 263pp. ISBN 978-1-137-32241-8 (hbk)

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During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, America's "New Immigration" period, men and women arriving from Italy constituted the largest group of arrivals. These newcomers needed paid employment, and the *padrone* system of professional agents acting on behalf of skilled and unskilled migrants, and employers alike, arose as a result. Simona Frasca reminds us that a convoluted network of labour brokers was not the only creation of the Italians on American soil at this time. Frasca argues that the performance and expansion of southern Italian culture is the forgotten history of this migration and her publication, which is part of Macmillan's Italian and Italian American Studies series, rectifies this. Frasca charts the Neapolitan songs of New York, asserting that they belong in the same arena as jazz, rhythm and blues, rock'n'roll, and other universally familiar genres born out of the migration of people from Europe and Latin America and significant enough to have made inroads into the twentieth-century American music scene and beyond.

Frasca's is the musical narrative for the Italian immigrants whose poor social status has been widely documented. *Italian Birds of Passage* reclaims the "primitive" elements that fuelled anti-Italian prejudice at the end of the nineteenth century as the unique artistry of Italian Americans. American newspaper accounts at this stage typically spoke of Italian brigands, easily identifiable with dangerous characteristics, passion, jealousy and aggressive physicality, to reinforce notions of racial inferiority. These stereotypes could be, and were, weakened when viewed in the context of Italian art, now no longer barbarous but poetic. Through a series of individual case studies, Frasca reinvents the New Immigration, presenting it as a most crucial time, when, rather than leaving Italy behind, migrants came to highlight their homeland on the map, safeguard their musical traditions and use culture to

introduce a level of civility that countered the vindictive and brutal Italian-American promoted by popular literature, entertainment and journalism.

Frasca's focus is music coming out of Naples, one of the busiest ports of departure from Italy, a major centre for music-publishing, and a place whose geography, she argues, is made audible in song. Further defence of representing Italy through this provincial example is Frasca's clarification that, in the early twentieth century, ideas of an Italian identity were not terribly meaningful, since, among the people who lived there, ethnicity was regional instead of national. People from Sicily self-identified as Sicilians, people from Abruzzo were Abruzzese, and so on. Indeed for some, it was only through migration, that they discovered they were Italian at all. Yet Neapolitan song was understood by nearly all of those who migrated from Italy and, in seeking a common cultural connection in their new country, they bought records of Neapolitan repertoire and tickets to see Neapolitan artists on tour, which further spread this music amongst emigrants in America. Even today, Frasca maintains there is common confusion over the difference between songs labelled Italian as opposed to Neapolitan.

In this instance, the birds of passage are the producers, performers and publishers who not only travelled to America, but crossed and re-crossed the Atlantic Ocean, making the journey with Neapolitan song via the harbour of New York, during the period 1895–1940. The theme of returning home is complex and, as Frasca admits, deserving of its own separate study. Yet time is given here to acknowledging that, for many of the Neapolitan publishers who faced social prejudice in North America, the arrival of American music in southern Italy was the “true invasion” taking place. Given that this is the story of a specific community at a set time, birds of passage is an interesting metaphor in that it is globally relevant for the infinite migratory societies maintained by music. In Frasca's use however, the “birds” also express that ambivalence rarely discussed in works on popular music diasporas, but which migrants often felt towards the homeland that they repeatedly returned to, either physically or emotionally. One such migratory bird here, immigrant comedian Giuseppe De Laurentiis, for instance, composed a virtuosic piece—published in the book in its original Italian and in translation—which describes the experience of living in a hostile New York. Yet, despite making a name through the subject matter of exile, De Laurentiis chose to move home after a short time rather than to remain in America. Originating as a research project in Tuscany and first appearing as an Italian edition four years earlier, Frasca's monograph has itself taken flight with this American edition, modified from the original as the author negotiates the binary identities not only of her subject, but also of her audiences, “at home” in Italy and elsewhere.

Frasca's archive consists of place and process. She constructs a multifaceted soundscape, from notations, press clippings, web pages and "slender" biographies. At the very core of the book, on its middle pages, are selected images of peoples, playbills and song scores, which bring the history a lot closer than the at-times dense and specialist text on the surrounding pages. For the migrant, home can exist and relocate in music, but place is discussed very specifically. The book includes detailed addresses and locations, including the nine main areas of settlement for the newly arrived Italian. Alongside a litany of male case studies—which reads rather like a who's who of the early Italian-American music scene, "Caruso and Armstrong" (72), "Eduardo Migliaccio and Tony Ferrazzaro" (81)—Frasca considers those hidden musicians, women and African American artists, who had a huge influence on the burgeoning Italian sound in New York, but were less public as performers and personalities than their white male peers.

An inevitable sense of loss inhabits the wider narrative of migration. Frasca adds Italian examples to those famous already in relation to Jewish and Irish narratives, who lost their family names in order to *become* American: Donato Casolaro immediately became Dan Casler on arrival in New York. And sometimes not the name but the ethnicity of the star is the disappearing act. In researching the case of Nina de Charry, Frasca found her in no Italian sources but, instead, in the archives of American history. For the many forgotten in Italy and unsettled in America, Frasca goes further and describes their disappearance of adulthood: albeit rather awkwardly, like an adolescent severing the "symbolic umbilical cord...the immigrant individual sometimes lives in a painful limbo in which certainties do not exist" (175). Such grand metaphors appear throughout the work and often serve to distract from the point, rather than elucidate it. In this moment, we are left wondering for whom it could be said that certainties do exist, whereas, in an earlier chapter, we are introduced to the Victor Talking Machine, a "strange new technology, like a Martian still waiting to dress itself in clothing that would prove it needed to stay on Earth" (49). The language is poetic, so not entirely illogical given the whole purpose of the publication is to view the situation of Italian migration through a new cultural lens. Nevertheless, such rhetoric jars as it diverts away from the main thrust of the argument.

Ultimately, the role of music as comment, dialogue and reaction, itself disappears, as a final chapter on record labels, producers, orchestras and directors moves us into the realm of commodity, business and sound ownership. This ties in with an earlier focus on technological developments—the rise of the gramophone over the phonograph, because it was on the former that recordings of Italian opera were played—when Frasca deletes the person of Enrica Caruso, the Neapolitan tenor, altogether: "Caruso was the Victor Com-

pany” (49). In returning to the American record industry at the close of the book, we celebrate the role of consumerism for preserving certain traditions of Neapolitan song, but are left considering a dynamic, malleable music that has become subject to new controls and is represented on record by the same pieces, orchestras and conductors appearing time and again. Frasca describes the taming of her wild birds as foreseeable, “subjecting them to that phenomenon of globalization in which we are currently still immersed” (162), but provides solidarity with other diasporic groups by not creating a linear voyage, rather a to-ing and fro-ing event that can never really have a final destination.

Italian Birds of Passage follows the creation of Italian-American cultural identity and is a valuable addition to the narrative of popular music and migration within the protracted experience of the immigrant. For Simona Frasca, the sense of a diasporic space as one constructed by migrants alongside a native group, gives way to an understanding of, not a space at all, but rather more a seam woven between two distinct cultures; a host, and a guest, whose artists regularly cross back and forth between two distinct places—migratory birds who leave and return at regular intervals and are not driven by a primary ambition to settle. In this analogy, music is the thread, the “channel of communication” (8), which retains the immigrant’s identity and draws them into a new state. Frasca backs up her study with detailed musical descriptions, structures, lyrics and notations, but the Neapolitan music itself acts as a character in its own right, achieving also a renewal and migration away from live public performance, onto disc, and into domestic use and the music market.