Stories and Memories of Sinti Estraixaria: A Look at the Past and Present of a Dynasty of Musicians

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Abstract

Sinti *Estraixaria* ("Austrians") represent one of the minorities that make up the peculiar cultural landscape of Trentino-Alto Adige, in north-eastern Italy. In this border area – the last western offshoot of what was once the Austro-Hungarian Empire – Sinti families, characterised by a certain degree of mobility, have progressively settled over the last two centuries, while continuing in part to practice crafts of an itinerant nature. Among these, music has traditionally played a prominent role, consolidating itself as a knowledge that – handed down from father to son – has given rise to veritable "dynasties" of players. Between the Sixties and the Eighties of the 20th century, the ingenuity of certain family musical ensembles ensured that the "craft of the musician" took shape as a "profession" – with even fortunate results for certain periods – although then the world of *Gage*, with its "rules" and bureaucracy, presented these protagonists with challenges that were in some ways insurmountable.

Today, music for young and old Sinti who in the meantime have become gardeners, waiters, iron pickers and mechanics, remains, rather than a profession, a heritage from the past. However, music contributes strongly to their own identity construction: although the moments of shared musical practice have become more sparse – more and more reserved for spectacular contexts in the sphere of a few events very often organised by the Sinti cultural associations themselves – a dialogical dimension nevertheless remains alive, which focuses on the evocation of an almost "mythical" past populated by exceptional musicians. Starting from the dialogue with some of these witnesses of ancient and modern times, a broader family and community history deeply linked to musical activity will be reconstructed; specifically, the present paper will focus on how the protagonists of said story, members of one of the most musically active families in the last sixty years, keep alive the memory of their musical past and constantly con-

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front the latter with their present. At the same time, the paper aims to highlight how their musical competence matured within such a "community of practice" (see Wenger 1999), and the dialogical dimension that music is able to stimulate, come to configure themselves as key instruments also from the point of view of the analysis and interpretation of sound documents from the past, making ethnomusicological investigation itself a field of exchange, knowledge and collaboration.

Italian Abstract

Storie e memorie dei sinti *estraixaria*: uno sguardo al passato e al presente di una dinastia di musicisti

I sinti *estraixaria* ("austriaci") rappresentano una delle minoranze che compongono il peculiare paesaggio culturale del Trentino-Alto Adige, nell'Italia nord-orientale. In quest'area di confine – ultima propaggine occidentale di quello che fu l'Impero austro-ungarico – le famiglie sinte, caratterizzate da una certa mobilità, si sono progressivamente insediate nel corso degli ultimi due secoli, continuando in parte a praticare mestieri di natura itinerante. Tra questi, la musica ha tradizionalmente avuto un ruolo di primo piano, consolidandosi come un sapere che – tramandato di padre in figlio – ha dato origine a vere e proprie "dinastie" di suonatori. Tra gli anni Sessanta e gli anni Ottanta del Novecento, l'ingegno di alcune formazioni musicali familiari ha fatto sì che il "mestiere del musicista" si configurasse come una "professione" – con risultati anche fortunati, per alcuni periodi – sebbene poi il mondo dei *gage*, con le sue "regole" e la sua burocrazia, abbia posto questi protagonisti di fronte a sfide per certi versi insormontabili.

Oggi la musica, per i sinti giovani e anziani che nel frattempo sono diventati operai, giardinieri, camerieri, raccoglitori di ferro vecchio e meccanici, rimane, più che una professione, un'eredità del passato. Tuttavia, essa contribuisce fortemente alla loro costruzione identitaria: sebbene i momenti di pratica musicale condivisa siano diventati più radi – sempre più riservati a contesti spettacolari nell'ambito di pochi eventi molto spesso organizzati dalle stesse associazioni culturali sinte – rimane comunque viva una dimensione dialogica che si concentra sull'evocazione di un passato quasi "mitico", popolato da musicisti d'eccezione. Partendo dal dialogo con alcuni di questi testimoni di tempi antichi e moderni, si ricostruirà una più ampia storia familiare e comunitaria profondamente legata all'attività musicale; nello specifico, il presente lavoro si concentrerà su come i protagonisti di questa storia, membri di una delle famiglie musicalmente più attive degli ultimi sessant'anni, mantengano viva la memoria del loro passato musicale e lo confrontino costantemente con il loro presente. Allo stesso tempo, il contributo intende evidenziare come la competenza musicale maturata all'interno di tale "comunità di pratica" (cfr. Wenger 1999), e la dimensione dialogica che la musica è in grado di stimolare, vengano a configurarsi come strumenti chiave anche dal punto di vista dell'analisi e dell'interpretazione di documenti sonori del passato, rendendo l'indagine etnomusicologica stessa un terreno di collaborazione, conoscenza e scambio.

In today's Trentino-Alto Adige, a territory located on the north-eastern border of the Italian peninsula, the Sinti represent one of the historical minorities, although not yet officially recognised as such. Their families have in fact been present in this geographical area for several generations, and according to Leonardo Piasere ([2004] 2021: 19), who reports that between the 19th and 20th centuries groups of Austrian and German

origin (*Sinti Estraixaria*, *Krasaria*, *Gaćkane*) settled in north-eastern Italy, several Sinti boast ancient Austrian and more generally "Austro-Hungarian" ancestry – as also recalled by some of their surnames, which are German or of clearly Germanic origin.

The research that led me to approach the cultural world of the Sinti in this region actually began in the archives. In 2017, I became interested in the musical practices of Roma and Sinti in Italy – a field of research that has been investigated very little in my country despite the presence of even ancient communities – and I searched for historical recordings attesting to Romani vocal and/or instrumental performances in what is considered the most important database of music of oral tradition in Italy, namely the Archivi di Etnomusicologia (AEM) of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia (Rome). Among the many collections – that result from research campaigns that have taken place since the late 1940s – I was able to isolate five whose tracks were attributable to Roma or Sinti performers. To one of these (collection 093) – particularly relevant because it contains recordings made by Diego Carpitella and Giorgio Nataletti on the occasion of the first international pilgrimage of nomads that took place in Pomezia (Rome, 1965) under the pontificate of Paul VI – I then dedicated a large part of my doctoral thesis, articulating the entire work around a dialogue between past and present, historical recordings and the voices of contemporary witnesses.

It was while listening to the tracks of the collection 093 – for each of which 40-second snippets are available online –[1] that I first encountered the *Estraixaria* ("Austrians"). These Sinti define themselves by referring to the territories they inhabited and within which they moved: in the metadata of the audio tracks in this collection,[2] which in themselves contain rather scanty information, the attribution of the performances to "members of the Histraiharia [or 'Hestraiharia'] tribe, from Bolzano"[3] appears with some frequency.[4] This annotation is curious since it is also applied – as I later ascertained – to

[1] Listen specifically, to the snippets of the two tracks that will be discussed in this article: Nataletti and Carpitella 1965a and 1965b.

[2] These data sheets – which can be viewed on the Accademia di Santa Cecilia website (https://bibliomediateca.santacecilia.it/bibliomediateca/cms.view?munu_str=0_1_0_5&physDoc=8812&pflag=personalizationFindEtnomusicologia&level=raccolta&numDoc=347&l=EN, accessed 27 February 2025) – contain information derived from the cross-referencing of documentary sources available in the Archivi di Etnomusicologia – mainly information taken from the catalogue *Folk documenti sonori* (Documentazione e Studi RAI 1977: 309–312), which in turn probably originated from notes compiled during the recording phase, but of which there is unfortunately no longer any trace in the documentary holdings. Secondly, the data sheets may contain additional information from listening to the audio tracks. The filling in of the data sheet and the digitalisation of the tracks originally recorded on magnetic tape – not only for collection 093 but for all the collections stored in the database of the Archivi di Etnomusicologia – were carried out by Walter Brunetto, an ethnomusicologist and collaborator of the Accademia.

[3] All translations from Italian and Romanes are the author's unless stated otherwise.

[4] See the data sheets of audio tracks 1–7, 11 and 16–20. The reference to the Sinti Estraixaria also appears in tracks 21, 22 and 23, where it would seem that performers from different backgrounds played together ("members of the Hestraiharia tribe [Bolzano], and other French, Italian, Spanish and German members").

chants in the Slovene and Serbo-Croatian (languages that the Estraixaria do not normally speak) or to performances that in any case refer – even from what one perceives at first listening – to quite diversified musical settings. To "put things in order," it was therefore necessary to move from the archive to the field, and it was here that, thanks to my interlocutors' initial involvement in the philological investigation of sound documents, I came into contact with a world full of fascination and stories linked to their musical past.

Earlier studies, such as Tauber 2006, have only hinted at the musical practices of Sinti Estraixaria in part (see below), mainly investigating other crucial aspects of their culture such as the flight marriage, the concept of "respect" and the relationship with ancestors – a topic, the latter, also masterfully developed in Williams' ([1993] 2020) work on the French Mānuš of the northern Massif Central. Instead, this contribution intends to focus on the musical practices of the Estraixaria, highlighting the use of shared listening – between researcher and research protagonists – as a methodology of investigation. In this specific case, sharing the listening of historical recordings proved fruitful both in terms of interpreting documents from the past and facilitating ethnographic dialogue concerning the present of community members as well.

In the following pages, I will highlight some key moments from my dialogue with members of Radames Gabrielli's family and delve into certain aspects of the subsequent analysis of the recordings under investigation. A musician born in Bolzano in 1958, Radames represents in his family the fourth generation of those born in these territories: his great-grandfather was born in Laces, in the Lower Vinschgau, while his ancestors – originally called Adelsburg – came from the Austrian town Kremsmünster. On both his father's and mother's side, his relatives were mostly musicians (Radames Gabrielli, interview by the author, 3 August 2021). Son of the great violinist "Balino," one of the founders of the historic musical group Figli del Vento ("Sons of the Wind," see below), Radames played for decades with his father and his brothers Gianfranco aka "Memè" and Armando aka "Ves" in the family band I Sinti del Tzardas. Mirko – a second cousin and brother-in-law of Radames, since he married his sister Liliana, known as "Ala" – also dedicated his life to music, and his voice will appear in the following pages. Finally, the testimonies of younger musicians will also be included: Robert "Sereno" Gabrielli, a guitarist born in 1981 and son of the guitarist "Ves" Gabrielli, and Lahi "Lucky" Colombo Gabrielli, son of the singer and violinist "Memè" Gabrielli. Lucky, born in 1978, has a real talent for music and is currently a soloist on both the violin and guitar (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. "Respect & Plurality 2022." From left to right: Matthew (Radames's son), Lucky, Sereno and Ves (photograph by the author, 26 March 2022).

From the Sounds of the Past to the Voices of the Present

In August 2018, I moved to Bolzano, initially for circumstances unrelated to my doctoral research, although the South Tyrolean capital itself later became my main field of investigation. At the time, I had already carried out a preliminary perusal of the recordings contained in the 093 collection and the materials accompanying it;[5] I had also conducted some summary research on the composite community inhabiting these territories: Sinti who identify themselves in different self-denominations,[6] among whom the Estraixaria – repeatedly and erroneously cited in the collection's data sheets as Histraiharia/Hestraiharia – are in the majority. Musical activity is still a widespread practice among the Sinti populating the region and among the Estraixaria in particular, although mostly reduced to spectacular contexts and in any case to a few annual events very

[5] In addition to the data sheets, there are in fact several pictures taken by Diego Carpitella inside the Pomezia camp. These have been digitised and can be consulted at the following link by typing 'Raccolta 93' in the search box: https://bibliomediateca.santacecilia.it/bibliomediateca/cms.view?munu_str=0_1_0_1&numDoc=17 (accessed 27 February 2025).

[6] The marriages between Sinti belonging to groups scattered throughout Northern Italy have meant that the regional territory has been populated, over time, by a variegated community whose members identify themselves in various self-denominations. As a result, the Sinti groups themselves present in this geographical area, as in other parts of Italy, do not define precise and isolated assemblies but are rather configured as "a kind of network of families, which interact variously among themselves" (Piasere [2004] 2021: 68).

often organised by the same Sinti cultural associations to raise public awareness. At first glance, the role that music plays for these Sinti today is quite different than in the past, when it traditionally represented one of the main sources of livelihood for Sinti families: even today, old people tell of how in the past music was used to earn a living, playing outside the houses of the *Gage*[7] and learning to handle instruments from a very early age.

Today, outside sporadic public performances – which sometimes include practice moments a few days before the performance to brush up the pieces of the repertoire – musical practice in the family environment is limited to festive events, funeral ceremonies and learning moments. While in the context of private parties live music is nowadays increasingly being replaced by karaoke, for funerals the tradition of playing music to honour the deceased remains, either in church – if he or she was of Catholic faith – or at the cemetery, for Catholic and/or Evangelical faith. Regarding learning, young people who show an interest in instrumental practice (mostly the guitar) become familiar with the instruments of their parents, grandparents and uncles, which are always at hand. However, if even their parents and grandparents have already become labourers, gardeners, waiters, old iron pickers and mechanics, the new generations generally do not view music as a possible full-time job as it was – for certain periods – for their ancestors, and therefore their assiduity in practising also suffers. The learning itself is an exercise that mostly takes place in solitude: an experienced player shows the first chords or musical phrasing – depending on whether the apprentice's vocation is as an accompanist or soloist – for the study of a piece and only when the young boy has practised enough to learn them will the "maestro" show him the rest. Boys are generally not allowed to perform in public with adults, but it may happen that they are called on stage to perform a song once they have learnt it. Men's musical ensembles, for their part, are always family ensembles and have a fluid nature: as far as I have been able to observe, their composition is the result of contingencies of the moment, ranging from personal availability to more or less good relations with family members, from the need to have a little extra financial income to the renunciation of a concert performance because one has suffered a bereavement, thus in respect for the dead. This is why musical ensembles are variable in their numerical composition, but also regarding the musicians that make them up, who are in fact replaceable with other relatives.

My relationship with some Estraixaria musicians began when I met Radames Gabrielli, president of the association Nevo Drom ("New Road") and the main promoter of concerts and events involving musicians mostly from the provinces of Trento and Bolzano. In March 2019, I had gone to attend a concert to which Radames had invited me

[7] This is term by which Sinti and Roma define non-Sinti and non-Roma (masculine gaǵó, feminine gaǵí, masculine and feminine plural gaǵé) – a word that condenses "the expression of otherness that individual Roma communities have constructed over time, the expression of not being Roma or rather not belonging to the Romani dimension" (Piasere [2004] 2021: 27). In this paper, the word will appear in the form Gage (gàǵe), which is the one commonly used among the Sinti in Northern Italy.

and which was held in the central and famous Piazza Walther. It was the final show of the 3rd edition of "Respect & Plurality," an event organised by Nevo Drom, that year in collaboration with the Alexander Langer Foundation, as part of the 15th anti-racism week. On stage, some musicians from his family were performing songs from their traditional repertoire, when at one point the leader of the band, seeing his cousin passing by, announced in a joking tone: "Now I'm going to do a nice song dedicated to a fan of mine. . . A beautiful song from her times, when we were. . . she knows where we were – our places – [she knows] the Sinti we were." To my surprise, I immediately recognised that song: it was a more rhythmic, modern version of "Prekarik u pani" (Nataletti and Carpitella 1965b) – "a song that will be two hundred years old," as the Sinti use to say, and which was also recorded in Pomezia in 1965, becoming the second audio track of the collection 093.

This occurrence unexpectedly allowed me to glimpse a *fil rouge* between the recordings I had found in the archive and the ethnographic present. I was therefore all the more convinced that engaging in dialogue with the witnesses of the present – Sinti and Roma, whose help was, moreover, fundamental in order to begin to orientate myself in the heterogeneity of languages, genres and styles that characterised the AEM's collection 093 – was the key to beginning to make the documents of the past "speak" without yet foreseeing that my interlocutors themselves might also be depositaries of a direct memory of the 1965 pilgrimage. This is precisely what emerged when, for the first time, I listened with Radames Gabrielli to the incipit of a particular version of Vittorio Monti's "Ciarda" recorded in Pomezia (track 1, Nataletti and Carpitella 1965a):

> [The musician who is playing] could be my father. . . In Bolzano, these [kind of] songs were performed by my father, my cousin or my uncles. . . I was also in Pomezia and I remember some things: there were so many Sinti from all over Europe. . . I remember a little bit, plus [my relatives] told me about it. . . My whole family was there. . . That time it was Bruno Nicolini, the priest [who organised the gathering], and they paid for everything – the journey, the food: everything. They also put up tents, but military ones – you know the big old ones: they put up a lot of those because many [people] came from far away without caravans. We went with the caravan and half of us slept in tents anyway. . . I was seven years old – about eight. . . There, the musicians were my brother, my father, my uncles and my cousin – from Bolzano. Then there were those from Germany – like Schnuckenack. . . [8] – and the French, who played very well. . . I remember the music was beautiful. . . At that time, everyone in my family was a professional musician. Then, when we went away from Pomezia, when we returned to Bolzano, [my relatives] created the music ensemble I Figli del Vento. (Radames Gabrielli, interview by the author, 26 April 2019)

This beginning of Radames' of account represents an initial narration of the Pomezia gathering from an insider's point of view, crucial in linking the micro-history of the

[8] Franz "Schnuckenack" Reinhardt (1921–2006) was a very well-known and appreciated musician, especially among Sinti of German and Austrian origin, who are still particularly fond of him, as they are towards his more famous relative Django Reinhardt.

Gabriellis to that historical event. At the same time, however, it also represented the incipit of an ethnographic dialogue that gradually highlighted the importance of a narrative dimension which through the evocation of the musical past of a dynasty of musicians, constantly contributes to the construction of their own individual and collective identity in the present.

Stories and Memories

"The Gabriellis, the Adelsburgs, were born with the violin: the violin was [already] in the bed!" This is how Mirko, born in 1944, begins to recount his youth. He too, like his father, started playing the violin at a very young age: Sinti learned – and still learn – on their own, "because the violins were there. So you took this violin and tried: *cla-cla-clac*, *cla-cla-clac*, and so you went on. Like these boys, these young men here, with the guitars: they take the guitars they know nothing, after a month they know everything!" "Everyone plays here," adds his wife Ala.[9] The Gabrielli family in fact represents a true "community of practice" (Wenger 1999) in which musical activity was raised to a professional level thanks to the skills and resourcefulness of some of its best musicians. And although, as time progressed, the "craft of the musician" has been combined – if not entirely replaced – with other jobs, it can be said that even today a considerable part of the men in this large family practice singing or can play the guitar and/or violin.[10]

Some of these violin and guitar players experienced a certain fame between the 1960s and the 1980s, when Radames' father also performed in the family musical ensembles. Archiglio Pietro, known as "Balino" among the Sinti and "Piero" among the Gage, was one of the main protagonists of the "golden age" of the family's musical career: a man of great inventiveness, painter, poet, magician, he is remembered with love and respect as one of the most virtuoso violinists in South Tyrol.[11] A leading figure in

[9] Mirko Gabrieli and Liliana "Ala" Gabrielli, interview by the author on 31 March 2022.

[10] Despite the fact that the musician's profession has established itself as a traditionally male profession and that music in general is still today an activity mostly practised by men, Radames Gabrielli often remembers that at the time of the family ensemble I Sinti del Tzardas, two of his sisters also performed with the group, "la Cinzia" as second voice and "la Tundra" as leading vocalist. In addition, digging into their memories, Radames and Mirko recount that to their grandmother used to play the Tyrolean zither – an ancient and now unusual instrument, later passed on to an uncle. This anecdote is interesting because it also testifies to the acquisition, by the Sinti who inhabited these lands, of purely local musical practices and instruments, similar to what happened in other parts of Italy where Sinti and Roma were able to become specialised interpreters of the musical traditions of the places they inhabited (see Staiti 2008).

[11] Living in Bolzano and frequenting Radames quite assiduously, I have on several occasions heard words of praise from locals who still remember Balino and the Gabrielli family's musical evenings. In a small column dedicated to record releases, published in the review *Lacio Drom* (see below), Balino's name appears fleetingly but significantly in relation to the album *Les grands airs bohémiens* (Fontana): "Most of the songs have a gypsy flavour in the style of operetta: e.g. 'Suona, zingaro, suona' by Kalman, 'Czardas' by Monti, 'Danze ungheresi' No. 4 and 7 by

the family band Vintakre Ciave – "Sons of the Wind," formed in the second half of the 1960s – and leader of the group I Sinti del Tzardas – founded later with his sons in the 1970s – Balino also "invented" some csárdás and waltzes, but he "knew how to play everything" (Radames Gabrielli, interview by the author, 31 March 2022). But above all, Radames pointed out that his father – like the other Vintakre Ciave members – possessed that "magic" (ibid.) capable of attracting and fascinating the audience. In his ingenuity and the constant reinvention of himself, this violin expert – who with his family was particularly close to Bruno Nicolini, the Bolzano priest who was a central figure in the organisation of the Pomezia pilgrimage –[12] was also the driver of the school bus that picked up Sinti and Roma children in Bolzano from the family camps to bring them out of the schools where they attended "special" classes intended for them. In the 1960s, he was also often involved in driving the buses to Lourdes and as a stretcher-bearer for the sick who went there on pilgrimages,[13] as the original caption of a photo published in the review *Lacio Drom* says (see Anonymous 1966). It is in this review that several photographs appear, in no particular order, showing the musicians of the Gabrielli family in the most diverse situations: from pilgrimages to evenings in restaurants and even school parties. The same review also mentions the concerts of the Vintakre Ciave,[14] the professional musical ensemble that, in Radames' recollection, was created by his father and uncles on the family's return from Pomezia.

In Balino's time, Sinti musicians mostly played in taverns, following pre-established itineraries to various locations in South Tyrol: "We already had places where we knew we could play, they waited for us, and then they prepared a table for us there. We would play there, then we would change location and so on until we arrived in Bolzano at the last tavern – at Ca' de Bezzi – and there we would end the evening: a good evening,

Brahms, 'Hejre Kati' by Hubay, 'Hora staccato' by Dinieu. In other words, it is the music we expect from Gypsies. It is played simply and straightforwardly with little improvisation. I must say that this is the favourite record of my Sinti friend Balino, one of the best Gypsy violinists in Italy" (Tipler 1975: 25).

[12] Bruno Nicolini – formerly chaplain of the gypsies in Bolzano – had founded in the city the Opera Assistenza Nomadi (Nomad Assistance Work), an association legally constituted in October 1964 and operating in the region under his leadership (see Borzaga 1965: 17–18). Nicolini's Opera, also thanks to the collaboration with the pedagogist Mirella Karpati, was active above all in the areas of social assistance to "nomads" and the schooling of Roma and Sinti children through the establishment of "special" classes called "Lacio drom." *Lacio Drom* was also the name of the aforementioned review, published by the Opera Assistenza Nomadi for over thirty years, starting in January 1965.

[13] Radames Gabrielli, various personal communications.

[14] In one of them, for example, we can read: "The Gypsy orchestra of the Figli del Vento composed of Sinti estrekaria . . ., made its debut with great success on 13 April 1969 in the hall of the Rainerum in the presence of a large audience, among whom many city authorities could be seen. Traditional Gypsy tunes were combined with modern songs, performed, however, in a completely original way. . . . The concert was then repeated, again with great success, in various locations in South Tyrol" (see Anonymous 1969: 39).

around one or two o'clock in the morning" (Radames Gabrielli, speaking at the conference "Richiedenti ascolto: Le musiche degli altri vicino a noi," 22 November 2021). But musicians were also hired to play at weddings and to serenade someone under their windows: "When my father, my grandparents, played. . . they would go into a club and play, and there was the lover [who said to one of them] 'can you do me a favour? Come on, I'll give you some money: come to my house and serenade my wife'. Then they would go more willingly because it was nice. . . and they also had fun. . . this was a job to earn a living, to support one's family: a job that lasted for centuries" (ibid.).

The evocated stories are many, and they almost always concern the ability of musicians of the past to move someone – a woman who, before dying, asked several times to listen to such a song, or the hotel manager who jealously guarded in his safe the recordings of a violin performance – and to win over an audience that was initially disinterested and reluctant to listen: "Look, Antonella, listen to me," Mirko tells me, "[Balino] played with many musicians, Gage let's say, but he always won: he never lost. They played well, the Gage, but when he *really* played, he was the one who won" (interview by the author, 31 March 2022).

But what does mean "really," I ask. And then Radames explains:

> You know we used to go to Lourdes all the time, right? I told you, didn't I, Antonella? In Lourdes [my relatives] once they went into a bar – people used to play everywhere in Lourdes, but [the Gage] didn't let the French Sinti play anymore because they always play the same music, what's it called? Jazz [manouche]! People were fed up with that [kind of] jazz. Then one day Z., my brother-in-law – you know him – and [addressing Mirko] who else? *U Ves nina* ["maybe also Ves"], I don't remember if he was there [too]. . .and my father [went into a bar]. [My dad] said [to the bar owner] 'can I play a song? Just one, one!' [So] the man listened to the song [and] they went out [of the bar] the [next] morning: he never left them – the bartender – and also the people who were there. They never left them leave [my relatives] left completely drunk in the morning! Because they played music completely differently. The people liked it. And then, the way my father played. . . Not because he's my father: say it too, Mirko, because maybe [Antonella] could think I'm saying it because he's my father, but it is not for this. (ibid.)

And Mirko replies: "No, no. That's it. I said it before, didn't I? Among a hundred violinists the winner was Balino! It was him! There were no others when he started [playing] *really*" (ibid.).

A person of such charisma could not fail to leave his mark, which is why talking about music today with his relatives and descendants almost always means remembering Balino, his skill, his enthusiasm, his ability to interpret "the songs" while respecting their original progression from beginning to end.

"The Beautiful Old Songs": Doing Philology Together Evoking a Mythical Time

When I went with Radames to visit Mirko and Ala in the authorised camp in the municipality of Trento where the two live together with a few other families, we talked about the gathering in Pomezia – which they both attended with their entire family – and listened together to some of the tracks from the collection 093. Of the numerous performances attributed to Estraixaria, only the first two are recognised as "their own" by Mirko and Ala, as well as by Radames and other family members: Monti's "Ciarda" (Nataletti and Carpitella 1965a) – a classic still in the repertoire of today's musicians – and the old song "Prekarik u pani" (Nataletti and Carpitella 1965b) – "on the other side of the river" – whose words and melody, however, seem to have undergone changes over time compared to the version recorded in 1965.

The first piece is a version of the "Ciarda" (Nataletti and Carpitella 1965a) performed by a violin soloist with the arpeggiated accompaniment of a guitar, a kind of arrangement that makes the performance particularly intimate and gentle, quite different from the lively violin performances with the vigorous accompaniment of two, three, four or more guitars that can be heard today among these Sinti, especially in spectacular contexts. Members of the Gabrielli family who have listened to this recording do not doubt that the violin soloist may be a relative of theirs. Indeed, the musical expertise gained over time within this community means that musicians and listeners – especially older ones – can identify their players by what is referred to among them as *tacca*: the style. The tacca is that personal "touch" that each musician possesses and which distinguishes him from others; it can, despite the specificities that characterise the personal style of each musician, be passed down "by direct line" when exclusive master-pupil relationships are established.[15] The tacca can therefore, at the same time, designate a way of playing of a specific family which is different from that of other Sinti or Roma (not to mention Gage) whose "affiliation" can be assumed with greater or lesser precision from time to time – as I happened to hear in relation to other violin performances also present in the Pomezia collection.[16] If on the one hand this opens up further reflections on the relations and exchanges between Estraixaria and other Sinti or Roma groups and between Estraixaria and Gage, on the other hand it implies the fact that a "familiar" musical style can be preserved over and above the individual style that each player develops. The latter can in turn be recognised among the musicians of the family by an ear trained to "hear the difference." It is in this way that Ala, Mirko and Radames, at the

[15] Radames, for example, says that although his nephew Lucky has his own tacca, he sometimes finds it difficult to distinguish Lucky's style from that of Balino, who was his main teacher from childhood. Lucky himself, evaluating the different styles violinists in his family, traces his own playing back to the tacca of his grandfather Balino.

[16] See and listen, for example, to the tracks number 21 and 22 (Nataletti and Carpitella 1965c and 1965d).

end of the expressive introduction of this "Ciarda" (Nataletti and Carpitella 1965a) recorded in Pomezia, recognise in the subsequent rapid movements of the bow the unmistakable style of their late uncle: his particular way of starting the part "backwards" – moving the arm from bottom to top –, a detail that precisely identified him and at the same time differentiated "his" "Ciarda" from that played by Balino. But while the violin style is memorable, partly because one lived by that music ("it's been in my head for a hundred years," says Mirko about Vittorio Monti's "Ciarda," "it doesn't go away anymore"), recognising the singer of "Prekarik u pani" (Nataletti and Carpitella 1965b) is more difficult. The song is part of a repertoire intended for "internal use," and the various hypotheses formulated fail to provide an unanimous answer. This is an old song: so old that "it is not known who invented it." Because, says another Sinti violinist born in 1945, "we learned it from our grandparents, us, not even our parents. It is [a] very important [song]" – although some do not hide that they find it a bit boring, precisely because of its repetitiveness. And yet, in its essentiality, this old song seems almost to take the form of a "myth of the origins" that tries to explain the rootedness among the Sinti of these lands, of the "craft" of the musician, once very widespread: its protagonist is in fact a musician who, playing along the river, prays to God to reach his beloved woman, who is washing clothes on the other bank; but after finally joining her – the version recorded in Pomezia tells us – he discovers that he will have to keep playing to eat. . . This ending, perhaps not exactly expected, but not too unfortunate either, is due to the woman's decision not to go to *mangel*, that is, not to practice the traditional form of begging that provided for the family's subsistence and was among the typically – though not exclusively – female activities.[17] The 1965 version presents a ternary metric pattern and is composed of two triplets, a quatrain and a final triplet of decasyllabic verses. Each triplet involves the alternation of three melodic phrases (A, B, C, with repetition of the melodic phrase C in the quatrain), the last of which, corresponding to the last verse of each stanza, functions as a refrain, repeating the same words each time with minimal variations:

(A) Joj prekarik u pani ćovela	She, on the other side of the river, washes [clothes]

[17] Mangel (pronounced "manghél") is a term that is present among both Sinti and Roma, and which today is also often evoked in an ironic sense, since this practice is no longer as widespread among Italian Roma and Sinti as it once was. When it comes to the practice itself, the Estraixaria translate the term with the word "sell," as Elisabeth Tauber also reports when listing the meanings that mangel takes on in their common language: "*Ǵau ti mangel*: 'I go to sell; I go to work'; or 'I go around and sell'. Rarely is *mangel* translated into Italian as 'mendicare' ['begging'], a word with a negative connotation for Sinti estrajxarja. Sinti offer merchandise by going from house to house; despite the negative connotation, the gesture for *mangel* is an outstretched begging hand that is shown when asked: *kaj ǵaha*?, 'where are you going?'" (Tauber 1999: 60). If women sold doilies and small artefacts, some report that in the past, men and children also went to mangel: often, a man would stop to play the violin outside the houses of the Gage, while the accompanying child collected any offerings.

(B) Me prekorik u pani basuaha	I, on this side of the river, play [the violin]
(C) Oh baro Deval, her voiś la ke ciu?	Oh great God, how do I get to her?
(A) Me pekoirik u pani basuava	I, on this side of the river, am playing
(B) Me prekairik u pani ćovava	I, on the other side of the river, am washing
(C) Oh baro Deval, [her] voić la ke ciu?	Oh great God, how do I get to her?
(A) Me bićuaula mangel – joh	I send her to sell – joh
(B) Joj penela: "na ǵava"	She says: "I'm not going"
(C) Her kera'a ti xas?, joh, [me] unti ǵau basuel	How shall we eat?, joh, I must go and play
(C) Ohi baro Deval, her voiś la ke ciu?	Oh great God, how do I get to her?
(A) Prekoirik u pani ćoveli	On the other side of the river you wash [clothes]
(B) Me prekarik u pani basuaha	I, on this side of the river, play [the violin]
(C) Ohi baro Deval, [her] voiś la ke ciu?[18]	Oh great God, how do I get to her?

I have heard several versions of this song, to which, probably in less distant times, a new quatrain was added between stanzas – new words onto different melody – that became the new refrain and which in turn is used as a verse in another popular song among these Sinti. This refers to a kind of "craft" musical making that could be imagined as "patchwork" and which consists of linking one melodic phrase to another, in concatenation.[19]

I had the impression that the recordings themselves – as well as allowing the focus of some technical elements that give an account of a certain competence gained through musical and listening practice – possessed an emotional potential: it is the latter that seems to be capable of rekindling memories and letting the narration of own personal stories start. The topic of musical emotion (see Becker 2004) was actually central in some ethnomusicological studies that has as protagonists Romani musicians and communities (see for example Bonini Baraldi 2021 and Pasqualino 1998). And precisely in relation to Sinti Estraixaria, Tauber (2006: 94–102) emphasises their ability to evoke and personify the dead through musical practice within the community. The sensation that recordings were capable of triggering emotions as much as live performances took

[18] A first version of the lyrics was kindly transcribed and translated for me into Italian by Radames Gabrielli, following the sense of the story and his own pronunciation of Romanes; thus, ignoring any mistakes the singer might have made during the performance and his pronunciation – on the one hand perhaps "dated" and on the other, according to Gabrielli, typical of some relatives and different from that in use among his close family. I subsequently adapted the text so that its words would reflect the sung performance as closely as possible, using the following spelling: ć as English "cheek," c as German "Zimmer," ǵ as English "gentle," g as English "good," k as English "key," x as Spanish "jamon."

[19] Lucky himself, Balino's grandson and a violinist like him, explained this way of proceeding to me, which is also present when making instrumental music ("we add and remove [musical phrases] and see what works").

shape in a more conscious way during the meeting with Mirko and Ala as well: if music itself – in a family that has always lived on music – is already a key argument in the dialogical interaction with the community, listening again to an "old song" was like opening a window on the past. I was drawn into a story of intricate genealogies, re-evocations of "gypsy fests," digressions on music – taught, learnt, reworked, resumed – and ways of making music in a continuous cross-reference from the past to the present and vice versa. The evoked past – when there were musicians who "really played" – stands out as an almost "mythical" time with which the present has to deal in terms of musicians' individual skills, ways of interpreting "the songs," approaches to the profession, passion and so on. The elders note that today there is not the same dedication and involvement as in the past: "We used to play for nothing, you know? Even for free," says Mirko, "for fun, you played," adds Ala, "if you just offered me a beer, that was enough," concludes Radames smiling (interview by the author, 31 March 2022). But this was also possible because of the presence of an audience that generated a "return" not only in economic terms but also on an emotional level: "When you went to play, people didn't just 'explode' [with joy]: [at first] they didn't like it. But then you left [the tavern] completely drunk! Because you would stay there all night: with a song, with a glass of wine!" (Mirko Gabrieli, ibid.). This emotionality, expressly linked to the public's appreciation during the family's most intense periods of musical activity, is an aspect emphasised also in relation to the activity of today's musicians: the presence of a large and interested audience is one of the main concerns in organising concerts, as well as an essential aspect for a good performance: "When he feels that you listen to him," says Mirko about the talented violinist Lucky, "then he becomes even better, because he feels that people are watching him. It's something you have in your heart" (ibid.).

In the Present

Even today, an "ancient" core of music consisting mainly of csárdás and waltzes has been preserved in the Gabrielli family's musical repertoire – especially in that intended for performance in front of an audience. Although other genres are also practised – and have been regularly practised, in the various periods in which the musicians have worked professionally – this nucleus is perhaps the one that could be defined as the most "emotional." These are the "beautiful old songs" that one does not want to forget, as Lahi "Lucky" Colombo Gabrielli says: music that has been maintained over the years, despite the natural updating of the repertoire, which today also includes various swing and jazz manouche pieces. Musics inherited from the past and clearly linked to a continuity of transmission that takes place within the family, learned "by ear and by eye" (see Ricci 2020). It seems to me useful, in order to understand the significance that musical practice and these musics in particular take on in the family and community environment, to look at such modes of knowledge transmission from the perspective of so-called "situated learning" (see Lave and Wenger 1991),

> considering learning to be the result of a social process and of active participation both in the context, strictly understood, of the element to be learned and in the broader social and cultural context within which learning takes place. The result is a dense network of relationships and understandings capable of building a community dimension of doing that brings together communicative, symbolic and identity elements capable of giving life to a "community of practice" (Wenger 2006) within which individuals, while learning, build their identity as members of a group. (Ricci 2020: 108)

In this shared practice lies an important part of being and feeling Sinti: "Of course, maybe [playing] will no longer be a job – maybe – but it is something that is part of our identity," in the words of Robert "Sereno" Gabrielli:

> I didn't pick up the guitar straight away: I saw them [my relatives] playing – I was a little child – I saw them going to play in these big hotels, in these theatres, and I saw them as artists, as important people. And I remember picking up the guitar, but I didn't really like it that much, I'll say that honestly. Only over the years did I realise that this thing, like it or not, was part of my existence. That's how I went about it: I started playing with my cousins and my father and I carried it on. I have three children, two sons; my two sons – although they may not be so interested in music – they play the guitar: so, out of nowhere, they play. . . This music, this culture, is part of our existence. (Robert "Sereno" Gabrielli, speaking at the conference "Richiedenti ascolto: Le musiche degli altri vicino a noi," 22 November 2021)

The legacy of the players of the past represents an important inheritance that today's musicians feel they must pass on to the next generation, as can be seen in the words of "Lucky," Balino's grandson and soloist of the ensemble The Gypsies Vàganes:

> Since I was a little child, I was in the music business: I grew up with music. Above all, I had a close relationship with my grandfather – a musician, violinist – from an early age: he took me around to play, he taught me. I would watch his violin, and it fascinated me. I was only eight when he and I went, alone, to play in a tavern: "Come with me," he said; "let's go," I said. I would try two or three notes with a little guitar, and he was really happy! He was very happy. And from that time on I said: music is part of me. Then, as I got older, I would sneak into his car when they [my relatives] went to play. Sereno would cry: "I wanted to go too!" Then I would secretly go with them: that's how I grew up. I really want to pass on what my grandfather passed on to me: I want to pass on to my children what my grandfather passed on to me, my father, my uncles, I mean. . . I have two sons and a daughter; we usually "try out" talents from an early age: "Pick up the guitar and see if you can play it. I'll teach you one note, more than that I won't teach you." Then he picks it up and succeeds. I pass him the violin – he plays as it comes – but it is there: there is music inside them already from an early age. (Lahi "Lucky" Colombo Gabrielli, speaking at the conference "Richiedenti ascolto: Le musiche degli altri vicino a noi," 22 November 2021)

In short, musicians were born and continue to be born among these Sinti. And although music represents a totally incorporated practice, absorbed almost by osmosis in the family context, the modes of public discourse practised by some of today's musicians presuppose a great awareness of their actions, which, at the same time, are clearly

placed in the furrow of a "tradition" to be preserved. As Sereno said: "[Playing] for me is a natural thing as it will be for my children. Because it is something that we carry on, from generation to generation, from family to family, from son to son, to carry on a culture that must be preserved, must be carried on, must be remembered" (Robert "Sereno" Gabrielli, speaking at the conference "Richiedenti ascolto: Le musiche degli altri vicino a noi," 22 November 2021).

It is within this perspective that the cultural activities of the Nevo Drom Association founded by Radames Gabrielli in 2006 also fit. Before taking the stage at the opening of the 3rd edition of the "Gipsy & Gipsy Jazz Festival," organised by the association in August 2021 in Bolzano, Sereno says:

> Why is this festival important? Because first of all we really like it, we like to show our culture, we like to show what we really are. Then we need to raise public awareness, we need to show people who the Sinti are: Unfortunately, there is a lot of generalised prejudice, saying that they are all gypsies, that they are all criminals, that they burn people, that they kidnap children. . . but we are Sinti. And I will in fact read on stage a testimony which states that Sinti have been present in South Tyrol since the end of the Fifteenth Century. (Robert "Sereno" Gabrielli, personal communication, 27 August 2021)

These words agree with those addressed by Lucky to university students: "We are here to pass on our music, also to non-Sinti, and this is important. . . And I would also like to pass this on to the young people: to interact by looking each other in the eye, to understand cultures, to understand and interact in music, because music is international, we know that, but this music here is a bit hidden – our music. And we want to pass it on especially to young people – to understand the beautiful things we want to give and pass on, together. This would be very important for us (Lahi "Lucky" Colombo Gabrielli, speaking at the conference "Richiedenti ascolto: Le musiche degli altri vicino a noi," 22 November 2021).

The achievement of cultural recognition consciously passes, therefore, through those "beautiful things" that one possesses and wants to share. "The beautiful old songs": music that bears witness to a time when, in the public's appreciation, there was that albeit brief space of recognition – as long as one night, "one song." "My brother and I went back in time," Radames tells me excitedly at the end of a very successful concert held, together with Lucky and Sereno, in the coveted venue of Bolzano's Parkhotel Laurin.[20] The "magic" of the Sinti, highlighted by Radames in one of our conversations (see above), who win over the Gage audience was fulfilled once again and, perhaps, it is also that emotion that continues to keep their tradition alive today.

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