



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Candidacy of classical Neapolitan song as a World Heritage

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On March 30, 2026, the Teatro Sala Umberto hosted an event to support the candidacy of classical Neapolitan song as a World Heritage Site. The initiative, titled "Era de Maggio," saw a royal audience enjoy the excellent direction and screenplay by Stefano Reali, with performances by Clotilde Sabatino and Leandro Amato. The evening retraced a journey through two centuries of Neapolitan music, beginning with

the popular origins of the first songs, born in the alleys of Naples, where fishermen, washerwomen, and street vendors sang to while away the days and pass on stories of everyday life.

It begins with a single, aching note. A violinist on a dimly lit street in Spanish Quarter, his sheet music stained by sea salt. Before the first verse is even sung, you feel it: that peculiar, paradoxical weight of lightness known only to this city. This is the raw material of the Canzone Napoletana—a genre that, for over two centuries, has acted less as a musical export and more as an auditory embassy for the Italian soul.

To understand the phenomenon, one must look past the cliché of the tourist slurping lemon sorbet at a Piazza del Gesù restaurant. The Neapolitan classics are not mere songs; they are sceneggiate—miniature tragedies set to music.

Take 'O Sole Mio (1925). Written by Giovanni Capurro and Eduardo di Capua, it is arguably the most covered melody in human history. Yet ask any Neapolitan, and they will tell you it is not a love song to the sun, but a song of desperate hope; a plea for the sun to return to a lover's face, written by a man who died in poverty. That dichotomy—ecstatic melody married to desolate lyrics—is the secret code.

Then there is Core 'ngrato (1911). When tenor Enrico Caruso, an exile from Naples, sang it at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1920, Italian immigrants wept in the aisles. They were not crying for the fictional "Caterina." They were crying for the alleyways of Forcella, for the smell of ragù, for the impossible distance from Vesuvius. Caruso understood this. He turned the Neapolitan song from a regional folk curiosity into the universal anthem of the diaspora.

Back home, the relationship has always been more complicated. For much of the 20th century, the cultural elite of Northern Italy regarded the Neapolitan song with a mix of affection and embarrassment. They called it "melenso" (mawkish).

Yet, they could not escape it. During the Fascist era, the regime tried to suppress local dialects in favor of a

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standardized national language. The Neapolitan song, stubborn as the pummarola vine, refused to die. It survived in the voice of Roberto Murolo, the gentleman guitarist who, in the 1960s, recorded an encyclopedic anthology of the classics. He stripped away the operatic bombast and returned the songs to their acoustic, storytelling roots. It was a revolution of restraint.

Today, that legacy pulses through the veins of contemporary artists like Pino Daniele, who fused the ancient dialect with blues and world music, and the current phenomenon of Geolier, a rapper who fills the San Siro stadium in Milan while singing entirely

in Neapolitan. The dialect is no longer “regional”; it is a brand of authenticity.

Unlike French chanson or German Lied, the Neapolitan song has no rules of polite distance. It screams, it whispers, it begs. When Luciano Pavarotti sang Caruso he wasn’t singing about Naples. He was singing about the fragility of the male ego, about dying, about love. That is universal. On YouTube, a 1958 recording of Renato Carosone’s Tu vuò fà l’americano (You wanna be american) has been remixed into electro-swing and played in Tokyo nightclubs. In Russia “Funiculi funiculà” is a staple of military bands. In Argentina, where a massive Italian migration occurred, you are as likely to hear “Torna a Surriento” at a wedding as you are a tango.

Walking home through the Spaccanapoli district, it’s possible to see a teenager busking with a smartphone connected to a portable amplifier. He is not singing ‘O Sole Mio. He is singing a trap version of Reginella, a 1917 classic by Libero Bovio. The tourists stop to film; the old women nod from their balconies.

This is the enduring miracle of the Neapolitan song. It has survived unification, war, television, and the internet. It has been called vulgar and sublime, often in the same breath. It does not ask for your permission. It simply asks, as the poet Salvatore Di Giacomo once wrote: “Lassate passa’ a musica” —Let the music pass.

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