A Song of Many Colours: Musical Hybridity in Corsica

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Debates on cosmopolitanism and its relationship to notions of world citizenship, popularly expressed in discourses of pluralism and multiculturalism, have engaged scholars from many disciplines over the past decade. In the musical arena, cosmopolitanism is often linked with stylistic boundary-crossing as well as technological savoir-faire, resulting in a musical sound born of an act of bricolage, fusion, syncretism, or hybridization. Martin Stokes has reminded us of the need to be alert to “the diverse positions of power, prestige, and influence from which people make musical alliances and forge musically cosmopolitan selves” (2004: 61-2).

This paper examines the way in which hybridity as a musical concept has informed the activities of contemporary groups on the Mediterranean island of Corsica. A peculiarity of the French state is that it does not admit to having minorities; if it did, the Corsicans – with their own language and strong sense of identity – would represent one of its most distinctive minority groups.

Hybridity has complex resonances in present-day Corsica. The directions taken by groups such as Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses, A Filetta and I Muvrini – who have progressed from youthful beginnings in the 1970s as part of the movement for cultural renewal within the island to become established professionals regularly working with artists from other parts of the globe – coincide in part with broader trends related to the ascendancy of world music. At the same time they have been underpinned both by new emphases in French and Corsican cultural policy and by changing ideologies regarding the island’s relationship with the outside world. In the analysis that follows I aim to illustrate how the transnational fashion for syncretic styles has met with the more specific French notion of métissage, the trend towards multiculturalism within France, the humanistically-inclined post-nationalist spirit in Corsica itself, the trope of Mediterraneanism, interregional alliances
promoted by the European Union, and the Corsican Assembly’s policy of “openness to others.” In unravelling these different strands and examining the way in which they manifest themselves in the activities and discourses of particular groups, I suggest that the hybridizing trend is neither a mere theoretical abstraction nor a magpie-like appropriation of exotic sounds for their own sake. On the contrary, individual cases may be viewed as meaningful human as well as artistic encounters, each with its own history and logic and appearing, in retrospect, as an integrated part of a group’s longer-term raison d’être.

The seeds of musical hybridity are already present in the island’s indigenous style of polyphonic song, of which the most well-known type is the paghjella. Pagjhelle are sung by three voices, each with its own distinctive timbre and mode of embellishment. Performances are characterized by spontaneity, close interaction between the singers, and a degree of improvisation within broadly fixed parameters that gives each new rendition the status of a re-composition rather than a simple reproduction. In the words of one singer, “That’s the beauty of it, the fact that everyone contributes something.” Another comments on the human interaction at the heart of the singing experience: “When you sing a paghjella with someone you don’t know, it’s a moment of encounter….You search for the other, you try to understand… it’s thrilling.”

Having fallen out of fashion in the post-war years, the paghjella enjoyed a spectacular comeback in the 1970s as the younger generation, inspired in part by the autonomist movement, began to take a new interest in their ancestral heritage. The paghjella, with its distinctive sound suggesting roots in more ancient times and its association with collective, democratic action and self-determination, was harnessed to the separatist cause and by the early 1990s had become reified as “the symbol of the profound Corsican being” (Berlinghi 1993: 230).

A renewed respect for traditional music in general was reinforced by the orientation of France’s new Socialist government that assumed power under François Mitterrand in 1981. In his inaugural budget speech, Minister of Culture Jack Lang made a case for increasing state investment in culture even at a time of recession, arguing that “a society that does not create dies” (cited in Looseley 1995: 82). Culture was now redefined to include forms of popular expression previously excluded from what was held to be serious art. The democratic principle of “the right to culture” was soon joined by “the right to difference.” The embracing of cultural diversity became inscribed in government policy and funding was offered to associations promoting regional languages, traditional music, and other aspects of local culture. A parallel openness to immigrant communities from France’s overseas territories and
former colonies meant that the scene was set for Paris to become the world music capital of Europe.

The French term most often used as an equivalent of the English “world music” is métissage, usually rendered by dictionaries as “hybridization,” “cross-breeding,” or “cross-fertilization.” Métissage indicates an understanding of world music as a transcultural neo-genre (sometimes labeled “world beat”) that is a collage of different styles. As Daniel Brown points out, it encompasses the word tisser, meaning to interweave: “It denotes the interplay of different elements of culture, language and populations, the intertwining of people and their identities” (2004: 207). In Corsica, the principle of métissage already had its parallel in the polyphonic paghjella, in which voices defined by different timbres and personal styles of ornamentation are interwoven to create a coherent and harmonic whole. For the more cosmopolitan-minded, a preoccupation with polyphony as a musical procedure now mapped on to the post-modern usage (following Mikhail Bakhtin) of polyphony as a rhetorical strategy accommodating multiple discourses. In musical contexts, polyphony increasingly came to be used as a synonym for dialogue between different musical languages and textures. The international stage and recording studio offered themselves as transcultural spaces where harmony could be created out of difference in a way that was in direct continuity with traditional practice.

These different conceptualizations of polyphony inform the work of Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses, established in 1989 by Patrizia Gattaceca and Patrizia Poli. The group’s 1991 debut album Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses (made up of four traditional polyphonic songs and thirteen new compositions) features a colourful line-up of international artists, including Manu Dibango (saxophone), Ivo Papazov (clarinet), Richard Horowitz (ney), Shaymal Maltra (tabla, djembe, and ghatam), and John Cale and Ryuichi Sakamoto (piano). Electronic effects are added by Hector Zazou, the album’s producer. The vocals were recorded in the church of St. Dominique in the Corsican town of Bonifacio. The instrumental lines, largely improvised, were added later in the studio, the majority in Paris and Sakamoto’s in New York. The result is a richly nuanced musical text whose expansive quality is evocative of wider horizons. “Rosula d’Orienti,” one of Poli and Gattaceca’s own compositions, reflects their intimation that the island’s culture owes as much to influences from the east as it does to Western Europe. Described in the disc notes as “a song which uncovers and projects connections past and to be tied by the roots of the Mediterranean,” the piece begins in what might be heard as a predominantly “Oriental” style. The leisurely introduction featuring the nay, a shamanic-like drumbeat, light bells and airy electronics contrasts markedly with the
more earthy qualities of the Corsican voices as they enter in two-part polyphony.

Les Nouvelles Polyphonies’ enthusiasm for working with musicians from outside the island is founded on the belief that it is through encountering others that we make progress and enrich ourselves. Poli explicitly identifies the group with the principle of métissage: “I like the expression Musics of the World (Musiques du Monde) because it implies métissage. Les Nouvelles Polyphonies Corses are métissage” (Peri 1992: 16). Ideologically, this fashion for cross-cultural musical dialogue relates to the ecumenical ideal of a shared humanity that was gaining ground at the time of the album’s release, serving as a counter-balance to the more inward-looking nationalist phase of the 1970s and early 1980s. Much of this import is captured in Michel Codaccioni’s celebration of Patrizia Poli as “the magnificent prowhead of a Corsican culture nourished by modernity, by métissage, by questioning, by respect for the other, by exigency, and by self-confidence” (Codaccioni 1993: 13).

The group has gone on to pursue a series of collaborative projects, meeting with artists from other cultures on what Gattaceca refers to as “polyphonic ground.” In the case of the first album, the guest musicians were other artists who happened to be recording with Philips at the time. For subsequent projects collaborators were more deliberately sought out. With their 2001 album Isulanima – recorded in Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia, with input from several Georgian musicians – the group deepened their exploration of the possibilities of both polyphonic language and song structure, resulting in a distinctive style that one press report describes as “the fusion of Corsican polyphony and the Mediterranean chanson” (Corse-Matin, 13 July 2004). “Matoub,” one of two songs with explicitly Maghrebian connections, has a striking history. Gattaceca wrote the lyrics in honor of the Kabyle singer, Matoub Lounès, who found success in Paris after fleeing Algeria, but who was assassinated during a brief return visit to his home country in 1998. The group began by recording the song with a flamenco guitarist who had joined them in Tbilisi. They then had the idea of including Matoub’s own voice at the beginning of the track. Listening to his albums, they found a passage in one song that they particularly liked and whose lyrics seemed to prophecy Matoub’s impending death. They were astounded to discover that this passage was in the same key as the part of Gattaceca’s song that they had already recorded. They now took the recording of Matoub, added the guitar part in the studio, and ran this section into their own singing, with the guitar accompaniment continuing unbroken. The result, in this case, was a hybrid work featuring not only voices from different cultures, but a marriage of voices of the living and the dead.

The group that has enjoyed the greatest popular exposure outside the island is 1
Muvrini. Jean-François and Alain Bernardini, the brothers who form its core, were initiated into the *paghjella*-singing tradition of their home village of Tagliu by their carpenter father, with whom they feature in Wolfgang Laade’s field recordings of 1973. By the late 1970s they were among the most active of the so-called “cultural militants” whose concerts – then viewed as potential breeding grounds for insurrection – were frequently banned by the authorities. In recent years they have been represented in the press as a “world music” group with “jazzy” and “Celtic” colorations – the Celtic element being significant both as a suggestion of more ancient shared roots (in parallel to the Mediterranean roots celebrated by groups such as Les Nouvelles Polyphonies) and as an indicator of sympathetic relations with other minority groups. In March 2004 they played to an audience of 55,000 at the Stade de France as guests of honor for La Nuit Celtique. In addition to performing songs from their latest album, *Umani*, they also sang traditional polyphonic songs accompanied by bagpipers from Brittany and Scotland and the Celtic harps of the Breton group Triskell, creating a blend which Jean-François Bernardini designated “celto-corse” (Filippini 2004: 89).

A prominent theme in I Muvrini’s public statements is that music is a tool for promoting global harmony. “We want to make our concerts into places of meeting and dialogue,” says Jean-François. “To show, certainly, our face, our identity, and our differences...But what we want to say most of all through our songs is that we are all citizens of the same love!” (*Corse-Matin*, 30 May 1994). This humanistic turn is reflected in the title of the album *Umani* (Humans), which features (among others) Andalusian singer-guitarist Josefina Fernandez, Senegalese-born hip-hop artist MC Solaar, Ivory Coast bass player César Anot, Senegalese *kora* player Soriba Kouyaté, Swiss singer Stephan Eicher, and two Afghan singers, Zarina and Manila Fazel. While the majority of the lyrics are in Corsican, other regional languages – Breton, Catalan, Occitan, Basque, and even French itself – appear in some of the songs. Like Les Nouvelles Polyphonies, I Muvrini have developed a style in which different musical idioms are worked into the fabric of new compositions. Jean-François comments on the need to learn how to integrate unfamiliar instruments: “At first we simply stuck them on to our music and afterwards we had to learn how to make them live together” (*Corse-Matin*, 30 May 1994). “A Jalalabad” – perhaps the most distinctive song on the album – is a good example of a through-composed song that integrates different idioms in contrasting but complementary sections (MC Solaar rapping in French, the high-pitched female Afghan voices singing refrain-like interludes based mainly on vocables, the solid male Corsican voices introducing more western-sounding harmonies in parallel thirds while singing in the Corsican language) rather than simply superimposing additional colorations on
The Mediterranean preoccupation shared by a growing number of groups warrants further comment. Described by Davis as a “melting pot” and by Braudel as an “ancient crossroads,” the Mediterranean has often been represented as syncretic by nature. While noting that “in Mediterranean countries, the number of musical practices with strictly local significance is enormous,” Tullia Magrini has suggested that the adjective “Mediterranean” should perhaps be restricted “to those musical expressions rooted in cultural interactions between different areas of the geographical Mediterranean – in other words, to those musical phenomena that cross the sea, that have in their DNA a genetic patrimony that unites elements of different cultures, and that carry the historical memory of contacts within the Mediterranean” (2003: 20). From these perspectives, “Mediterranean music” functions as another synonym for métissage, while groups throughout the region have been able to represent contemporary musical forms resulting from “contamination,” “fusion” or “hybridization” as inherently authentic (Plastino 2003: 10-11). This representation might be seen to articulate with Steven Feld’s identification of “a new, postmodern species of ‘authenticity,’ one constituted not in isolation or difference but in creolization proper, an authenticity precisely guaranteed by its obvious blendings, its synthesis and syncretism” (1994: 266).

For Corsica, the Mediterranean turn – which reaches far beyond the arts to economics, the environment, rural regeneration and tourism – offers a way out of the French-Corsican impasse by side-stepping the question of national belonging and allowing the island to make its voice heard within a wider European forum. A vital dimension of the EU vision is the concept of “a Europe of regions,” where linguistic minorities – once viewed simply as national sub-groups – are now, as Janne Bleg Jensen notes, seen to “form an important basis of the ‘new Europe’ as a mosaic of different cultures; a ‘unity in diversity’” (2001: 70). A significant development of the 1990s was the establishment of the EU’s Interreg programmes to support collaborative projects between different regions of the EU, and in some cases beyond EU borders. In Corsica these programmes, supported by substantial funding, have led to a further increase in projects involving Mediterranean partners in particular but also those from other “French” territories.

By the beginning of the new millennium, the principles of “exchange,” “encounter” and “opening up” that had already been embraced by many musicians had assumed a key position in the official policies of the Corsican Assembly, with Jean Baggioni, former president of the Executive Council, expressing his conviction that: “Above all, we must not
be afraid of opening ourselves up more, of fertilizing our roots and at the same time accepting modernity. Tradition is indispensable; nothing but tradition is conservatism” (Corse-Matin, 6 June 2004). There is, of course, a danger of being swept away by rhetoric. Some indigenous critics have expressed unease at what they see as a wanton appropriation of musical styles foreign to the Corsican tradition. In practice, however, the artists themselves often see clear points of kinship between Corsican music and the music with which they are engaging – whether at the level of style, structure, procedure, or intent. One might argue that the “encounter” that has always taken place within the paghjella has simply been taken a stage further; and it is perhaps because of the traditional function of polyphonic singing as a space within which to meet the other that so much emphasis is placed on making meaningful connections with other musicians.

In this paper I have attempted to sketch out the way in which hybridizing trends in Corsica have emerged as a product of intersecting ideologies, aesthetics, and practices. To borrow Max Peter Baumann’s words, today’s music-makers have become agents of their own transformation as they “individually select, newly configure, historicize, sample, innovate and synthesize … and work out their own musical narrative constructs” (2001: 14). A central focus of debate among Corsican musicians in the 1990s was the question of how to maintain a meaningful and recognizable connection with the traditional styles that were seen as a vital component of Corsican identity while at the same time embracing more contemporary concerns and fashions, looking beyond the confines of the island itself, and making use of new technologies. Songs such as those discussed here seem to offer a workable solution – one that does not risk falling prey to the “cultural grey-out” anticipated by some critics of the world music phenomenon. The hybridizing gesture, adapted to local conditions and aspirations, has served as a useful tool for making alliances and gaining an entry into the world music network. At the same time, the groups that have become so adept at working with new media and idioms have not abandoned traditional practices. Many continue to operate according to older paradigms in local contexts, and are anxious that opportunities for everyday music-making should be safeguarded. Even in their most hybrid commercial products, meanwhile, the Corsican voice is clearly recognisable. They might therefore be said to have “successful[ly] hijack[ed]” what Arjun Appadurai refers to as “the twin Enlightenment ideas of the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular” (1990: 308).

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References

**Discography**

