Operetta in Marseille (France) During the 1930's, a Bridge to the New Cultural Industry: The Example of Tino Rossi

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Whatever happened to operetta? Did the genre disappear? It could have mutated instead. One hypothesis is that it might have metamorphosed during the 1930s, becoming the musical. With this development, the *tenorini* may have taken refuge, in the most financially advantageous case, in the recording industry and variety song.

In Paul Lincke's operetta *Frau Luna* (1899), the famous aria "*Das macht die Berliner Luft*" already gives the idea of a future metamorphosis. This aria is lively, light, and joyful. However, it is also cheerfully punctuated by a singularly intrusive snare drum. One might almost believe that the "sonic proportions" of future rock are already there: a light song supported by the martial, invasive accents of pop drums, including the shattering, seductive, even hypnotic snare. One also notices the unexpected connection between the pop and martial worlds. It is in this possible common ground in particular that Deleuze and Guattari's formula finds its real relevance: this is the pessimist "*potential fascism of music*".¹

Tino Rossi or the "*tenorino-crooner*" hybrid: an emblem of the musical changes of the 1930s

Let us come to our focal case, the example of a French singer, Tino Rossi. From 1939 and for more than a decade after, his voice was so present on French radio that he himself asked (in writing) the stations to program

1 See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Mille plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), 430.

him less, because he was afraid of tiring listeners.² Even today, his interpretation of *Petit papa Noël* (1946) remains the greatest commercial success in the history of French song. It can therefore be said that Tino Rossi became a real ‘variety singer’, if not *the* French variety singer if only one were to remain.

Tino Rossi made his debut as an operetta singer. On March 3rd, 1933, he was hired “as a *tenorino*” by Justin Milliard at the Alcazar, in Marseille, for seven days and fourteen performances. Then he performed on another famous stage in the city, the *Théâtre des Variétés* (note this name, for it is significant). It was then that the record label Columbia spotted him. Significantly, in the early 1930s, it listed Tino Rossi in two sections of its catalogues, “Singer” and “Tenor”. The composers working for the firm, Vincent Scotto in the lead³, wrote variety songs especially for Rossi. But our historic hybrid, a “crooner-tenor”, also recorded for Columbia on July 9th, 1935, melodies by Reynaldo Hahn, an emblematic operetta composer, as well as *D’une prison* and *Paysage*. Hahn said of Rossi: “[His] voice draws its appeal from this somnambulist material, this simplicity taken to excess with a probably unconscious art of musical modelling.”⁴

In the film *Lumières de Paris* by Richard Pottier (1938), Rossi sings Gounod’s *Ave Maria* (1859), and La Callas herself claimed that no one had ever sung it so well. Again in 1941, in the film *Fièvres* by Jean Delannoy, the singer “compares” the “small and great” repertoires: variety and classical, focusing on a precise subject which would concern’ a Corsican, as Rossi was: the Virgin Mary. In the film he sings the variety song *Maria* (by Roger Lucchesi and Jean Féline), but also the *Ave Maria* by Schubert. Here we should note that melodies from the classical repertoire were no less successful than songs from the cultural industry at this time, with this Schubert number becoming one of the singer’s great “hits”.

The 1930s therefore saw a combination of several phenomena, “classic” and “variety” repertoires, but also, more insidiously, capitalism and social

2 See Laurent Rossi, *Tino Rossi, mon père* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), 97.

3 Scotto composed, in particular, *Ô Corse, île d’amour* and *Vieni ... Vieni* which offered Tino a triumph from the first evening of his engagement at the Casino de Paris, the 14th of October 1934.

4 We translate “[sa] voix tire son attrait de cette matière somnambulique, de cette simplicité poussée à l’excès avec un art, probablement inconscient, du modelage musical.” Quoted by Gisèle Parry, “Tino: Le charme dure encore. Pourquoi?” *Le monde et la vie* 127 (December 1963), 32.

5 The Corsican “national” anthem is a hymn to the Virgin, patron saint of the island.

progress. Paradoxically perhaps, the birth of the French cultural industry was linked to the social advances that appeared in 1936. As such, we should look at the events of that particular year.

1936, paid holidays and the cultural industry

At the dawn of the summer of 1936, Leon Blum's Front Populaire (Popular Front) had just come to power and passed a series of landmark laws. On June 11 and 12 the famous "paid vacation" was introduced (two weeks annual vacation for all), along with laws on collective agreements and a work week of forty hours. The bosses counterattacked at first by refusing to apply these laws.⁶ It was then, according to Sandrine Grandgambe, that a new cultural policy was born, that of France as an 'architect state':

*Georges Huisman and Jean Zay joined forces to propose a new cultural policy and to plead for a popularisation of culture. As for the achievements of the Popular Front, sometimes timid, they concerned in particular the educational programs, the field of creation and the reforms of the opera. Finally, to talk about the music itself, musicians joined behind the Popular Front, seeking to reach out to the people through a movement of collecting and transcribing traditional music and folklore. The proliferation of festivals and events made music an omnipresent art.*⁷

However, traditional music preoccupied this 'architect' France less than it concerned the totalitarian governments of the time (populist, possibly demagogic), mostly in the USSR, Germany and Italy. Christopher L. Moore writes of a search for a learned "popular modernism", including festivals as both national and universal projects, such as those held on July 14th, Bastille Day.⁸ Modernism thus became a national political concern for a country which identified with its cultural mission on the world stage.

6 The far-right leagues reconstituted themselves into political parties and sometimes resorted to terrorism. Bosses and finance made their choice: "Rather Hitler than the Popular Front".

7 Sandrine Grandgambe, "La politique musicale du Front Populaire," in *Musiques et musiciens à Paris durant les années 1930*, ed. Danièle Pistone (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), 21. Our own translation.

8 See Christopher Moore, "Le Quatorze juillet: modernisme populaire sous le Front Populaire," in *Musique et modernité en France (1900–1945)*, eds. Sylvain Caron, François de Médicis and Michel Duchesneau (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2006), 363.

This was succeeded, two years later,⁹ by a policy of giving commissions to “modern” composers, notably those of the Groupe des Six (Francis Poulenc, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Germaine Tailleferre, Georges Auric, Louis Durey). But there was no question of forcing musical modernity to make itself more accessible. The masses, instead, had to rise up to it.

However, what history seems to have retained from this year, 1936, especially when looking at the cinema of the time, is not so much traditional music, nor even modern scholarship. Instead it is the cultural industry, then booming, which seemed to impose its models, including on the masses, and even to write history itself, at least that of 1936. That said, the fame of certain songs that were written in 1936 has not always survived, due to the clean slate of the Second World War. Who knows, for example, the *Chant des marais*, which was then a very popular symbol of resistance (not yet clandestine) to Nazi Germany,¹⁰ a French version of a *Moorsoldatenlied* (1933) composed¹¹ by the Rudolf Goguel, who was nearly inmate of Börgermoor concentration camp? On the other hand, at least two songs produced in 1936 seem to have remained more widely known, which is ultimately not trivial.¹² It is possible that one of them, in particular, managed to consolidate its place in history because of its alignment with the historical policy of the state – and certainly also because of the way its fame continued to grow, including after the war, due to its immortalized performer, engraved on a disc by the then nascent cultural industry. The new government of Léon Blum responded to its social realism, and the actor-singer Jean Gabin put his working-class banter at the service of the song *When We Walk by the Water*.¹³ One verse, in a way, paints the “old world” of the worker in a minor tonality: “*from Monday until Saturday, to win radishes*.”¹⁴ The chorus however exalts, in the homonymous major, the new social leisure socie-

9 Later, the commissions continued under the aegis of the Vichy government: “As part of an extension of a practice inaugurated by the Popular Front in 1938, the State placed fifty-seven commissions to French composers during the Occupation.” Yannick Simon, “Composer sous Vichy,” in *Résistances et utopies sonores. Musique et politique au XX^e siècle*, eds. Laurent Feneyrou and Nicolas Donin (Paris: CDMC, 2005), 40.

10 See Élise Petit, “Deux exemples de restauration narcissique par la création musicale,” *La revue française de musicothérapie* 31, no. 3–4 (2011): 150–4.

11 The text was designed by Johann Esser and Wolfgang Langhoff. An English version was later released, *Song of the peat bog soldiers*.

12 The success of songs – even political and therefore historical – seems therefore very often more fleeting.

13 *Quand on s’promène au bord de l’eau*.

14 “Du lundi jusqu’au samedi pour gagner des radis”, which implies in French “to work hard to win very little”.

ty (admittedly only barely emerging at the time). It seems that, in this case, the Front Populaire was not “watching this song”, since it was focused on its more elitist policies. It was instead this song which watched the Front Populaire and this helped win the song its posterity, at least in part. This was perhaps also the case with *Ma pomme* (also from 1936), as interpreted by Maurice Chevalier, whose slang and – here again – banter, seemed especially appropriate in this year of socialist blossoming, beyond the popularity of social songs and films during the 1930s in general.

Another song, recorded on August 10th, was of a different ilk, with no slang this time. In a sense, it too was “reversing” state policy. Tino Rossi made the link, like a true Mediterranean, between Italian opera and France. He then democratised, “socialised” the aria of transalpine operas through *Marinella*. But this was quite the opposite of the project of the architect state, which aimed more to raise the working masses towards the lyrical repertoire rather than to bring them down towards some pan-aesthetic which combined the lightness of an operetta with overdetermined romanticism. The winner in this contest seemed less the state, or the public, or even the operetta, than Tino Rossi himself, and especially the nascent¹⁵ cultural industry which “made him”.

1930s: aesthetic change or mutated aesthetics?

Why did France in 1936 know this short work, essentially in the form of a slogan, *Marinella*, better than, for instance, *La suite provençale* by Milhaud (1936), a work with a similar Mediterranean evocation? To be sure, the French Riviera, automatically evoked in Rossi's case, was perhaps itself the main attraction for those workers enjoying their new, paid vacations. By some paradoxical irony, *Marinella*, a populist anti-social-architect work (as constructed by an industrial aesthetics) became the “*song of the popular front*”¹⁶ according to Yves Borowice, which he explains as follows:

The songs of the 1930s are a great material for the historian: abundance linked to the appearance of new techniques – recording, talking pictures, ('singing'), TSF – and the status of a show in its own right. The genre was alive, varying according to interpretations which sometimes even modified their texts. How can we measure

15 The cultural industry was not yet mocked, although industry *in general* was already feared, as shown by Chaplin's *Modern Times*, also from 1936.

16 Yves Borowice, “La trompeuse légèreté des chansons: De l'exploitation d'une source historique en jachère — L'exemple des années 30,” *Genèse* 61 (2005): 98.

actual success in retrospect? Memory is unfaithful or deliberately selective, accounting records are non-existent or confused. The only reliable allies, the discographies. The recordings then took a weight capable of starting a career (for example, Tino Rossi). These songs were less than ever the 'virginal emanation' of a society, but a professionally fabricated fantasy. In the 1930s – years of economic crisis and political perils – they symbolised the production of a 'counter-real', carefree and fanciful. But their collective appropriation knew how to divert their intentional meanings and made Marinella the song of the Popular Front.¹⁷

Adorno explained the rise of the cultural industry by the simple “*masochism*”¹⁸ of the masses. But the reason for its inexorable rise had to be deeper, more anchored in history. The paradox is that Rossi was able to retain such an “aura”, along with *Marinella*, capable of associating it durably with the first workers on their first paid vacations. However, the mechanical reproduction specific to gramophone records could not contain any “aura”, according to Walter Benjamin.¹⁹ That said, the “aura” of the first recordings might exist as a “historical aura”. In other words, perhaps the invention of 1936 was less *Marinella* than the French cultural industry in general, a more consistent invention, therefore more “auric”, more or less: more *historical*.

Moreover the association with cinema, as an additional historical fixer, was of considerable importance. We also remember the song *When We Walk by the Water* (Quand on se promène au bord de l'eau) because it is taken from a film,²⁰ typical of the French historical realism of the 1930s, and this is also the case for *Marinella*.²¹ These two successes were thus achieved

17 Ibid. Certainly Rossi had sung for the striking workers, notably in the hall of Galeries Lafayette in Paris. See Christian Plume and Xavier Pasquini, *Tino Rossi* (Paris: Bréa, 1983), 47.

18 “The reception of Puppchen [Dolly], a pre-war tune in vogue, was in no way different from that experienced by one of those syntheses of children’s songs that jazz today gives us. But the context in which these songs for children appear – in a masochistic gesture we deride our own desire for a lost happiness when it is not the demand for happiness itself that we compromise by turning to a childhood whose own inaccessibility testifies to the inaccessibility of joy itself – this context is specific to the new listening.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Le caractère fétiche de la musique et la régression de l’écoute* (Paris: Allia, 2001), 52.

19 See Walter Benjamin, *L’Œuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproductibilité technique* (1939) (Paris: Payot, 2013).

20 *La belle équipe* by Jean Duvivier.

21 Written for the eponymous film.

by a very recent invention, *talking pictures*, and more specifically, *singing pictures*. The cultural industry therefore had many advantages. It mixed images, music, narration, and electricity, in a fabulous way. The aesthetic mutation that it carried out, no matter what Adorno or Benjamin may have claimed, was carried away by a real aesthetic of technological change, specific to the 1930s, and of which talking pictures were a great, fabulous symptom.

Basically, to deny *Marinella* its historical importance is to deny any “aura” of talking pictures. Certainly, some have claimed that cinema had always been “*impure*”²² in general. But the fact that art became so sensational through the cinema, and especially its recorded “satellite” songs, does not mean that the art itself was lost.

Moreover, that the eternal lightness of the operetta genre may have mutated into a mechanically reproducible lightness (on disc or on film) can engender the process of reproducibility itself (which Benjamin notes), but not in all cases a new form at lightness. In other words, when Adorno castigates the variety songs as regressive in supposedly new ways, he forgets so many examples of light songs in the old operetta repertoire. It was electricity and radio broadcasting, on a large scale, that made such works accessible, or even *imposed* them on his ears, in an unprecedented way, in what can be termed a new type of lightness. We therefore come back to Pascal Quignard’s comment: “*fascism is linked to loudspeakers*”.²³ The “aesthetic problem” of variety songs would therefore not be that of bad composers but of their association with electricity. The problem would be that such music could become “obligatory music” throughout the urban space, and no longer just confined to operetta theatres. This is what Tino Rossi himself observed when he was afraid that the radio would play his songs too often.²⁴

The idea that in the 21st century operetta is dead might therefore be wrong. This genre may have first mutated into the genres of variety and musicals, and thus have succeeded and developed, at least economically. If we follow Guy Debord’s idea,²⁵ developed in 1967, our society is mainly dedicated to entertainment. If we associate this idea with that of Baudrillard,

22 “Cinema is an impure art. It is indeed the ‘plus-one’ of the arts, parasitic and inconsistent. But its strength in contemporary art is precisely to create an idea, the time of a pass, the idea of the impurity of any idea.” Alain Badiou, *Petit manuel d’inesthétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 128.

23 Pascal Quignard, *La haine de la musique* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1996), 273.

24 See again note 2.

25 See Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).

that of the Consumption Society,²⁶ our neo-operettas seem all the more central as “mass consumption shows”. Or perhaps our entire society – at once light, in appearance, and skilfully orchestrated – have mutated into a vast operetta underpinned by unknown librettos?

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26 See Jean Baudrillard, *La société de consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

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