

PAOLO BRAVI

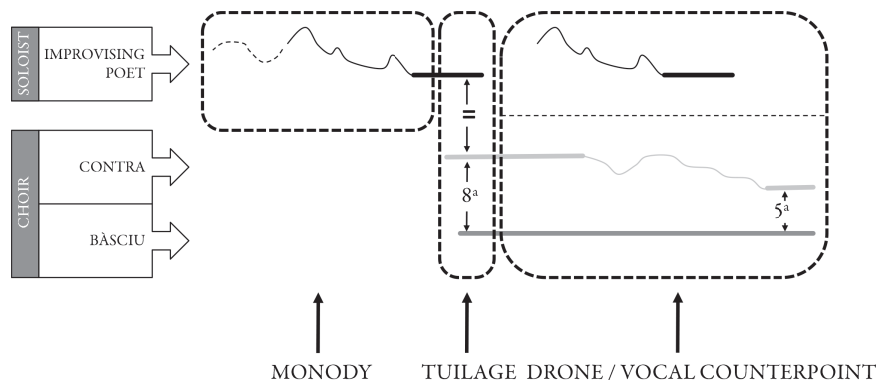
The Construction of the Individual Style of Singing in the Sung Poetry of Southern Sardinia: Reflections upon a Critical Case

In this paper I describe a case in which the very first steps in the construction of the singing style of a young Sardinian improviser encountered some difficulties and, in particular, caused some problems for the two-part accompanying choir during a poetry contest. I also report the protagonists' comments and opinions on the topic, analyze musical aspects of the performance and propose some keys for the interpretation of the observed anomalies. These keys are based on both the peculiar situation of the improviser, who emigrated from Sardinia when he was 24, and of his native village, Burcei, which shows influences from the Barbagia area especially as far as poetical styles are concerned.

1. Introduction

Southern Sardinia is host to a long-standing tradition of contests of improvised poetry, known as *cantadas campidanesas*. On these occasions, a number of *cantadoris* (improvising poets), usually four, confront each other in poetry using two different verse types: the *mutetu longu* (which is longer and more difficult and used in the first part of the *cantada*) and the *versu* (which is shorter and easier and adopted in the final part of the contest). These performances are usually held in summer, on occasion of the Festivals organized to celebrate the Patron Saints of the various villages. The improvisers appearing onstage in these performances are 'professionals': they have another job, but receive a significant reward for their participation in the poetry contest. When they perform the complex metrical structure of the *mutetu longu* they are accompanied through non-measured singing by a two-part vocal choir made up of a *bàsciu* ('bass') and a *contra* (Bravi, 2010: 317-332). The former sings a drone one octave below the *tonus finalis* of the *cantadori* at the end of each section of the *mutetu longu* and is characterized by a typical guttural emission that gives rise to the acoustic phenomenon of 'period doubling' (Bailly, Heinrich & Pelorson, 2010). The *contra*, a part that intervenes a little before the *bàsciu* in the polyphonic part of the *mutetu*, sings a melody that usually starts at the same pitch as the *tonus finalis* of the *cantadori* and then, after a short melodic movement, ends one fifth above the *bàsciu's* note (figure 1).

Figure 1 - Schematic graphical representation of the basic musical structure of the *a mutetus longus* singing style. To be noted in particular, the standard tonal relations among the three voices in the central section, where the polyphonic section starts in the form of a “*tuilage*”¹ between the improvising poet on the one hand and the *contra* and the *bàsciu* on the other



2. Case-Study: the first trial of the improviser Severino Monni

It is common usage that a poet who aspires to become a ‘*cantadori*’, i.e. a (semi) professional improviser, is first “tested” by other professionals during an informal poetry contest. The case-study here considered is that of the Campidanese improviser Severino Monni’s (from now on: SM) first trial (*collaudu*). He sings at a private poetry contest together with three professional *cantadoris* (Antonello Orrù, Roberto Zuncheddu, Daniele Filia) and with the professional accompanying singers Filippo Orrù (*contra*) and Rossano Cardia (*bàsciu*). The performance was held in Sardinia (CA) in Southern Sardinia on 24.04.2012, in the presence of a few listeners, mostly SM’s relatives and aficionados of Sardinian improvised poetry, and was documented by a home video recording. In this *cantada* one can hear that, when SM is singing, the accompanying choir (made up of two young semi-professional singers) rarely manages to start its intervention in the right tonality (*crai*, ‘key’) (Figure 2).

Indeed, as regards the music, the poetic trial appeared to be quite an ordeal for the new would-be *cantadori*. Nevertheless, his expert colleagues generally appreciated the quality of his improvisation, and he was acknowledged as being able to take part in public exhibitions in the future. As a matter of fact, this actually did come about in the following years. Then again, as SM himself told me in one of our interviews, this is a common problem for improvising poets who are starting out on their careers:

¹ “*Tuilage*” indicates the temporary overlapping of parts that may be realized during the alternation between two independent musical parts (cfr. Agamennone, 1998: 27). In the case of the *a mutetus longus* sung poetry, this happens when the vocal parts of the *contra* (before) and the *bàsciu* (later) start accompanying the voice of the improviser, who can then – but not always – perform another line, singing above the two-part choir (Mossa, 1999).

specialmente all'inizio, un improvvisatore si concentra sul testo di quello che deve dire, quindi la voce la lascia dov'è e questo, visto dal punto di vista de *sa contra*, è un grosso problema [tr.: 'especially in the beginnings, an improviser concentrates on the text that he has to say, therefore he does not give attention to his voice and this, from *sa contra*'s point of view, is a big problem'] (Monni, 2014).

Figure 2 - Spectrograms (window length: 0.05 s.) of two example cases of tuilage between the improviser (SM)'s tonus finalis and the contra's tonus initialis. On the left, we can see the spectrogram showing the only 'correct' tonal juncture in the performance (mutetu n. 6, section 1), i.e. the improviser's finalis has the same f_0 as the contra's initialis reached through a glissando; on the right, the spectrogram displays one 'incorrect' tonal juncture, with the two notes at different pitch levels performed by the improviser and the contra singer

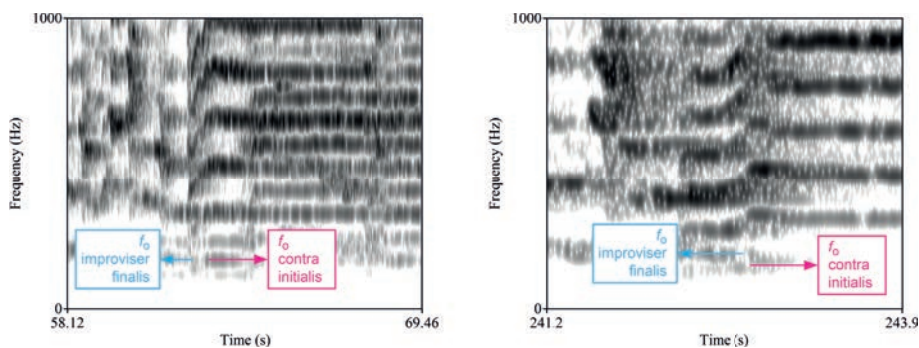


Figure 3 - The cantadori Severino Monni (left) and the contra singer Filippo Urru, together with Paolo Bravi, (right) during the interviews



The topic was discussed with the two protagonists and examined by means of a 'bi-focal' approach (Bravi, 2012): on the one hand, I interviewed the poet SM and the *contra* singer Filippo Urru in order to record their memories about that event and to capture their perspectives and opinions on the issue, while, on the other hand, I carried out a music analysis of some aspects relevant to the tonal disorders emerging in the performance.

With regard to the musical problems that emerged during this performance, three main aspects have been considered here. These were both analyzed and dis-

cussed with the singers in order to provide some prospective explanations of the tonal disorientation between the improviser and the two-part accompanying choir that occurred during the performance in question.

2.1 Lowering of the tonal centre

The *contra* always starts singing (*tonus initialis*) at a lower pitch with respect to the last note (*tonus finalis*) sung by the improviser SM.

Figure 4 - Differences between the finalis (*f*) of SM's melodic stanzas and the initialis (*i*) of the *contra* intervention. Note that, apart from the last *mutetu* (*n.* 6), not all the stanzas (*torradas*) of each *mutetu* longu were recorded, so a different number of pairs (*cantadori's* finalis / *contra's* initialis) are reported in the six *mutetus* sung by SM during the performance²

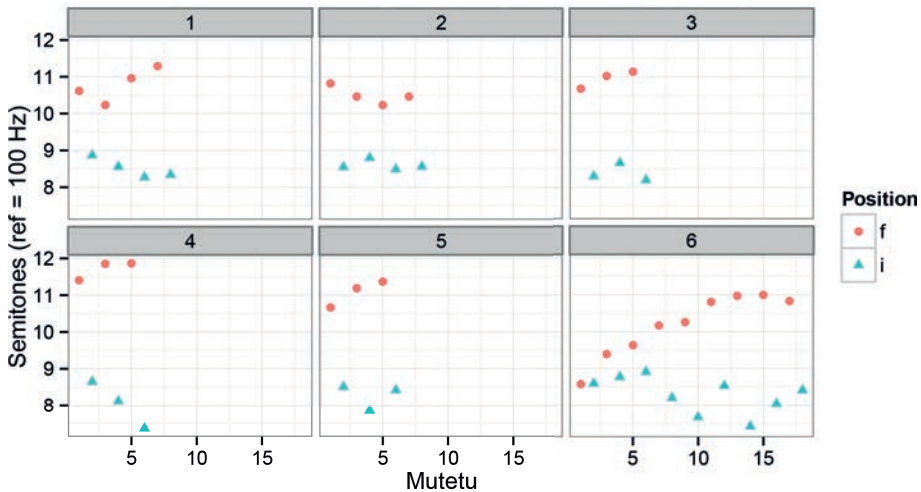


Figure 4 shows that, with the exception of the first intervention of *mutetu* n. 6, there is always a low melodic jump (ranging from -0.63 st to -4.51 st) between the two notes which, according to the music rules of the genre, should instead have the same pitch.

² This partial and 'selective' recording is due to the fact that, according to specific rules and based on the mechanism of *retrogradatio* (in Sardinian-Campidanese: *arretroga*), many textual repetitions are present in a *mutetus longus* poetical contests (cfr. Zedda, 2008: XXII-XXVIII). These repetitions are not usually documented in amateur recordings of this kind of improvised poetry (Lutzu, 2012).

Figure 5 - The inverse relationship between SM (the cantadori)'s final and the contra's initial pitch

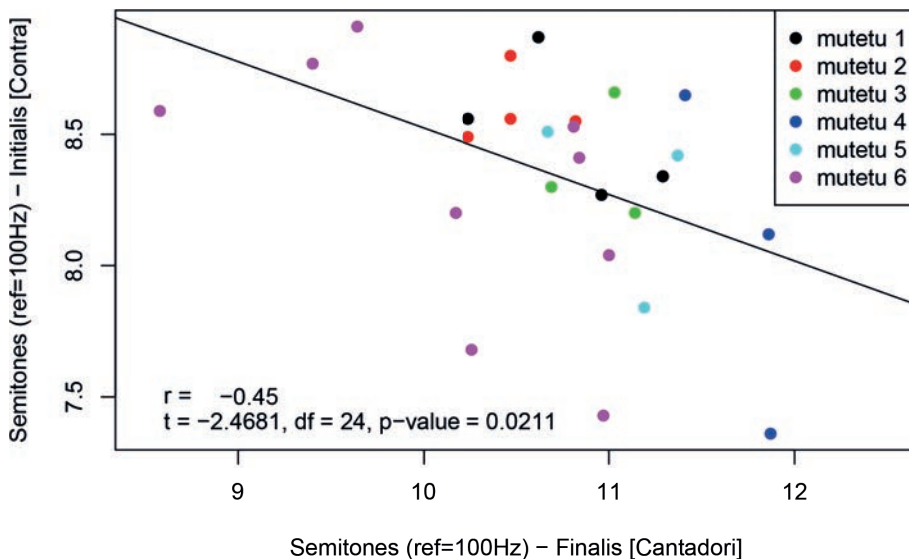
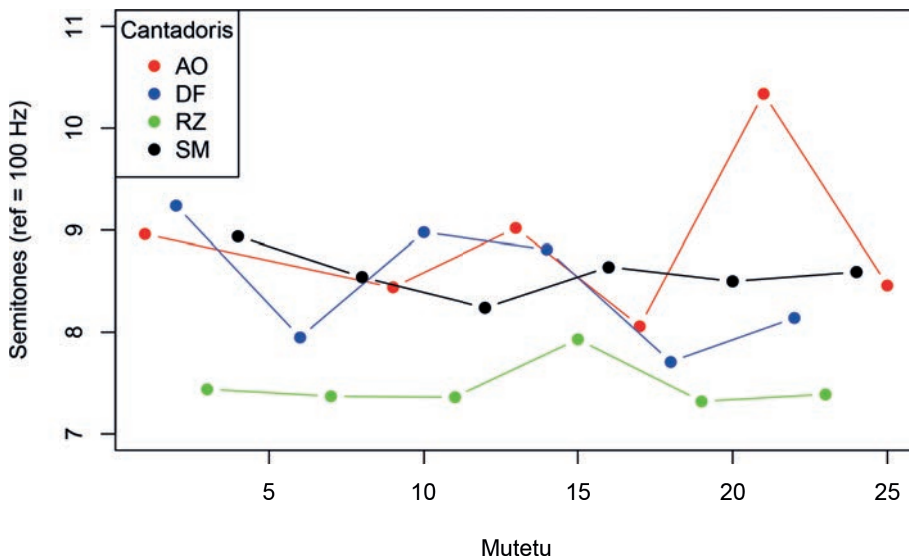


Figure 6 - The improviser Roberto Zuncheddu (RZ)'s singing usually has a low and quite stable key



In general, it can be observed that, with respect to a frequent rise of SM's *toni finales* within each *mutetu*, the *contra's toni initiales* tend to be less unstable and, in some cases, show a pitch-lowering tendency. On the whole, these opposite tendencies have a moderate correlation (Figure 5), which fits well with what the *contra* singer Filippo Urru states, i.e. that he likes improvisers singing in a low tonality and who are able to maintain the established key throughout the entire performance. In fact, Roberto Zuncheddu, the improviser who is especially appreciated by the *contra*

Filippo Urru, uses a quite stable and low tonality in this performance, with a tonal center around 155 Hz ($\sim E^b3$; Figure 6):

Io con Roberto [Zuncheddu] mi trovo benissimo. Mi trovo un po' male con Marco quando usa troppo l'acuto perché Marco, a differenza degli altri [improvvisatori], parte con quest'acuto, e quello ti fa stonare. Però poi anche lui si rende conto e allora abbassa il tono e va cadenzando come gli altri [improvvisatori] [tr.: 'I get on very well with Roberto [Zuncheddu]. I don't get on with Marco [Melis] when he uses a high pitch because Marco, unlike the other [improvisers], starts with a high note, and that makes you go out of tune. But then he realizes and therefore he lowers the pitch and keeps on singing as the others [improvisers]'] (Urru, 2014).

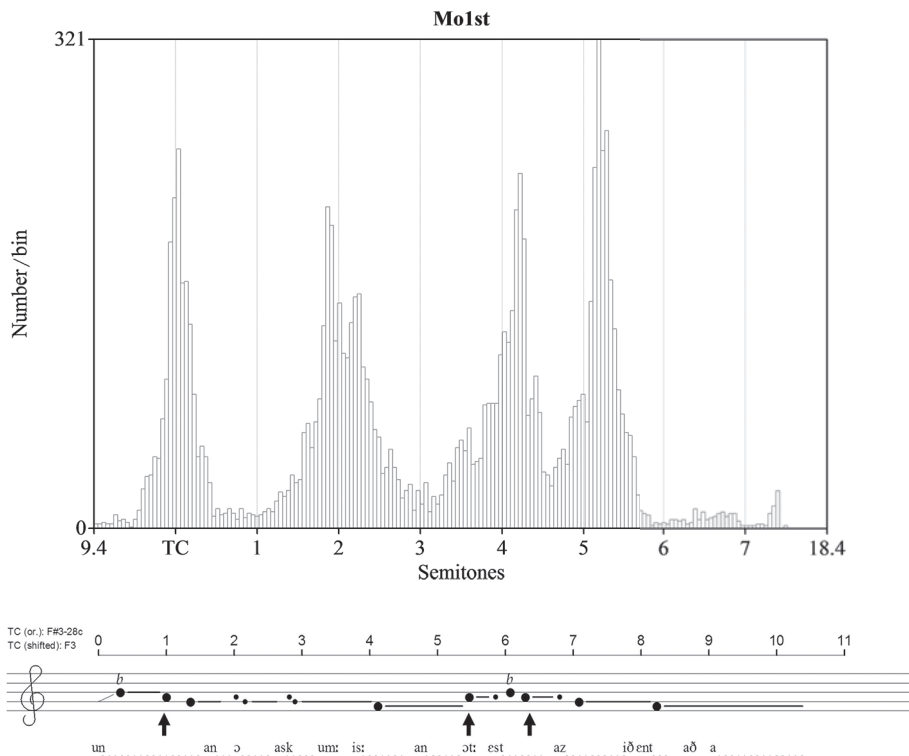
2.2 A peculiar third degree

Just as happens for other cultural aspects in the mountain village of Burcei, SM's singing style seems to be unintentionally influenced by Logudorese improvised and sung poetry (Pillonca, 2002; Manca, 2009; Pilosu, 2012). What follows is what SM has to say about this aspect of his village's culture and about the historical relationship between Burcei and Barbagia, the mountainous part of Sardinia where Logudorese poetry is widespread and currently practiced:

Burcei è un paese nell'entroterra, è un paese che è nato intorno al 1600 ed è un paese che è nato dalla transumanza dei pastori della Barbagia. C'è un legame molto forte fra Burcei e la poesia barbaricina, la poesia logudorese, ecco perché ancora oggi Burcei è una roccaforte anche dei [poeti] logudoresi: ci sono due gare all'anno dei [poeti] logudoresi a Burcei. Il legame fra Burcei e la poesia penso che sia un legame secolare e forte proprio perché i pastori cantavano quando facevano queste transumanze del bestiame [tr.: 'Burcei is a backcountry village that sprang up around 1600, and it is a village born from the transhumance of the shepherds from Barbagia. There is a very strong connection between Burcei and the poetry from Barbagia, that is to say Logudorese poetry, this is the reason why Burcei is a stronghold of Logudorese [poets] even today: in Burcei there are two poetry contests a year of Logudorese [poets]. I think that the connection between Burcei and poetry is centuries old and strong precisely because the shepherds used to sing while they moved their herds'] (Monni, 2014).

One of the differences between the singing styles of the Campidanese improvisers and the Logudorese ones is the different intonation of the third degree, basically close to a major third from the tonal centre in Logudorese poetry (ex. C – E; cfr. Sassu, 2010 or. ed. 1973), whereas it is usually quite close to a minor third from the tonal centre in Campidanese *a mutetus longus* poetry (ex. C – E^b; cfr. Bravi, 2010, ch. 24). In this performance, SM seems to sing aiming to tune the third degree of his vocal melody towards the major degree, instead of the minor one, as would usually be the case for this singing genre (Figure 7).

Figure 7 - At the top: fo histogram of mutetu n. 1 of SM (bins: 10 cents), where the pinnacle corresponding to the third degree is clearly placed over a distance of four semitones from the tonal centre (labelled as "TC" in the X axis), i.e. close to an interval of major third; at the bottom: musical transcription of the first line of the same mutetu (arrows indicate three A notes, at a distance of a major third with respect to the tonus finalis of the line (and tonal centre of the song) F



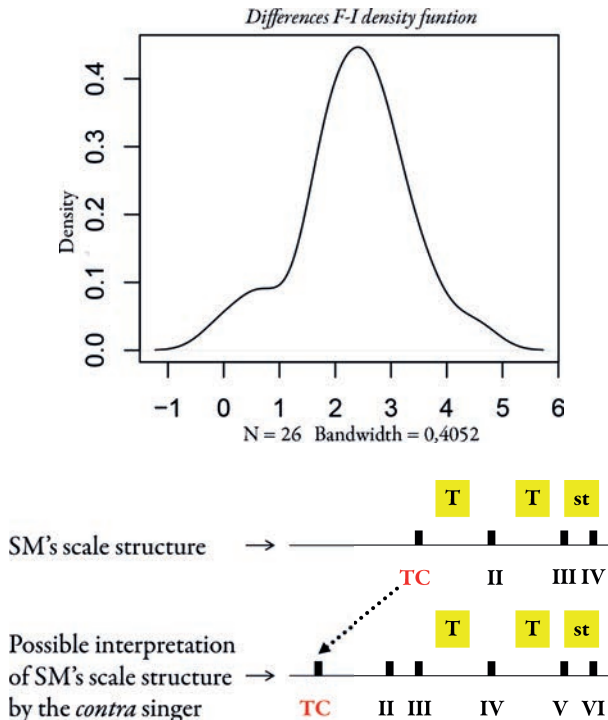
This musical peculiarity of SM's singing style may find its explanation in his education and practice in the first years of his apprenticeship. In this period, SM, just like all the other people living in the village of Burcei, used to listen to Logudorese sung poetry (octaves, *modas* etc.). This practice most likely established some kind of unaware imprinting on his musical conception that shows its effects on what he does in the poetical and musical Campidanese system.

Io andavo e vado pazzo per *is modas* specialmente di Pazzola, tipo ce n'era una sulla Sardegna e una su Eleonora D'Arborea che quand'ero piccolo le canticchiavo sempre. Probabilmente inconsciamente, non è stata mai una cosa voluta, hanno influenzato la prima parte del mio apprendistato. Però è stata una cosa inconscia, io non ho voluto però il nostro background rientra in tutto quello che facciamo [tr.: 'I was and still am nuts about *is modas*, beyond the octaves, particularly Pazzola's [a Logudorese improviser]. There was one [moda] about Sardinia and one about Eleonora D'Arborea which I always used to sing when I was young. Probably unconsciously – never on

purpose – they influenced the first part of my apprenticeship. I wasn't aware of it, I didn't want it but our background always affects everything we do'] (Monni, 2014).

SM's tendency to tune his third degree close to the major third interval might be due to his early habit of listening to Logudorese sung poetry and singing some renowned songs from this repertoire on his own. As a hypothesis, one could argue that this could contribute to explain the lowering in *contra* tonality described in the par. 2.1. This lowering of the pitch is widely variable but, in a number of cases, close to three semitones. If we consider the equivalence between the I-IV degrees of a major scale and the III-VI degrees of a minor one, it is possible that an overall misunderstanding of the function associated to the intervals used by the improviser might have occurred, i.e. that the *contra* interpreted – of course with no theoretical awareness – the *finalis* as an anomalous and unexpected third degree and lowered the tonality according to his perception of the tonal relations in the improviser's singing (Figure 8).

Figure 8 - In the top panel, a plot of the density function of the intervals between SM's *finalis* and the *contra*'s initialis expressed in semitones, where the maximum value is close to three semitones, i.e. a minor third interval; in the bottom panel, a prospective musical interpretation of the *contra*'s approach to SM's singing



2.3 Training alone

Some biographical notes and some specific information about SM's experience and practice in the field of improvised poetry are of great interest in explaining what happened in the *cantada* analyzed here.

Firstly, as has already been said, his first experiences and approach to Sardinian poetry in his youth were tied to his family's attitudes and shared passion and involved not only Campidanese, but also Logudorese poetry.

Mio padre ha sempre registrato le gare, girava il Campidano, girava il Sulcis e quindi io sono sempre andato con lui. Tutta la nostra famiglia si spostava per seguire le gare. [...] Contemporaneamente è nato l'interesse per un altro tipo di poesia che era la poesia logudorese, specialmente Zizi e Remundu Piras, perché c'era un mio zio che era appassionatissimo di poesia logudorese. E la poesia logudorese mi è piaciuta subito, forse ancora più della campidanese, in quel momento [tr.: 'My father always recorded poetry contests, [for these reasons] he travelled the Campidano [South Sardinian sub-region], he travelled around Sulcis [South-West Sardinian sub-region], and so I always went with him. All my family travelled around to attend poetry contests. [...] At the same time my interest for another type of poetry was born, Logudorese poetry, and especially for [Bernardo] Zizi and Remundu Piras, because my uncle was a big fan of Logudorese poetry. And I liked Logudorese poetry at once, perhaps even more than the Campidanese one, at that moment'] (Monni, 2014).

Secondly, SM had emigrated along with his parents and younger brother to Piedmont (a region in the North-Western part of Italy) in 2000. His father was the principal inspiring muse and mentor for him and his younger brother, Simone, who is now also doing improvisation. To get to work, all three of them have to travel by car every day. While they are on the road, they are used to improvising poetry, challenging one another:

Con me c'è mio fratello che canta [improvvisa], e c'è anche mio padre che canta. [...] Quindi quando siamo in tre generalmente cantiamo *a mutetus longus* quando siamo in macchina. [...] Quando sono solo [in macchina], perfeziono di più la voce, quando invece sono in compagnia cerco di perfezionare l'improvvisazione, l'argomentazione [tr.: 'My brother sings [improvises] with me, and then there's my father who sings as well. [...] So when the three of us are together we usually sing in [the style of] *mutetus longus* when we're in the car [...] When I'm on my own [in the car], I do all I can to improve my vocal ability, whereas when I am with others I try to improve my ability to improvise, to debate'] (Monni, 2014).

The absence of a constant exchange of opinions with a community of improvisers and expert listeners and the practice of singing without a real accompanying choir represents an uncommon training process for a Campidanese improviser. *Cantadoris* usually start their experience as improvisers by taking part in informal meetings where amateurs and professionals often face each other in poetry contests (Bravi, 2010: 60-63). The scarcity of this kind of poetic confrontation within a community of practitioners and the lack of discussions and exchange of views that are common therein are significant factors that could have a role in the anomalies

in SM's first trial which has been considered here. The absence of a "preventive censure of the community" – to use the concept introduced by Roman Jakobson and Pëtr Bogatyřev in their well-known 1929 article (Jakobson, Bogatyřev, 1966 or. ed. 1929) – can explain, to a certain extent, what happened during the performance. In particular, the lack of any reciprocal knowledge between SM and the singers of the accompanying choir is acknowledged by SM himself as a reason for the musical difficulties that occurred during the performance:

[In quella *cantada*] la mia voce ha creato delle difficoltà a *sa contra* ... uno, perché *sa contra* non mi conosceva; due, perché io non conoscevo *sa contra* e sostanzialmente io non avevo la cosiddetta *crai*, quella che si chiama *sa crai de sa contra*, che può essere bassa o alta [tr.: '[in that *cantada*] my voice caused some difficulties for *sa contra* ... firstly, because *sa contra* didn't know me; secondly, because I didn't know *sa contra*, and basically I didn't have the so-called 'key', what they call the '*contra* key', which may be low or high'] (Monni, 2014).

3. *Final considerations*

The construction of a personal style of singing (*tràgiu*, or *cadentza* to use the village of Burcei's terminology) is a long-lasting process that usually starts from the conscious or unconscious imitation of other improvisers' styles. From this early stage, a singing style usually evolves through a process of personalization and adaptation to one's personal vocal means, specific esthetic goals and needs as an improviser. SM describes the starting point of the process of construction of his singing in this way:

Il mio *tràgiu* è un *tràgiu* solamente abbozzato per adesso e quindi il cammino è tutto da fare. Quello che ho cercato di fare è dare un'impronta originale [al mio stile di canto]. Probabilmente quello che ho fatto io dall'inizio è unire o mescolare il mio background, quello che avevo imparato fino ad allora, e metterlo in voce. [...] Qualcuno mi ha detto che un po' assomiglia a delle cadenze logudoresi, qualcuno mi ha detto che è influenzato dai miei ascolti di musica leggera addirittura, cantautori ecc. ecc. Non so se è vero o no. In realtà io ho cercato di fare qualcosa che riprendesse un *tràgiu* [di altri *cantadoris*] e ho cercato di modificarlo in modo che fosse il mio. Ancora non ci sono riuscito, ci sto ancora provando. Dei miglioramenti ci sono stati, però il processo è lungo. – [PB]: Qual è il tuo modello da personalizzare? – [SM] Il mio modello è un incrocio fra Urru [Raffaele] e Zuncheddu [Roberto], almeno questa era l'idea [...] Ci sono determinati *tragi* che danno la possibilità all'improvvisatore di fermarsi quando vuole durante *sa sterrina* [la prima sezione del *mutetu longu*]. Questo è quello che cercavo io: di poter fare le pause come le faceva Urru, come le fa Vargiu [Eliseo]; invece i *tragi* molto veloci non lo permettono, tipo quello di Pani [Antonio], quello di Falqui [Pierpaolo] ed altri [improvvisatori] [tr.: 'My *tràgiu* [singing style] is just a rough *tràgiu* for now and so there's a long way to go. What I have tried to do is to give an original mark [to my singing style]. Probably what I have done from the beginning is to join or mix my previously learnt background and put it into my voice. [...] Somebody told me that it seems a bit like the Logudorese style, others have said that it is even influenced by my listening to popular music, etc. I

don't know whether this is true or not. Actually I tried to do something that conjures up the singing style [of other *cantadoris*] and I tried to modify it to adopt it as mine. I haven't managed to do it yet, I am still trying. There have been some improvements, but the process is still a long one. – [PB]: What was your model? – [SM] My model is a mixture between Urru [Raffaele] and Zuncheddu [Roberto], at least this was my idea. [...] There are singing styles which give the improviser the chance to stop when he wants during *sa sterrina* [the first section of the *mutetu longu*]. This was what I was looking for: to have the chance to make pauses as Urru did, as Vargiu [Eliseo] does; instead, quick singing styles do not allow you to do this, like that of Pani [Antonio], or Falqui [Pierpaolo] and other [improvisers]' (Monni, 2014).

At the moment, for the improviser SM the evolutionary process of the construction of a personal and completely satisfying singing style is still in embryo. He is maturing as a poet thanks to his strong passion for poetry, his study of the masters of Campidanese improvisation from the past and present, his frequent trips to Sardinia where he can meet other improvisers and experts, as well as his active participation on social media sites, where he takes part in 'virtual' *cantadas* and publishes the video recordings of his poetry contests. As far as his voice is concerned, as Filippo Urru says, there is still room for improvement:

Comenti a boxi, issu si depit fai ancora una boxi po cantai, perou cussu gei ddu at a fai cun su tempus. Cantendi unu s'aderetzat sa boxi, agoa stabilit cali est su tonu suu, chi ddi andat a gustu puru. Issu nci depit traballai ancora, poita no s'imparat in d-un'annu ma s'imparat in d-una carriera [tr. from Sardinian: 'As for his voice, he still has to build a voice for singing, but this needs time. With the experience of singing one refines his own voice, then establishes his style, which satisfies him. He still has to work on it, because one doesn't learn to do this in a year, but one learns it in a career'] (Urru, 2014³).

Although the voice is not the most important gift of an improviser, since one primarily needs a sharp and brilliant mind and a particular and well-trained memory, it is however an important feature and the hallmark with which he presents himself to the public.

La prima cosa che si sente di un improvvisatore, ancora prima del vero discorso poetico, è la voce, e la voce è un marchio di fabbrica: ognuno deve avere il suo, [anche se]

³ Given the level of linguistic fragmentation in Sardinia and the presence of two principal varieties of Sardinian – Logudorese and Campidanese – the issue of the search for a common Sardinian orthographic standard has been largely debated in the last decades (Contini, 1993; Argiolas, Serra, 2001; Grimaldi, Mensching, 2004; Comitau "Abbia a unu sardu comunu", 2004; Pittau, 2005; Corongiu, 2009, among others). As a consequence of this discussion and of the publication of both regional and national laws aiming at the safeguarding and the promotion of minority languages (Sardinian Regional Law n. 26/1997 and Italian National Law n. 482/1999), the Autonomous Region of Sardinia published two proposals for a standard system of orthographic transcription of Sardinian for administrative usage at different times (R.A.S., 2001; R.A.S., 2006). In the present case, the transcription of the interview in the Sardinian-Campidanese language was made according to the orthographic standard defined in Cardia et al., 2009, a collective work realized under the auspices of the Province of Cagliari and officially adopted by the same Institution on 17.03.2010.

in realtà poi tutti i più grandi improvvisatori hanno ripreso cadenze precedenti [tr.: 'The first thing that one hears from an improviser, before his poetic argumentation, is his voice, and his voice is a trade-mark: everyone must have his own, [even if] as a matter of fact the greatest improvisers borrowed preceding singing styles']. (Monni, 2014).

Just like any other young poet, SM is on the road to reaching this goal, armed with the attention and diligence provided by his strong determination and passion for poetry.

Acknowledgements

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