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Maintaining and renewing Italian identity in Melbourne: The Bellini band

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## Intro

The bands Vincenzo Bellini is a Melbourne based Italian Community concert band of currently over fifty musicians. It is an amateur reeds and brass band initially formed from within the Italian community in 1971, that has played a strong role in representing a band tradition traceable to the nineteenth century and post-world war 2 period.

## History

The banda movement in particular derives from rural southern Italy, where most Italian migrants to Australia originally came from. The Italian musician Bellini himself came from Sicily in the South of Italy, reinforcing the connection with homeland and province. By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> c there were an abundance of Italian wind bands throughout Italy that operated as musical institutions that crossed regional and class distinctions. In 1888 there were 6000 civilian bands. They evolved from the military bands in instrumentation and style, that featured on stage performances of popular works by Verdi, Rossini and Puccini amongst others. This role of the Banda in regional areas in Italy was to provide music for the town community at events, such as gatherings, picnics, whilst purveying and popularising Italian operatic works to the poorer and remote, as well as supporting religious ceremonies and bringing together communities within social and religious gatherings in events called *festa*.

## **Melbourne Banda - migration**

The formation of banda in Australia was made possible by mass migration following the second World war. Over 250 000 Italian migrants came to Australia's cities between 1947 and 1971, and many of the original Bellini band musicians played in their home town banda before migrating. Melbourne was their principle destination, with 36% making a home there by 1981.

A greatly overlooked aspect of studies of migrants to Australia is how their memories , beliefs, and ways of village life are perpetuated, evolved, discarded and even reimagined.

To numerous immigrants, including some of the participants in this study, homeland town bands for many acted as a local institution that intricately bound up the life and religious traditions of their villages, that through music enabled the religious expression, cultural and communal celebrations of Italian provincial life.

The traditional role of this band performance was in support of *festa*- the celebration of patron saints of individual towns was an important aspect of southern Italian sociability, pride and community life, in particular the southern Italian regional village life. *Festa* asserted regional difference, the overtly social experience of regional Catholicism, also uniting villagers through a shared organisation and singular regional dialect, or *paese*

## **Heyday**

By 2005 the Italian –Australian newspaper *Il Globo* reported over 45 festa celebrations, predominantly in Melbourne, and over half featured the Banda Bellini.

An engagement of the bands performance at festa di Santissima, on Sunday 18 2005, describes the band in service uniforms and caps gathered near the church entrance , and as the mass ended, the priests, helpers and congregation emerged carrying a statue of the feted saint on a wooden platform; the band struck up a lively march ‘Borgoesia’ as the followers ambled to a nearby park. They played several more marches and hymns, many of the crowd singing along, before returning to conclude the church service. Returning to the park, the band performed a concert event that included selections from *Il Trovatore* by Verdi, *Carmen* by Bizet, and *Aida* by Verdi, whilst food and drink, a spaghetti eating contest and tarantella dance off was to be enjoyed as part of the ongoing entertainment, culminating in a fireworks display. (Aline Scott Maxwell).

***Methodology-phenom, semi structured, transcriptions, IPA, analysis separately, emergent themes, and quotes atr verbatim to give voice to the participants***

***Our participants- Elaine, Ann, Frank, Larry, Quinto, Stefan, Michael, Carmelo***

### ***Why do they come to play?***

Newer participants reasons for playing

Elaine: This is the music from my culture, I am Maltese but my grandmother used to hum and sing these songs, and it’s a grea opportunity to play this kind of music-the classical operas, it was a breath of fresh air to the marches I was used to playing.

Elaine:I like to come here on a Friday- it’s the night off for me, I look forward to it. The kids fend for themselves, theyre not babies, I don’t do the housework or the cooking. My Husband doesn’t play, but he comes and sits next to me and hes made friends in te percuisision section . Friday is band night.

Larry: My first bandmaster who taught me how to blow into an instrument said to me, Larry, when you get older and you move from town to town, if you go to the local nand youll find 25 friends just like that,and I never forgot that, an its true, isn’t it?!

***Maestr0.....***

## **EROSIONS**

### **SELF**

Age/death- they are now in their late 60s and 70s.

They are old, tired and not as mobile as they were once- hip and knee replacements, ill health

This impacts on their performances in that

- they can no longer walk- or march
- they have little patience for waiting for masses to finish
- find it difficult to sustain playing

### **COMMUNITY**

Audience have died, marking a significant impact on the performances

- diminishing audiences/family participation, the cornerstone of sociality and activity for the banda
- -lack of connection with community organisations- The organisers of cultural events have also passed on, losing connection and understanding of what the Banda represents to the Italian communities older members

Lack of welcoming younger musicians/don't understand/these elders see the academically challenged who were sent to the village maestro to find a positive outlet- they have no connection with current student, their relationship to music, or their motivations in participating in the band.

### **ENSEMBLE**

-death and departures of significant conductors who have acted as mentors, respected fonts of knowledge who resembled those attributes they saw in their homeland maestros

-limited financial returns from Festa and the lack of other performances mean that the ensemble remains in a precarious position financially, as far as finding money to pay for the rent of their rehearsal venue.

-Disconnection of expectations within the ensemble- some treat the rehearsal as a concert, others as an opportunity to work on their parts, and others to seek help with theirs

Don't trust or put faith in the maestro- will argue about repertoire, musicality., and this is not just an erosion but also classifies as a resistance to the future wellbeing of the band

They play loud, they play without sensitivity or musical awareness other than what they wish to put in and get out of the experience- to some it may not be a musical experience, nor a valuable learning one, but then it reaffirms their ability as an instrumentalist, and the memories they carry from their adolescent village band experiences

**Anne captures a reflective moment in rehearsal**- they can have a tiff over the timpani or the trumpets being too loud, having to reconcile with the bassoons feeling someones blasting in their ears. They will stand there, and they will scream, and then bang their hands, clap, and then they will sit down and its blown over- that seems to be the way they want to operate

## RESISTANCES

### **unwillingness to evolve and adapt to new audience landscape and different performance concept**

- resistance to formal concert concept/ changing the cultural concept of what the band means to them, embodied in their traditional musicality and sociability
- unwilling to accept new knowledge, to evolve, to refine their musical abilities-they cling to the amateur hallmarks.

**Elaine** states" It's a brio type of music, an Italian term meaning vivacious , and the young men of the parish usually would clown around in front of the band , drink and have fun

**Ann**- "This is the way we played it forty years ago, they just blast away, not try things or accept suggestions from the conductor...but the older ones are thinking, this is the way we do it and the conductor can scream his head off saying softly softly, but you can hear the blare in your ear- no changes there..hes enjoying himself, hes not going to change

Lack of acceptance of an Australian born maestro:

Of the past Maestro Guido Benzi **Larry** says, he was a great composer of music, he did all the arrangements by hand, we have files full of them, original transcriptions of the Operas. He wrote the pieces for each member of the band. For each instrument, which was incredible.

A young saxophonist from Italy playing in the band receives similar reverential treatment

**Larry**- hes a young saxophonist, same sort of capabilities I think, hes only 28, and hes incredible, ive noticed.

Of the current maestro, Australian born of Italian parents, **Michael and Stefan** say

" hes not bad, he brought some new music, but I told him 4, 5 times Stefan and I don't like this music, that's not our music, no, send it back.

Current maestro Carmelo Pulisi recalls performing with the band as a young student.

"I was playing in the house band for an Italian song Festival, we accompanied all the singers, and then Banda Bellini played their own thing, the William Tell Overture- It was like comedy relief, the other musicians would be sniggering and laughing"

Carmelo continues,

' I felt sorry for them, because they were not progressing – I decided to answer the ad for the maestro position. I found their attitudes set in stone- and the way they react to being challenged by any stylistic understanding, and finesse, and ability to execute that in performance. I quickly understood the difference between musicante a musician , and sonatore- an instrumentalist – an amateur.

I spoke to Renato, who said do you realise that all these old Italian guys are dropouts- they were told by their teachers sthat they weren't any good , you cant do maths, no good at writing, how about we give you an instrument and and you go visit the maestro down the road, see what he can do, you be a sonatore. Carmelo continues" so in a sense the local twn band became the dropout centre the weak academic kids- so with their history, they've had it in for teachers- I am ta teacher by profession, a conductor, I am the embodiment of the thing that these guys hate. And in rehearsals, they say, well this guys not really good, lets get someone better.

They don't want to change, and accepting of the fact that when they die, the ensemble dies with them. They are arrogant in their uncaring for the ensemble, their unwillingness to change, and their attitude to accommodating an audience. They are happy being loud and out of tune, and new musicians come and hear that and think they don't want to give up their Friday nights for that

Financially, we are hamstrung in playing to the Italian community beyond the occasional church appointment, because a member of the committee has the band stitched up to the pension groups around Melbourne and they are our audience-it's a mess.