

Evivva la banda!: The Wind Band and the Italian *Festa* Tradition in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area

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During the summer months, if one finds him- or herself in certain pockets of Toronto or the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) from late May through early September, they just might hear the echoes of an Italian wind band. There are currently several such bands for hire in the area. Among these is the *Complesso Bandistico Guiseppe Verdi* (CBGV), under the direction of Maestro Guiseppe “Joe” DiGirolamo. As a saxophonist in Maestro DiGirolamo’s band, I have had the opportunity to perform at a number of *feste*¹ over the past four years.

Having been a part of the band for quite some time, and having participated in a number of *feste*, I became interested in exploring the relationship between the band and the *festa* further. Through participant-observation and a series of formal and informal interviews, my research culminated in a major research paper as part of my recently completed master’s degree in ethnomusicology. The main point of interest I sought to understand was the role and significance of the band in the *festa* tradition.

The *festa*, also referred to as the *festa patronale*, is the celebration of a town or village’s patron saint. Although the tradition may be found throughout Italy, it is especially prominent among the Italians of the *Mezzogiorno*. The *Mezzogiorno*, literally meaning “mid-day”, refers to the southern part of Italy, consisting of the regions Sicilia, Sardinia, Calabria, Apulia, Basilicata, Campania, Abruzzi, Molise, and Lazio. The inhabitants of this southern area are called the *meridionali*, and are of particular importance to the *festa* tradition in Toronto and the GTA, since they comprise the majority of the Italian wave of immigrants who came to Toronto from the early 1950s through the early 1970s.

The *Complesso Bandistico Guiseppe Verdi* has been a part of the *festa* tradition among the Italian community of Toronto and the GTA for the past several decades. In the early 1990s, Maestro DiGirolamo, a local music teacher and previous director of the Toronto Italian Band (another local Italian wind band), was invited by Maestro Giovanni Giannone to conduct the CBGV, and eventually to also become director. As the new maestro for the CBGV, DiGirolamo has since been responsible for contracting the band for various *feste*; establishing, arranging, and sometimes composing repertoire for the band; and organizing the hiring and participation of musicians (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The Complesso Bandistico Guiseppe Verdi, 2012. Photograph courtesy of the author.

The “maestro” is the representative or figurehead of the band. At the *festa*, it is common to hear the organizers thank the maestro for the performance of his or her group. It is also common for *festa* attendees to call out to the maestro to request various tunes or to personally thank them for the music. For example, at the *Festa di Maria Santissima della Grazie*, the band played a selection from Verdi’s *Nabucco* as fireworks were shot into the evening sky. One of the *festa* attendees, an elderly gentleman, said to Joe just as the band finished the piece, “*Grazie per fa una bella giornata per me.*”²

I questioned Joe in regards to what directing the band means to him personally, and he replied, “That’s a good question. The band means your expression. So in other words, if your love, and when you hear good sound, that the band is your expression ... you see a part of yourself.”³ That expression includes the instrumental makeup of the band. The CBGV is composed of 25 musicians (six clarinets, five saxophones, three baritones, three trombones, four trumpets, tuba, bass drum, snare drum, and cymbals). Exact instrumentation varies depending on who is present for the gigs and if substitutes are available for those who are absent.

The *feste* in which the CBGV participates have slight variations in custom; however, the main order of events is generally similar. In the morning, *festa* attendees arrive to prepare their picnic tables and socializing areas. The band arrives as these preparations are underway, prior to the liturgical component

of the day. The band begins its day's performance by predominantly playing symphonic and military marches.⁴ When it is time for the mass to begin, the priest or a member of the organizing committee signals to the maestro for the band to take a break. During this time, the members of the band socialize with each other, often indulging in a cup of espresso or a glass of homemade wine.

It was during one such break that I found myself speaking with Jennifer Doria, an alto saxophonist in the CBGV, about the participation of the band in the *festa*. Doria is a music teacher at a local high school; her background is part Italian, and she has attended various *feste*. I asked her opinion on having a live band present at the *festa*, as opposed to a recording, a cheaper alternative that some organizational committees have had to resort to. She replied, "I think you would lose so much with the recording. It lacks authenticity, and it lacks that human connection, because it's also about community, and the band is part of that community."⁵

The connection between the band and the community is evidenced in its participation in the procession, the most sacred and revered element of the *festa*, which occurs immediately following the mass. As the mass is concluded, a statue of the *patronale* (patron saint) is prepared for carrying in the procession. With the presentation of the statue, the band typically plays "Ernani", an excerpt from Act 1 of Giuseppe

Verdi's opera by the same name. In the opera, the opening scene consists of a group of bandits singing to their rebel commander, Ernani. They exclaim "Evviva! ... Beviamo! Nel vino cerchiamo almeno un piacer!"⁶ In context of the *festa*, the procession usually concludes with a chorus of attendees shouting "Evviva! Evviva [insert name of saint]!" Wine, or *vino*, is as intrinsic to the celebrations as food and music. As in many other cultures, wine is used in Italian traditions to salute and pay homage as much as it is used for enjoyment. It is not surprising in the least, then, for a song that immediately references wine to be used for the entrance of the iconic saint statue at the beginning of the religious processions.

The processions are led by the priest, or a team of *festa* attendees who carry the statue of the saint. The band is almost always situated in the immediate vicinity, either in front of or behind the statue. The length of the procession varies from twenty minutes to an hour, depending on the location and the particular *festa*. The priest leads the followers in prayer, and a chorus of women will usually sing devotional hymns. The band's playing is interspersed between the prayers, and the repertoire is often hymns that devotees sing along to. One of the most common hymns is "Noi Vogliamo Dio" (Figure 2). In addition to the hymns, the band includes symphonic and military marches.



Figure 2: "Noi Vogliamo Dio" as transcribed by Maestro Guiseppe DiGirolamo. Alto saxophone part from the author's CBGV repertoire book.

There is one additional aspect that I find interesting, since it is important to the way in which the traditions and memory of the Italian homeland and heritage are expressed by the diaspora. As Rice notes in regards to the Macedonian *sobor*,⁷ children participate in a highly significant way: they wear traditional costumes. While everyone else at the *festa* is dressed in modern, casual, or semi-casual attire, the children are

sometimes dressed in traditional garb (Figure 3). These children are often second- or third-generation Italian-Canadians. Similar to the children at the *sobor*, if they are unable to show in song, ritual, or dance behaviour that they are members of a culture or village, they can at least show it in dress (Rice 1980, 126).



Figure 3: Children in traditional Italian costume lead the procession, followed by the band and a statue of Santa Maria del Castello. *Festa di Maria del Castello*, September 2, 2012, Woodbridge, Ontario. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Following the procession, the *festa* attendees begin their picnic. It is a time for socializing, feasting, and celebrating both the *patronale* and the community. The band will start the picnic by playing symphonic and military marches, as well as arrangements of folk songs.⁸ When it is time for the band to exit, they often will play the Canadian national anthem, followed by the Italian anthem. The picnic, however, carries on long after the band has left.

From my observation of the Italian wind band and the *festa* tradition in Toronto and the GTA, there are several other points of interest worth raising before I conclude with a discussion of one particular *festa* gig. First is the participation of women in the band, and

second, the central importance of food in the *festa* tradition and how it may relate to music. In the Complesso Bandistico Giuseppe Verdi there are two female members, Jennifer Doria and me, who both play alto saxophone. Historically, the Toronto Italian bands were all male, and perhaps the same could be said of the bands in Italy as well, but this is a changing trend.

I asked several male members of the band about the absence of women. David DiGirolamo opined that “I think what was intimidating more for the girls was you would be the only girl playing in a band of all men. So I don’t think it was the boy’s club and girls were not allowed, it was more did someone feel

comfortable coming in to play.”⁹ In a somewhat different sentiment, Emanuel Tucci referred to the inequality of women’s rights in the early to mid-20th Century and its transfer to the domain of music, “Not today, but you know, even a hundred years ago, when musicians would be commissioned by the city or the priests or churches to write songs, they were all men ... unfortunately women did suffer.” Tucci continued, “But now, it’s a fresh sight seeing more and more women joining these bands because everybody has something to offer. And now we’re slowly getting to [where] everyone can offer what they have equally.”¹⁰

Though in the Italian wind band setting of Toronto the number of women in the band is still quite low, there is an interesting example in another part of the *fiesta* of a woman assuming a role traditionally associated with men. The current president of the Casavieri Club Toronto, a group that celebrates the Festa di San Onorio at the beginning of June, is Laura Moscone. I asked Laura how she was treated as being a woman on the organizational committee, since in traditional Italian culture such roles were considered “men’s work”. She agreed that it had certainly been so in the past, but that her current committee was being very helpful and respectful.

Part of Moscone’s organizational duties includes preparing for the *fiesta*. Though not a musician herself, Moscone has great respect for the wind band. When asked if she felt the *fiesta* would be a celebratory occasion without the hiring of the band, she replied, “I don’t think the *fiesta* would be the same ... it [the procession] is almost like a lull sometimes but then you hear those big bangings or those clashings and ... I’m thinking to myself, that’s an announcement of a celebration, of any celebration, and in our case, Saint Onorio ... [the] band is a signaling of something coming.”¹¹ As well as the procession of the saint, the band may be constituted as the signal of what is unofficially the most significant element of the *fiesta* tradition: the feast.

Music and food share a sensory relationship. In an illuminating parallel between music and food, and the importance of both in celebrations such as the *fiesta*, David DiGirolamo speculated:

I think it’s the pleasure that’s derived from both. If you play music, that’s meant to be shared, when you get there to play, you’re not just hiding there behind your lyre, blowing out your notes. To me, that sharing of that music that you’re going there to do is no different than the food you’re gonna make. When you cook, one of the things that you want, your pleasure in cooking the food, is watching somebody else enjoy what you made ... when somebody eats what you made and they go “Oh my gawd, this is so good,” that’s

where your pleasure comes from right? And I think, as a musician, it’s the same thing, that’s what you’ve got to strive for.”¹²

A *Fiesta* Vignette

Sunday, August 26, 2012: Festa di San Francesco di Paola

The Festa di San Francesco di Paola is affectionately referred to by members of the Complesso Bandistico Giuseppe Verdi as the “prosciutto gig”. The *fiesta* is organized by the Associazione Vazzanese Toronto, an Italian-Canadian community from Vazzano, Calabria, though a former member of the organization, an older gentleman named Antonio, has remained responsible for the hiring of the band. As soon as the musicians arrive, they are already thinking of the feast that awaits them on their break. Each year, Antonio provides the band with homemade prosciutto and sopressata (cured Italian meats), fresh bread, cheese, wine, and watermelon.

This year, we played a fairly long pre-mass set, during which we toured the *fiesta* grounds, playing in different sections. The *fiesta* takes place at a park area around the St. Patrick Roman Catholic Church in Brampton, Ontario. At the top of a hill lies an outdoor chapel, which the association uses for the mass. At one point a soccer ball rolled into the band from a group of boys playing nearby. One of the clarinetists, without interrupting his playing, kicked the ball back to them as they shouted thank you. I cite this small incident because it displays the ways in which the band is part of the *fiesta*. They are not encased separately from the festivities, but can be very much a part of all aspects of the event.

Once the priest arrived, the band walked across the park to where another group of picnic tables had been prepared. Antonio had set up caution tape around the tables on which he spread the band’s “prosciutto” feast. I had the opportunity to speak with Antonio, who passionately described his love for the band. He mentioned that as a teenager in Vazzano he had been a musician, but had to quit in order to help with his family’s farm. He always remembered his short time with the band, mentioning that he particularly liked gigs where they would be offered food: “When I was a musician, they offer me sometime, something, you know, I take my money home because I no spend it that day. So I remember to offer something to the band.” When asked how he thought the band was important to the *fiesta*, Antonio replied, “If no band, what are you gonna do? You go, it’s dead! Gotta be a band. Gotta be a band. Band is important, make happy everyone ...”¹³

One of the ways in which this gig is unique from most, if not all, of the others, is that the band plays for certain points of the mass. Following our lunch break courtesy of Antonio, the band played several devotional hymns, including “Noi Vogliamo Dio”, during the receiving of communion. This is one of the most sacred of moments in the mass.¹⁴ The wind band’s provision of music for this particular aspect of the *fiesta* exemplifies the cherished and respected role that the band may have to the community.

Shortly after the mass, the procession began. Because the mass had taken place later than anticipated that day, the band had time to participate in the full procession, but had to conclude its performance at the *fiesta* shortly thereafter.¹⁵ The song we played for our exit was “Parata di Eroi” (Parade of Heroes), a military march by Italian composer Francesco Pellegrino. One of the band members remarked that we had already played that march earlier in the day. The first time we had played it, Antonio happily exclaimed “Ah! Parata di Eroi!”. Maestro DiGirolamo made sure we played Antonio’s song for him again as we left. I smile thoughtfully as I remember the maestro mentioning to me at one of our last gigs of the season, “And what is our job if not to please the public?” A question, perhaps, but remembering Antonio and many others like him, a rather poignant statement as well.

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Notes

¹ Singular *fiesta*.

² “Thank you for making a beautiful day for me.” This *fiesta* took place at St. Philip Neri Roman Catholic Church, Toronto, on September 2, 2012.

³ Interview with the author, September 30, 2012, Vaughan, Ontario.

⁴ The *marcia sinfonica* is the “trademark” of the Italian wind band, though both symphonic and military marches are “regulated by the primary function to accompany the religious processions and enhance the ritual and pageantry that is associated with the celebrations” (Rocco 1986, 143). The symphonic march is often lengthier than a military march, slower in tempo, and has an operatic or *bel canto* melodic quality. One reason for the distinct nature and relationship between the *marcia sinfonica* and the Italian wind band is that the “... Italian band does not march in the military sense, but rather processes or walks along with the people who give honor to the patron saint of their town, the music [therefore] reflects a more cantabile nature” (ibid., 143-144).

⁵ Interview with the author, August 12, 2012, Vaughan, Ontario.

⁶ “Hooray! We drink! In wine we seek at least a pleasure!”

⁷ The *sobor*, literally translated as “gathering”, is similar to the Italian *fiesta* tradition in which a patron saint is paid homage through celebration. For further reading see Rice 1980.

⁸ In Italian culture, what are understood to be “traditional” songs are not necessarily songs passed down through oral transmission. They also include songs composed in the 19th and 20th Centuries that became very popular among rural Italians, as well as excerpts from operas (e.g., “Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves” from Verdi’s *Nabucco*, which is included in the repertoire of the Complesso Bandistico Guiseppe Verdi). When I asked my grandfather, and other elderly Italians in my community, what they consider traditional music, they will often refer to these composed pieces.

⁹ Interview with the author, September 25, 2012, Toronto, Ontario.

¹⁰ Interview with the author, September 30, 2012, Vaughan, Ontario.

¹¹ Interview with the author, September 26, 2012, Vaughan, Ontario.

¹² Interview with the author, September 25, 2012, Toronto, Ontario.

¹³ These comments were part of an informal conversation with Antonio just before the band started to play after its lunch break. August 26, 2012.

¹⁴ In the Catholic faith, the consumption of a small piece of bread is when the devotees believe that they are receiving the body of Christ.

¹⁵ The band is hired for approximately three hours. During that time, the number of tunes it plays before or after the mass and procession depends on the progression of the day’s events.