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Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio: A Common Good to Be Reinterpreted

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Abstract

The Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio (2002–2023) was one of the most internationally renowned Italian world music projects. Comprising 18 musicians from around the world, who spoke nine different languages and belonged to three distinct religious traditions, it promoted a tangible vision of multiculturalism, helping to redefine the image of Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II as a space for encounter and exchange. This case report offers a critical reassessment of the Orchestra's twenty-year experience, examining it in relation to the migratory flows that have affected Rome, and specifically the Esquilino district. Much of the already extensive scholarly literature on the Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio places the square at its conceptual centre, often understanding it as inherently welcoming. This contribution highlights the contradictions underlying this interpretation, demonstrating how the square is also shaped by historically elitist dynamics and persistent social tensions. This perspective is supported by ethnographic fieldwork conducted with Pino Pecorelli, the Orchestra's former bassist, deputy director, and artistic producer. The research offers a more nuanced understanding of the square, conceived not only as a symbol of multicultural coexistence but also as a space shaped by the conflicts and transformations characteristic of contemporary society.

Keywords: Ethnographic Fieldwork; Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio; Migrations; Rome; World Music

Introduction

Numerous scholars [1-3] have examined the Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio (OPV) and its uniqueness within the Italian landscape. The OPV was founded in 2002 within the Apollo 11 Cultural Association, based on an idea by Mario Tronco (1962 -) and Agostino Ferrente (1971-). It brought together approximately eighteen musicians from ten countries: Italy, Argentina, Cuba, Senegal, Tunisia, Brazil, Ecuador, India, the United States, and Hungary. These analyses have often taken the concept of the 'square' as their starting point, understood as a space in which the "role of collective action, thanks to its capacity to reinvent society by innovating politics and democratic experience," [4] assumes a central function. Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II, located in the Esquilino district, [5] could be considered a square that fostered, to draw on the reflections of anthropologist Hannerz, "cultural serendipity": [6] a space in which the co-presence of events, imaginaries, and individuals created particularly favorable conditions for the generation of new cultural forms and complexities through their close coexistence within the same space. Indeed, it is in the limited spaces of the city that we find "the greatest variety of subcultures, the most articulated cultural apparatus, and a range of contrasting yet interconnected ways of managing meaning" [7]. The square changes over time: the surrounding architecture, the functions of buildings, the infrastructure, and the ways in which space is used all change [8]. At the same time, it also changes on a social and cultural level, as the communities that inhabit it, everyday practices, forms of sociability, and the events taking place there evolve. It is therefore people, through their presence and activities, who continually redefine its meaning; above all, however,

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it is the use made of the square that determines its role. Even when the term piazza takes on a negative connotation, as in the expression drug-dealing square, it nevertheless retains the original meaning of the urban square: a space for encounters, mutual recognition, and the formation of relationships. In sociology, the analysis of the drug-dealing square invites us to examine these places not merely as illegal drug markets, but as complex social systems embedded in specific territorial, economic, and relational contexts [9]. The drug-dealing square constitutes a social microcosm, organized according to informal rules, hierarchies, roles, and forms of cooperation that enable the system to function and endure overtime. Many analysts in the field have interpreted the drug-dealing square as a form of "criminal welfare": a system that redistributes resources, creates employment, and structures social relationships within the local community. Naturally, this is a form of welfare rooted in illegality and the potential for violence; nevertheless, this does not prevent it from fulfilling, in the perception of those involved, a function of protection and support [10]. If, as Levy argues, "the square that works best is the one capable of connecting people with the history of their countries," [4] then it is also necessary to move in the opposite direction: to broaden the perspective through which the concept of the square is understood, avoiding limiting its analysis to the destination space alone and including the place of origin as well [11,12]. This paper, through ethnographic fieldwork conducted with Pino Pecorelli (1976 -) bassist, artistic producer, and deputy director of the Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio until 2022 - draws on one-to-one interviews aimed at exploring the concept of the square as a cultural identity, using the theoretical tools offered by the sociology of migration.

Interlude: A Case-Report

The reflection by writer and geneticist Guido Barbujani - "the human species is a migratory species" [13] - presented at the 2022 Rome Science Festival (Festival della Scienza di Roma), recalls an established scientific perspective: mobility is a structural feature of human evolutionary history. "To those who speak of defending 'our' roots, I would reply that roots belong to plants," [13] Barbujani continues. Migration, for humans as for animals (or for humans as animals?), is, in fact, a natural condition - and, to quote Aristotle, nature does nothing in vain. Human beings, therefore, as biological, cultural, and spiritual organisms, also define themselves through movement, adaptation, and interaction with different environments. Would Aeneas have fled Troy if the Greek Sinon had not succeeded in gaining the Trojans' trust, and if the Greeks, once they had emerged from the horse, had not laid waste to the city? If the twenty-first century has been described as "the age of migration," [14] and if a significant proportion of these movements consists of forced migration, [15] it seems legitimate to ask to what extent contemporary ultranationalist hysteria affects the continuity and intensity of these phenomena. This is also the paradigm at stake in the case of the Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio: not a journey, but a flight.

Even in the context of flight, the musicians' most urgent desire was to assert their cultural identity. The main driving force, however, remained economic in nature: the search for work and recognition of the dignity of their professional role. Individual trajectories were extremely heterogeneous; the only condition they shared was that of flight, understood as an act of escape from oppressive circumstances: flight from political regimes, such as the Cuban one, or from economic systems unable to guarantee decent living conditions. The experiences recounted are numerous: some musicians, having arrived abroad to perform - for example, with the Senegalese ballet or Cuban orchestras - decided to go into hiding rather than return; others took advantage of contingent opportunities, as in the case of a musician who chose to disembark in Italy from a cruise ship on which he worked. There is also the case of someone travelling to Paris who, while staying with an uncle in early September 2001, suddenly found himself exposed to a climate of hostility due to the "manhunt for Arabs," which forced him to hide and seek refuge in Italy [16].

Rome's historic centre, which had experienced a gradual demographic decline during the 1960s and 1970s, became the focus of substantial migratory interest between 1991 and 2001: "the number of foreign residents increased from 50,000 to 100,000" [17]. The figure most relevant to this account is that "in most cases (53%), foreigners were employed in unskilled occupations, which only rarely involved native-born residents (6%)" [17]. Through its 1,400 concerts in more than 150 cities, the Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio contributed to reversing this trend: musicians arriving from countries such as Tunisia, Cuba, the United States, Senegal, Brazil, India, Hungary, Ecuador, and Argentina, alongside Italian musicians, had the opportunity to engage in highly skilled and remunerated professional activities.

Conclusions

When we referred earlier to the idea that human beings also define themselves through movement, adaptation, and interaction with different environments, this should be understood considering the premises set out in the introduction. The fact that the image of the square as a naturally welcoming meeting place - and, above all, the 'square as a concept' - initially attractive to the subaltern classes, has undergone a process of revalorization over time has meant that the very ethnic communities that animated it have gravitated around it without being able to settle there. Although these communities were precisely the ones

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that generated the process of cultural hybridisation for which Piazza Vittorio Emanuele II is still known today in the national context, they were drawn to the area primarily because of its proximity to Termini Station, a crucial urban transport hub, and the presence of the ethnic market.

There was a market in Piazza Vittorio. They came there precisely because there was a market. As a Roman, I never used to go to Piazza Vittorio. The musicians did not live in Piazza Vittorio either, because they could not afford it. We rehearsed on Via Conte Verde, at the Apollo 11 Association, and that is why we used to frequent that area; it was the square where it was easy to meet the Senegalese man going to buy things from another Senegalese man, or the Arab man going to buy meat from another Arab man. The musicians who had no stability in the city experienced the square more than anyone else, but for a simple reason: they slept at Mario Tronco's house, who lived in Piazza Vittorio [16].

The fact remains that, if "mobility is a predominantly social event," [18] it is also true that "defining a movement requires drawing a line and agreeing that it has been crossed. Where that line is drawn, geographically and administratively, is essentially a social and political construct" [18].

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