



Paolo Conte: Italian ‘Arthouse Exotic’

Tony Mitchell

Humanities & Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney, P.O. Box 123 Broadway, NSW 2007, Australia

E-mail: tony.mitchell@uts.edu.au

Abstract

Paolo Conte is the most internationally successful of the Italian singer-songwriters who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. He is also among the most idiosyncratic, eclectic and unusual exponents of what Franco Fabbri has defined as the canzone d'autore (author's song). Nonetheless he remains a rather arcane, cult figure in the Anglophone world – an example of what Simon Frith has called 'the unpopular popular'. A combination of apparent opposites – the provincial and the cosmopolitan – his music appropriates a global sweep of influences without being definable as 'world music'. Characteristics of both his rough, untrained singing style and wry, ironic and opaque compositions have strong affinities with US singer-songwriters like Tom Waits and Randy Newman, and he draws heavily on early American jazz influences, although he remains quintessentially Italian. This makes him difficult to categorise in the world music market.

Popular, classical, exotic

Piedmontese *cantautore* (singer-songwriter) Paolo Conte has been lauded in Italy for the distinctively broad global focus – what Paolo Jachia has called an ‘exoticism’ and ‘a search for elsewhere in the texture of the everyday’ (Jachia 1998, p. 102) – in his urbane, sophisticated, jazz-oriented songs, which often explore the dilemmas of characters who are in imaginary flight from the everyday. But despite his long-term acclaim in Europe since performing at the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris in 1984 he has only relatively recently, in his late sixties, begun to receive recognition in the UK and the USA. After his 1998 USA tour, *Rolling Stone* designated his album *The Best of Paolo Conte* ‘essential listening’ for that year, and Robert Christgau listed it in his top 100 albums in *Village Voice*. Conte’s eight-city sell-out tour of the US and Canada in 2001 consolidated this acclaim. Ranked by Jachia as one of the two ‘major figures of the contemporary Italian music scene’ (along with Franco Battiato [*ibid.*, p. 100]) and highly regarded in Europe for his suave performance persona, droll humour and songs suffused with pre-1920s-jazz influences, Conte is an undiscovered treasure for many Anglophone listeners, despite the fact that a number of his songs are either partially in English or are peppered with (often nonsensical) English phrases. His

deep, languid and gravelly baritone vocal delivery and often cynical, dark and metaphysical lyrics make his songs highly idiosyncratic.

Roberto Caselli concludes his 2002 monograph on Conte with the statement: 'Undoubtedly Conte is an Italian public figure of major current international status, without being bound by fashion and ephemeral cultural references, which he is able to both engage with and at the same time resist within the extraordinarily classical foundation with which he has imbued the various elements of his music' (Caselli 2002, p. 118). The use of the term 'classical' is notable here – seemingly an artistic judgement which seeks to distinguish Conte's music from the ephemeral and the fashionable, which he both 'involves' and 'resists'. This positions him within 'a kind of arthouse culture' in popular music, to borrow an expression used by Simon Frith (2004, p. 51) in relation to commercially independent niche forms of music. The issue at stake here is one of value – as Frith has noted elsewhere, 'one way of ascribing popular cultural value is to show that a successful record is, in fact, art'. The value and importance of Conte's music is related to the transformative quality of what Frith has referred to as the '*unpopular popular*': 'Culture as transformation . . . must challenge experience, must be difficult, must be *unpopular*' (Frith 1996, pp. 20–1).

There is a telling moment in Mark Dezzani's (2000) English language documentary *Paolo Conte: A Face on Loan*, which illustrates how Conte can be both popular and 'unpopular': a snippet from Adriano Celentano's 'huge international hit' version in 1968 of Conte's song 'Azzurro' ('Sky Blue'), about a lonely, bored guy whose girlfriend has gone off to the seaside on holiday, and who toys with the idea of catching a train to join her, then thinks better of it. Celentano strolls through film projections of summer streets as he sings it on an Italian TV pop variety show, finishing up with the train chorus, for which he is joined by a dance troupe of men in suits and women in striped mini skirt outfits, rather gauchely simulating a train going forwards, and then backwards. This is followed by Conte's own far more urbane, suave version of the song, performed to a rapturous concert audience in Amsterdam in 1988, with Conte playing solo piano, intoning one of his more iconically 'exotic' lyrics, almost in a rap idiom ('I dream of Africa in my garden, with oleander and baobab' . . .), accompanied in the final chorus by the voices of his eleven-piece jazz ensemble. Celentano's performance of the song comes across as 1960s seaside pop kitsch, while Conte's own, far more subtle, nuanced and sophisticated reinterpretation of it, which transforms it into a 'classic', is much easier to define as 'art'. Yet arguably his reading of the song and its enthusiastic response is to some degree dependent on its audience's memories of Celentano's popular hit version. As the song with which Conte chooses to finish his Amsterdam concert, and one of the main, far from 'classical' foundations on which his reputation as a singer-songwriter is based, it neatly poses the dilemma of whether Conte's music should be read as popular music or as a more 'arthouse' form of song writing.

Conte and the *canzone d'autore*

Gianni Borgna, in his authoritative volume *Storia della canzone italiana*, defines Conte's style of singing as 'provincial swing', alluding to his Piedmontese origins in the small agricultural and famous wine-producing town of Asti, 30 kilometres from Turin (Borgna 1992, p. 359). Borgna's description is apt, given that Conte continues to live in his family's home in Asti, and has composed all his songs on his parents' piano,

absorbing all the US jazz influences from the 1920s onwards which they introduced him to via illegal 78 rpm records smuggled in from France during Mussolini's ban on American music (Perrier 1989, p. 27). At the same time, perhaps more than any other Italian *cantautore*, he is a musical *flanêur* who draws on a cosmopolitan panoply of musical influences.¹ These extend from Neapolitan song to various forms of early US jazz from boogie-woogie to swing (in *A Face on Loan* he cites Fats Waller, Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Sidney Bechet), as well as Brazilian and other Latin American musical influences (such as the Argentinian singer-songwriter Atahualpa Yupanqui and tango and milonga, rumba, samba and Cuban habanera), Charles Aznavour, Georges Brassens and French *chanson*, French quadrille and possibly German cabaret, to the extent that his is an admixture of extensively eclectic, nomadic and syncretic styles of music. His songs take the listener on imaginary exotic voyages – to Hawaii, Africa, South America, as well as to historic places like Paris in the 1920s, the setting of his 2000 magnum opus about the reception of jazz in Paris, *Razmataz*. Conte has stated that 'I don't like travelling, or holidays, I like to stay in my own place and fantasise. I don't sing about the world, or current events, or politics . . . perhaps my dabbling in exotic names is a kind of modesty, a way of hiding' (quoted in Jachia 1998, p. 102). His songs are miniature evocations of imagined images and locations, alongside a more 'provincial' concern with towns in Northern Italy, peopled by daydreamers, cyclists, love stories and relationship breakdowns.

Franco Fabbri's well-known taxonomy has designated seven types of *canzone* in Italy – the traditional song, the pop song, the 'sophisticated song', the *canzone d'autore*, the political song, the rock song and the children's song (Fabbri 1981, p. 123). Conte, along with some of his contemporaries, could be categorised relatively unproblematically as practising primarily the *canzone d'autore*, along with elements of the 'sophisticated song' and the traditional song, broad as these genres may be. In terms of lyrics, Fabbri distinguishes the *canzone d'autore* from other genres in that it contains

the highest level of complexity, with regard to richness of vocabulary, rhetoric and syntax. [...] The tendency of the *canzone d'autore* towards individual characterization can be seen above all in its lyrical vocabulary, which is richer and more open to literary suggestion [than other genres]. (*ibid.*, pp. 124, 127)

These features are readily identifiable in the lyrics of Conte's songs, which often contain oblique, fragmentary observations, and opaque, disconnected images which verge on the surreal. The literary aspects of Conte's lyrics were officially acknowledged in 1981 when he was awarded the Premio Montale, a prize established in honour of the Nobel Prize-winning Italian poet Eugenio Montale, which is normally given to literary figures. In a discussion of the usually 'indirect, filtered and second hand' relationship between poetry and the *cantautori* – many of whose song lyrics have been published in book form – Umberto Fiori cites Conte, along with De Gregori, Dalla and rapper Jovanotti, as one of the more celebrated *cantautori* who are occasionally acclaimed by audiences, critics and reviewers as 'poets' but more often likely to reject such claims and regard their songs as 'inept photographs of poetry' – to quote the Roman *cantautore* Antonello Venditti (Fiori 1996, p. 157). An example from one of Conte's most famous – and poignant – lyrics, 'Un gelato al limon', invoked by Barry Singer as 'romantic, bittersweet, extravagant, yet cunningly concise' can serve to illustrate that in Conte's songs, it is the cadenzas, intonation and tonal resonance of the singer's voice together with the musical arrangement of the song that produces a three-dimensional 'poetry' that the lyrics on the page can never evoke:

A lemon ice cream, lemon ice cream, lemon ice cream

Hidden away at the end of the city

It's real lemon,

Do you like it?

While another summer's about to end

[Un gelato al limon, gelato al limon, gelato al limon, / sprofondati in fondo a una città / un gelato al limon / e vero limon / ti piace . . ? / mentre un'altra estate passerà . . .]

The song dramatises a conflict between the banal and almost obsessive repetition of the trite 'gelato' refrain with regrets about the end of summer and the protagonist's mixed feelings about his involvement with a woman 'about to enter my life with baggage full of perplexity'. His suggestions of what he can offer her become more and more banal on the one hand ('a shower in the public baths which are in the depths of tepidity', 'the intelligence of electricians, so at least our sad hotel room will have some light') and more grandiose and exotic on the other ('the afternoon moon for the Arab dream you love') in a contrast between simple, ordinary everyday surface rituals with deeper, more emotionally seismographic events. Conte's delivery is wry, restrained but also at times ironically melodramatic, and the piano carries most of the melodic weight of the song. The 'poetry' of the song relates, in Conte's words, to 'a general poetic sense. There should be poetry in the music as well as in the lyrics, the cadences, the composition, the orchestration, the intensity of the interpretation. It's the harmonic ensemble of all these components that should be poetic' (Caselli 2002, p. 41).

Other elements Fabbri notes as endemic to the *canzone d'autore* and which can be detected in Conte's songs are intellectual aspirations, literary influences (although cinema is even more of an influence), overtones of French existentialism, and jazz, while its class distinctions also seem apposite to Conte, a lawyer by trade and family tradition:

The *canzone d'autore* (perhaps this is an aspect of its sincerity) appears to have a social image which corresponds to its actual area of consumption: that is, lower-middle and middle-class intellectuals, students, the Italy of mass scholarization, the university open to everyone, intellectual unemployment. (Fabbri 1981, p. 132)

A related aspect which arguably relates to a number of Conte's songs, is the tendency of the singer to create a personality which can be identified with the protagonist of the song, and for this personality to dominate:

things that might be considered mistakes of intonation or bad pronunciation in other genres are accepted as characteristics of individual personality, which is of primary importance in this genre. (*ibid.*, pp. 126–7)

These idiosyncratic 'mistakes of intonation' might be applied not only to Conte's widespread use of an assortment of grunts, gasps, laughs, scat singing and other onomatopoeic vocalisations, but also to his employment of a number of fragmented, nonsensical, and often non-sequitur, English expressions which are often pronounced rather oddly (Conte claims to speak no English). A prominent example of the latter is the well-known chorus of 'Via con me': 'It's wonderful, it's wonderful, it's wonderful, good luck my babe, it's wonderful, I dream of you . . . chips chips, du-du-du-du' (which Roberto Benigni parodies in *A Face on Loan*). Fabbri designates Conte, along with Enzo Jannacci (especially in the latter's collaborations with Dario Fo), as the two most important and successful innovators of a revival of the forms and conventions of the *canzone d'autore* which distinguished it from the growing clichés of rock music in Italy in the late 1970s. This suggests that in terms of his place within Italian traditions



Figure 1 CD cover for Paolo Conte: *Una faccia in prestito* (1995).

of popular *cantautori*, Conte, along with Jannacci (who, as Jachia notes, performed and recorded some of Conte's songs in the late 1970s and early 1980s, most notably 'Genova per noi' [Genoa for Us], 'Questa sporca vita' [This Dirty Life] and 'Sudamerica' [South America], and shared with him 'a vein of all-consuming, melancholy lunacy' [Jachia 1998, p. 77]), represents complex and contradictory aspects of both song tradition and innovation.

Paolo Jachia, in his 1998 book *La canzone d'autore italiana 1958–1997*, partially confirms Fabbri's prognosis. Jachia, careful to note that 'rather than referring literally to a musical genre, with *canzone d'autore*, we refer to a rather blurred area that collects a host of heterogeneous musical phenomena' (Jachia 1998, p. 9), ranks 109 Italian *cantautori* in a musical graph, including a number of recent hip hop MCs, according to the concentration of elements of rock, pop, folk, jazz, funk/soul, melodic tradition and innovation discernible in their songs. Conte rates five out of five for jazz and innovation, three out of five for melodic tradition, and nothing in the other categories, while Jannacci is one of twenty artists who get five out of five for elements of innovation, while also scoring two or three for rock, pop, folk, jazz, funk/soul, and melodic tradition. Jachia ranks Conte and Fabrizio De Andre as the two most important links 'between the Genovese *cantautori* of the 1960s [Gino Paoli, Luigi Tenco, Bruno Lauzi, Sergio Endrigo, Umberto Bindi and Pietro Ciampi] and the anxieties of the current musical scene, and the only ones consistently capable of playing on present tendencies, and taking new artistic and creative risks with each new release' (*ibid.*, p. 100).

Conte's significant influence on Italian *canzone* is acknowledged in Caselli's (2002) study of Conte, which concludes with an extensive list of newer *cantautori* who can be identified as 'heirs' of Conte, beginning with his brother Giorgio Conte, and his former guitarist Jimmy Villotti, and including Vinicio Capossela – who has recorded with Conte's orchestral arranger and saxophonist Antonio Marangolo – Sergio Cammamiere, Gianmaria Testa, who like Conte uses jazz, tango and habanera, and Marcello Murru, who has worked with Conte's former producer Lilli Greco. Of these, Testa has begun to reach a Francophone and Anglophone audience and recorded a number of outstanding albums on the Chant Du Monde label. Even a US swing jazz group called 8 1/2 Souvenirs (a name no doubt deriving from Fellini) has recorded two songs by Conte, 'Happy Feet' and 'Come di'. This suggests that his influence has been deep if not widespread; Caselli concludes that '[a]ny attempt to group together all the influences that Conte has exerted on his younger and not so young colleagues is almost impossible since a myriad of absolutely heterogeneous personalities move through the undergrowth of the *canzone d'autore*, making more or less obvious references to the open and emotive poetics refined by well-known and much appreciated artists, among whom Conte is one of the most representative' (Caselli 2002, pp. 116–7).

Cinematic song writing

In Conte's song 'Lo zio', where there are flashes of both Shanghai and Duke Ellington dressed as a boxer in a dressing gown, 'everything rolls like a film in the projector'. Conte deploys cinema not simply in the sense of having written music for the cinema (he has scored films by Lina Wertmüller and Roberto Benigni, among others, and won a David di Donatello award in 1996 for his music for the animated film *La freccia azzurra* [The Blue Arrow]) – but also in his conception of songs as mini films. In *A Face for Loan*, Conte talks about Gershwin's 'cinematic syncopations', and describes his songs as 'cinematic flashes'; in his interview with Perrier he states 'my songs are like pieces of film. When the atmosphere is established, when the characters are firmly in place, when everything is set to happen, I offer a CLOSE UP ON THE IMAGE' (Perrier 1989, p. 101):

I have always said that my generation was more nourished by film than by literature. For us, and particularly for provincials like me, the cinema was the great discovery of the 20th century. It was our opening on the world. For me, cinema would be a real education, in the sense that it would allow me to tell stories in a visual way, as in a film. Simple, even banal stories, at first sight, but with something more in the interpretation, the writing, a certain colour in the use of words, in the pauses and hesitations which take us beyond a simple narrative. The secret of art is to be a bit enigmatic. (*ibid.*, pp. 103–4)

One of Conte's songs is entitled 'Rebus', which provides a fitting metaphor for this often enigmatically cinematic aspect of a number of his songs. Two particularly brief and cryptic filmic examples occur on his 1987 album *Agua-plano*. In 'Hesitation', an eavesdropper in a hotel interprets an afternoon seduction scene occurring behind a locked door, in which a 'hesitation' takes place, and the carpet under the door 'seems electric' and the 'roses he had given her were there waiting to be understood'. 'Max' is even more cryptic, describing a 'lucid, tranquil' figure whose 'fluency doesn't simplify things', and who is asked to let the protagonist get out, as he 'sees a secret approaching'. The song ends with an arresting clarinet figure, augmented by piano and violin, and then repeated by an accordion, which seem to absorb the enigma of the

lyrics into a melodic resolution. (Conte has explained that he wrote the music for this song before the lyrics, as is his usual practice, and had particular difficulty composing the lyrics until he 'had a vision of a voluminous, even monumental character . . . who was friendly, but led a dangerous life, driving cars and riding racehorses' [*ibid.*, p. 68]). Caselli suggests 'Max' is an example of Conte's 'hermeticism': 'one has to deduce, reconstruct, extrapolate and naturally seek help from the music in order to conclude that this is a small masterpiece' (Caselli 2002, p. 30). In most cases, the fragmentary, suggestive lyrics are nourished by the richness of the musical accompaniment, where an extended jazz-chamber ensemble of piano, guitar, double bass, violin, accordion and sometimes a brass section are deployed.

Cinematic analogies can be applied to not just the dramatic situation and meaning of Conte's songs, but also to their musical structure and their use of elliptic minimalism. Indeed, Conte has suggested one of the reasons he uses English in his songs is because 'My music has a cinematic quality, and the English language is more cinematic than Italian' (Singer 2001). The cinematic quality of Conte's songs was evoked extensively by John L. Walters in his UK *Guardian* review of Conte's Royal Festival Hall concert in May 2005:

His musical world is . . . an arthouse movie soundtrack imbued with self-mocking humour and nostalgia for an imagined past. Each song suggests a fragment of a screenplay: an encounter, a missed opportunity, tall stories told through a haze of alcohol and smoke. Though the concert programme helpfully includes English translations, Conte's orchestrations illuminate each scenario like a master cinematographer . . . Conte conjures up circus bands, seaside dancehalls and spaghetti westerns – shades of Nino Rota and Ennio Morricone. . . . This is a courteous, accomplished and grown-up music of the highest quality, without the slightest hint of rock'n'roll. (Walters 2005)

Walters establishes conclusively and convincingly the 'arthouse' aspect of Conte's output, as well as its status as mature, adult-oriented popular music quite distinct from the youth orientations of rock'n'roll, if not exactly 'classical'. While the Rota and Morricone references may be rather clichéd Italian reference points, they do align Conte with an Italian cinematic tradition familiar to most Anglophone audiences. His cryptic, quirky and fragmented trad jazz song 'Un fachiro al cinema' from *Una faccia in prestito* is actually set inside what appears to be an arthouse cinema, but otherwise gives little away, as the impetus is on the listener to interpret the film:

I missed a film because in the cinema
Three rows in front, yes, there was you
If only the sun would float this way
Over the fogs of art!
Yes, I, like a fakir, I stretch and turn
I twist and bend
I look at you and look no more
I missed a film
In a cinema of all places
They showed another film just for me
Hello²

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Bianca Galipò for her assistance with this article. All translations from the French and Italian are by the author, except where otherwise indicated.

Endnotes

1. I am not alone in describing Conte as a *flâneur*; commenting on Conte's throwaway comic song 'La vecchia giacca nuova' ('The Old New Jacket') from his 2004 album *Elegia*, Max Cavassa claims rather breathlessly that the song evokes 'in one fell swoop Baudelaire's *flâneur*, the incommunicability of the Nouvelle Vague and Ingmar Bergman, and Fellini's fierce and tragic *Dolce Vita*'; see <http://www.kalpoz.com/recensioni/elegia.htm>
2. English translation included in the container insert of *Una faccia in prestito*, Warner Music/East West 1995. Translator uncredited.

References

- Bonanno, M. 2001. *Paolo Conte: Sotto le stelle del jazz: Naufragi, voli, canzoni* (Foggia, Bastogi)
- Borgna, G. 1992. *Storia della canzone italiana* (Milan, Mondadori)
- Brckett, D. 1995. 'The electro-acoustic mirror: voices in American pop', *Critical Quarterly*, 37/2 (Summer), pp. 11–20
- Cselli, R. 2002. *Paolo Conte* (Rome, Editori Riuniti)
- Coveri, L. 1996. 'Lingua e dialetto nella canzone popolare italiana recente', in *Analisi e canzone*, ed. R. Dalmonte (Trento, Università degli Studi di Trento), pp. 25–38
- Dezzani, M. 2000. *Paolo Conte: A Face on Loan*. Television Documentary, Europe Productions.
- Fabbri, F. 1981. 'The system of canzone in Italy today', in *World Music and Social Change*, ed. S. Frith (Manchester, Manchester University Press)
1983. 'What kind of music?', *Popular Music*, 2, pp. 131–43
- Fiori, U. 1996. "'In un supremo anelito.'" L'idea di poesia nella canzone italiana', in *Analisi e canzone*, ed. R. Dalmonte (Trento, Università degli Studi di Trento)
- Frith, S. 1995. 'The body electric', *Critical Quarterly*, 37/2(Summer), pp. 1–10
1996. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Oxford, Oxford University Press)
2004. 'Does British music still matter?', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 7/1, pp. 43–58
- Jachia, P. 1998. *La canzone d'autore italiana 1958–1997*, (Milan, Feltrinelli)
- Lechner, E. 2003. 'Global pop' (review of Paolo Conte, *Reveries*), *Village Voice*, 29 May
- Marcus, G. 1977. *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'N' Roll Music* (London, Omnibus Press)
- Mitchell, T. 2000. 'The Moon is a Lightbulb and other stories: Fo the songwriter', in *Dario Fo: Stage, Text and Tradition*, ed. J. Farrell and S. Antonio (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press), pp. 101–21
- Perrier, N. 1989. *Paolo Conte: La memoire fauve* (Montréal, Editions Phidal)
- Sarlin, B. 1975. *Turn it Up!: I Can't Hear the Words* (London, Coronet Books)
- Santoro, M. 2002. 'What is a "cantautore?" Distinction and authorship in Italian (popular) music', *Poetics*, 30, pp. 111–32
- Singer, B. 2001. 'Paolo Conte: an Italian crooner of restless songs is all over the map', *New York Times*, 25 February
- Testa, C. 1996. 'The dialectics of dialect: Enzo Jannacci and existentialism', *Canadian Journal of Italian Studies*, 19/29&52
- White, T. 2000. 'Randy Newman's America: a portrait of the artist', *Billboard*, 112/50, 9 December, pp. 15–19
- Walters, J.L. 2005. 'Paolo Conte', *The Guardian*, Tuesday 25 May