

THEA TIRAMANI

EXPLORING *BELLANÖVA*'S MUSICAL DIALOGUE:  
HOW ORAL TRADITION MUSICIANS CAN INTERACT  
WITH MUSICAL WRITING AND ARRANGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

Il patrimonio musicale delle *Quattro Province*, nell'Appennino italiano, è una tradizione musicale viva e praticata. Alcune coppie di suonatori di *piffero* (oboe popolare ad ancia doppia) e fisarmonica animano ancora, con ampia partecipazione di pubblico, feste, balli e matrimoni. Il noto duo composto da Stefano Valla (*piffero*) e Daniele Scurati (fisarmonica) è portatore di un'antica tradizione, che mantiene viva non solo attraverso un lavoro di conservazione della memoria, ma anche attraverso una rispettosa innovazione e creazione all'interno del repertorio. La collaborazione del duo con Marcello Fera, compositore, violinista e direttore d'orchestra, e Nicola Segatta, violoncellista, nasce da questa volontà di sperimentazione. Il progetto *Bellanöva* propone un dialogo dei quattro strumenti, bilanciando l'oralità con la scrittura musicale. Lo scopo di questo articolo è indagare come quattro musicisti di diversa estrazione possano interagire in modo collaborativo, adattandosi alle reciproche esigenze, conciliando le rispettive e diverse incorporazioni di competenze musicali.

PAROLE CHIAVE tradizione, innovazione, oralità, scrittura musicale, incorporazione

SUMMARY

The musical heritage of the *Quattro Province* (Four Provinces) in the Italian Apennine is a live musical tradition. A few pairs of *piffero* (a popular double-reed oboe) and accordion players still animate, with wide audience participation, festivities, dances, weddings. The well-known duo composed of Stefano Valla (*piffero*) and Daniele Scurati (accordion) are bearers of an ancient tradition, which they keep alive not only through a memory preservation work, but also through respectful innovation and creation within the repertoire. The collaboration of the duo with Marcello Fera, composer, violinist and conductor, and Nicola Segatta, cellist comes from this desire of experimenting. The project *Bellanöva* proposes a dialogue of the four instruments, balancing orality with musical writing. The purpose of this article is to investigate how four musicians from different backgrounds can interact collaboratively, adapting to each other's needs, reconciling their respective and different embodiment of musical skills.

KEYWORDS tradition, innovation, orality, music writing, embodiment



## 1. Introduction

«*Che bela növa m'avì purtà*  
o bel faccin d'amore? Dimmi che növa m'hai purtà che sei venuto a quest'ora...»  
«*E mi la növa che v'hö purtà e mi non so se vi piacerà: sun gnü a domandarvi*  
*oh vui bella morettin se volete maridarvi*»

[«What good news have you brought me,  
oh handsome lad of love? Tell me, what news have you brought that you've come at this hour...»  
«The news I've brought you, I don't know if you'll like it: I've come to ask you,  
oh lovely girl, if you'd like to marry»]

THE *Bellanöva* project was born in 2020 from the collaboration of Stefano Valla and Daniele Scurati – *piffero* and accordion players and living exponents of the Apennine musical tradition known as the *Quattro Province* (Four Provinces)<sup>1</sup> – with Marcello Fera, a composer, violinist, and conductor, and Nicola Segatta, a cellist who is also a composer and luthier. The ‘good news’ – a translation of the quartet’s name, which is also the title of their album released at the end of 2020 under the Felmay label – refers to the remarkable ability of these four individuals to initiate and guide a process of dialogue, mediation, rewriting, and reinvention. This process begins with a vast and complex repertoire, a living tradition closely tied to a specific instrument: the *piffero* of the *Quattro Province*, a folk double-reed oboe. The *Bellanöva* project is just one of several examples of how *Quattro Province* music<sup>2</sup> has embraced contamination, opening itself over time to new contexts and engaging with different musical worlds.

In this context, the concept of contamination refers to the case where a classical musician incorporates new elements that reflect his own cultural background and education. As Blacking points out, each new musical idea is not simply a linear extension of previous concepts; rather, it represents a new emphasis arising from personal experience and social environment.<sup>3</sup> I find this concept useful for theorizing contamination as an active interaction between the experiences of the classical musician and those rooted in the oral tradition, rather than a simple addition. As music reflects social structures and shared emotions within a given context, the intervention of the classical composer – as I will explore in more detail later – operates in a similar way. The composer can introduce contamination into the tradition while remain-

1. The expression *Quattro Province* refers to an area of the Italian Apennines encompassing four provinces from four different regions: Genoa (Liguria), Alessandria (Piedmont), Pavia (Lombardy), and Piacenza (Emilia-Romagna). Though now sparsely populated, these valleys were once vital crossroads, facilitating the movement and exchange of traders, armies, pilgrims, and travelers, as evidenced by the ancient roads that traversed the region, such as the Via Postumia, the Via Francigena, and the Via del Sale. The dense network of communication routes that crisscrossed this region fostered friendships and kinship ties, reinforcing a sense of belonging to a community that transcended regional boundaries. News traveled along with goods: wood, coal, wine, rice, and ancient song.
2. Various local scholars have meticulously reconstructed the geography and cultural practices associated with this area, as well as the cultural significance of *piffero* music. See FERRARI *et al.*, *Chi nasce mulo* and GNOLI *et al.*, *Coi nostri strumenti*.
3. BLACKING, *How Musical Is Man?*, p. 73.

ing socially rooted and respectful of the emotions and shared structures of the community in question. Indeed, «the forms are produced by human minds whose working habits are, I believe, a synthesis of given, universal systems of operation and acquired, cultural patterns of expression».<sup>4</sup> The «forms produced by human minds» find their coherence in the collective response to the very structure of the tradition, which remains perceptible even in a context of contamination. The work of the Bellanöva Quartet embodies what *piffero* player Stefano Valla describes as the essential elements of the 'tradition': a deep and sensitive understanding of the past, coupled with a contemporary gesture that reflects the respectful innovation and creation of those who actively engage with the tradition. This approach allows 'tradition' to thrive in the present and project itself into the future. Specifically, an analysis of the musical output of the Bellanöva Quartet raises important questions about the relationship between oral and written music, prompting inquiries into the extent to which these two realms can influence one another and the potential outcomes and limitations of such an encounter. Furthermore, this study facilitates a thorough exploration of the mnemonic mechanisms involved, as well as the incorporation and visualization of sonic images by musicians from the oral tradition. These elements are inextricably linked to their relationship with a specific territory and are often challenging to disentangle when considered alongside the learning and reworking processes characteristic of written music.

## 2. Tradition and Innovation in the Musical Repertoire of the *Quattro Province*

The music of the *Quattro Province* comprises a repertoire that is still widely practiced, lively and inherently linked to contemporaneity; to quote Fabietti,<sup>5</sup> it is an «authentic tradition» not limited to an unchanging, crystallized repetition of itself, but embracing innovation and change as intrinsic, defining elements.<sup>6</sup> The urge to survive – forward-looking rather than past-oriented – and to transmit this knowledge comes from within the culture itself, reflecting a society that has resisted territorial depopulation and finds its identity in the distinctive sound of a musical instrument. The sound of the *piffero*, even more than the musical repertoire it conveys, becomes a language understood by an extended community that shares places, contexts, and occasions, reconstructing collective memories through sound and forming what Appadurai calls a «community of sentiment».<sup>7</sup> Today, more than ever, many people feel part of

4. *Ibid.*

5. FABIETTI, *L'identità etnica*, p. 81.

6. See HOBBSBAWM – RANGER, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* and BLUM et al., *Ethnomusicology and Modern Music History*.

7. APPADURAI, *Modernity at Large*, p. 8.



Figure 1. Stefano Valla (*piffero*) and Daniele Scurati (accordion) performance during the Carnival of Cegni (PV), March 2, 2019. Photo by Thea Tiramani

the *Quattro Province* community without being permanent residents of the area; their sense of belonging is maintained through regular participation in dance festivals, the most important musical events in the area. In this way, they experience a sharing of emotions, ideas and values conveyed through a distinctive sound that serves as a bridge between past and future within a ritualized present.

There are currently about twenty active *piffero* players in the *Quattro Province* area. The duo of Stefano Valla (*piffero* and voice)<sup>8</sup> and Daniele Scurati (accordion and voice)<sup>9</sup> – the ‘traditional’ members of the Bellanöva Quartet –

8. Stefano Valla was born in Genoa in 1962. His roots are closely connected to Cegni – the musical center of the *Quattro Province* tradition and his mother’s hometown – where he spent summers with his grandparents, attending dances, weddings, and carnivals, all accompanied by the sound of the *piffero*. He metaphorically inherited the legacy of one of the most renowned *piffero* players, Giacomo *Jacmon* Sala, who, in an ironic twist of fate, passed away just days after Valla’s birth. Through a close relationship with Ernesto Sala, *Jacmon*’s cousin (for an analysis of *Jacmon*’s historical recording, see BALMA *et al.*, *Giacomo Jacmon Sala*), Valla decided at the age of nineteen to move to Cegni and become a *piffero* player.
9. Daniele Scurati combines a background in oral musical tradition with formal classical training, having studied piano at the conservatory. His hybrid profile – as a musician rooted in oral tradition yet partially trained in academia – is particularly intriguing. He also works as an elementary school teacher. Like Stefano Valla, Scurati has been immersed in this musical culture from a young age, frequently visiting Cegni and its surroundings, absorbing its musical sounds and practices.

has become a reference point for *piffero* and accordion players in the *Quattro Province* area. Since they began performing together in 2000, Valla and Scurati<sup>10</sup> have played in different settings and on different occasions, often leaving the 'comfort zone' of the Apennines and the familiar stage of the *feste a ballo* (music and dance festivals; see Figure 1).

Stefano Valla embodies the idea of a performer and thinker who sees music not only as a profession but as a true *raison d'être*. He develops a critically reflective and self-conscious approach, offering insights of great value to scholars, shedding light on contemporary issues and imagining the future of himself and his music. He refers to the *piffero* as 'an instrument of the future', a concept that emphasizes not only the endurance of the instrument, but also the need for an entire territory to thoughtfully reinvent itself, balancing innovation with respect for its roots.

Today, Valla is a pivotal figure for *piffero* and accordion players, mentoring students who recognize him as a living repository of tradition and seek his guidance to shape themselves as the musicians of the future. Through his years of active engagement in the *Quattro Province* music scene, Valla has developed the conviction that memory is, by nature, an act rooted in the present, even though it remains deeply connected to the emotions and musical recollections of the past. Thus, he rejects the notion of static memory as the preservation and re-presentation of a crystallized, unchanging past. Music, as «humanly organized sound»,<sup>11</sup> evolves with the individuals who perform it, incorporating innovation and creativity into its expression. As he states:

Behind the concept of tradition lies the concept of knowledge. Tradition is knowledge, is understanding what people did before. The risk, however, is in viewing tradition as something fixed that we must simply repeat because that's 'how it was'. I've learned from masters who are no longer with us, but every pedagogical and didactic step is inherently creative, so for me, tradition cannot exist as a static, repetitive thing. Instead, the idea of knowledge is much more open: I want to understand what was done before and how it was done. Viewing the past as a two-dimensional space is a mistake; it's a superficial perspective. To truly understand the past, we must develop it, recognizing it as something far more complex than a single dimension.<sup>12</sup>

Knowledge of the past, combined with a deep-rooted connection to a specific territory that enables even involuntary learning through musical enculturation,<sup>13</sup> should not lead to nostalgia:

I don't want to be nostalgic. Musicians had to walk everywhere because there were no cars, and there were wars... I'm not nostalgic for those times. What I want is to understand what the musicians of the past thought and how they

10. The duo released three CDs, in 2001, 2005 and 2009 and a DVD in 2013.

11. BLACKING, *How Musical Is Man?*, p. 10.

12. Conversation with Stefano Valla, 9.11.2011, Cegni (PV). Translation by the author.

13. See RICE, *Enculturation* and CAMPBELL, *Musical Enculturation*.

perceived tradition. They had fewer opportunities to hear other music within a still-intact peasant society. They played their own music, just as I play mine. For me, this isn't 'traditional music'; it's simply my music.<sup>14</sup>

The task of every musician is to stay attuned to the present, remaining open to all that contemporary music has to offer:

Our commitment is to imagine our music in the present and project it into the future. That, to me, is tradition. The commitment is to maintain and evolve at the same time. It is physiological. When everything is aligned, when we have the technical, melodic, ethical, and aesthetic understanding of a repertoire, adapting to circumstances becomes instinctive. Transition carries a creative obligation. The moment I begin to produce sound, I have to make a gesture that is neither predetermined nor obvious. One day, I was rehearsing with my accordionist and a pianist. Someone who assumed they could pass judgment said, 'our music doesn't need that' [referring to the piano], as if what I play with my accordionist is always certain, fixed, and established simply because we perform it. But I have to bring this music to life every time, or else it doesn't truly exist. Tradition isn't an external entity. It exists in the people who embody it.<sup>15</sup>

Musicians of the past introduced innovations, leading to significant changes in the repertoire. More modern dances, such as the *valzer* and the *mazurca*, joined older forms like the *piana* and the *alessandrina*, while organological changes included the replacement of the *müsa* by the accordion.<sup>16</sup>

Contexts and occasions of performance have also evolved: while summer dances and patron saint's days remain important, the famous Cegni Carnival was temporarily suspended around 1955 due to the winter depopulation; it was replaced by the White Carnival, held on August 16 when vacationers are present.<sup>17</sup> Other events, such as the musical walk to the village of Pizzonero in honor of St. Bernard, have recently been introduced.<sup>18</sup> Today, the music of

14. *Ibid.*

15. Conversation with Stefano Valla, 11.08.2020, Cegni (PV). Translation by the author.

16. In earlier times, the *piffero* was accompanied by the *müsa* of the *Quattro Province*, a bagpipe with a single drone that was widespread in the Apennine mountains between the provinces of Pavia, Genoa, Alessandria and Piacenza until the early 20th century. From the final decade of the 19th century, the accordion began spreading across Europe, introducing a new sonic paradigm as a 'portable orchestra' and reflecting the cultural changes of the time (see BICEGO, *Cantami o müsa*). In many contexts, the ancient sonority of the bagpipe, which had characterized celebrations and folk dances for centuries, was gradually replaced by this new instrument, capable not only of playing melodies suited to modern dance forms but also of performing polyphonies reminiscent of the solemn tones of a church organ, while providing clear rhythmic and harmonic support.

17. Both carnivals are actively celebrated today.

18. The choice to accompany the ascent to the village of Pizzonero with the music of the *piffero* and the accordion, which from afar 'beg' in music the inhabitants of the small village to allow them to enter, is a relatively recent invention. However, it revives an old custom, recalling a time when musicians would walk to the locations where they were hired to perform.



the *Quattro Province* is performed in European concert halls, international festivals and Universities, responding to a present in which movement and cultural exchange are particularly relevant. In this sense, Valla and Scurati's efforts to renew the repertoire by composing new pieces – while respecting the established forms of the tradition – and their openness to new performance contexts that transcend specific territorial boundaries can be understood.

The traditional repertoire of the *Quattro Province* mainly consists of dances (*alessandrina*, *monferrina*, *giga*, *piana*) and ritual music for special occasions (mainly weddings and Carnival). The two instruments involved, the *piffero* and the accordion, take on the respective roles of lead melody and rich harmonic accompaniment, marked by distinct harmonic and rhythmic characteristics. During the performance, a close musical interaction between the two players is essential. This interaction is based not only on a personal connection but also on a shared understanding of musical formulas (of a semi-improvised nature) used as performative signals. These may indicate transitions between sections of a piece, variations in dynamics and tempo, or the intention to conclude a piece. The musical compositions selected to represent the duo's repertoire, included in their three published CDs, are both traditional pieces and new works that actively become part of the repertoire. These innovations never alter the form of the pieces, whether couple or group dances, but rather operate within the traditional structures through a process of layering, adding and expanding harmonies, adopting varied rhythmic solutions, and incorporating phrasing from different genres, such as milonga or tango. They experiment with new sonorities that the *piffero* can reproduce through its performance technique. In this process, the listening experiences of the two musicians, working together on the composition of a new piece, play a crucial role in shaping their current musical output. Thus, the music becomes both an expression of the musicians' identities, a creative gesture, and a narrative of a community, evoked in its entirety through sound.

### 3. The *Bellanöva Project*: A Meeting of Musical Worlds

One occasion in which the musical repertoire of the *Quattro Province* is manipulated and interpolated can be found in the *Bellanöva* project, where the *piffero* and accordion are joined by violin and cello to create new sounds, engaging in a challenge that raises important questions about the relationship between orality and written music (Figure 2).

The *Bellanöva* Quartet was born from the wish of Marcello Fera, a composer, violinist, and conductor, to immerse himself in the fascinating repertoires of the *Quattro Province* that he encountered in the early 2000s. As a Genoese moved to Trentino-Alto Adige, the discovery of this repertoire also allowed him to re-establish an imaginary connection with his homeland and its music. Aware that the music of Valla and Scurati 'works very well' as it is



Figure 2. The Bellanöva Quartet. Marcello Fera (violin), Stefano Valla (*piffero*), Daniele Scurati (accordion) and Nicola Segatta (cello). Photo from the *Bellanöva* CD cover

usually performed and ‘does not need a violin and a cello to disturb it’,<sup>19</sup> Fera describes his intention to rework this musical material as a ‘cannibalistic act of love’ aimed at blending with the sounds of the *Quattro Province* and engaging with them as a composer. This desire was enthusiastically accepted by Stefano Valla, who was eager to share in the process.

The quartet released a CD in 2020,<sup>20</sup> corresponding to their concert program. The tracks represent the various strands that constitute the rich repertoire of the tradition: the more archaic dances, including two *alessandrine* and one *piana*, dances of Austro-Hungarian origin such as the *valzer*, *mazurca*, and *polca*, music of social rituals, such as the *Bella Növa* and *Levar di tavola*, dedicated to marriage, and songs. The proposed repertoire is extracted from its original context and functions, transported into a new listening dimension what the composer himself defines as a ‘transfiguration dedicated to a new kind of reception’.<sup>21</sup>

Marcello Fera engages with the repertoire in various ways, always adopting an approach that could be described as one of ‘preventive respect’. He consistently chooses to preserve the melody of the *piffero*, leaving it untouched and free from any variations. His goal is to interact and create a dialogue between two musical worlds in search of a shared repertoire, without disrupting the course of tradition, while simultaneously engaging with it closely. In this way, Stefano Valla is not influenced by the score – he himself states that he cannot

19. Conversation with Marcello Fera, 25.11.2022, Cremona. Translation by the author.

20. The *Bellanöva* CD is available at [https://open.spotify.com/intl-it/album/ocinEul7rPDaZd-lo5Fothn?si=QTYgAezWSdSqNgp29j\\_U4A](https://open.spotify.com/intl-it/album/ocinEul7rPDaZd-lo5Fothn?si=QTYgAezWSdSqNgp29j_U4A).

21. From the *Bellanöva* CD booklet.



read it – while the other members of the quartet follow a fully written and composed part. It is also interesting to note that Daniele Scurati, the accordionist, never reads a score during duo performances; when he plays with Valla, he is free to improvise within a given harmonic-rhythmic ‘system’.<sup>22</sup> However, when performing in the quartet, he must adhere to a predefined, fixed score. On the other hand, while Stefano Valla maintains a certain structural rigidity, he is not bound to the score and is free to introduce new sonorities, effects, and embellishments in his melodic line. Fera’s approach to working with the repertoire can be divided into three main types, as he describes:

My working method was of three types. A first one that is the additional type, in which I superimposed a counterpoint of voices dedicated to violin and cello on the original dictation of *piffero* and accordion, leaving intact the part that was already there. If there is a theme with a strongly defined identity, I leave it as it is and create a counterpoint. Another kind of intervention is to work in the way that Valla and Scurati play some of the pieces, leaving only the *piffero* melody intact and completely changing the accompaniment scheme and the harmonies. The third mode of intervention, which I have used especially in some songs, is that of classical arrangement, where our action is that of a timbral assignment of the harmonic conception as it is conceived.<sup>23</sup>

The composer thus develops the source material using three distinct techniques.

The first compositional technique applied is addition-based counterpoint. Here, a counterpoint – a new interplay of distinct melodies – is introduced alongside the original folk melodies. Violin and cello lines are layered over traditional parts, particularly the *piffero* and accordion, which preserve their original phrasing. In this way, the counterpoint enhances the character of the folk melody without overwhelming it, allowing both musical traditions to coexist.

The second technique emulates the performance styles of Valla and Scurati. In this case, the *piffero* melody is largely preserved, while the underlying harmonies and accompaniment undergo transformation. This approach modifies the harmonic foundation without disturbing the primary melodic line, creating a new yet familiar listening experience.

The third approach is classical arrangement, a technique centered on orchestration and timbral variation. This method assigns the harmonic framework to different instrumental groups, crafting a varied palette of tonal colors that enriches the musical texture. Here, the traditional melodies are supported by harmonies articulated through distinct timbral selections, as in a classical ensemble.

These techniques enable composers to create music that honors traditional sources while incorporating new layers of complexity.

The following three examples illustrate these approaches to musical reworking.

22. The musicians use the term ‘system’ to refer to a rhythmic-harmonic pattern.

23. Conversation with Marcello Fera, 25.11.2022, Cremona. Translation by the author.

The ‘additional’ intervention mode can be observed, among other pieces, in *Piana Bella*, which can be listen to in both duo and quartet versions ([Audio 1](#) and [Video 1](#)).

The *piana* is a group dance in binary meter with a triplet progression. Its structure is based on an intricate alternation between two characteristic sections. In the first, longer section in  $\frac{3}{8}$ , the *piffero* leads with a triplet melody featuring a lively contour, primarily moving in stepwise motion with occasional small intervallic leaps. At the end of this musical passage, a ‘pause’<sup>24</sup> is systematically introduced, serving as a link to the second section. This transition is marked by a change in meter and an agogic gesture to signal a brief halt, essential for coordinating the dance movements.

In the *piana*, the dancers form a circle, holding hands. In section A, they move around the circle in a counterclockwise direction. After eight steps, they stop, and all turn to face inward to perform the ‘balletto’ (section B). Here, ‘balletto’ refers to a specific moment in the dance characterized by the use of the ‘step of the *Quattro Province*’. This step consists of three movements: the first is long, followed by two shorter, that require the dancers to quickly lift their feet off the ground. This technique allows dancers to move, as often happens, on uneven surfaces such as cobblestones, grass, streets, and courtyards. At the end of the ‘balletto’, everyone moves toward the center, still holding hands, letting out a loud shout. Returning to their places, the dancers perform a second ‘balletto’, then once again advance toward the center with a shout.

In the Bellanöva Quartet version ([Video 1](#)), the composer retains the original *piffero* and accordion parts while adding vocal lines on violin and cello. The composer introduces the piece with an opening section where the violin and cello engage in a free dialogue, occasionally weaving in musical elements from the original dance. In the transcription of the piece (Example 1), I have highlighted some rhythmic and melodic elements that the violin adopts from the *piffero* theme.

The dance, with a more structured pattern, only emerges with the entry of the accordion, which establishes a rhythmic ostinato on a dotted rhythm, similar to a percussion instrument.

At this point, the accordion shifts from its role as a low harmonic instrument, as the cello now fills in the lower range. The arrival of the *piffero* marks a clear transition to the traditional form (Example 3).

With the entrance of the *piffero* and accordion, the role of the violin becomes somewhat reduced, as it shifts to providing a counterpoint to the *piffero* line, frequently employing syncopated rhythms to introduce additional variety. The violin re-emerges melodically during the ‘pause’ sections, following an approach reminiscent of basso continuo,<sup>25</sup> a technique of accompaniment with which Valla demonstrated familiarity, at least in its general principles, during several of our conversations.

24. The term ‘pause’, as used by the musicians themselves, refers to a connecting moment between sections, during which the *piffero* is silent and thus in a ‘pause’.

25. BACH, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*.

Example 1. *Piana Bella*, Bellanöva version, adaptations and arrangements by Marcello Fera. Introduction

The first system of the musical score consists of five staves. From top to bottom, they are labeled: Piffero, Violin, Cello, Accordion (treble clef), and Accordion (bass clef). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The Piffero staff contains six whole rests. The Violin staff begins with a rest, followed by a sixteenth-note triplet, a half note, and a quarter note. The Cello staff begins with a rest, followed by a sixteenth-note triplet, a half note, and a quarter note. The two Accordion staves contain six whole rests.

The second system of the musical score consists of five staves. The Piffero staff contains six whole rests. The Violin staff begins with a rest, followed by a sixteenth-note triplet, a half note, and a quarter note. The Cello staff begins with a rest, followed by a sixteenth-note triplet, a half note, and a quarter note. The two Accordion staves contain six whole rests. A green box highlights a quarter note in the Violin staff, and a blue box highlights a quarter note in the Cello staff.

The third system of the musical score consists of five staves. The Piffero staff contains six whole rests. The Violin staff begins with a rest, followed by a sixteenth-note triplet, a half note, and a quarter note. The Cello staff begins with a rest, followed by a sixteenth-note triplet, a half note, and a quarter note. The two Accordion staves contain six whole rests.

Example 2. *Piana Bella*, Bellanöva version, adaptations and arrangements by Marcello Fera. Accordion entrance

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system, starting at measure 21, features a treble clef staff with a melody of quarter and eighth notes, a bass clef staff with a bass line of quarter notes and half notes, and a piano accompaniment staff with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. A red arrow points to the beginning of the piano accompaniment. The second system, starting at measure 28, continues the melody and bass line, with the piano accompaniment staff showing a change in rhythm. A red underline is placed under the bass line in measure 28.

Within this arranged musical structure, the violin's sound qualities contribute brilliance, precision, expressiveness, and polyphonic depth. Its role extends beyond mere accompaniment, as it accentuates both the bass line (accordion) and the soprano line (*piffero*) through responsive phrases and musical suggestions. In this way, the violin enhances the *piffero*'s presence as a leading voice, while refraining from taking part in the primary melodic action.

In other instances, the composer preserves the *piffero* melody in its entirety while altering the accompaniment pattern, as exemplified in *Alessandrina in Re* (*Alessandrina in D*), available in both duo and quartet versions ([Audio 2](#) and [Audio 3](#)).

The *alessandrina* typically consists of «an initial period corresponding to the circle dance, followed by a second repeated period corresponding to the

Example 3. *Piana Bella*, Bellanöva version, adaptations and arrangements by Marcello Fera. *Piffero* entrance

33

42

49

55

· 75 ·



ballet».<sup>26</sup> This sequence is generally repeated, introducing a new ‘round’ and a second ‘ballet.’ Typically, «only two musical sections are present, sometimes varied in comparison to the initial phrases; in other cases, the structure is enriched, as new or partially new melodic material is introduced in the second part of the dance».<sup>27</sup> The standard structure of the *alessandrina* follows an ABB CDD form, where A and C represent two distinct ‘rounds’ danced in a circle, and B and D represent the contrasting ‘ballet’ sections. A ‘pause’ often occurs between sections, marked by the accordion’s solo. The dance itself is performed in pairs within a circle, with dancer changes occurring between sections. In section A, dancers perform in pairs; in the first B section, they engage in the ballet facing each other, and during the pause before the second ballet, they change partners. The second ballet is then danced with new partners.<sup>28</sup>

In Fera’s reworking of *Alessandrina in Re*, the structure remains similar, beginning with a free-form introduction featuring a violin and cello dialogue. The accordion accompaniment adopts a simplified rhythmic pattern to maintain the regularity required for a quartet setting (Example 4).

The addition of the violin and cello introduces a new sonic dimension, incorporating dissonances into the harmonic structure (Example 5). Some of these dissonances, such as sevenths and ninths, are explicitly written in the score, while others emerge organically from the interaction between the violin and cello’s playing style and that of the accordion. The accordion maintains the oral tradition of connecting chords through passing note – a practice that is not notated in the score – resulting in spontaneous harmonic clashes that enhance the texture.

An analysis of the instrumental balance, both in recordings and live performances, reveals a sonic imbalance favoring the *piffero* and accordion. In certain passages built on note-for-note counterpoint, the violin part becomes indistinct, serving primarily as a timbral enrichment rather than a clearly perceivable line. In the previously discussed *piana*, the cello reinforces rhythmic and harmonic features, not only underscoring the bass but also providing functional inner voices within the harmony, which is completed in the lower register of the accordion. In this case, however, the cello moves more freely, often crafting melodic lines in counterpoint to the violin, sometimes with metrically regular patterns, sometimes contrasting the bass accentuations with syncopations added for variation. Given the complexities of managing a four-part texture, it is noteworthy that syncopated passages are consistently played during the *piffero*’s ‘pause’ moments, thus preserving the established meter and avoiding rhythmic conflicts.

Finally, it is necessary to analyze the piece *Bella Növa*, the vocal song from which the quartet takes its name ([Video 2](#) and [Video 3](#)). This is a *stranòt*, a narrative monodic song sometimes interspersed with instrumental sounds,

26. BALMA, *La musica del piffero pavese*, p. 406. Translation by the author.

27. *Ibid.*

28. SCARSELLINI *et al.*, *Osservazioni sui balli da piffero*, p. 480.

Example 4. *Alessandrina in Re*, Bellanöva version, adaptations and arrangements by Marcello Fera. Introduction, accordion accompaniment

The musical score is arranged in four systems. The first system shows the Piffero (flute) part with rests, the Violin part with a melodic line, the Cello part with a lower melodic line, and the Accordion part with rests. The second system continues the Violin and Cello parts, with the Accordion part providing harmonic support. The third system features a pink box highlighting a section in the Violin and Cello staves, and red lines underlining the bottom two staves. The fourth system continues the Violin and Cello parts, with the Accordion part providing harmonic support.

Example 5. *Alessandrina in Re*, Bellanöva version, adaptations and arrangements by Marcello Fera. Dissonances

set in a minor key, which Valla learned from his grandmother. It is part of the wedding repertoire; specifically, the lyrics tell the story of a young man's declaration of love and proposal of marriage to a girl.

In the duo version, the piece opens with an instrumental introduction where the *piffero* and accordion establish a very regular ternary dance meter. The *piffero* melody anticipates the melody of the following vocal verse, while the accordion accompaniment is harmonically static yet rhythmically active. A noticeable agogic shift occurs between the introduction and the vocal verse: the character of the vocal section – maintaining a ternary but slower tempo – appears quite distinct from the liveliness of the instrumental introduction. The accordion accompaniment, with its long chords reminiscent of an organ and suggesting a certain solemnity, makes this section even more static. Additionally, the accordion is used systematically to create an instrumental link between the vocal sections.

In the Bellanöva Quartet version, the introduction is extended, originally performed only by *piffero* and accordion. Here, the cello takes on the melodic theme typically played by the *piffero* in the duo version, but with a freer, late-Romantic approach, partially liberated from the strict ternary beat. Following a suspended chord on the accordion, Valla presents the vocal melody on the *piffero* before beginning to sing the song's verses. The vocal style remains consistent with the duo version, showing no change in intensity or vocal timbre. The vocal sections, interspersed with instrumental interludes, vary in arrangement and orchestration. In the first verse, the violin and cello pro-

vide counterpoint, emphasizing the long notes of the voice through smooth, conjunct movements. This legato effect contrasts with the rough vocal style, acting as a musical adhesive that minimizes the agogic gap between the freer introduction and the vocal verse. In this piece, Fera employs what he describes as a 'mimetic'<sup>29</sup> approach. In the second verse, the vocal line is primarily accompanied by the cello, which moves fluidly with ascending and descending melodic lines, highlighting key notes of the harmony. The accordion supports the cello subtly, adding only a few notes to sustain the chord without creating too much separation from the voice. In this vocal piece, the composer's intervention is both prominent and impactful, more so than in previous examples. The legato effect from the strings softens the harmonic roughness and vocal timbre, which in the duo version are intensified by the rigid accordion chords, lending the piece an almost sacred, ecclesiastical quality.

#### 4. From Orality to Music Writing and from Music Writing to Orality: Inverse Contamination

The *Bellanöva* project exemplifies a meaningful dialogue between an oral music tradition and the realm of so-called 'classical' musicians. This type of encounter, which invites reflection on the relationship between orality and written forms, demands a unique analytical approach, distinct from that applied to cross-cultural musical exchanges occurring within different oral traditions.<sup>30</sup>

While it is common to examine the impact of traditional, orally transmitted music on written compositions – consider, for instance, the incorporation of folk melodies in much of classical music – it is equally essential to recognize that this influence can operate bidirectionally. This mutual contamination not only intertwines musical traditions but also prompts each tradition to re-evaluate its own potential, limitations, and the possibility of establishing a genuine dialogue (Figure 3).

The study of the Bellanöva Quartet's musical production demonstrates that, in order to establish a genuine, performative dialogue, it is often the so-called 'classical' music – rooted in written notation – that must adapt to an oral tradition, which can be somewhat rigid and resistant to change. Marcello Fera himself is acutely aware of the complexities inherent in the relationship between oral and written music, as evidenced by his thoughtful decision to leave the *piffero* parts largely unchanged while introducing modifications in the accordion sections:

In the relationship between orality and writing, writing must serve the unique characteristics of the oral dimension, which contains far more 'information'

29. From the *Bellanöva* CD booklet.

30. See HILL, "Global Folk Music" *Fusions*.



Figure 3. The Bellanöva Quartet. Marcello Fera (violin), Stefano Valla (*piffero*), Daniele Scurati (accordion), and Nicola Segatta (cello). Cremona, Monteverdi Theater, November 25, 2022. Photo by Thea Tiramani

than writing can convey. It is also essential to take care to avoid, as much as possible, the rigidity that writing tends to impose on orality. In practice, all I did was to ‘clothe’ the established duo with additional voices for violin and cello, finding natural points within the existing texture where my writing could seamlessly integrate. This approach was particularly applied to the dances, while for the songs, I undertook a more traditional arranging process. Only in a few cases did I feel the need to adjust Daniele’s part, as he serves as the link between the oral and written elements within the quartet.<sup>31</sup>

The *Bellanöva* ensemble operates as a four-part dialogue that can be simplified into a two-way interaction: traditional musicians preserve their style and performance approach unchanged, while classical musicians make adaptations to achieve an aesthetic-musical result that is both relevant and non-disruptive. In this sense, the *Bellanöva* case study exemplifies how orality and writing need not be viewed as strict dichotomies but as realms with potential for overlap.<sup>32</sup> This dynamic arises from various factors, most notably the strong roots that Valla and Scurati have in their musical practice, making any departure from their established techniques and styles a challenging process when integrating new elements. Marcello Fera expresses a clear stance on this, providing insight into his approach to reinterpreting and reworking given musical material based on an oral tradition repertoire:

31. Conversation with Marcello Fera, 25.11.2022, Cremona. Translation by the author.

32. See FINNEGAN, *Literacy and Orality*, p. 125.



From a certain point of view, oral transmission is the most rigid, because the transfer of information from master to disciple by ear contains something definitive. Everything is embedded within it. At the same time, however, in performance practice, there's the daily personalization of the repertoire to be played. So, when you transcribe a piece of oral music, you have to make choices, deciding what you favor between the framework of a melody and how that melody is expressed. And here's another thing: in some music, how it's played is what it is. Musicians in the oral tradition don't usually have the chance to step outside their language system. Oral transmission is marked by rigidity, while writing allows for exploration outside of it, but in a more superficial way.<sup>33</sup>

What is more significant, however, is that the project's artistic approach prioritizes the authenticity of the musical tradition over superficial integration of external musical elements that could compromise its recognizability. Despite this approach, the performers recognize that such collaboration can yield meaningful and artistically compelling results, achieved through mutual and ongoing mediation. The incorporation of new timbres, the partial structural reworking of pieces, and the addition of *ex novo* introductions and endings are all elements that add complexity and depth to our analysis. Certainly, the music of the oral tradition here is enriched by timbral elements characteristic of 'classical' music, due to the inclusion of the violin and cello, which enhance the timbre and structure of the music performed. However, it is essential to underscore that the creative process is shaped significantly by how individual musicians engage with and handle the musical material in interaction with one another. In this project, Fera and Segatta exhibit a noticeable interpretive flexibility, which allows them to adapt to a musical environment that is new or at least distinct from their typical contexts. Enabled by the use of musical notation, they can modify, intervene, and learn new pieces more rapidly than would otherwise be possible. While training within an oral tradition is known to foster improvisational, creative, and transmissive aspects of the repertoire, beginning with the memorization of a 'model',<sup>34</sup> the reliance on memory, even when well-honed over years, presents a limitation. Specifically, it can pose challenges when introducing new musical elements from external sources, as this risk destabilizing the established 'model'. Consequently, substantial modifications rarely affect the core structure of the pieces. Nevertheless, the concept of writing is not entirely foreign to Stefano Valla, who has, on multiple occasions, referred to having written parts in his head. This 'mental writing' enables him to internalize an extensive repertoire and engage more directly with audiences, unmediated by external supports.<sup>35</sup> However, this 'false' writing – distinct from traditional notation<sup>36</sup> – prevents the systematic

33. Conversation with Marcello Fera, Stefano Valla, Daniele Scurati and Nicola Segatta, 25.11.2022, Cremona. Translation by the author.

34. See LORTAT-JACOB, ed., *L'improvisation dans les musiques de tradition orale*, GIANNATTASIO, *Il concetto di musica*, CAPORALETTI, *I processi improvvisativi nella musica*.

35. See WILLIAMSON, *The Value of Performing Music from Memory*, p. 92.

36. See ONG, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 11-12.

integration of new elements, thereby favoring stability, particularly in terms of melody.<sup>37</sup> Without the agility and direct intervention that written notation permits, modifying this internalized text becomes challenging.

A comprehensive understanding of this project must also consider the audience's perspective. What kind of reaction does such a musical experiment elicit from those familiar with the *Quattro Province* repertoire, people who regularly attend *feste a ballo* and are thus acutely aware of the music's functional role? This question aligns with the duo's rationale for 'exporting' the music of the *Quattro Province* beyond its traditional contexts. While acknowledging the intrinsic link between music and territory, Valla and Scurati recognize the importance of introducing the music of the *Quattro Province* to audiences beyond its geographical confines, reaching those who have never encountered this musical tradition before. To this end, the duo has brought their performances to European concert halls, international festivals, and universities, always with a steadfast intention to 'recreate a situation', to evoke a world intimately connected to a particular territory and to narrate its essence through sound. This approach allows them to engage listeners with a sense of place, preserving and transmitting the cultural resonance of the *Quattro Province* music even in unfamiliar settings.

For us, there's both continuity and connection with tradition, and, at the same time, a need to communicate and share our music beyond our own territory. This balance between our roots and the desire to reach out in today's world is crucial. I can't recreate the atmosphere of one of our festivals in a theater; I can only evoke it. Through the myriad impressions of the audience, I aim to convey an emotion that might evoke a whole world. Sometimes, I have the illusion that I'm achieving this. But I do see that, wherever we go, we manage to create a certain atmosphere.<sup>38</sup>

A similar process is evident in the duo's participation in the *Bellanöva* project; by maintaining a dimension rooted in orality and introducing only minimal musical variations, Valla acknowledges the significance of the creative gesture while remaining a narrative voice for a community that is fully evoked, even when sounds are reworked for aesthetic purposes. Likewise, the violinist's presence in some of the duo's performances during the ascent to the small village of Pizzonero for the feast of St. Bernard is well received. Here, Fera restricts himself to intentional yet non-intrusive interventions, primarily melodic overlays or simple counterpoints that subtly alter the overall sound of the piece within an established repertoire.

37. See BRONSON, *Melodic Stability*, pp. 50-51.

38. Conversation with Stefano Valla, 19.11.2020, Predosa (AL). Translation by the author.

## 5. Visualizing Sounds

Through careful listening to Stefano Valla's interactions with the other three musicians, including the accordionist, it becomes evident that certain notes played on the solo instrument, the *piffero*, are intentionally tuned outside of the equal temperament system. For aesthetic reasons – or, as Valla describes it, for 'reasons of feeling' – the intentional lowering of certain pitches enriches the harmony of the piece, imparting a distinctive sound. Valla himself has emphasized the significance of pitch in numerous interviews, addressing these tonal nuances with precision and insight. Over the years, partly due to his personal enthusiasm for early Italian music from the eighteenth century, Valla became acquainted with historical temperaments, likely drawn to the older system of pitch relationships distinct from today's standard. Inspired by such structures, and fully aware that the accordion is tuned in equal temperament, he embraces responsibility for micro-variations that diverge from the consistent intervals dictated by equal temperament. Informed by his familiarity with historical temperaments and affect theory, Valla advocates for the intentional use of altered intervals and specific intonations of notes – either slightly raised or lowered in relation to the accordion's reference system – according to the contextual and expressive demands of each piece:

I have a sound in my head, and that is fundamental. I believe you have to nurture the idea of the sound, especially the sound of the voice. You have to cultivate this idea. So, if you play even just three notes but manage to move me to tears, then there's a true reason of feeling behind it. There are those who play only to prove what they can do, but without feeling, they leave me completely indifferent.<sup>39</sup>

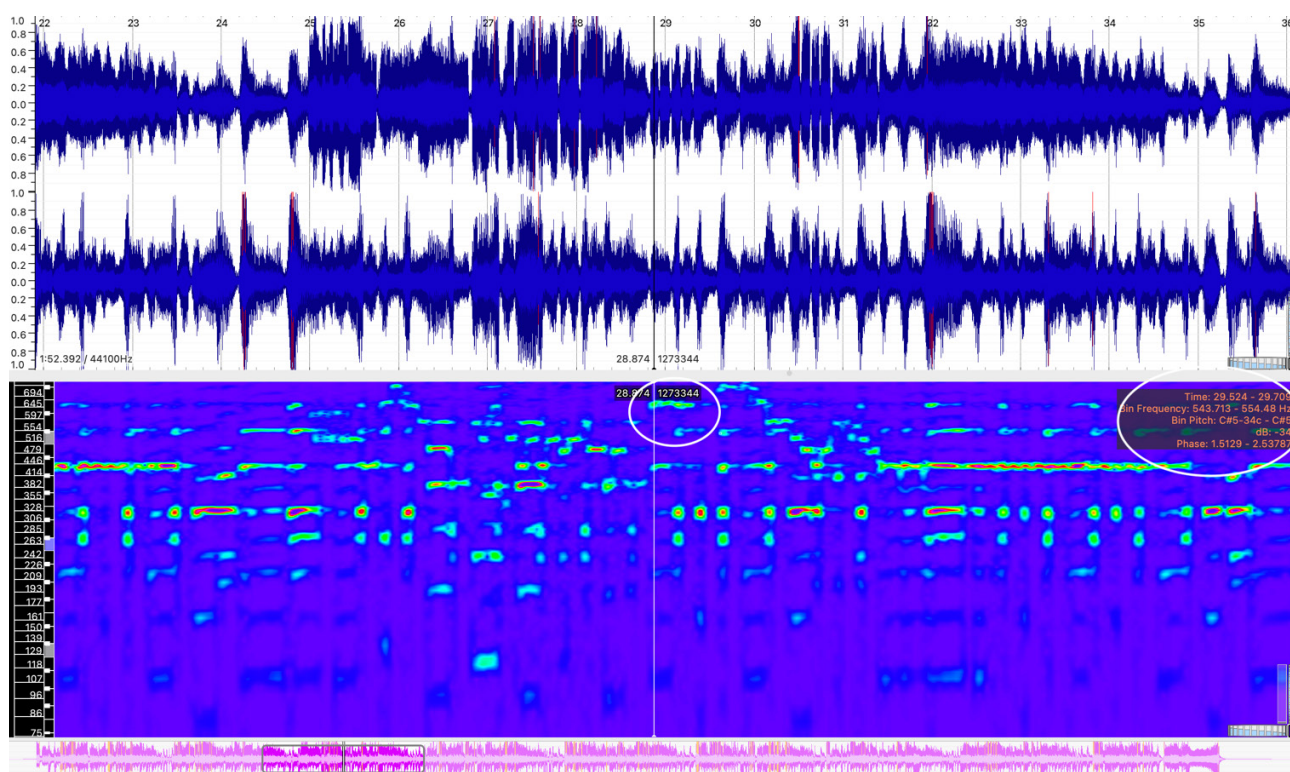
In Valla's instrumental practice, the 'reason of feeling' is expressed through microvariations in intonation. One example he provides is the note C $\sharp$ 5 within the harmonic context of A major:

I'll give you an example: in this *alessandrina*, I play a descending C-sharp that I absolutely love. If we're in A major and I play C-sharp exactly as it's supposed to be, I really don't like it. If I play C natural, it feels as though we're in a minor key. Instead, I play a C-sharp that's fading, sad, mournful. It's like a note with its head tilted to the side. I can almost see it.<sup>40</sup>

The character he aims to give to a note that would typically function as a major third within an A major harmony is mournful, with a 'lowered head'. In fact, this note is deliberately lowered to such an extent that it sounds to the listener almost like a hybrid with a natural C, as illustrated in the pitch spectrum analysis below (Example 6).

39. Conversation with Stefano Valla, 11.08.2020, Cegni (PV). Translation by the author.

40. *Ibid.*

Example 6. *Alessandrina* in La, analysis of the pitch spectrum

This technique can also be observed in Valla's singing. In an interview, he himself drew a connection between *piffero* performance techniques and vocal techniques, as though the *piffero* were meant to imitate the human voice as closely as possible.

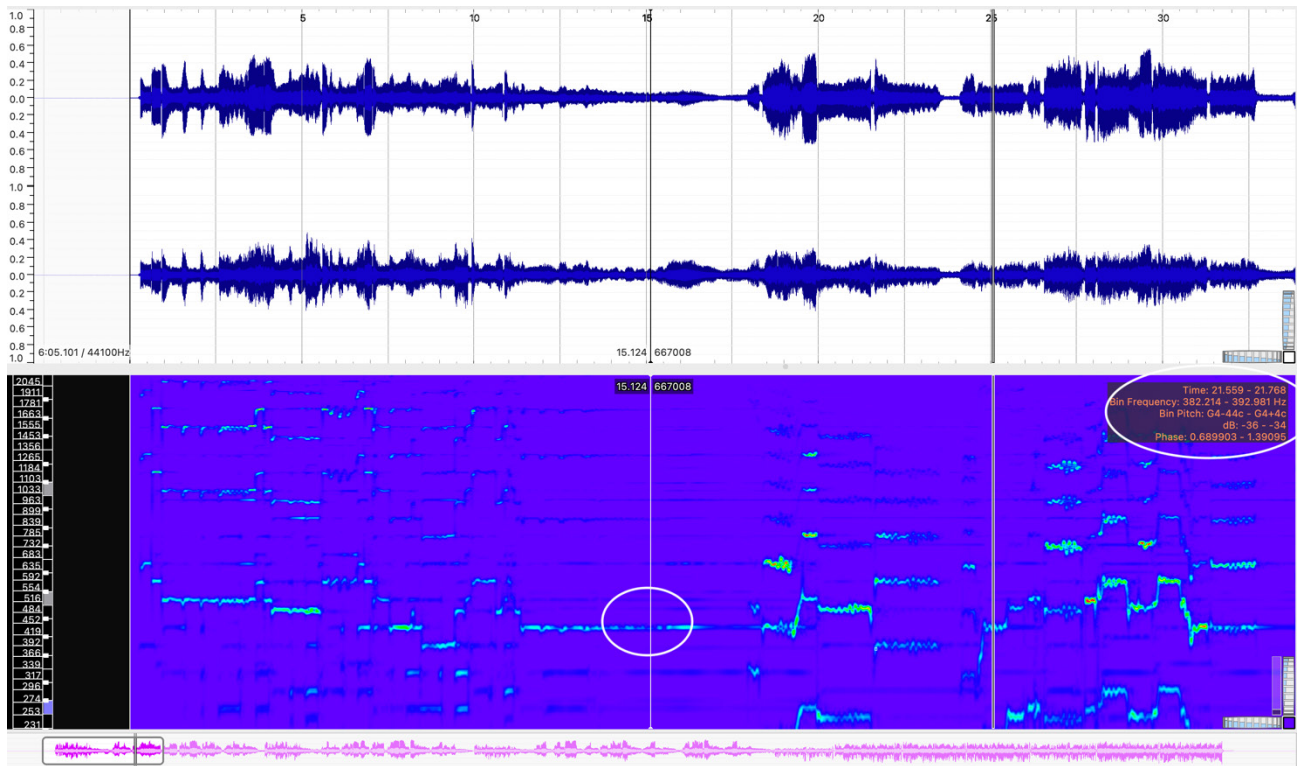
Yes. As I mentioned before, I've always thought of the *piffero* as a voice. For me, the goal is to transform this wood into a voice. I achieve this by adjusting the reeds or using specific techniques. I've always called it a 'transfiguration' that turns a note into a voice. The articulation that the *piffero* can produce is like a kind of pronunciation. It can be more or less developed, but it is a voice.<sup>41</sup>

The following example shows the intonation of a long final note in the opening of *Bella Növa*, a song already affectively colored by its use of the minor key. The G note is intoned in a gently descending manner, slightly preceding the accordion's entry to create a 'melancholy' effect (Example 7).

Returning to the relationship between orality and writing, it's interesting to note that the 'model' we have discussed, memorized by Valla, is often enriched with a variety of embellishments and sound effects made possible by

41. Conversation with Stefano Valla, 9.11.2011, Cegni (PV). Translation by the author.



Example 7. *Bella Növa*, analysis of the pitch spectrum

his *piffero* technique. Some of these embellishments and tonal effects are so deeply embedded in the model that asking Valla to play without them is akin to stripping away fragments of his musical memory. It is also important to note that Stefano never repeats himself identically in his performances; however, being asked to play without these embellishments and sound effects poses a real challenge, especially for those to which he is 'emotionally attached'. His attachment to certain sounds evokes such vivid images that it is nearly impossible for him to disrupt both the sensorimotor processes and emotional memories they involve. For this reason, it's relevant to consider how profoundly the mental image of a piece must shift when faced with a different arrangement – such as in the *Bella Növa* project – a challenge Valla embraces with great sensitivity. For him, music is not merely a sequence of written notes but a series of images, each imbued with infinite shades of color, for which he feels an almost irresistible attachment.

## 6. Conclusions

In this essay, I have examined how certain pieces from the oral tradition of the *Quattro Province* have been reinterpreted by a classical composer, adapt-



ing them for an instrumental ensemble larger than the original. This adaptation has prompted a series of reflections on the relationship between orality and writing and on the musical identity of a specific territory. This process of blending traditions has developed through three primary modes of intervention, which I have illustrated by analyzing three specific case studies: the addition of an instrumental countermelody to original themes, modifications to the harmonic and timbral structure, and arrangement. These examples demonstrate how, in this process, writing becomes a tool that ‘dresses’ in the oral tradition, inserting itself only where the musical structure allows. However, as the musicians involved emphasize, the intention is never to fix or restrict orality but rather to expand its possibilities, making tradition a living and dynamic reality. In this sense, music is never simply a ‘thing of the past’ but an active, personal practice that reflects the current identity of its performers.

The very act of blending oral tradition with elements of art music appears, therefore, as a form of respect and enhancement of the original characteristics, where the *how* becomes an integral part of the *what*, as described by the musicians. According to Marcello Fera, orality retains a precision that writing, while valuable, cannot fully capture. Nonetheless, it is precisely through writing that traditional repertoire can transcend its original boundaries without losing its essence.

What impact might such an operation have on the eyes – and ears – of audiences familiar with the original traditional repertoire? As Philip V. Bohlman discusses in *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (1988), orally transmitted music is often capable of incorporating external elements as a form of fusion that, paradoxically, can strengthen its identity rather than diminish it. The *Bellanöva* project represents a continuous dialogue between orality and writing, where art music, far from fixing tradition, becomes a new element that expands the original meaning. Underlying this concept of tradition is the value of transmission, understood not as a mere repetition of the past but as an act of understanding and adaptation. The musicians involved in this blending emphasize that each interpretation and adaptation is a ‘projection of music into the future,’ born from the desire to make tradition current and alive. This view rejects the notion of tradition as a static structure, confined to lifeless repetition.

#### AUDIOVISUAL MATERIALS

(last accessed January 2025)

Audio 1. *Piana Bella*. Stefano Valla and Daniele Scurati, included in CD *Segni*, vol. 2, *Musique du monde*. Italie: Musiques de l’Apennin, Buda Records, 2005, track 17 (excerpt), <https://youtu.be/koyVTqDjkXM>.

Audio 2. *Alessandrina in Re*. Stefano Valla and Daniele Scurati, included in *Per dove*, vol. 3, *Musique du monde*. Italie: Musiques de l’Apennin, Buda Records, 2009, track 7 (excerpt), <https://youtu.be/6qkkiv-iXSA>.

- Audio 3. *Alessandrina in Re*. Bellanöva Quartet. Included in CD *Bellanöva*, Felmay Records, track 1 (excerpt), <https://youtu.be/F5ngKrUL4ks>.
- Video 1. *Piana Bella*. Bellanöva Quartet. Monteverdi Theater, Cremona (Italy), November 25, 2022. Camera, sound, and editing by Thea Tiramani, <https://youtu.be/j5W6PJ8pZGc>.
- Video 2. *Bella Növa*. Stefano Valla and Daniele Scurati. Predosa (AL, Italy), November 19, 2020. Camera, sound, and editing by Thea Tiramani, <https://youtu.be/r29ZNKVEBto>.
- Video 3. *Bella Növa*. Bellanöva Quartet. Monteverdi Theater, Cremona (Italy), November 25, 2022. Camera, sound, and editing by Thea Tiramani, [https://youtu.be/O\\_ZmnG4VOe4](https://youtu.be/O_ZmnG4VOe4).

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NOTA BIOGRAFICA Thea Tiramani, laureata in Musicologia e diplomata in Pianoforte, ha conseguito il Dottorato di Ricerca in Scienze del Testo Letterario e Musicale presso il Dipartimento di Musicologia e Beni Culturali dell'Università di Pavia dove è stata assegnista di ricerca. Attualmente è Docente di Storia della Musica per Didattica presso il Conservatorio di Novara. Si occupa principalmente di musica e migrazione, di repertori italiani di tradizione orale o misti e di musica e didattica.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE Thea Tiramani has a degree in Musicology and a diploma in Piano. She obtained her PhD in Literary and Musical Text Sciences from the Department of Musicology and Cultural Heritage at the University of Pavia, where she was a research fellow. She is currently a Professor of Music History for Education at the Conservatory of Novara. Her work primarily focuses on music and migration, Italian repertoires of oral or mixed traditions, and music education.

