Chapter 14
"Where Is the Orchestra?" The Sanremo Festival Through the 80s and the 80s Through the Sanremo Festival

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Abstract In Italy, the Sanremo festival and its songs, the *canzoni sanremesi*, gained the status of antonomasia for an "easy"—and maybe "old"?—kind of song. During the 80s, the festival's producers faced the increasing importance of commercial TVs and new international MTV-pop stars. They tried to renew its image by Borgna (Le canzoni di Sanremo [Sanremo's Songs]. Laterza, Rome, 1986) creating a brand new section for young singers (the "*nuove proposte*"), and (Borgna in L'Italia di Sanremo. Cinquant'anni di canzoni, cinquant'anni della nostra storia [Sanremo's Italy. Fifty Years of Songs, Fifty Years of Our History]. Mondadori, Milan, 1998) removing the orchestra. After 30 years, singers could now go on stage and perform playback, while drum machines, gated reverbs and synthesizers could be used not necessarily involving "old" orchestral sounds. Eros Ramazzotti and Luis Miguel had a great success at the festival singing about the importance of being "nowadays young people" (*Terra promessa* and *Ragazzi di oggi*) symptom of the rush of being "up-to-date" of the decade—exactly as the removal of the orchestra showed on a timbral level—while commercial TVs were polarizing their success exactly on that. The aim of this paper is to analyze through several musical aspects (tonal, timbral, vocal, etc.) how the festival created new pop phenomena in the 80s while commercial TVs were creating their own, their differences and similarities (if any) and what it meant for later Italian pop song.

14.1 Introduction

This article is the result of the very start of a research group on popular music in Italy in the 1980s and 1990s. I am aware that it may sound pretextuous, but there is a reason—a *musical* reason—for choosing the Sanremo Festival from 1980 to 1989, and not because of the main focus of this research group. I will come to that later.

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Some of the most relevant strategies in musical communication used at the Sanremo festival during the 1980s will be discussed here, especially considering some of its most successful songs and singers.

14.2 Looking for Success

14.2.1 The Discoteque

At the end of the 1970s, the Festival was not as successful as it was in the 1950s and in the 1960s: with the new generation of *cantautori*—very successful singer-songwriters who avoided accurately to participate, while the first generation of *cantautori*, in the early 1960s, did—and all the social revolutions of the 1970s, the Festival lost popularity. Let us just consider that its third evening—the final one—was the only one to be broadcast on TV.[1]

From 1980, the new producers of the show—particularly Gianni Ravera—decided to change it, to make it "younger". He chose a popular, 28 years old DJ, Claudio Cecchetto, to host the Festival.

Cecchetto's role is particularly interesting considering the role of music on TV in those years: he gained a very good success in discotheques and free radios in Milan in the late 1970s, and after hosting a show in 1978 for the private TV channel TeleMilano 58,[2] he was hired to host a program on RAI called *Discoring*.[3] He then hosted Sanremo for three years (1980, 1981 and 1982). He is one of the first stars in Italian show business who first reached success in private radios and *then* moved to national TV.[4] This is essential: Italian "free" radios—that is, non-national radios—were now, in 1980, considered "what young people listen to", and national TV changed after them.

The idea behind this choice was clean cut: to catch a younger audience—those new consumers who, besides buying records, went to this new venue, *the discotheque*. The Festival's scenography changed faster than its soundscape: in 1980, 1981 and 1982 the stage was overtly turned into a dance floor, with a disco ball at the very top of it, a square floor in the middle of the stage and colored lights.

Economic reasons led to another important change: *no more orchestra*. And this is the reason why the decade 1980–1989 is particularly interesting for the Sanremo Festival: all of the artists went on stage and sang on a recorded track, sometimes lip-syncing, sometimes singing live while pretending to be playing a guitar or a

[1]In 1980, RAI (Italian national broadcasting company) had three TV channels. Commercial TVs were recently born, and were not broadcast nationwide.

[2]Owned by Silvio Berlusconi, TeleMilano58 later became Canale5, one of the most popular TV channels in Italy.

[3]Kind of an Italian version of *Top of the Pops*.

[4]After that, he moved to private TVs and to private radios again.

piano. It never happened before or thereafter: in Sanremo, singers traditionally have to sing live—in 1964 singer-songwriter Bobby Solo was disqualified for singing *Una lacrima sul viso* in playback. *The record* had to be the main attraction, *not the song*, and this is the reason why the version on stage had to sound exactly as the record. And since 1981 the sounds of those songs changed abruptly: synthesizers, drum machines or drums with gated reverb were almost in every song. Some of those effects were hard to obtain live at the time, so a recorded track was very helpful. The "classic" orchestra, which was included again in 1990, with its 'old' sounds, was not welcome anymore: even when strings were needed, they were synthesized. The choice of recorded backing tracks is also due to the fact that *records*—not songs as commercial products for publishers—were the main focus of the music industry: the Festival was created in 1951 in order to help music publishers having their songs broadcast on radio, played by orchestras and sung by famous singers,[5] but in the 1980s this concept was outmoded. In the 1980s the Sanremo Festival was not the Festival of Italian songs anymore[6]: it was the Festival of Italian records.

Singers might have been not 18, or 20, or 25 years old, but their music *sounded* new. Al Bano & Romina Power and Ricchi & Poveri[7] had a tremendous success at the Festival with songs heavily influenced by the new born *Italo disco*, taking advantage several times of the possibilities of playback and of recorded track: Romina Power, for instance, always sang double tracked, because of her feeble voice, especially if compared to the powerful, tenor-like voice of her husband.

14.2.2 Singalongs

In the first half of the 1980s, the Festival gained a huge success, especially thanks to some very well-known singalongs: although often using new electronic sounds, they were built on famous chord sequences such as the vamp loop or its variation called Milksap loop.

As explained by Philip Tagg, a chord loop is a "short repeated sequence of (almost always) three or four chords" (Tagg 2014: 482). The vamp loop is a chord loop characterized by the sequence ↻I-vi-ii-V↺ (e.g. ↻C-Am-Dm-G↺, or ↻G-Em-Am-D↺); Milksap is:

> [A] derogatory term, probably first coined by Jerry Lee Lewis, to designate the bland pop songs recorded in the USA by "all those goddam Bobbies" – Bobby Darin, Bobby Rydell, Bobby Vee, Bobby Vinton, etc. – between 1957 (the end of rock 'n' roll) and 1963 (the

[5]Cf. Fabbri (2008a: 83–7), Borgna (1986, 1998).

[6]Its full name is Festival della canzone italiana (Festival of Italian song).

[7]Ricchi e Poveri in the 1970s were a vocal quartet (two women, two men), and turned into a trio (one woman, two man) in 1981.

arrival of the Beatles and Rolling Stones). The harmonic epitome of this teen-angel sort of pop was the ↪I vi IV V↩ vamp (Tagg 2014: 495).

Being the IV chord a variation of the ii chord (e.g. F and Dm, in C major), the vamp loop and the Milksap loop can be considered the same chord loop. It is the chord loop of songs such as *Stand By Me* (King 1961) or *Blue Moon* (Rodgers and Hart 1934), and was used mainly in romantic songs where the girl was depicted as an "angel". Even though it was used mainly between the 1950s and the 1960s, in early 1980s some hugely successfully Italian songs were built out of this chord loop—and, it goes without saying, they were all love songs.

Those songs' success raised the problem of "quality": they were "too easy" and "silly" to be good or to be taken seriously, but, at the same time, people seemed to like them. For this reason, a "critics' poll", the *Premio della Critica*, was created in 1982. It means—not implicitly, but overtly—that songs winning first prize are not supposed to be the "best" and critically acclaimed songs.[8] Popularity was not in question: quality was.

14.3 Post-1982: Back to Classic—But 'Youth' Is the Word

In 1983, Claudio Cecchetto left the RAI and went back to Fininvest to host Festivalbar, a summer contest between the most sold records of the season. Festivalbar was extremely and successfully young-oriented, so producers of the Sanremo festival tried to restore its image of "classic": right after Ceccheto left the stage changed again, stating the nature of the Festival as the temple of "classic" Italian song. No more dance-floor, no more disco ball, and (in 1989) a white piano in the middle of the stage—but no orchestra yet.

However, the importance of young audience was kept in mind by the producers: in 1984 the *Nuove Proposte* category, a parallel section for young singers, was created. Acclaimed singers such as Eros Ramazzotti, Andrea Bocelli or Laura Pausini started their international careers from the *Nuove Proposte* section.

In 1984 and 1985 youth became the main theme of two famous songs. *Terra Promessa* by Ramazzotti (1984) opens with the lines:

Siamo i ragazzi di oggi	We are today boys
Pensiamo sempre all'America	We always think about America
Guardiamo lontano	We look far ahead
Troppo lontano	Too far ahead

[8]The same song won both first prize and critics' poll four times: in 1995, in 2001, in 2007 and in 2011.

While *Noi ragazzi di oggi* sung by Miguel (1985) focuses overtly on that.

Noi, ragazzi di oggi, noi	We, today boys, we
Con tutto il mondo davanti a noi	With all the world ahead of us
Viviamo nel sogno di poi	We live dreaming what's next

Ramazzotti and Miguel represented two different kind of young boys: while Ramazzotti was a poor boy from the suburbs, Miguel looked like a soon-to-be yuppie, or a teenage version of Julio Iglesias.[9] And their voices were very different, too: natural, even graceless, that of Ramazzotti, passionate that of Miguel. But in both songs, the importance of "youth", and today—with a hopeful look on tomorrow—was essential.

When Sanremo became the temple of classic Italian song again, commercial TVs were too important to be ignored. A new, young, noisy—albeit innocuous—singer, Jovanotti (a.k.a. Lorenzo Cherubini), produced by Cecchetto, represented the "today young boy who always thinks about America". In the now restored "classic" environment of Sanremo, his shouts and moves were clearly out of place, but the absence of the orchestra and the possibility of using a backing track was enough to let him go on that stage in 1989, with a song about one of the most popular rock Italian singer-songwriters since the early 1980s, Vasco Rossi. Anyway, this represented several, clear musical statements:

(a) once again, after many years, every successful Italian singer must go to Sanremo at least once in his life to be considered a "star", even looking out of context;
(b) commercial TVs led to a new image of noisy, funny, cheerful pop singers;
(c) Sanremo could attract young audiences by incorporating some "alien" presences.

Always thinking about America or about the UK, Italian young audiences were attracted by Sanremo also because of the amount of foreign guests in the 1980s: even when they musically had nothing to do with Sanremo (for example KISS, Depeche Mode or the Scorpions), these guests were acclaimed by huge crowds of young boys and girls who wouldn't have probably watched or attended the show otherwise. It also indirectly shows the increasing economical possibilities and power of the Festival's producers, who could afford to get more international superstars every year (Table 14.1).

Moreover, after Live AID and *We are the world*, the idea of a charity singalong reached Sanremo too, with the song *Si può dare di più* (Morandi 1987): three famous singers—Gianni Morandi, Enrico Ruggeri and Umberto Tozzi—joined forces for a successful, overproduced (synthesizers, electric pianos, drums with

[9]In a scene of a 2006 Italian movie called *Notte prima degli esami*, set in 1989, a young lawyer looking like a slimy yuppie sings *Noi ragazzi di oggi* with his brand new karaoke system.

Table 14.1 Foreign guests at the Sanremo festival from 1980 to 1989

1980	Billy Preston & Syreeta, Dionne Warwick, Sheila & B. Devotion, Status Quo, Suzi Quatro, Sylvester
1981	Bad Manners, Barry White, Dire Straits, Hall & Oates, Robert Palmer
1982	America, Bee Gees, Donovan & Astrella Leiych, Gloria Gaynor, Hall & Oates, Johnny Halliday, KISS, Marianne Faithfull, Stray Cats, Van Halen, Village People
1983	Commodores, Frida (ABBA), John Denver, KC & the Sunshine Band, Peter Gabriel, Ph.D., Saxon, Scorpions
1984	Bonnie Tyler, Culture Club, Paul Young, Queen, Randy Crawford
1985	Bronski Beat, Chaka Khan, Duran Duran, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Sade, Spandau Ballet, Talk Talk, Village People
1986	Depeche Mode, Double, Falco, Fine Young Cannibals, King, Mr. Mister, Prefab Sprout, Spandau Ballet, Sting, Talk Talk
1987	Bob Geldolf, Cutting Crew, Duran Duran, Europe, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Nick Kamen, Patsy Kensit, Paul Simon, Pet Shop Boys, Spandau Ballet, Style Council, The Bangles, The Smiths, Whitney Houston
1988	A-ha, Art Garfunkel, Bon Jovi, Bryan Ferry, Chris Rea, Def Leppard, George Harrison, Joe Cocker, Little Steven, Manhattan Transfer, New Order, Patsy Kensit, Paul McCartney, Rick Astley, Robbie Robertson, Suzanne Vega, Terence Trent D'Arby, Wet Wet Wet, Whitney Houston
1989	Belen Thomas, Boy George, Bros, Charles Aznavour, Chico Buarque de Hollanda, Chris Rea, Cliff Richard, Depeche Mode, Elton John, Europe, Joan Manuel Serrat, Johnny Clegg, Kim Wilde, Little Steven, Nick Kamen, Ofra Haza, Ray Charles & Dee Dee Bridgewater, Roachford, Sandie Shaw, Simply Red, Tanita Tikaram, Toni Childs, Tracy Spencer, Tuck & Patti, Yazz

gated reverb, electric guitar *à la* U2) charity singalong that looked overtly to models from overseas.

Anglo-American models were both present and assimilated, on the stage of Sanremo.

14.4 Toto Cutugno

Luis Miguel's *Noi, ragazzi di oggi* was written by the most popular singer and songwriter in Sanremo in the 1980s, Toto Cutugno. After winning in 1980 with *Solo noi*, he participated 8 times in 10 years, with songs sung by himself and by others. He reached #2 six times in ten years, writing seventeen songs in ten years, whether he sang them or not, literally dominating the Festival (Table 14.2).

Besides that, he was the musical host in *Domenica In*, RAI's Sunday afternoon popular program, and hosted another popular show, *Piacere Raiuno*, from 1989 to 1992: in a certain way, he was the face of popular song on national TV. His image of a simple man singing simple songs was the opposite of the *cantautore* as the sophisticated and politically committed poet of the 1970s. His success lasted more or less for that decade.

Table 14.2 Songs[a] written by Toto Cutugno at the Sanremo festival for himself (8) and for other singers (9)

Year	Song	Singer	Placement
1980	*Solo noi*	Cutugno	#1
1983	*L'Italiano*	Cutugno	#5
1984	*Serenata*	Cutugno	#2
1985	*Noi, ragazzi di oggi*	Luis Miguel	#2
1986	*Azzurra malinconia*	Cutugno	#4
1987	*Figli* *Io amo* *Il sognatore* *Canzone d'amore*	Cutugno Fausto Leali Peppino Di Capri Ricchi & Poveri	#2 #4 #5 #7
1988	*Emozioni* *Per noi* *Io (per le strade di quartiere)*	Cutugno Fiordaliso Franco Califano	#2 #8 #13
1989[b]	*Le mamme* *Sei tu* *Se non avessi te* *La fine del mondo*	Cutugno Stefano Borgia Fiordaliso Gigi Sabani	#2 #2 #6 #23
1990	*Gli amori*	Cutugno	#2

[a]Full list of references in the appendix at the end of this essay
[b]That year, and for that year only, an intermediate category between *Stars* and *New singers* was introduced for the Festival, *Emergenti*. Stefano Borgia reached #2 in that category

While gaining a tremendous popularity in Eastern Europe, in Italy he was regarded as the epitome of trash in music and in TV, as represented in the titles of a TV program from 1992 called *Mai dire TV* (*Never say TV*): a young man—supposedly a fan of rock or heavy metal, as suggested by his hair and clothes—is sick of Cutugno singing *L'Italiano* on TV, and throws the TV set out of the window, while we listen to an extra-diegetic heavily distorted guitar lick and an intervention of Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*[10] as the TV falls down and explodes.

The fact that this particular TV show was produced between 1991 and 1992 is also important: Cutugno reached #2 in Sanremo in 1990, and, that same year, won the Eurovision Song Contest with *Insieme: 1992*.[11] After that, all of a sudden, after being one of the most invasive presences on TV and in Sanremo in the 1980s, he almost disappeared: he hosted some morning TV shows for RAI, and came back to

[10]Significantly, while the band sings the lines: "Mamma mia, mamma mia/Mamma mia let me go/Beelzebub has a devil put aside/For me/For me/For me."

[11]It was the second—and last, so far—time for an Italian singer to win the Eurovision Song Contest. The first and previous Italian winner was Gigliola Cinquetti with *Non ho l'età (per amarti)* in 1964.

the Festival in 2005—reaching #2, again—but without reaching success again. His fame seems to be linked to that particular decade.[12]

14.5 Communicative Strategies

14.5.1 Sound and Image

Speaking of sound, the sound of the acoustic guitar (and its image) on top of a pile of electronic sounds (mainly synthesizers and electronic drums) was a symbol of authenticity: not being a virtuoso, he accompanied himself more or less like everybody else would do. Also his vocal timbre was quite graceless, and he usually sang easy melodies (often singalong-like). This can resemble the image of many *cantautori*, but with the essential difference of his lyrics, always about love or simple things in life, often recurring to clichés (Cutugno was never considered a "poet"). He represented himself as a middle-of-the-road pop phenomenon, the musical image of a common man—not particularly good at singing, nor at playing, just simple and incredibly successful.

Cutugno looked as common as pure and true the love between Al Bano and Romina looked while they were on stage together, singing in unison and looking in each other eyes: in fact, their songs dealt, again, mainly with simple things in life—and love, of course: at the time, their records' titles and song lyrics exploited the fact that they were married.[13] After singing verses separately, they always sang refrains together, most of the times in unison; nevertheless, Al Bano's and Romina's voices are always discernible—his voice is powerful and tends to melismatic singing, while hers is feeble and linear. They sing together, they sound together and they look at each other with eyes full of love, smiling. As stated in a line of their song *Ci sarà*: "Devi crederci" [You must believe it]—and those looks of love helped the audience believing. This use of unison is a social anaphone, as Philip Tagg defines in his semiotics of music:

> [A] musical sign type bearing iconic resemblance to what it can be heard to represent (2012: 582) relating musical structure to a para- or extramusical group formation with specific traits in terms of number, gender, group dynamic, shared values, function (Tagg 2012: 602).

[12]Other successful songwriters almost disappeared in the 1990s: Cristiano Minellono and Dario Farina, who wrote many songs for Al Bano & Romina and for Ricchi & Poveri in the 1980s, disappeared from the charts too (with a brief return in the 2000s).

[13]Just to name four albums: *Felicità* (Happiness 1982), *Che angelo sei* (What an angel you are, 1982), *Effetto amore* (Love effect, 1984) and *Sempre sempre* (Forever and ever, 1986).

In the case of Al Bano & Romina, this social anaphone worked as the representation of a happily married couple, with a strong (sometimes even rude) man and an elegant, rich,[14] gentle lady melting their voices together in a happy marriage.

14.5.2 A Matter of Structure

Sanremo songs are mainly written in a verse-refrain structure (*strofa-ritornello*, in Italian), with the refrain repeated several times towards the end (quite often, ad libitum): they are considered the epitome of this form. Those songs analysed here are, for the most, verse-refrain songs: *Felicità*, *Ci sarà*, *Solo noi*, *L'Italiano*, *Sarà perché ti amo*, or *Perdere l'amore* are no exceptions. As Franco Fabbri states, although *Every Breath You Take* (Police 1983) is written on a vamp loop, exactly like many successful Sanremo songs, it would not have been "good" for Sanremo because it has a chorus-bridge structure—with *two* different bridges (Fabbri 2005: 171–3)—while the Sanremo song by definition has a verse and a refrain (repeated over and over, preferably with a trucker's gear change towards the end—we'll see what a "trucker's gear change" is next paragraph).[15] This is true for *most* of those songs but several hits from Sanremo in the 1980s, sometimes even those that won the first prize, are significantly *not* verse-refrain. Vasco Rossi's *Vita Spericolata* (1983) and Zucchero's *Donne* (1985) were extremely unsuccessful in Sanremo but hit the charts, becoming Italian classic songs, and are in a chorus-bridge form. Their lack of success at the Festival seems to suggest that their structure played a role in this, but Alice's *Per Elisa* (1981) won the first prize although it is a chorus-bridge song (with the hook line clearly placed at the beginning of every chorus).

The "trucker's gear change" is:

> [A] change of key occurring near the end of a song, shifting upwards […] by some relatively small pitch increment – most commonly by one semitone (half step) or whole tone (whole step) (Tagg 2012: 605).

Many Sanremo songs use this harmonic tool in order to increase pathos: *Ancora* (De Crescenzo 1981), *Felicità*, *Ci sarà*, *Io amo*, *Si può dare di più*, *Io (per le strade di quartiere)*, just to name a very few, have a "gear change", sometimes towards the end of the song, sometimes in the middle. Nevertheless, even in extremely popular and extremely "classic" songs of the very same years, we can find unusual

[14]Romina Power is the daughter of US-American actor Tyron Power.

[15]Most of the Beatles' first hits were in a chorus-bridge form, just like many "standard" American songs. This form can reasonably be considered as opposed to the verse-refrain structure (see Fabbri 2008b: 155–96, 2012).

elements: for instance, in 1988 Massimo Ranieri won with a song—*Perdere l'amore*—which displays a *reverse* trucker's gear change for the last chorus, shifting *downwards* by one semitone.[16] So, Franco Fabbri is right when he states that:

> [T]he most striking thing is not the fact that the [Sanremo] canon can be explained or described […]: but the fact that it exists. It is this particular focus that makes the workers of the industry pledge themselves to Sanremo for months […], and not just to the practical aspects of the festival, but also, implicitly, to its abstract concept, to this "song to be sent to Sanremo", similar […] to Calvino's *Nonexistent Knight* (Fabbri 2005: 173).

14.6 Conclusions: What Is Left?

Is there a model for the Sanremo songs of the 1980s? No, there isn't. There were easy singalongs and "discoish" rhythms, but also complex harmonies and arrangements, even in those songs that won the Festival or hit the charts. Throughout the whole decade producers and organizers looked for new styles and new artists, sometimes abroad, sometimes from commercial TVs, trying to be in step with the times and opening the Festival to other genres (rock and disco music above all): by doing so, the Festival reached again a huge audience and regained its status. Many things changed since 1990, but the *Premio della Critica* and the *Sezione Nuove Proposte* are still there today, and Sanremo is broadcast for all its length by the RAI still today (since 1981).

The only real musical constant at Sanremo in the 1980s is the use of drum machines (or drums with gated reverb), keyboards and, sometimes, electric guitars with chorus—*Never orchestras*. In this sense, Sanremo successfully changed, sounding like all successful records in the 1980s, and did more than surviving. After reaching a new audience, it could restore its "classic" image, re-introducing the orchestra in 1990 and erasing again all electronic sounds.

Songs such as *L'Italiano*, *Felicità* or *Sarà perché ti amo* may be considered too poppy and easy, but without them—representing a real Renaissance for the Festival—the Sanremo Festival would have disappeared. After them, *thanks to them and to their success*, Sanremo was again the temple of Italian "classic" song—and this is why, in 2013, Toto Cutugno, Ricchi & Poveri and Al Bano were given the Sanremo career awards. With that popularity, the producers in the next decade could use a new punch-line to identify the Festival, exploiting its regained popularity and success: "Because Sanremo is Sanremo."

[16]Yes, the alto saxophone rises the pitch an octave higher, but Ranieri comes back right after a few bars of solo, and sings a semitone lower—helping his final, high and long note.

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