

Benefits of choral singing: Alcamese music (Sicily) in Apocryphal Gospels

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Introduction

Is it possible to cure the human soul through education in music and singing? What additional benefits does execution and choral concentration bring? What are Apocryphal Gospels? What role does Alcamese music play in this? To answer to all these questions that turn around my research, I go back to my childhood, because everything starts right in my past. I still remember the voice of my grandmother Vincenzina and her sisters while they were singing lyrics in Sicilian dialect, where the characters were Lu Bammineddu (the Child Jesus), La Marinnuzza (Maria, the Mother), San Giusippuzzo (St. Joseph, putative father of Jesus), Sant' Annuzza and San Jachinu (St. Anne and St. Joachim, the grandparents of Jesus), Micheli, Gabrieli and Raffaeli (the Archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael), l'anciledi di lu celu (the angels of Heaven), lu voi and l' asineddu (the ox and the donkey), li pasturedi di lu prisepi, li musicanti and lu ciaramiddaru (the shepherds of the crib, the musicians and the bagpiper), Aspanu, Minziuni and Badassanu li tri Rignanti (the three Wise Men Gaspar, Baldassarre and Melchior), Lu Patri Eternu (God the almighty Father).

These evangelicals characters were described in melodious lyrics like some christian iconographic. That is the testimony that the ancient known the contents of "Non Canonical Gospels" and they represented them in the field of artistic expression and in the narrative field. The reported description usually didn't correspond with the one of the sacred texts. Those sing-song of easy intonation penetrated in my mind, my skin, my soul, until I made a treasure of them understanding the meaning. They kept a long religious and popular tradition in western Sicily, my own native land.

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The apocryphal gospels

I didn't know that in these texts there were contents of some books unrecognised by the Church, the apocryphal gospels. The word "apocryphal" comes from the Greek word "apocryphon", that means hidden and occult. These apocryphal gospels are those writings that haven't been recognised because they were suspected of heresy, which didn't correspond to the canonical gospels of the official teaching of the Catholic religion excluded the liturgical reading from the hands of the faithful. The mystery that still today hovers the figure of Jesus made that the apocryphal texts are always more searched, known and read.

The text of a melody titled "Lu Bammineddu all'acqua si n'ha juto", text in Sicilian dialect, known in Alcamo and surroundings says "Lu Bammineddu all'acqua si n'ha juto, un siriceddy d'oru s'ha purtatu. Arrivannu a la funtana l'ha rumputu, cu li so santi manu l'ha sunatu. Docu astabanna ci sta l'arginteri. Facemuci l'aneddu a lu Signori. L'aneddu a lu Signori un ci sta. Ci stanno tri chiuvidda pi la cruci. Cu Gesù mi staiu, cu Gesù mi curcu. Chiamu a Gesù, iu paura un'haiu. Iu mi curcu no stu lettu, c'è Maria ni lu me pettu, idda dormi, idda vigghia, si c'è cosa m'arruspigghia. M'arruspigghia cu lu so mantu: ni lu nomi di lu Patri, di lu Figghiu e di lu Spiritu Santu". Translated in Italian and then in English, it means: the child Jesus has gone to draw from the water and with him he brought a small pitcher, but, arrived at the fount he broke it; with his sacred hands he fixed it up. From the other side of the angle there is a jeweller.

Let's do a ring to the Lord, but it is not possible to make the ring for the Lord, we have three small nails for his cross. I stay with Jesus, with Jesus I sleep, and calling Jesus I'm not afraid. I sleep in this bed, there's the Virgin in my chest. She's sleeping and she looks after me, and if there's a danger she wakes me. She wakes me with her mantle.

We find the narration of this episode of Christ's childhood in the II code of the apocryphal of Tommaso, cap. 11,1 titled "Jesus bring the water in the mantle".

It is said that Jesus was 6 years old and his mother gave him an amphora and sent him to draw water. But he crashed in the crowd and he broke up the amphora. So Jesus folded the cloak he wore, he filled it with the water, and he brung it to the mother. At the seen of what happened, the mother kissed him and she kept in her the mystery of what she saw (Moraldi, 1971).

Also in the Arabic gospel of childhood, at the chapter 45,1, is reported the same episode with the title "the broken Amphora".

It is said that a day, mistress Maria, ordered to go and fetch the water from the well. So he went to fetch the water, he filed the amphora but it has broken into pieces. Expanding his shroud, the Lord Jesus took the water and he brought it to the mother who was stunned by that fact. She hired and kept in her heart all the things that she saw (Moraldi, 1971).

In the gospel of pseudo - Matthew, chapter 33,1 it is reported with the title "The Broken Jug".

Here as well it is said that Jesus was six years old, and his mother sent him with a Jug to fetch water at the fountain, together with other children. And it happened that, after the water was fetched, one of the children gave him a thrust and overturned the jug, breaking it. But Jesus stretched out the cloak and he used it to gather in it as much water as it could contain. After that, he brought it to his mother. At this sight she was amazed, she meditated between herself, and she put everything in her heart (Moraldi, 1971).

In the second part of the song we find a preach for the night. The ancient inhabitants of Alcamo sang it every evening to their children or to their grandchildren before they went to bed. Deserves to be mentioned, also another chant known in Alcamo and its surroundings is “Li Tri Rignanti “ (literally the three Kings). The text the Alcamese dialect is in the following: “Si parteru Tri Rignanti, li Tri Re di l’ Urienti, cu la stidda in cumpagnia , pi vidiri lu Missia. Susi pasturi! Nun dormiri ‘cchiù!!! Jemu a vidiri lu Bamminu Gesù. Susi pasturi ! Nun dormiri ‘cchiu!!! Jemu a viddiri lu Bamminu Gesù! Poi la stidda s’ha firmatu e la grutta ci ha mustratu. Sfasciateddu lu truvaru, li piruzzi ci vasaru. Susi pasturi! Nun durmiri ‘cchiù!!! Jemu a vidiri lu Bamminu Gesù. Susi pasturi! Nun dormiri ‘cchiù!!! Jemu a vidiri lu Bamminu Gesù”. Below, the literal version in English: Three kings left, the Tree Wise Men of the East, accompanied by a star, to see the Messiah. Stand up o shepherds! Don’t sleep anymore !!! Let’s go see the Baby Jesus. Stand up o shepherds! Don’t’ sleep anymore!!! Let’s go see the Baby Jesus. Suddenly the star stopped on a cave. They found the Child without clothes and kissed his little feet .Stand up o shepherds! Don’t sleep anymore!!! Let’s go see the Baby Jesus. Stand up o shepherds! Don’t sleep anymore!!! Let’s go see the Baby Jesus. The text of the song tells of the journey undertaken by the Three Wise Men to see and adore the Child Jesus. They will be guided by a mysterious star that will lead them to the cave where the Child Jesus lives. Arriving at the cave, the Three Wise Men worshiped the Child and recognized him as the Messiah. In reality, of the aforementioned story of the Three Wise Men and their search for the Child Jesus, nothing is known for certain, neither about their origin nor about their origin nor about their ethnicity; an aura of mystery hovers over them.

We speak of them only in the canonical Gospel of the Evangelist Matthew, in chapter 2, verse 1-12 and in the following Apocryphal Gospels: Proto-Gospel of James in chapters 21 and 23, in the Codes Hereford and Strudel, Gospels of the Saviour ‘s childhood chapters 88-96, in the Arab Gospel of childhood in chapter 7, in the Gospel of Pseudo Matthew in chapter 16 and in the Armenian Gospel of childhood in chapter 5.

In short, in the Proto-Gospel of James, the narration is similar to the Canonical Gospel of the Evangelist Matthew and also bears many similarities whit the text of the Alcamese chant of “I Tri Rignanti”. All three texts speak of the Three Wise Men from the East, the search for Jesus, the finding of the Divine Child in a cave and the star that acted as a guide. In some fragments attributed to the Gospel of the Pseudo Matthew, the race of the Three Wise Men is spoken of, one white, the other yellow and the third dark skinned, representing the continents of the Old World: Europe, Asia and Africa. In the Armenian Gospel of Childhood, the names of the Three Wise Men are reported as in tradition, they are recognized as kings and finally there is also talk of their royal gifts:

The Three Wise Men were three brothers: Melkon (Melchior), who reigned over the Persians, Balthasar (Belshazzar), who ruled over the Indians and Gaspar (Casper),who ruled over the land of the Arabs. Melkon had with him myrrh, aloe, muslin, purple, pieces of linen and the books written and sealed by the hands of God. Balthasar brought as gifts to offer to the Child incense, precious nard, cinnamon, and other perfumes. Gaspar had gold, silver, precious stones, sapphire of great value and fine pearls. Both in the Canonical Gospel of the Evangelist Matthew and in all the apocryphal gospels we speak of the meeting of the Three Wise Men with King Herod (Morandi, 1994).

As for the star, “Stidda” in Sicilian dialect, it is present in all the apocryphal gospels and in the Canonical Gospel of Matthew. The Fathers of the Church identified the stars with angels, since in many biblical texts it is written that they descended to earth to guide the path of men. The common representation in the shape of a comet and the words “Comet Star” go back to the fact that Giotto, since the passage of Halley’s comet in 1301, I draw a long-tailed comet in the Scrovegni chapel in Padua. Starting from the fifteenth century, the detail had an extraordinary artistic fortune in the representations of the crib and the nativity of Jesus.



Figure 1. Sicilian glass painting “Adoration of the Three Wise Men”. Maestro Vito Fulco last Pincisanti. Alcamo (Sicily)- Private collection.

Like the previous Alcamese song “Lu Bammineddu all’ acqua si n’ ha juto“, this song too has an easy catchy melody and fast rhythm. For more than seven years I have been researching apocryphal-texts in Alcamesi melodies and I am reconstructing their intonation note by note, handed down only orally. So it was very difficult to put everything together, because I have collected the vocal and textual inheritances handed down to me by my grandmother and his sisters, who died a few years ago. From this was born also my desire to experiment. I have experimented it for more than ten years with the chorus of Alcamo named “Francesca Adragna” born from the courage of a mother, the teacher

Rosetta Ingrao that to remember the daughter Francesca, died suddenly in her sleep at the age of twenty-seven, has created a particular Choral Group. Singers don't know the music, they have different ages (from seven to ninety years old), and different social backgrounds. Through the choir song gets out the suffering: loneliness, poverty, depression, adaptation problems and relational problems. Through the choir song, and in particular with the execution of popular songs from Alcamo, they have developed self-confidence and they have cured their souls and their suffering. Self-esteem and gratification have come forward, but in particular the pleasure to stay together. The rediscovery of songs belonging to the homeland, to the Christian traditions linked to the apocryphal gospels, has simplified the teaching of singing and aesthetics and it has favoured the intonation and the memorisation. Singing the melodies of Alcamesi has favoured a sense of euphoria in the elderly: they have freed themselves from sadness, anger and fear. By trying so much joy they have regained their love for life. On all this unique musical reality of its kind, I would not have bet even a cent. Yet more than ten years have passed and this numerous vocal group, made up of about forty elements, has made more than a hundred concerts, learning the musical pieces from various repertoires only for imitation. A hard and interminable work.

Lu Bambineddu all'acqua si n'ha jutu

Tradizionale
Ricostruzione melodica e testuale
e trascrizione di Maria Messana

Moderato

DO-
Lu bam - bi - ned - du all'ac - qua si n'ha ju - tu un

3 FA- SOL DO-
si - ri - ced - du d'o - ru s'ha pur - ta - tu. Ar - ri - van - nu, al - la fun - ta - na l'ha rum -

6 FA- SOL DO-
pu - tu, cu li so' san - ti ma - nu l'ha sa - na - tu. Do - cu a - stab -

9 SOL DO-
ban - na ci sta l'ar - gin - te - ri, fa - ce - mu - ci l'a - ned - du, a lu Si - gnu - ri. L'a -

13 DO-
ned - du, a lu Si - gnu - ri nun ci sta, ci stan - nu tri chiu - vid - da pi la

16 FA- DO- FA- DO-
cru - ci. Cu Ge - sù mi sta - iu, cu Ge - sù mi cur - cu,

19 FA- DO- Sib DO-
chia - man - nu, a Ge - sù ju pa - u - ra un n'ha - ju. lu mi

21 FA- DO- FA- DO-
cur - cu ni stu let - tu c'è Ma - ria ni lu me pet - tu: i - u

23 FA- DO- Sib DO- FA- 3 SOL
dor - mu l'd - da vig - ghia si c'è co - sa m'ar - ru - spig - ghia, m'ar - ru - spi - ghia cu lu so can - tu.

26 3 3 3
Nu no - mu du Pa - tri, du Fig - ghiu e di lu Spi - ri - tu San - tu.

Choral practice

The fact that the choristers do not know how to read the scores proposed to them becomes a task for the vocal-choral practice and great effort in memorizing the melody and the inherent text. But let's go in order. From the observation in the field, they require at least two weekly rehearsals per section, more than the choral rehearsal which involves all the elements of the various sections, bass and in addition the children's section, accompanied instrumentally by the piano and a flute. The choristers are provided with photocopies of the text relating to the piece of music to learn. This is their first impact: knowing the content of the song and learning its words.

Subsequently we move on to the motif. Personally I sing and sing again, first small musical engravings and then musical phrases, repeating them to exhaustion, until the choristers memorize text and music correctly, in order to be faithful to the original score. The use of Information and Communication Technology is often also used, but always under my supervision: my fear is that the choristers alone can cripple both the text and the intonation. Clearly it takes months before the singers are able to learn and make their own melody and lyrics. Some songs sometimes require years of study before maturing. We must arm ourselves with great patience and perseverance! At the beginning of this great musical adventure, the pieces I chose were only monadic, even if of various genres. Over the years, even if with great difficulty and sometimes unfortunately with failures, we arrived at the performance of polyphonic pieces. Hence the arrangement of the four sections and the white voices. Many choristers are members of the same family: husband, wife, children, brothers or sisters, grandfathers and grandmothers, uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces. Some are friends or acquaintances, others not.

The atmosphere that has been established within the group, over the years, is rather quiet, joyful and playful. Collaboration has also made its entry among the vocalists. In the first years of experimentation there were conflicts and distrust: each mistake was the fault of the other! It took hours, days, months and years to dismantle their thinking. Discouragement often came and I often thought about giving up. Honestly, I experienced the first year of business as a failure. Despite the good will and an immense physical, psychological and moral sacrifice, the objectives set had not led to a differently hoped-for or perhaps only imagined end. Finally, one day by chance, I had the idea of using a circle-time set-up, method that I used a few years ago in some classes of a lower secondary education institution. At that time its use helped me to manage the communication between pupils. It was a turning point: the choristers felt free to say their opinion, they deepened their knowledge of each other and took into consideration the needs of each of them; first steps to create a word of integration within the choir, enhancing the skills of individuals and those of the choir itself.

Observing them, I thought that the use of this method was an instrument of prevention and resolution of possible conflicts and it allowed me to get to know better the dynamics present within the choir. Talking, discussing and then singing. It was difficult, but not impossible, to inculcate in the singers that the strength of the choir is precisely their union: one for all and all for one, like the motto of the "Three Musketeers" by Alexander

Dumas father. In the choir every voice is useful and precious. Cooperation is essential: if one is wrong, everyone is wrong. Both success and failure belong to everyone, including the director and instrumentalists. You don't say "you were wrong", but "we were wrong". You have to learn to collaborate, there are no other solutions if you want to be a choir. The oldest choristers, especially the men, hesitated to accept the choir director's directives, even more their hostility worsened if the director was a woman. Hence the need to be accepted and to propose a vocal repertoire of their liking. I remember their effort in learning intercostal-diaphragmatic breathing techniques. It is dramatic to note the incorrect use of breathing and consequently the irreparable defects caused in the voice. I had to resort to speech therapy session and subsequent lectures on the correct use of the voice and breathing, all in voluntary work. Later we moved on to intonation techniques. A long preparation work of almost seven months.

The choristers did not like the theoretical lessons and vocal technique. They were unmotivated at times, tired and bored. They often skipped weekly appointments. I asked myself several times: what shall I do? How can I get their attention? I had proposed simple songs that I alternated with breathing exercises and vocal technique. But they didn't like them: for the young and the little ones they were trivial, for adults and the elderly boring. Let's not talk whether the lyrics were in Latin or in a foreign language. A real tragedy!!! Hence the idea of alternating this tiring process with some simple songs belonging to our native country, It was a success. With vocal practice and choral performance of melodies in the Alcamese dialect, the choristers had a new approach to the musical world and their mood changed for the better. They were no longer stressed, always present at the weekly meetings and concerts that followed. They worked together, listened to my suggestions and left their daily problems at home. The choral music workshop became almost a parallel life for them. The elderly began to communicate with each other, the children easily learned both dialectal texts and simple melodies. The women were very relaxed while they were singing and they did not give big problems any more. The middle-aged men and a few youngsters, quarrelled every now and then creating some disappointment, but this was soon dismantled with great patience and I often tried to let them apologize, even if they were reluctant. Finally, little by little I reached some specific objectives, among which the improvement of the intonation of the single sounds, the memorization of the texts more quickly and the exact execution of the melody. Small polyphonies of third intervals were added to the monody in the choruses and in the final incisions.

This technique was useful to enrich the song and in the final part to disguise errors of duration. Non-professional singers, who do not know the musical writing, sing freely as they please: they don't care about time, duration and intensity. For this reason I decided to change my gestures while directing and to use facial mimic, to help the vocalists to understand better: In certain executions I felt more a traffic cop than a choir director. I tried to experiment with a lot of different techniques to enforce my direction and the execution of music in genera. Music has often been at their service and has been healing. Even if the songs weren't perfect from a rhythmic point of view and they sometimes had a waning musical intonation, as far as the DIY (do it yourself) intensity is concerned, the final result was excellent from a therapeutic point of view. I still remember their first

performance: great enthusiasm and excellent self-esteem came forward. It was a good performance. The concert was held in December 2007, on the day of Saint Nicholas of Bari, that is the sixth of the month, in the ancient Franciscan church of “Sant’ Anna Cappuccini” in Alcamo and then repeated a week later in the monumental and beautiful eighteenth-century church “ Sant Oliva”, in Alcamo ,too. Even all those who came to listen to the folk and traditional musical events from Alcamo were amazed and pleased. From here on , my attention turned to both the music and the lyrics of these chants. Hence the idea of creating a playlist and researching the texts in the apocryphal gospels, restoring, transcribing both the words and the music so that these melodies transmitted orally would not be lost and became memory for the new generations.

During the years to come in my logbook I wrote down all my observations in the field concerning the activities carried out with the amateur singers of the Alcamese choir “ Francesca Adragna “.I got closer and closer to the study of the music that cares and I got interested in song therapy. In Italy there were quite serious surgeries where patients played or sang while doctors removed brain cancer. In my small musical world I tried to apply the care of music, with imitation singing and preferring the dialectal music of one's own territory, since I realized that this activity has created cohesion between different people, has improved the mood and freed many singers from stress, sadness, anger and fear. Choral singing relieved the pain associated with memories of serious mourning. Choristers improved attention, concentration and memorization. The joy of living came forward. My hypotheses became certainties and realities when one evening, talking to my son Saverio, a medical student at the University of Palermo in Sicily, he pointed out that all my observations on the benefit of choral singing could also be proven from a medical-scientific point of view and he spoke to me about a study promoted by the Royal College of Music in London, made on the increase of energy acquired by a vocal ensemble and on the strengthening of the immune system. A world opened up to me. At that time I was setting out on a new adventure at the University of Valencia: a PhD in choral singing. My son gave me the idea of making my research more original and complete, because first it was mostly oriented towards a historical musical itinerary, melodic and textual collection and restoration and transcription. Following his suggestion, I wanted to ascertain if in the choristers who sing dialect music the production of cortisol, the stress hormone, dropped and consequently increased those of the feel-good hormones such as oxytocin, serotonin and endorphin, subjecting them to special salivary swabs. After that the title of my research became “Benefits of choral singing”, Alcamese music (Sicily) by the apocryphal gospels.

Directors of the thesis: Rosa María Bo Bonet, Francisco Carlos Bueno Camejo, Ángel San Martín Alonso, at University of Valencia, department of philosophy and science of education and department of history and geography. Unfortunately, due to Coronavirus, some steps of my research slowed down and partially suspended. In full emergency, clearly my salivary swabs and my hypotheses will have to wait. Many testing labs are clearly committed to verifying coronavirus positivity and saving lives. For singing, and consequently for the choir and related activities, it was a traumatizing and difficult year. To forget!!! Due to the easy contagion and the prohibition of gatherings, the choral vocal

performance has suffered incalculable damage. The singers had to put aside their voice and consequently their soul, their way of being, of expressing themselves, of thinking, of transmitting emotions and living. I can't imagine a world without song. It's like a black and white painting. During this period, the choristers of the "Francesca Adragna" choir practiced for small groups or for sections, through distance learning. But it is not the same thing as live singing rehearsals. There are no smiles, hugs, open discussion together, out of tune, concerts. Music is everything: it is life.

Special thanks

A special thanks to my grandmother Vincenzina Campo who orally transmitted to me the texts and popular melodies of Alcamo, to her sisters and my grandparents; to my son Saverio Coppola who through his medical studies helped me to experience my research; I thank Professor Rosetta Ingrao and the choristers of the "Francesca Adragna" choir of Alcamo, who have allowed me over the past seven years to experience the benefits of choral singing, to have endured and supported me during the vocal and choral activities inherent to the songs of the musical tradition alcamese. Thanks also to my mother Fortunata, my brothers Enza, Giuseppe, Mario, to my sister-in-law Maria and Daniela and Gaspare, to my nephews Ester, Leonardo, Desirée, Francesco, the pianist Rosalba Ganci and Ylenia Cruciata, who sang and played with me in shows and concerts to safeguard and make known the texts of the apocryphal gospels and the songs of the Alcamo tradition and Don Salvatore Grignano for the comparison of the texts taken from the apocryphal gospels with the canonical gospels. I also thank Giorgio Cammisa, Piera Fundarò, for their help for the English language and Aurora Rincon. I thank Vito Fulco for his paintings on the glass, my music teacher Mimma Bambina who has always believed in me and the professors of the University of Valencia specially Francisco Carlos Camejo Bueno, Rosa Maria Bo Bonet, and Angel Sanmartín Alonso. Finally I thank my husband Vito who accompanied me morally to me in this adventure and an infinite thanks to my father Leonardo who watches over me from up there.

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Moraldi, L. (1994). *Tutti gli Apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento*. Torino: PIEMME.

Maria Messana was born in 1967 in Alcamo, a town on the Gulf of Castellammare in Sicily. She started to study piano and singing at the age of 7, graduating later at the "A. Scontrino" conservatory in Trapani. In 1996 she graduated in music teaching, choosing the study and the direction of choral singing and the music – sacred liturgical. She directed the choir "A. Bruckner", in the "Missa Choralis" by F. Liszt, in the prestigious cathedral of Monreale filmed by the RAI (National Italian Television). Since 2010 she directs the "Francesca Adragna" choir and from here comes the deepening of the Alcamese music and his research and reconstruction of the lyrics and melodies, which have never been written down to date. She is currently a singing teacher at the "V.F.Allmayer", a musical high school in Alcamo, Sicily. She is still conducting a research session on the theme "Benefits of choral singing: Alcamese music (Sicily) in Apocryphal Gospels".
