

L'improvvisatore in genre scenes by foreign and Italian artists in the 19th Century¹

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Abstract. The famous Italian improviser Maria Maddalena Morelli, known as Corilla Olimpica, inspired Madame de Staël's Corinne ou l'Italie, and other literary works combining travel experiences with the celebration of Italian improvisers, some of them were famous all over Europe. A tradition of extemporaneous poetry existed also as a kind of folk music, not only to sing poems in ottava rima like Ludovico Ariosto's Orlando furioso and Torquato Tasso's Gerusalemme liberata, but also to improvise duels on various topics.

In the 19th century some genre paintings and engravings depict the improvvisatori from the foreigners' point of view, while popular drawings and engravings, like Bartolomeo Pinelli's, allow the spread of the Italian counterpart of the cliché of the extemporaneous. This paper compares these two figurative approaches, by putting images in relationship with travel accounts, novels and musical sources, as well as with the tradition of improvised poetry attested in the Italian peninsula by the ethnomusicological research.

Riassunto. La famosa improvvisatrice italiana Maria Maddalena Morelli, nota come Corilla Olimpica, ispirò Corinne ou l'Italie di Madame de Staël e altre opere che combinavano esperienze di viaggio con la celebrazione degli improvvisatori italiani, alcuni dei quali famosi in tutta Europa. La tradizione della poesia estemporanea esisteva anche nell'ambito della musica popolare, non solo come canto dei poemi in ottava rima, come l'Orlando Furioso di Ariosto o la Gerusalemme Liberata di Tasso, ma anche sotto forma di improvvisazione di contrasti su vari temi.

Nel XIX secolo, alcuni dipinti e incisioni illustrano gli improvvisatori dal punto di vista del viaggiatore straniero; mentre disegni e stampe popolari, come quelli di Bartolomeo Pinelli, diffondono la versione italiana del cliché del poeta

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¹The subject of this paper originated as an ethnomusicological research on improvised poetry in central Italy in 2014, thanks to a research grant by the University of Florence. Currently I am working on extemporaneous poetry as an independent researcher, both doing ethnography in Tuscany and Latium and with a historical approach, especially taking into consideration various texts, musical transcriptions and iconographical sources from the early 18th century.

estemporaneo. Questa ricerca mette a confronto due approcci figurativi, mettendo le immagini in relazione sia con resoconti di viaggio, romanzi e fonti musicali, sia anche con la tradizione dell'improvvisazione poetica attestata nella penisola italiana dalla ricerca etnomusicologica.

In central Italy, poetic improvisation in *ottava rima* has been practiced for seven centuries. Still nowadays, poets, coming from various towns and villages, especially from Tuscany, Latium and Abruzzi, meet quite regularly during the year to improvise, singing eight-line verses (without any instrumental accompaniment), on subjects given by the organisers of the meetings or by the public. Normally during the performance a series of duels between two (or more rarely three) poets takes place, each poet defends an argument and they alternatively sing in *ottava rima*, a stanza made of eight hendecasyllabic lines, rhyming ABABABCC². This stanza has been used since the 14th century in Italian literature and especially in the 16th century masterpieces like Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* and Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*. The tune normally used to improvise in *ottava rima* is composed of two parts, each corresponding to a quatrain. Despite being widely recognisable, it only exists in its many variants, since each poet adapts it according to personal stylistic features, like the ornamentation, vibrato, his/her speed in composition, or the habit to split the verse in two hemistichs³.

²Some videos taken during poetic meetings in 2014 and 2015 may be found in my vimeo account, see for example <https://vimeo.com/141994287> for a series of octaves on subjects concerning food and the pleasure of the table sung by individual poets and <https://vimeo.com/143563104> for a duel between two poets on nature and the hand of man.

³Extemporaneous poetry in *ottava rima* in central Italy has been studied by ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, researchers in Italian literature. It is impossible to give, here, a comprehensive bibliography, I will mention only the titles that may be useful to generally contextualise this phenomenon and my approach, for a more detailed bibliography see the website www.aporie.it. M. AGAMENNONE, *Cantar l'ottava*, in G. KEZICH, *I poeti contadini*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1986, pp. 171-218 and M. AGAMENNONE, *Modi del contrasto in ottava rima*, in M. AGAMENNONE, F. GIANNATTASIO, ed. by *Sul verso cantato*, Padova, Il Poligrafo, 2002, pp. 163-223 provide a close analysis of the melodic contours and of the particular organization of time that poets undertake to arrange an improvisation in correct stanzas of eight hendecasyllabic lines. P. G. ARCANGELI, G. PALOMBINI, M. PIANESI, *La sposa lamentava e l'Amatrice*, Pescara, Nova Italica, 2001 (reissued in 2014) examines the practice of improvising poetry within an impressive survey of the traditional music in the area called Alta Sabina. G. KEZICH, *I poeti contadini*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1986 and ID. *Some peasant poets*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2013 describes the fieldwork made in Tolfà (a village in the hills north of Rome) in the 70s, investigating the cultural background of several poets and making hypotheses on the impossibility of studying the process of oral composition using the classic oral-formulaic theory by Milman Parry and Albert Lord. P. BRAVI, 1989/1990, *Oralità e improvvisazione nell'Ottava Rima*, diss., Roma, Università "La Sapienza" re-examines the question of formulaic theory with an ethnomusicological approach concluding that, while Parry and Lord's *formulae* are not common in *ottava rima* improvised poetry (and when they can be found they are not part of a shared language but belong to individual styles), many other devices and strategies can be recognized in the process of oral composition. F. FRANCESCHINI, *I contrasti in ottava rima e l'opera di*

Even if reading the historical sources about poetic improvisation in the past centuries through the lens of the living tradition may be misleading, I believe that it is possible to assume continuity in this practice and it is of paramount importance when trying to highlight the changes that have occurred during the centuries.

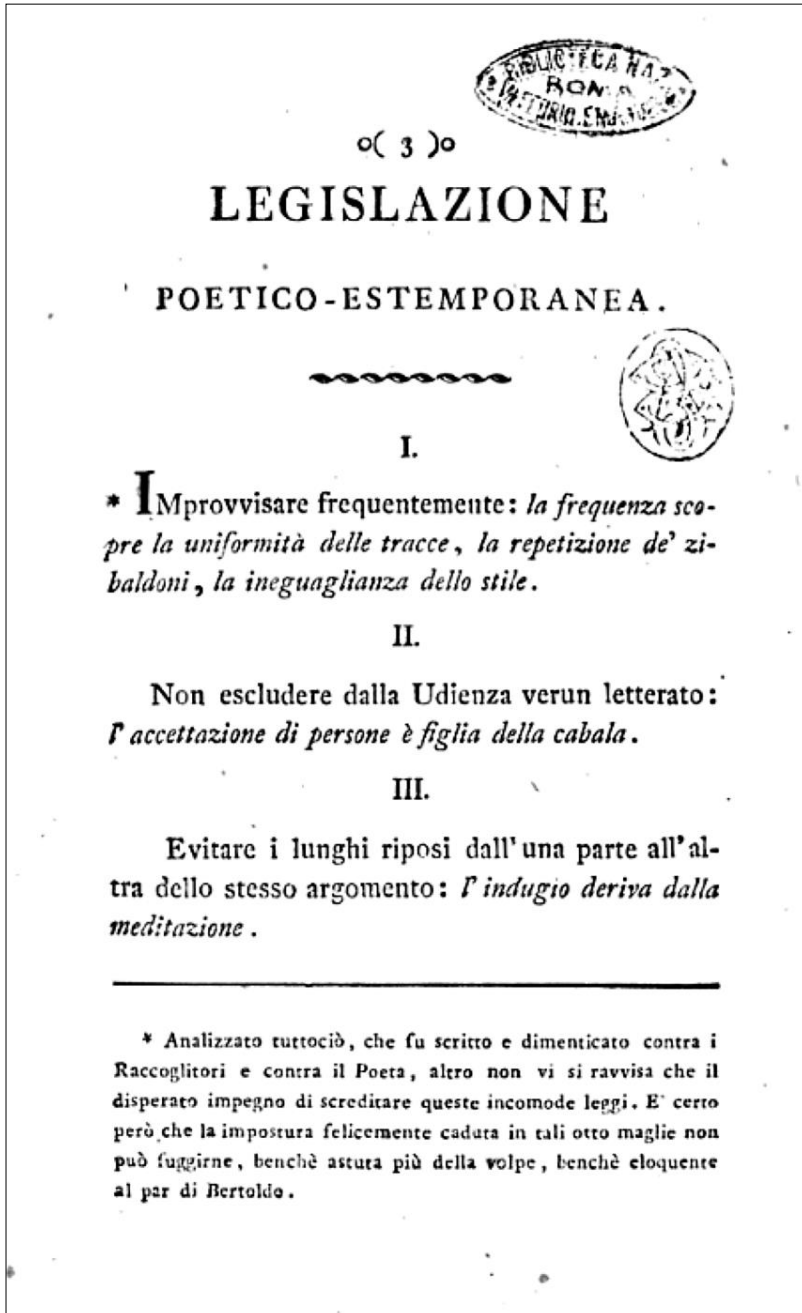
I became more and more interested in the possible connections between the present tradition and the practice of the *improvvisatori* of the 18th and 19th century when I first read the *Legislazione poetico-estemporanea* by Francesco Gianni⁴ and the remarks on extemporaneous poetic performance which can be found in many other writings, travel reports and biographies from the 18th and 19th centuries onwards and that have been already discussed by researchers in Italian literature like Alessandra Di Ricco and Angela Esterhammer⁵.

Concerning Francesco Gianni's *Legislazione*, apart from the 6th rule that suggests the public be told in advance the various meters that the poet is able to use during improvisation (now poetic improvisation only makes use of *ottava rima*: the poets from Alta Sabina can improvise also in *terza rima* – tercets of hendecasyllabic lines – or in quatrains, with the accompaniment of an accordion or a bagpipe, but this is not the case of poets from other areas of central Italy), all the others are now part of an unwritten ethical code of extemporaneous poets. Gianni's *Legislazione* contains the suggestions to improvise frequently (I), it claims that it is necessary to improvise in front of everybody, even scholarly educated people (II), it suggests to avoid long pauses (III), to agree to improvise on any subject and insists on the possibility for the poet to request an explanation of the given subject if necessary (IV-V), it suggests avoiding useless invocations (VII) and to write poetry, in order to have time to reflect upon it (VIII) [figs. 1-2].

Vasco Cai da Bientina, Pisa, Pacini, 1983, while making interesting historical considerations, it analyses the written production of Vasco Cai, a celebrated extemporaneous poet of the early 20th Century.

⁴ The *Legislazione poetico-estemporanea* (extemporaneous-poetic legislation) was published in F. GIANNI, *Leda e Giove, canto estemporaneo di Francesco Gianni con metodo e rime obbligate proposto in Siena il dì 12 Agosto 1795*, Firenze, Ad istanza di un gentiluomo senese, 1795, pp. 3-4. It has been widely discussed in A. DI RICCO, *L'inutile e meraviglioso mestiere: poeti improvvisatori di fine settecento*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1990, pp. 51-66.

⁵ A. DI RICCO, *L'inutile e meraviglioso mestiere*, cit.; A. ESTERHAMMER, *Romanticism and Improvisation, 1750-1850*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.



Figs. 1-2. Legislazione poetico-estemporanea, in F. GIANNI, *Leda e Giove, canto estemporaneo di Francesco Gianni con metodo e rime obbligate proposto in Siena il dì 12 Agosto 1795*, Firenze, Ad istanza di un gentiluomo senese, 1795, pp. 3-4.

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IV.

Accettare qualunque tema onesto da qualsivoglia proponente: *la universalità rimuove il sospetto della impostura.*

V.

Se il tema proposto fosse ignoto al Poeta, dimandarne la spiegazione o il racconto: *lo scibile è immenso; non è Poeta chi tutti sa gli argomenti, ma chi sa tutti cantarli poeticamente.*

VI.

Dichiarare i metri, che si possiedono; scegliersi tra questi dalla Udienza: *questa scelta esclude un' antecedente preparazione, distingue l' ottimo, il mediocre, l' infimo nell' arte metrica.*

VII.

Non ricorrere alle invocazioni inutili, agli episodi estranei, ai luoghi comuni: *questo è il partito dell' artificio.*

VIII.

Scrivere i versi, che si cantano: *il giudizio dell' occhio è più sicuro di quello dell' orecchio.*

The last rule, to be exact, is not shared by everybody: even if some of the actual poets also write and publish their own collections of poetry (containing both proper written poetry and transcriptions of memories of improvisations), many other young and old poets refuse to write because they consider the oral performance the true manifestation of their poetry, which loses its character when written. Nevertheless, writing in poetry is quite common as a means of personal communication: quite often the poets write each other text messages in *ottava rima* using their mobile phones, others write octaves on social networks, while some of the poets of the past used to send each other letters, writing in *ottava rima*.

I also realized that many of the elements of the performance considered in the writings about the 18th and 19th century *improvvisatori* are of paramount importance also for the living poets: for example the advantages given by a good voice, the importance of gesture, the public dimension of poetic improvisation, the idea that the ability to improvise is “a gift from nature”, the necessity to combine oral and written culture.

Beyond becoming familiar with aulic improvisation (this is the conventional expression that I will use for performances by celebrated improvisers in aristocratic environments), I tried to detect the descriptions of improvisations in taverns, squares and streets, that can be found in written sources from the 18th and 19th centuries. I realized that many descriptions of improvised poetry were scattered in dozens of texts, and sometimes the accounts about aulic poets giving performances in private or public meetings could give some information also on the improvisations by unknown people, performing in inns and streets on subjects like the history of Rome, or mythology, or singing Tasso's or Ariosto's poems.

Actual improvisation differs from the historical practice because only one metrical structure is now widely used, *ottava rima*, while in the 18th and 19th centuries other metrical structures were also used. Moreover, now poets sing without instrumental accompaniment, while many of the *improvvisatori* of 18th and 19th century used to sing with the accompaniment of a musical instrument, usually a stringed instrument.

Both musicologists and researchers in Italian literature have worked on poetic improvisation and on the singing of Ariosto's and Tasso's stanzas in the 16th and 17th centuries, while apparently, apart from Roberto Leydi⁶, Saverio Franchi⁷ and

⁶ R. LEYDI, *Erminia monta in gondola*, in A. BOMBI, M. NEVILLA MASSARO, ed. by, *Tartini. Il tempo le opere*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1994, pp. 417-442.

⁷ S. FRANCHI, *Prassi esecutiva musicale e poesia estemporanea italiana*, in B. GENTILI, G. PAIONI, ed. by, *Oralità: cultura, letteratura, discorso*, Roma, Ateneo, 1985, pp. 409-427.

recently Melina Esse⁸, musicologists have almost neglected the performances of the *improvvisatori* of the 18th and 19th centuries. Nevertheless, Italian improvisers like Bernardino Perfetti, Corilla Olimpica, Teresa Bandettini, Fortunata Sulgher Fantastici, Bartolomeo Sestini, Francesco Gianni became famous all over Europe, and their performances were considered as events not to be missed by the foreign travellers. Not all the opinions about improvised poetry were enthusiastic⁹, but this phenomenon, both in its cultivated and in its folk manifestations, had a great influence on the perception of Italy and of Italian culture.

Here I would like to discuss some of the problems posed by a historical-musicological approach to improvised poetry starting from a series of iconographic sources mainly dating to the 19th century.

I will make some remarks on four kinds of images: some representations of late 18th and 19th century aulic improvisers; the improvisers in some 19th century genre scenes, especially from Rome; the portraits of Beatrice di Pian Degli Ontani (1803-1885), a female illiterate improviser celebrated by Niccolò Tommaseo and other folklorists, travelers and men of letters; two photos of the actor playing the part of Domenico Somigli, an extemporaneous 18th century poet from Florence, celebrated in the play *Fra le disturne e i canti* by Alessandro Roster¹⁰.

Happily, my investigation is facilitated by important previous research. Concerning the female improviser, I am indebted to Melina Esse's article on *Encountering the Improvvisatrice in Italian opera* published in 2013¹¹. As far as the genre scenes are concerned, three contributions from the late 1980s are still very useful: Tillman Seebass' essays on Italian folk music represented by Léopold Roberts and by German writers and artists from the 18th and 19th centuries¹² and Febo Guizzi's article on music in Italian genre paintings of the 17th and 18th centuries, published in the 1990 volume of «Imago Musicae»¹³.

⁸ M. ESSE, *Encountering the improvvisatrice in Italian Opera*, in «Journal of the American Musicological Society», 66, 3, 2013, pp. 709-770.

⁹ See for example the famous letter by Charles De Brosses on Perfetti's improvisation in Siena that he witnessed in 1739: C. DE BROSSES, *Le président De Brosses en Italie. Lettres familières écrites d'Italie en 1739-1740*, I, Paris, Didier et C., 1858, pp. 336-338 Lettre à M. De Blancey, XXVII, Rome, 21 octobre 1739.

¹⁰ A. ROSTER, *Fra le disturne e i canti. Scene della vita di Domenico Somigli detto Beco Sudicio*, Firenze, Bemporad, 1910 [1911 in the front cover].

¹¹ M. ESSE, *Encountering the improvvisatrice*, cit.

¹² T. SEEBASS, *Léopold Robert and Italian folk music*, in «The world of music», 30, 3, 1988 pp. 59-84; ID. *Idyllic Arcadia and Italia musical reality: experiences of German writers and artists (1770-1835)*, in «Imago Musicae», 7, 1990, pp. 149-187.

¹³ F. GUIZZI, *The sounds of povertà contenta: cityscape, landscape, sound-scape and musical portraiture in Italian painting in the 17th and 18th centuries*, in «Imago Musicae», 7, 1990, pp. 115-147.

The improvvisatori and the ideal of antiquity

Different images of aulic improvisers are now preserved, both on canvas and as engravings in the collections of poems printed by themselves or by listeners and admirers. Apart from a few exceptions they are represented as isolated figures, crowned with laurel, sometimes with arms and hands alluding to gestures, sometimes with a lyre [figs. 3-4].



Fig. 3. A. Kauffmann, *Fortunata Sulgher Fantastici*, oil on canvas, 1792, Firenze, Palazzo Pitti.



Fig. 4. G. Landi, *Ritratto di Teresa Bandettini in Arcadia (Amarilli Etrusca come Musa in un paesaggio ideale)*, oil on canvas, early 19th Century, Lucca, Palazzo Mansi.

Melina Esse has demonstrated that the feminine figure with a lyre, depicted in a neoclassical style, is a quite explicit reference to Sappho, considered as «the emblem of spontaneous performance, the embodiment of an ideal in which creation and execution, words and music, were united»¹⁴. She has also demonstrated that the idea of classical antiquity was behind both the protagonists of Madame de Staël's *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807, inspired by the improviser Maria Maddalena Morelli, known as Corilla Olimpica) and other narratives and musical representations of the *improvvisatrice*, among them the protagonist of Giovanni Pacini's *Sappho* (libretto by Salvatore Cammarano from Franz Grillparzer's tragedy of the same title), an opera staged in Naples in 1840.

A neoclassical attitude is evident also in François Gérard's 1822 painting of *Corinne at Capo Miseno* [fig. 5],

¹⁴ M. ESSE, *Encountering the improvvisatrice*, cit., p. 715.



Fig. 5. F. Gérard, *Corinne au Cap Misène*, oil on canvas, 1819, Lyon, Musée des Beaux Arts.

an illustration of a passage of Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, where the protagonist is asked by her friends to sing about the memories aroused by Vesuvius and the bay of Naples.

Le peuple même, qui la connaissait de réputation, ce peuple qui, dans le midi, est, par l'imagination, bon juge de la poésie, entourait en silence l'enceinte où les amis de Corinne étaient placés, et tous ces visages napolitains exprimaient par leur vive physionomie l'attention la plus animée. La lune se levait à l'horizon; mais les derniers rayons du jour rendaient encore sa lumière très pâle. Du haut de la petite colline qui s'avance dans la mer et forme le cap Misène, on découvrait parfaitement le Vésuve, le golfe de Naples, les îles dont il est parsemé, et la campagne qui s'étend depuis Naples jusqu'à Gaëte, enfin la contrée de l'univers où les volcans, l'histoire et la poésie ont laissé le plus de traces. Aussi d'un commun accord, tous les amis de Corinne lui demandèrent-ils de prendre pour sujet de vers qu'elle allait chanter les souvenirs que ces lieux retraçaient. Elle accorda sa lyre et commença d'une voix altérée¹⁵.

¹⁵ MADAME DE STAËL, *Corinne ou l'Italie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1985, p. 348.

Far from being a hint to a musical activity, the lyre, both in the novel and in the images, is a symbol of poetic inspiration and an allusion to the poetesses of antiquity. More generally, the idealised portraits of the improvisers do not contain any references to the real practice of music-making that improvisation implied. The performances of aulic improvisers were effectively accompanied by music, as many sources attest; however, the role and the essence of musical accompaniment have not been systematically investigated. Carl Ludwig Fernow, for example, a German artist who lived in Rome from 1794 to 1803 and published an essay on the improvisers in his *Römische Studien* (1806-1808), observes that the musicians not only accompanied the poetic improvisations with special tunes according to each meter, but they used to introduce the performance while the poet was thinking about the given subject and play during the pauses of improvisation¹⁶. Melina Esse, having examined Wilhelm Waiblinger's account of Rosa Taddei's performances, suggests that music not only «intensified the physicality of the spectacle of creative effort», but also «acted in a more practical way: it gave the poet time. Time to think of the appropriate rhyme, to find the right word. Time, in other words, to tap into memory»¹⁷.

The sources describing the performances of aulic poets mention instruments like the violin, harpsichord, piano, harp, and guitar. A few musical transcriptions are given by Fernow, who provides a *passagallo romano* for a quatrain of hendecasyllabic lines, a tune used by Corilla to improvise quatrains of seven-syllable lines, another used by Teresa Bandettini to improvise in quatrains of eight-syllable lines, and finally a tune to improvise in *terza rima*. Other transcriptions for different meters may be found in Waiblinger's essay on Rosa Taddei¹⁸, and in the collection of tunes to improvise various meters belonged to the jurist and improviser, active in Naples, Nicola Nicolini¹⁹. As far as I know, all sources describe the singing as a kind of recitative, based of course on the intelligibility of words.

A passage from the novel *A diary of an ennuyée* by Anna Jameson (London, 1826) gives a description of how a performance of an extemporaneous poet could be. The *Diary* is not a real travel report, it is a piece of fiction, however written after a real trip

¹⁶ C.L. FERNOW, *Gli improvvisatori e l'entusiasmo dell'artista*, ed. by S. SACCHI, Pisa, ETS, 2004, pp. 54-56.

¹⁷ M. ESSE, *Encountering the improvvisatrice*, cit., pp. 718, 755-756.

¹⁸ W. WAIBLINGER, *Rosa Taddei, unter der Arkadiern Licori Partenopea*, in *Werke und Briefe*, vol. 3 *Verserzählungen, vermischte Prosa*, Stuttgart, Cotta, 1986, pp. 454-478. Melina Esse has transcribed in modern writing some of the musical transcriptions by Fernow and Waiblinger, see M. ESSE, *Encountering the improvvisatrice*, cit., pp. 752-753, 755-756.

¹⁹ A series of 60 photos of the manuscript entitled *Musiche per poesie estemporanee ad uso di Nicola Nicolini* are preserved in Milan, ARCHIVE OF THE ISTITUTO NAZIONALE PER LA STORIA DEL MOVIMENTO DI LIBERAZIONE IN ITALIA, in the Fondo Malvezzi, b. 12, fasc. 43/17. On Nicola Nicolini, see B. CROCE, *Note sulla letteratura italiana del Settecento*, vol. 8, *Gli improvvisatori*, in «Quaderni della "Critica" diretti da B. Croce», 6, novembre 1946, pp. 38-56, especially p. 46.

through Europe, and it gives an interesting description of a performance by the poet Bartolomeo Sestini in Rome in 1816-1817. Despite being fictional, the description matches up with other more faithful accounts, that is why I have chosen it to try to understand what the portraits of the improvisers do not tell us about their performances.

April 7. — Any public exhibition of talent in the Fine Arts is here called an Accademia. Sestini gave his Accademia in an anti-chamber of the Palazzo —, I forget its name, but it was much like all the other palaces we are accustomed to see here; exhibiting the same strange contrast of ancient taste and magnificence, with present meanness and poverty. We were ushered into a lofty room of noble size and beautiful proportions, with its rich fresco-painted walls and ceiling faded and falling to decay; a common brick floor, and sundry window panes broken, and stuffed with paper. The room was nearly filled by the audience, amongst whom I remarked a great number of English. A table with writing implements, and an old shattered jingling piano, occupied one side of the apartment, and a small space was left in front for the poet. Whilst we waited with some impatience for his appearance, several persons present walked up to the table and wrote down various subjects; which on Sestini's coming forward, he read aloud, marking those which were distinguished by the most general applause. This selection formed our evening's entertainment. A lady sat down in her bonnet and shawl to accompany him; and when fatigued, another fair musician readily supplied her place. It is seldom that an improvvisatore attempts to recite without the assistance of music. When Dr. Moore heard Corilla at Florence, she sung to the accompaniment of two violins. Fantastici preferred the guitar; and I should have preferred either to our jingling harpsichord. However, a few chords struck at intervals were sufficient to support the voice, and mark the time. Several airs were tried, and considered before the poet could fix on one suited to his subject and the measure he intended to employ. In general they were pretty and simple, consisting of very few notes, and more like a chant or recitative, than a regular air: one of the most beautiful I have obtained, and shall bring with me to England²⁰.

About the two violins accompanying the performances of Corilla, a footnote explains: «Corilla (whose real name was Maddalena Morelli) often accompanied herself on the violin; not holding it against her shoulder, but resting it in her lap. She was reckoned a fine performer on this instrument; and for her distinguished talents was crowned in the Capitol in 1779»²¹. This text may be put into relation with a passage from Charles Burney's *The present state of music in France and Italy*:

Tuesday 11 [September 1770, Firenze] At another great accademia, at the house of Signor Domenico Baldigiani, I this evening met with the famous *Improvvisatrice*, Signora Maddalena Morelli, commonly called La Corilla, who is likewise a scholar of Signor Nardini, on the violin; and afterwards I was frequently at her house. Besides her wonderful talent of speaking verses *extempore* upon any given subject, and being able to play a *ripieno* part, on the violin, in concert, she sings with a great deal

²⁰ *The diary of an ennuyée* by Mrs Jameson, Londra, 1826, pp. 310-313. On the description of Sestini's performance by Anna Jameson see M. CAESAR, *Poetic Improvisation in the Nineteenth Century: Giuseppe Regaldi and Giannina Milli*, in «The Modern Language Review», 101/3, 2006, pp. 701-714.

²¹ *The diary of an ennuyée*, cit., pp. 312-313.

of expression, and has a considerable share of execution²².

I have not found any other source matching Jameson's description of Corilla's playing technique («resting it [the violin] in her lap»), however, Nicola Nicolini's manuscript confirms the use of accompanying poetic improvisations with two violins. In fact, it contains a series of tunes for two violins and a bass, to accompany improvisation in hendecasyllabic, decasyllabic, octosyllabic, seven-syllables, six-syllables and five syllables lines [figs. 6-11]²³.



Fig 6: Figs 6-11. Some photographs of the manuscript *Musiche per poesie estemporanee ad uso di Nicola Nicolini*, Milano, Istituto Nazionale per la Storia del Movimento di Liberazione in Italia, Fondo Malvezzi, b. 12, fasc. 43/17.



Fig. 7, vedi didascalia fig. 6.

²² C. BURNEY, *The present state of music in France and Italy: or, The journal of a tour through those countries*, London, T. Becket and Co., 1771, pp. 250-251. On Corilla Olimpica's biography and her relationship with Nardini see A. ADEMOLLO, *Corilla Olimpica*, Firenze, C. Ademollo e C., 1887.

²³ This is not the right place for a close analysis of this important source, the analysis of this manuscript and of the meaning of the word *passaggio*, recurring in various descriptions of poetic improvisation, especially in *ottava rima*, of the 18th and 19th century to describe the musical accompaniment is one of the goals of my research.



Fig. 8, vedi didascalia fig. 6.



Fig. 9, vedi didascalia fig. 6.

A musical score for three instruments: Violino I, Violino II, and Bass. The score is written in 2/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The Violino I part begins with a first-measure rest and a *rit.* marking. The Violino II part starts with a first-measure rest. The Bass part begins with a first-measure rest. The score consists of two systems of staves, with the first system containing three staves and the second system containing three staves. The notation includes various rhythmic values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests.

Fig. 10, vedi didascalia fig. 6.

A musical score for Cello and Double Bass. The score is written in 2/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The Cello part begins with a first-measure rest and a *rit.* marking. The Double Bass part starts with a first-measure rest. The score consists of two systems of staves, with the first system containing two staves and the second system containing two staves. The notation includes various rhythmic values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The word "Cello e basso" is written in the upper right corner of the first system.

Fig. 11, vedi didascalia fig. 6.

Poetic improvisation as a form of relational entertainment

The images of improvisers that I have considered until now represent single figures, in a dark or neoclassical background, in any case isolated from the context of their performance. This is not the case of the images representing the singers of Ariosto's or Tasso's poems or the figure of improviser in Rome or in the country near Rome in the genre paintings by artists from continental Europe or in Bartolomeo Pinelli's (1781-1835) engravings.

It is almost impossible to find a real event behind the various paintings and engravings of the *improvvisatori* that were produced during the 17th and early 18th century, however a few hypothesis may be tried. The most striking feature of the images of the performers of Ariosto's or Tasso's poems or of the *improvvisatori* is that their actions are represented as strictly relational. Street singers and improvisers are always represented in relationship with their public, even if in stereotyped genre scenes. This seems to correspond to the various descriptions that may be found in travel reports of the Grand Tour.

In the Neapolitan engravings representing the narrators of Rinaldo's achievements from Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* or other chivalric poems, the performer reads from a book in front of his audience. Benedetto Croce calls these performers Rinaldi, and observes that they used to recite using a *cantilena tradizionale* ("traditional chant"), miming the action with their body²⁴. As far as I know, no musical instruments are found in the engravings of the *cantori di Rinaldo* from Naples. The engraving by Hjalmar Mörner [fig. 12]



Fig. 12. H. Mörner, Il cantore di Rinaldo.

²⁴ B. CROCE, *Aneddoti di storia civile e letteraria. XXIX I «Rinaldi» o i cantastorie di Napoli*, in «La Critica. Rivista di Letteratura, Storia e Filosofia diretta da B. Croce», 34, 1936, pp. 70-74.

that was displayed in Lecce in 2015 during the exhibition *Il Grand Tour da Napoli a Otranto*²⁵ may be fruitfully put into relationship with this description from John Moore's account from *A View of Society and Manners in Italy*:

As I sauntered along the Strada Nuova lately, I perceived a group of people listening, with much attention, to a person who harangued them in a raised, solemn voice, and with great gesticulation. I immediately made one of the auditory, which increased every moment; men, women, and children bringing seats from the neighbouring houses, on which they placed themselves around the orator. He repeated stanzas from Ariosto, in a pompous, recitative cadence, peculiar to the natives of Italy; and he had a book in his hand, to assist his memory when it failed. He made occasional commentaries in prose, by way of bringing the Poet's expression nearer to the level of his hearers' capacities. His cloak hung loose from one shoulder; his right arm was disengaged, for the purposes of oratory. Sometimes he waved it with a flowing, smooth motion, which accorded with the cadence of the verses; sometimes he pressed it to his breast, to give energy to the pathetic sentiments of the Poet. Now he gathered the hanging folds of the right side of his cloak, and held them gracefully up, in imitation of a Roman senator; and anon he swung them across his left shoulder, like a citizen of Naples. He humoured the stanza by his voice, which he could modulate to the key of any passion, from the boisterous bursts of rage, to the soft notes of pity or love. But, when he came to describe the exploits of Orlando, he trusted neither to the powers of his own voice, nor the Poet's genius; but, throwing off his cloak, and grasping his cane, he assumed the warlike attitude and stern countenance of that hero; representing, by the most animated action, how he drove his spear through the bodies of six of his enemies at once; the point at the same time killing a seventh, who would also have remained transfixed with his companions, if the spear could have held more than six men of an ordinary size upon it at a time²⁶.

The mandolin seems to be the most common musical instrument in paintings by non-Italian artists, whose title refers to the *improvvisatore* in Rome or in the countryside near Rome. Generally the improviser is represented near or inside a tavern [figs. 13-14] or in a more indefinite country landscape.

²⁵ M. CONGEDO, *Il Grand Tour da Napoli a Otranto. Il turismo prima del turismo, il viaggio di formazione*, Otranto, Castello Aragonese, 18 giugno - 31 ottobre 2015, Galatina, Congedo Editore, 2015.

²⁶ J. MOORE, *A View of Society and Manners in Italy*, London, W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1781, vol. 2, pp. 186-188.



Fig. 13. W. Marstrand, *Allegrezza popolare all'osteria*, 1853, unknown location.



Fig. 14 H. Eichens, *L'improvvisatore*, acquatint, 1849.

Sometimes, like in Edouard Brandon's paintings of *L'improvvisateur dans la campagne de Rome* now at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Lille [fig. 15],



Fig. 15. E. Brandon, *L'improvisateur dans la campagne romane*, 1831, Lille, Musée des Beaux Arts.



Fig. 16. *Petits métiers d'Italie. L'improvisateur* (d'après un croquis de M. Charles Yriartes), Paris, Imprimerie Auguste Vallée, 1860 ca.

the mandolin is held, but not played during the performance, by another bystander. This instrument is often mentioned in travel reports describing poetic improvisations, however, both textual and iconographic sources seem not to be systematic in describing the musical accompaniment. The absence of information about accompaniment in some accounts of poetic improvisation and the presence of images (especially from central Italy) where the musical instrument seems to keep silent during the poet's performance seems to suggest that

the accompaniment was not always there. In some cases the subject of the improviser gives the chance to make a synthesis of various Italian clichés, for example, the improviser and the puppet theatre in the engraving taken from a drawing by Charles Yriarte (1832-1898) [fig. 16]

or the improviser in a tavern with two ladies dressed in lavish traditional cloths in the engraving by the German artist Herman Eichens (1813-1886) [fig. 14].

The engravings by Bartolomeo Pinelli on the subject of the improviser are particularly interesting because they represent the Italian counterpart of this kind of genre scenes. In Pinelli's prints the improviser is normally represented in a very specific setting: a tavern, the street or the square, the country outside Rome, in a mutual exchange between environment and soundscape, between the poet-musician and his public. Pinelli was a painter, engraver and ceramist, he became famous with his collections of engravings on the *Costumi di Roma*, printed in various editions that had an enormous success. In his article about Léopold Robert and music, Tilman Seebass has highlighted the important influence that Pinelli's collections of engravings had on foreign artists, especially on Robert: Pinelli and Robert knew each other and some of Robert's paintings are directly inspired by Pinelli's engravings, printed since the first years of the 19th century. Therefore it is likely that Pinelli's work indirectly influenced also painters like the Danish Wilhelm Marstrand (1810-1873) or the French Edouard Brandon (1813-1891).

A poet playing a *mandola*-shaped instrument is in the engraving entitled *Improvvisatore popolare* [fig. 17],



Fig. 17. B. Pinelli, *Improvvisatore popolare*.



Fig. 18. B. Pinelli, Uomo che canta le istorie, di domenica ai lavoratori di campagna sulla Piazza Barberini in Roma.

where the performance is set in a landscape of ruins, with a small group of people. Here the male improviser is admired by the four women, while two men on the two sides stare at him grimly. We can imagine that here the poetic improvisation has a more private function and involves a love competition. Another engraving by Pinelli shows an improviser singing or reciting without musical accompaniment. Its title is *Uomo che canta le istorie, di domenica ai lavoratori di campagna sulla Piazza Barberini in Roma* [fig. 18], and it shows an improviser holding a frame drum without playing it. The action of telling stories is connected to the singing of poems of chivalry that I have already mentioned about Naples, or to the habit of performing other stories like *Pia de' Tolomei*, *Francesca da Rimini* and many others, mainly in *ottava rima*, attested by hundreds of sheets and pocket books published throughout the 19th century.

Two engravings by Pinelli show improvisation scenes in which the instruments are absent: *Il poeta improvvisatore al Testaccio nel mese di ottobre* [fig. 19] and *Donna romana improvvisando in poesia all'Osteria del Carciofolo vicino le Terme Antoniane, il giorno della Festa del Divino Amore* [fig. 20].



Fig. 19. B. Pinelli, Il poeta improvvisatore al Testaccio nel mese di ottobre.



Fig. 20. B. Pinelli, Donna romana improvvisando in poesia all'Osteria del Carciofole vicino le Terme Antoniane, il giorno della Festa del Divino Amore.

The latter, suggesting that also women used to improvise, seems to represent a poetic competition between a man and a woman, and may be put into relationship with a duel described by Edmond About in his 1861 *Rome contemporaine*:

Mon arrivée n'avait pas interrompu un combat de virtuoses. Tous les dimanches, ou peu s'en faut, quelques amateurs de poésie se réunissent là pour improviser des vers. On les accouple deux par deux, et ils s'escriment tour à tour sur un sujet donné, comme les bergers de Virgile. Le texte ordinaire de leurs improvisations est l'histoire ancienne ou la mythologie. Je ne sais pas où ils ont fait leurs études, mais ils galopent sans broncher dans les champs de la fable et de l'histoire, depuis le chaos jusqu'à la mort de Néron. Si l'on épluchait trop soigneusement leurs vers, on y trouverait peut-être quelques anachronismes de détail, mais la poésie couvre tout de son manteau de pourpre et d'or. La prosodie italienne n'impose pas des lois bien sévère; la rime est facile à trouver dans une langue ou une moitié des mots finit en *o* et l'autre en *a*. Mais ce qui m'a le plus étonné dans ces tours de force, c'est le choix presque toujours heureux de l'expression brillante. Le vocabulaire poétique, fort différent du langage familier, s'est conservé, je ne sais comment, dans ces esprits demi-incultes. Un cordonnier qui savait à peine lire nous a débité la guerre de Troie dans le style le plus pompeux et le plus fleuri.

Une mandoline grattée discrètement accompagnait la voix du poète, car les vers se chantent et ne se parlent pas. C'est une sorte de récitatif rythmé, une mélodie monotone et ronflante. Les Romains ont la voix haute, sonore, et presque toujours emphatique. Il n'y a pas une syllabe de leurs discours d'apparat qui ne soit accentuée par l'orgueil national. C'est plaisir d'entendre un petit garçon chanter dans la rue:

Auguste empereur romain.

ou

Nous irons au Capitule!

La joute dura une heure et demie, et je regrettai de n'avoir ni plume ni crayon pour vous sténographier quelques vers. Les applaudissements de l'auditoire étaient la récompense des vainqueurs; les sifflets et les huées punissaient le vaincu, dès que sa langue commençait à s'embarrasser. Le cordonnier de la guerre de Troie garda l'avantage assez longtemps, mais il fut battu à plate couture par un tanneur du quartier de la Regola. Tout paraissait fini, et le tanneur remettait déjà sa veste pour aller dormir sur ses lauriers, quand une femme se leva d'une table voisine et se plaça devant lui, les poings sur la hanche. C'était sans mentir une créature magnifique, large, haute et belle, telle à peu près qu'on se représente les louves du temps des rois. J'ai su qu'elle était blanchisseuse, et son mari souffleur de verre.

«Vous n'y entendez rien, dit-elle, et c'est moi qui vous battrais tous. Toi, prends ta mandoline.» Elle partit de l'origine du monde et s'avança d'un pas ferme à travers l'histoire des dieux. La gaillarde possédait sa mythologie comme Hésiode lui-même. Bientôt elle entra de plain-pied dans la guerre de Troie, sauva Énée de l'incendie, l'amena au pays des Latins, rossa Turnus et tous les autres, sauta d'un bond à la naissance de Romulus, chassa les rois avec Lucrece, conduisit les armées de la république à la conquête du monde, débrouilla le chaos des guerres civiles, applaudit Cicéron, tua César aux pieds de la statue de Pompée, mit Auguste sur le trône, renversa les empereurs les uns sur les autres comme des capucins de cartes, et finit par une invocation directe à la madone qui lui souriait derrière une lampe, avec un enfant dans les bras.

Elle allait droit devant elle, se reprenant quelquefois, ne s'arrêtant jamais, remplaçant un mot par un autre, recommençant la tirade applaudie et la corrigeant sans y penser. Ses yeux brillaient comme ceux d'une pythonisse; sa voix tremblait de plaisir; son geste simple et un peu trop régulier scandait le verset appuyait sur la phrase. Elle fut applaudie comme on sait applaudir ici. Ni le cordonnier ni le tanneur n'entreprirent de lui répondre, et elle retourna toute rouge auprès de son homme qui avait tenu l'enfant pendant ce temps-là²⁷.

²⁷ E. ABOUT, *Rome contemporaine*, Paris, Michel Lévy Frères, 1861, pp. 121-124.

Some portraits of 19th century's illiterate improvisers

When researchers on folklore and folk song started to pay attention to improvised poetry, towards the middle of the 19th century, the phenomenon was celebrated as exceptional. It is quite remarkable that while Pinelli was still alive, Niccolò Tommaseo's encounter with Beatrice di Pian degli Ontani (1802-1885), the famous shepherd and improviser from the province of Pistoia, raised a very strong surprise and admiration²⁸. Many scholars and travelers met this illiterate female improviser, considering her an exceptionally gifted creature, even if they had to acknowledge that improvisation in *ottava rima* was common in the countryside where Beatrice used to live. Apparently the exceptionality was given by the fact that Beatrice was a woman, therefore she was comparable with the celebrated Sapphos, like Giannina Milli from Teramo, for example, and whom she met in 1865²⁹.

Among the travelers and writers who wrote about Beatrice, two give us portraits of her. The American Francesca Alexander, who met Beatrice when she was older, but published a drawing of a young Beatrice in her volume *Roadside songs of Tuscany*³⁰ [fig. 21], and Clara Schubert, who dedicated a long article to Beatrice in the journal *L'illustrazione italiana* in 1888³¹, together with a portrait of Beatrice as an old woman [fig. 22].



Figure 21. Beatrice di Pian degli Ontani, in F. ALEXANDER, *Roadside songs of Tuscany*, ed. by J. RUSKIN, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1885.

²⁸ The first encounter of Tommaseo with Beatrice di Pian degli Ontani is described in N. TOMMASEO, *Gita nel Pistoiese*, in «Antologia. Giornale di Scienze, Lettere, Arti», XLVIII, 1832, pp. 12-33.

²⁹ A. CHIAPPELLI, *Una pastora poetessa. Beatrice di Pian degli Ontani*, Firenze, Seeber, 1902, pp. 16-17.

³⁰ F. ALEXANDER, *Roadside songs of Tuscany*, ed. by J. RUSKIN, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1885.

³¹ C. SCHUBERT, *La pastorella poetessa. Beatrice di Pian degli Ontani*, «L'Illustrazione Italiana», 31, 1888, pp. 51-52; 32, pp. 71, 74; 34, pp. 108-109, 112.

intraprendente, non ha ancora fatto riempire le loro tasche; ma neppure ha tolto loro quella sobrietà che li mantiene contenti e felici, e ancora non ha loro rubato quella beata semplicità, che investe il loro pensare e il loro sentire di quella poesia cara e soave, che si manifesta nei suoni si puri della loro lingua materna, e senza affettazione alcuna, anche nei versi. E non soltanto in versi imparati, ma pure in quelli che la fantasia suggerisce loro spontaneamente. Non dico già che tutti sieno poeti nel vero senso, non voglio di certo esagerare; ma sostengo che ben difficilmente si potrebbe trovare tra i montanani un dano, che non abbia mai (com'essi dicono) *dato una ottava* al suo amore, e alla quale la ragazza non abbia risposto con un'altra ottava di rimando.

Su queste montagne, in mezzo a questo popolo, nacque e visse la nostra Beatrice.

Essa fu di statura piuttosto piccola; era forte ma svelta molto; aveva i capelli neri, tutti arciocciati, che spesso le cadevano sopra la fronte; occhi grandi, nerissimi e di un lustro singolarmente bello; aveva bei denti e belle fattezze, ma la sua pelle era un po' bruciata.

— Così la descrisse a me una signora americana, che l'ha conosciuta e avvicinata per più anni, che le ha voluto un gran bene e che di lei ha fatto un bellissimo ritratto, che si tro-



La poetessa BEATRICE DI PIAN DEGLI ONTANI.

va riprodotto esattamente nei *Roadside songs of Tuscany* (Canti popolari Toscani), editi per John Ruskin.

E questa signora (che mi ha pregato di non nominarla) non conobbe la Beatrice quand'era giovane, ma quando avrà avuto almeno una quarantina d'anni. Non s'intende dunque, come il grande Tommaseo, che la vide nel 1832, all'età di 30 anni, nella sua nota e bella prefazione ai "Canti Toscani", (troppo nota, affinché io osi di riferirla qui) dica di lei che non era bella, aggiungendo, è vero, "ma con un volger d'occhi ispirato, quale non l'aveva M^{me} de Sade" (cioè la Laura del Petrarca). E il Giuliani, che la vide nel '30, parlando degli occhi di lei, dice: "e suol piantarvi in faccia, senza mai abbassarli; piuttosto costringe i vostri ad inchinarsi ammirati." Non sarà stata di quella bellezza che al Tommaseo andava a genio, perché, grazie al cielo, dei gusti ce ne sono diversi; ma il fatto sta, che anche al cavaliere Fucini, che nella *Domenica del Fracassa* ne scrisse un articolo, fu detto dai contadini di lassù, che la Beatrice, da giovane almeno, sia stata formosa. Vestiva fino a una certa età l'antico costume pistoiese, che più tardi mutò col semplice vestuario della contadina d'oggi. E da tale fece la vita.

(Continua). D.F. SCHUBERT.

Fig. 22. La poetessa Beatrice di Pian degli Ontani, in C. SCHUBERT, *La pastorella poetessa. Beatrice di Pian degli Ontani*, in «L'Illustrazione Italiana», 1888, 31, p. 52.

In spite of being very different, the two portraits have in common the absence of music and a process of idealization that is opposite to the one employed for Teresa Bandettini, Corilla Olimpica, and the other 18th Century Sapphos.

Here the woman is represented as a humble lady of poor origins, whose appearance perfectly fits the ideas of, respectively, a chaste girl and of an old housewife.

Francesca Alexander wrote about her portrait of Beatrice:

At this time Beatrice used generally to wear the old-fashioned contadina dress in which I took her likeness: a scarlet bodice, blue handkerchief, garnet necklace, and gold ear-rings; her long linen sleeves were ruffled at the wrist; when about her work she used to push them above her elbows, as I drew them.

On grand occasions she would wear a white embroidered veil, handkerchief, and apron, all of which she had when she was married. No picture can give an idea of her beauty, because it is impossible to represent the light in her eyes, which seemed always to come from within and not from without. Whenever I see the sun shining into deep water, it always makes me think of Beatrice's eyes, they were more like that than anything else³².

Finally two photos will be the object of my attention. They are taken from a theatre play written by Alessandro Roster and published in 1910. The title is *Fra le disturne e i canti*³³ and it is about some episodes from the life of Domenico Somigli, called Beco Sudicio, a blind improviser who lived in Florence between 1744 and 1823. In the text of the play, the poet sings accompanied by an instrument named *tiorba*. The name *tiorba* occurs also in another text about the life of Domenico Somigli, a chapter from the essay *Il guazzabuglio, ossia Varietà di poesie e saggio di prose*, written by Pirro Giacchi and published in Florence in 1875³⁴.

I am still working on the use of the word *tiorba* in these Tuscan 19th Century sources, and I suspect it is an archaism which does not necessarily correspond to what we now call *tiorba*. In a footnote Pirro Giacchi explains that the *tiorba* is a kind of big-bellied guitar with metal strings that are plucked by a plectrum («la *Tiorba* è una specie di chitarra colla pancia e tutte le corde di metallo, le quali si pizzicano col plettro»³⁵). Giacchi writes that the *tiorba* used to play the *passagallo*, which, according to him, is the sound that exclusively accompanies the [singing of the] octave in improvised songs («il *Passagallo* è il suono che accompagna esclusivamente l'ottava nei canti improvvisati»³⁶).

The first edition of Roster's play contains two photographs [figs. 23-24] that represent Beco Sudicio holding a theorbo-like instrument.

I believe that its presence as a stage instrument in an early 20th century play is the result of an interpretation of the word *tiorba* according to the new interest in early instrumental music and in musical instruments in an epoch of musical exhibitions, where also important musical instruments collections were displayed, but when musical accompaniment to improvised poetry in *ottava rima* had already disappeared in Tuscany.

³² F. ALEXANDER, *Roadside songs of Tuscany*, cit., p. 287.

³³ A. ROSTER, *Fra le disturne e i canti*, cit.

³⁴ P. GIACCHI, *Il guazzabuglio. Ossia varietà di poesie e saggio di prose*, Firenze, Tipografia dell'Associazione, 1875.

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 238.

³⁶ *Ivi*, p. 240. The name *passagallo* is quite common in the accounts performances of improvised poetry, here it seems that the word refers to the typical accompaniment of the practice of singing in *ottava rima*.



Figs. 23-24. photos from A. ROSTER, *Fra le disturne e i canti. Scene della vita di Domenico Somigli detto Beco Sudicio*, Firenze, Bemporad, 1910 [1911 in the front cover].