

Family-style San Remo Song Festival Triumphs

Judith Harris (February 12, 2015)



It is safe to predict that the 65th season of the San Remo Song Festival ends in triumph Saturday night. After a dull season last year, the quintessentially Italian musical competition returned in grand form with 11 million tuning in nightly. Behind this lively revival was emcee Carlo Conti's return to the family-style festival of the distant past. And is there also nostalgia for the real Italian family?

It is safe to predict that the 65th season of the San Remo Song Festival ends in triumph Saturday night. After a dull season last year, the quintessentially Italian musical competition returned in grand form with 11 million tuning in nightly. Among the reasons for this lively revival was emcee Carlo Conti's return to the family-style festival of the distant past, when performers like Nilla Pizzi, Domenico Modugno, Claudio Villa, Peppino Di Capri and Massimo Ranieri had all of Italy glued to their black and white TV sets.

In case anyone missed the point, on the inaugural festival evening Tuesday the bespectacled, family-



style Conti brought on stage what he called Italy's largest family. As it turned out, larger families do exist in Italy, but anyway Aurelio Anania, 47, his wife Rita, 43, and their 16 youngsters from Catanzaro made an impressive showing in the midst of the San Remo pop hoopla and eyebrow-raising styles. Aurelio spoke movingly of the grace of God responsible for the joy of having such a big and "extraordinarily normal" family, living in a small apartment (110 Sq. M) with a modest stipend. Theirs is "a family of other times, built upon solid principles of sacrifice and everyone's commitment," intoned one commentator.

Offsetting some of this in the festival was the presence of the popular bearded Austrian trans entertainer Conchita Wurst, born Thomas Neuwirth, singing "Heroes." Austria's "bearded lady" (as the UK daily Telegraph called her) had won the Eurovision competition in 2014. At San Remo one of the two hostesses handed her a huge bouquet of flowers, saying, "To you because you are a flower," to the same generous applause accorded the 18 Ananias. (To see Conchita perform go to: [>>>](#) [2])

I've always loved the San Remo festival ever since I saw my first in Rome back in 1966, and one of the joys of the annual event is being able to listen to the radio playing, all day long, and sing along with the grand old songs of the past, like Gigliola Cinquetti's "Non ho l'eta'" (I'm too young) of 1964 and Modugno's "Nel blu dipinto di blue" (In the painted blue of blue - actually, untranslatable!) of 1958, better known as "Volare." Not to mention "Nessuno mi puo' giudicare" (No one can judge me) sung by Caterina Caselli and "Una lacrima sul viso" by Bobby Solo. And can anyone forget "Lontano dagli occhi" (Far from my eyes) by the wonderful Sergio Endrigo?

Full disclosure: for RAI International I even broadcast the festival from San Remo for two years running. Together with my co-host Augusto Milano, who handled the festival in Italian (I was the English-language presenter), we were tucked into a RAI van just at the edge of the catwalk, and conducted interviews.

On one extraordinary evening we were joined by none other than Nilla Pizzi, who had won the festival edition of 1952 singing "Vola Colomba." (You can hear her in 1952 at [>>>](#) [3] and again in 1972 at [>>>](#) [4]) She was still singing, and beautifully, in our van, her voice soaring right over the young singers in the competition (among them a 15-year-old I was obliged to interview). It was a special moment when an Italian woman working in India phoned us to say that she would never had guessed that hearing our broadcast of San Remo would make her incredibly nostalgic for Italy. And in fact overseas listeners are still out there, and tracked, from Canada to New Zealand.

So if family style, or at least nostalgia for it, is reviving the Festival at an age when human beings go into retirement, what about the real Italian family? According to the official statistics-gathering agency ISTAT in its 2014 annual report on Italy, "Changes in the structure of families...reduce the informal exchange of help," meaning that it is tougher on the young to help the ever older relatives because people live longer (almost to age 80 for Italian men, over 84 for women). This, combined with the low birth rate of 1.42 children per female in 2012, makes such "informal exchange of help" difficult.

So does the economic crisis. In the Mezzogiorno or South of Italy almost 8% of families live in absolute poverty; in all of Italy, almost 5%. In an incredible increase, almost 48,000 Italian families - more than triple the number of a decade ago - now live in shanties, trailers or tents, again according to ISTAT.

The divorce rate is on the rise: in 1995 there were 158 separations and 80 divorces for every 1,000 marriages, but now well more than double that. Marriages that fall apart usually last fifteen years, when couples tend to separate, and divorce after 18. The median age of those divorcing is 47 for men and 44 for women, and the figure is high because couples tend to marry later in life than ever in the past. "Religious marriages are the most stable," but in general recent marriages do not last very long. Maybe not - but San Remo does.



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Links

[1] <http://ftp.iitaly.org/files/famiglianumerosa1423750310jpeg>

[2] <http://www.rai.tv/dl/RaiTV/programmi/media/ContentItem-e995fcb5-e069-4d1c-a470-2bb25e4bbdd7.html>

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_vJIBxIZRY

[4] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMr6rwDGEtE>.