



A Filetta performing as part of Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's *Apocrifu*

A FILETTA

Andrew McGregor takes a look at the Corsican polyphonic ensemble keeping this ancient form of singing alive

Henri Serpillon

Spot-lit in the cool shadows of a small church in Corsica, six men stand in a semi-circle, eyes half-closed, hands cupped over ears, voices keening, pirouetting, soaring around one another, raising hairs on the back of your neck with ringing sincerity and raw passion. This is the timeless sound of Corsican polyphony, voices that seem 'to issue from the birthpangs of the world' according to the island's biographer Dorothy Carrington. And to get here you've probably followed one of the posters on a lamppost, phone box, or a tree that guide you towards Corsica's ancient music. This is A Filetta, performing the traditional three-part *pulifunie* (polyphony) that faced extinction until the wave of Corsican nationalism in the 1970s that led to the *riacquistu* – the reacquisition of music and language that ignited the cultural renaissance of the 80s and 90s.

A Filetta are named after the Corsican fern, so well-embedded that it's almost impossible to uproot. They were formed in 1978 by a schoolteacher and a beekeeper in Balagne in the north of the island. The ensemble's early repertoire of songs with guitar included just a handful of polyphonic compositions. But the characterful voice and musical personality of Jean-Claude Acquaviva have been the key to their sound on a 35-year journey from nationalist fundraising concerts to major world music festivals, constantly revitalising and renewing their musical traditions through their own compositions and collaborations.

The ensemble developed a musical double life; it was already a fixture at the Easter Passions in Calenzana, and Acquaviva began stretching his compositional muscles in pieces for the Calvi Passion. By the late 80s A Filetta were placing liturgical styles from these village confraternities alongside the secular *paghjella*, the traditional laments and ballads of love and loss sung in three parts. A key example became their calling card: 'A Paghjella di l'Impiccati' (The Ballad of the Hanged Man), a tale of Corsican resistance to the French army in the 1770s. Acquaviva's version began as a *chanson*, then freed itself from guitars as a *capella* polyphony of searing power. You can hear its evolution across A Filetta's recordings, and the vocal style that's come to define the ensemble's sound – mellower, more sophisticated harmonising than the amateur ensembles, wonderfully

fluid ornamentation, and an emotional and dynamic range that's astonishingly affecting.

In 1989 A Filetta helped organise the first *Rencontres de Chants Polyphoniques* in Calvi, an international festival of polyphony that throws open the doors to vocal ensembles from all over the world, and simultaneously introduces them to Corsica's vocal heritage. Collaborations followed, with Georgian Voices and *maloya* singer Danyèl Waro. Acquaviva's musical ideas were becoming more adventurous: his compositions for a theatre performance of *Medea* led to a series of collaborations with French film composer Bruno Coulais, and experimental combinations with Tibetan music, and even rap. It's given A Filetta new musical confidence as well as a new toolkit; from being part of the island's aural tradition, they now read music, and learn and compose in the digital environment.

Acquaviva's recent *Di Corsica Riposu, Requiem Pour Deux Regards* explores the tension between ancient and modern that

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keeps the group's musical batteries charged, drawing inspiration from other cultures as they reconnect with Corsican laments for the dead.

Two recent excursions have been into the world of theatre and dance with Moroccan-Belgian choreographer Sidi Larbi

Cherkaoui. *Apocrifu* (2007, pictured) explores the idea of sacred texts and books with three dancers and A Filetta sharing the stage. And *Puz/zle*, created for the Avignon Festival in 2012, brought the Corsicans together with Lebanese singer Fadia Tomb El-Hage and has been reworked as a concert piece. Cherkaoui describes A Filetta as a "polyphonic group that sing with a single voice."

So A Filetta not only represent the best of Corsica's *riacquistu* on a world stage, but they have become a distinctive voice on the contemporary theatre scene. For Acquaviva it's gone far beyond simplistic reverence for tradition: "Rather than a question of fidelity to one's roots, it's a question of having roots. Once you have them, you don't need to prove that you are faithful to them." ♦

+ PODCAST Hear Andrew McGregor's report and music from A Filetta on this issue's podcast

+ DATES The 25th edition of the *Rencontres de Chants Polyphoniques de Calvi* festival runs from September 9-13

BEST ALBUMS

Intantu (Virgin France, 2002)
Intantu is perhaps A Filetta's finest studio album, and it includes the most spine-tingling account of 'A Paghjella di l'Impiccati' (The Ballad of the Hanged Man).

Passione (Olivi Music, 1996)
 Award-winning recording of *Christ's Passion*, the music performed during Holy Week in Calvi in the 90s.

Si Di Mè (Virgin France, 2003)
 Featuring arrangements and orchestrations by film composer, Bruno Coulais, who is a key collaborator.

Di Corsica Riposu, Requiem Pour Deux Regards (Oeda, 2011)
 Jean-Claude Acquaviva's most ambitious composition to date. Here Corsican laments for the dead meet Georgian drones and *bandoneón*. Reviewed in #80.

Mistico Mediterraneo (ECM, 2011)
 Sketches of Corsica in which A Filetta's intense harmonies meet the trumpet of Paolo Fresu and *bandoneón* of Daniele di Bonaventura. Reviewed in #77.

BEST DVD

Trent'anni Pocu, Trent'anni Assai (Oeda, 2009)
 A documentary (with subtitles) that retraces the 30-year career of A Filetta with personal accounts, letters, voices photographs, testimonies, and songs.

IF YOU LIKE A FILETTA, THEN TRY...

Jean-Paul Poletti & Le Chœur d'Hommes de Sartène

Fiori di Memoria (Auvidis/Naive, 1999)
 One of the *riacquistu*'s most important singers taking his highly-trained ensemble on a musical journey through Corsica, classicising tradition, and unleashing extraordinary vocal potency.