

POÈTE MAUDIT

PART MAUDITE

BEING AN HOMAGE
TO THE LATE ITALIAN SINGER
PIERO CIAMPI

BY GEORGIO VALENTINO

2012

ÉDITIONS SAINT-GILLES DE RAIS
BRUSSELS

Presented in the context of
the live performance situation of the same name
staged in Brussels, Belgium
on the 6th of December, 2012

with

Georgio 'the Dove' Valentino: voice, guitar, organ
Todor Stefanov: piano, Luc van Lieshout: trumpet
and sound engineer Benjamin Meunier

Not a single word has been published about Piero Ciampi in the English language. A shameful omission, no doubt, but such an offense is not without its inherent consolations. To wit, there are worse things than a *tabula rasa*. We consider Ciampi's fortunes in his native Italy, where his is certainly *not* a household name, where he is rather *little known* but where—and this is already a world of difference—Ciampi *exists*. His death some decades ago is an unfortunate but immaterial fact in this respect for, modest though it may be, his posthumous profile shows a marked improvement over the living years. One can listen to him. One can also speak about him. One can even write about him.

But his countrymen have done Ciampi scant justice in life as in death. In the first case, they ignored him; in the second, they rediscovered his doomed genius under the sign of caricature: *il maledetto livornese*. While not wholly inaccurate, the model is no less confused. To begin with, the exact nature of the *maledizione* in question is unclear. Friends and followers, rivals and casual acquaintances alike beheld an alcoholic, a depressive, an alcoholic, a hustler, an alcoholic, a narcissist, an alcoholic, a supremely gifted poet... and an alcoholic. His *œuvre*, pitched from start to finish somewhere beyond maudlin but just short of histrionic, is curiously cited by reverent colleagues as the *degré zéro* of authenticity even though it is too patently intelligent, too knowing to be natural. Indeed, it is not even

entirely his own. Ciampi engaged a small team of intimates who contributed not just musically—as did composer/producers Gianfranco Reverberi and, above all, the divine (and very recently departed) Gianni Marchetti—but lyrically as well; nearly half of the verse comprising the Ciampi catalogue is co-written by junior brother Roberto Ciampi and/or close friend Pino Pavone. If Ciampi's records are *confessions*, one wonders whose sins they disclose.

All this may have been difficult enough to negotiate but a premature death sufficed to cut through the miasma of messy detail and clarify the essentials of his biography. True, it was only *relatively* premature, for—dead at forty-five—he was no James Dean. In any case, this *deus ex machina* assured Ciampi a picturesque, if two-dimensional obituary and a subsequent bohemian beatification. The caricature was pushed by a cross-section of contemporaries who might have employed it to lionize (as beautiful loser) or vilify (as simply loser), but who shared a strictly casual commerce—if any—with the man himself, and thus spoke with little authority. Ciampi's inner circle unanimously eschewed such mythmaking in favour of a more nuanced, human line. Yet the mythical version would be accepted uncritically by those even further removed from the too-demanding historicity of a flesh-and-blood Ciampi, because it *works*. And efficacy has its own relation to truth.

If it's ultimately a question of truth, then, the Ciampi legend is found wanting. It ignores the real genius of the man and his work, which certainly involves a tactical deployment of the *poète-maudit* tropes to which the various sects of modern bohemia subscribe, although only in the doctrinal mode, only insofar as they delimit a constitution (in a dual sense: as both an explicit, unified code and the stable, coherent identity to which said code refers). This deployment is in Ciampi's case not at all an affirmation of any such constitution, but rather a Deleuzian deterritorialization; and this deterritorialization is only one of several departures through which his willingly schizoid œuvre is

achieved. Ciampi is no bohemian. He is rather, like Baudelaire, *un dandy égaré dans la bohème*.

His own literary, and specifically Francophile bent opens the door to Deleuze, Baudelaire and Verlaine, this last with his poorly understood, or poorly articulated, *poète-maudit* model, which too many have found too apt to apply to Ciampi. Ciampi did, of course, consider himself a poet more than a singer, or at least more than a singer in the Italian popular tradition. He sang his verse in the manner of the Francophone *chansonniers* of the day—Montand, Ferré, Brel—, and refused to identify as *cantante* or *cantautore*.

Ciampi experienced his first sojourn in late 1950s Paris as a revelation. It was there that he encountered Sartre, Céline and the *Canadien errant*, Leonard Cohen, and there that he conceived his future career and duly styled himself Piero l'Italiano, a name he would fine-tune to 'Litaliano' when he returned to Italy and began recording with Reverberi. The Litaliano catalogue—comprised of eight 45s, an EP and one practically still-born LP, all issued between 1960 and '63—is a respectable enough exercise in the romantic crooner genre, right down to the standard compositional structures (written overwhelmingly in $\frac{3}{4}$ time), saccharine melodies and spacious orchestral arrangements. There is little, however, to distinguish it from the competition, apart from the grain in Ciampi's voice, too coarse for the bobby-soxers.

As a commercial endeavour it failed spectacularly, foreshadowing the rest of Ciampi's ill-starred career. It also established the thematic preoccupations that would distinguish his œuvre *in toto* and mark him definitively as a *poète maudit* in the Verlainean mould. Foremost among these is a sense of loss, an angst which does indeed recall Rimbaud's *tristesse sacrée*. There is no doubt but that he suffered greatly in a personal sense: two failed efforts at domesticity (both yielding estranged children), the death of his mother, the state of chronic poverty in which he lived. And yet the too-facile *poète-maudit* construction ignores in its strict biographical determinism the fact that some of the most

lugubrious songs in the catalogue are not written by Ciampi but by Pavone.

In the same period, failure was already found attaching itself as another quantitative value recommending Ciampi as *poète maudit* (and another, too, which he would learn to deterritorialize and exercise as a pure intensity). *Trop réussi comme raté*, Ciampi was lauded by his peers—including, invariably, those more successful in terms of record sales and public profile—as *un vero poeta*, too pure a talent and temperament for the business. This is nothing but the disingenuous deference habitually inflicted on so-called marginal objects, and it is perhaps this more than anything which places them at the margins (and constitutes them objects while simultaneously constituting [and centring] the subjects which regard them). Like the Romantic's preoccupation with death, this posture assumes every sign of respectful reverence but it masks a violent loathing. Marginality is to be experienced always at second hand, in its most stylized and least vertiginous iterations, which is not to experience it at all.

Ciampi hadn't the luxury of all this hypocrisy. He *lived* his failure and, in its turn, it liberated him. First from himself. He retreated behind the scenes for the remainder of the decade, writing songs for other singers to record. 'Ho bisogno di vederti', authored under yet another pseudonym (Ramsete) and performed by Gigliola Cinquetti and Connie Francis, nearly placed at Sanremo in 1965.

By the time he re-emerged as his own man with the watershed 1970 A-side 'Tu no', he had broken from the very form of popular music. In the course of the next several years, he and Marchetti, Pavone and Roberto pursued the ghost of song across a sublime triptych of albums: *Piero Ciampi* (1971), *Io e te abbiamo perso la bussola* (1973) and the double LP *Dentro e fuori* (1976). And Ciampi made of himself the ghost of a singer, still baleful, still bereft but now delivering his performances in an anæsthetized drone, a flat bark or a conversational spoken word. He no longer concerned himself with melody, in whose place he affected a near-monotone

recitation, an altogether more appropriate platform for the dry cadences and stark intensities of his verse. And this abstraction of the singer function put Marchetti—a soundtrack composer by trade—very much in his element; consequently these records *feel* more like film soundtracks than *canzoni*.

This formal ascesis advanced in concert with a complementary, perhaps even more radical movement toward symbolic saturation—a *mise en schizo* of the motifs he had been rehearsing all the while, and the transposition of these elements into the flows of a fully realized mass culture industry. The true genius of Ciampi lay in his achievement of remarkable privilege within the context of a market regime in which he was properly speaking useless, like Bataille's *part maudite*, the *énergie excédante* given over to a *dépense improductive, libre, inconditionnelle*. There could be no market motive behind RCA Italiana's decision in these years to sign and retain Ciampi in the face of losses which were in any case anticipated: abject sales figures, the artist's refusal to engage in promotional activities and his justifiable hostility towards the public. RCA executive Ennio Melis owned that the company's stake in Ciampi was conceived from the beginning as an 'investimento a fondo perduto.' The *poète maudit* had necessarily to be reterritorialized as a cult fetish for the cognoscenti but this was the only concession to the transactional logic of the market, a strange concession that served in fact to *widen* the imbalance of accounts by obliging extra expenditure on extravagant special editions which yielded no symmetrical returns (another echo of Bataille's *pure perte*).

Par définition, ce mouvement dont l'effet est la prodigalité, est loin d'être égal à lui-même.

Critics have spilled too much ink and evaporated too much breath in rote repetition of words like *uncompromising*—almost always in bad faith, in the praise of any *soi-disant* rebel (and there are too many of them)—but for once, in the exceptional case of Piero Ciampi, any such rhetorical embroidery is justified. And yet it's not enough.

This literature carries the only plan of salvation.
Do not throw it away. Pass it on to another.