MELBOURNE’S BANDA BELLINI
LOCALISATION OF A TRANSPLANTED ITALIAN TRADITION*

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Abstract:
The Banda ‘Vincenzo Bellini’ is a Melbourne-based, Italian community concert band of over fifty musicians that upholds a musical tradition traceable to nineteenth-century Italy. Many of its members played in their home-town banda before coming to Australia. In considering the Banda’s significance and symbolic function within the local Italian community, the article examines three of its primary roles: as an integral component of the still vigorously maintained regional tradition of the patron saint festa; in its more formal concertising role at official and other community events; and as a vehicle for popularising Italian operatic repertoire.

THE BANDA MUSICALE ITALIANA ‘VINCENZO BELLINI’, or Banda Bellini, is a large thirty-five to fifty-two piece, amateur reeds and brass ‘concert band’ that was formed within the Melbourne Italian community in 1971 and continues to play an active and highly significant role in this community. It maintains a band tradition traceable to the nineteenth century and still strong in the immediate post-World War II period in those parts of Italy, especially rural southern Italy, from where most Melbourne Italian migrants came. Many of the Banda Bellini’s musicians played in their home-town banda in Italy before migrating to Australia, and all except its youngest members carry memories of the banda as a local institution that was intricately bound up with the cultural

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life and religious traditions of their villages or towns. While the visible and aural components of the Banda Bellini are not conspicuously marked by ‘difference’ within its Australian context, it nevertheless has some highly distinctive features that distinguish it strongly from the all-brass and reeds-and-brass bands of the Anglo-Australian tradition. These include the prominence and importance of Italian operatic music in its repertoire and its role in another Italian tradition by which it is often identified: the *feste* that celebrate the patron saints of individual towns from which Italians have migrated. These and other things link the Banda Bellini both to national Italian culture and to regional village culture in ways that resonate particularly strongly for first-generation Italian-Australian migrants.

This article considers the Banda Bellini as both a transplanted and localised Italian tradition by examining aspects of its history, its performance contexts, membership, musical characteristics, and meanings for Melbourne’s Italian community. It focuses in particular on the Banda’s two principal functions, namely, to provide music for *feste* and to present concerts at official and other Italian community events, and it demonstrates amongst other things the Banda’s role as a locus for community social interaction. It also illuminates aspects of the social, religious and cultural character and development of the community from the late 1960s to the present and the community’s relations to and identifications with the homeland.

**Italian Origins**

In mid-nineteenth-century Italy, wind bands and opera were musical institutions that crossed both regional and class divisions at a time when Italy was in the process of formation as a unitary nation state. The Italian wind band developed as a military band, both in the sense that its musicians were in the employ of the military and that it conformed to what is known as ‘military band’ instrumentation: mixed reeds and brass, or so-called ‘concert band’, instrumentation as opposed to all-brass band instrumentation. Military bands of this type became popular during the Napoleonic regime’s occupation and rule of much of Italy (1796–1814), which brought the French craze for wind bands to the Italian people. Civic or town bands based on the ‘military’ band model began to become institutionalised from around the mid-nineteenth century; according to one contemporary source, there were some six thousand civilian bands by 1888. The second half of the nineteenth century saw technical standardisation and improvements
to wind-band instruments, which made them easier to play and more accessible to untrained musicians. The wind band also grew in size and sophistication with its absorption of the newly invented saxhorn (valved brass) family and, later, following recommendations by a 1901 Italian military music commission, saxophones. By the end of the nineteenth century, almost every small and large town across Italy was said to have a banda. These were often amateur bands with grass-roots membership and, notwithstanding general developments in Italian wind bands, varied greatly in size, instrumentation and sound according to factors such as locality, economic and social conditions, and population base.

The banda’s connections with opera also date from the nineteenth century. Operas by Verdi, Rossini, Puccini and others often included an on-stage wind band (banda sul palco). Moreover, various opera composers, including Verdi and Mascagni, had experience playing in or directing bande. But the banda’s most significant role in relation to opera was as a purveyor and populariser of Italian and other operatic repertoire beyond the opera house, bringing it to people prevented from experiencing opera directly by economic circumstances, class or remoteness. By the second half of the nineteenth century, operatic music already represented a highly significant component of the banda repertoire and it has remained a staple ever since.

The Development of Melbourne’s Italian Community and the Emergence of the Banda

The formation of bande in Australia was made possible by mass migration following World War II, which brought a huge influx of Italians (over 276,000 net between 1947 and 1971) to the major cities and resulted in the development of concentrated Italian communities in particular urban areas. Melbourne was their principal destination and 36.3 per cent had made a home here by 1981. Nevertheless, it took nearly two decades of post-war Italian migration before the Italian population of Melbourne was sufficiently strong numerically, socially and religiously to support the establishment of its own banda.

In fact, Melbourne’s first Italian banda, called the Banda Giuseppe Verdi, is perhaps better described as a private band than a community band. Its founder and director was Donato Marcianò, and a large article in Il Giobo of 13 May 1969 (p.15), which announced the band’s formation and named all forty-four of its founding bandsmen, referred to Marcianò
as having led the highly successful *banda* of Lecce. The Banda’s debut concert was an auspiciously high status one, taking place at St Patrick’s Cathedral following Mass on 8 June as part of Italian National Day celebrations. Subsequent major community appearances by the Banda included a mainly operatic program presented at a three-day Italian fair in Princes Park, Carlton, in February 1970, and again in 1971, and a similar program for a major Italian concert held at the Myer Music Bowl on 2 March 1971 as part of the Moomba festival.  

Earlier, in August 1970, a large advertisement for the Banda Giuseppe Verdi, complete with photograph, had appeared in *Il Globo*, proudly declaring that it was fifty-strong and perpetuated ‘in questa terra la nobile tradizione bandistica italiana’ (the noble tradition of Italian banding in this country). It listed twenty examples from its repertoire, almost all operatic, and announced its availability for religious and other engagements anywhere in Victoria. This strongly indicated that the Banda’s ambitions—or those of its leader—were substantially greater and more entrepreneurial than the ambitions of most community music ensembles. However, the Banda Giuseppe Verdi did not survive beyond 1971, and the current Banda Vincenzo Bellini was founded on 18 May of that year.

The importance of Italian opera for both bands, in terms of repertoire and as a marker of Italianess, is evident from their names, which represented continuity with the *banda* tradition in Italy, where many bands are named after Italian opera composers. Additionally, the Banda Bellini’s choice of name was intended to trace a connection with its musicians. Whereas Giuseppe Verdi hailed from northern Italy, Vincenzo Bellini was from Catania, Sicily, and therefore represents southern Italy, from where most of the band’s musicians came.

The Banda Giuseppe Verdi’s activities during its short existence established a pattern that its successor was also to follow, comprising patron saints’ *feste* and concerts at community-wide events. The following two recent ‘snapshots’ of the Banda Bellini in these roles, as observed by the author, provide a point of reference for the subsequent more detailed discussion of the Banda Bellini and its place in the Italian community.

**Melbourne’s Banda Bellini: Some Snapshots**

One of the Banda’s engagements in 2005 was the annual *festa* in honour of Maria SS. (Santissima) Annunziata, patron saint of Oppido Mamertina, a town in Reggio Calabria province, which was celebrated on Sunday
18 September at St Mary’s church, Mount Evelyn, in the foothills of the Dandenongs.

As the 11 a.m. Mass drew to a close, the band musicians, dressed in service-style uniforms and caps and clutching their clarinets, saxophones, tubas and other instruments, gathered near the church entrance amongst a growing crowd. Suddenly, the priests, their helpers and some young girls carrying baskets of flowers emerged from the church, followed by members of the congregation and a group of suited men carrying the statue of the saint on a large wooden platform. Banknotes had been pinned by devotees to ribbons attached to the saint and waved like colourful streamers in the breeze. A large golden crown was carefully placed above the saint’s head and the men then lifted the platform on to their shoulders.

The waiting musicians—mainly middle-aged and elderly men but also a few younger musicians, both male and female—struck up a leisurely march, *Borgosesia* (Sabatini). A procession led by the priests and their retinue started off down a winding, sloping path followed by the saint, the band and the congregation and others in a long tail (see illustration 1). The musicians commenced in rough formation but gradually drifted into informal groupings, creating an unbalanced but interestingly ever-shifting sound. They played several Italian marches and a hymn, *Mira Il Tuo Popolo*, to which many in the crowd sang along. The entire procession circled the nearby sporting oval and basketball courts before returning up the path to the church.

With the saint safely restored to the church and blessings pronounced, everyone ambled back to the basketball courts for food, drink and a range of entertainment. The first item in the afternoon’s events was a half-hour concert by the Banda, which was seated in band formation in the centre of the open-air courts (see illustration 2). The *capobanda* (bandleader) opened the program by conducting the march, *Catalania* (Lombardi). Principal conductor, Maestro Virgilio Marcianò, then conducted the symphonic march, *Tramonto Festoso* (Sabatini), three operatic transcriptions from *Il Trovatore* (Verdi), *Carmen* (Bizet) and *Aida* (Verdi) respectively, another symphonic march, *Pupetta Innamorata* (Orsomando), and a final medley that concluded with a rendition of *Beer Barrel Polka*. Many in the crowd talked amongst themselves or queued for food and drink, but some sat at nearby trestle tables to listen. The rest of the afternoon’s entertainment included some young Italian-Australian pop singers with recorded backing; ballet and jazz dances by girls from a local dance school; a raffle; a
Illustration 1. The Banda Bellini in procession behind the statue of the saint at the Festa of Maria SS. (Santissima) Annunziata, Mount Evelyn, 17 September 2006.

spaghetti-eating contest; and a tarantella contest, in which enthusiastic participants from the largely Calabrian crowd danced to an organetto (small button accordion), tamburello (tambourine), and songs in dialect. The festa concluded at 7 p.m. with a fireworks display.

A dramatically contrasting Banda event took place the following month on Saturday 29 October at Melrose Reception Centre in Tullamarine. This was a ‘Gala Night’ celebrating the 170th anniversary of Vincenzo Bellini’s death and the 34th anniversary of the Banda Bellini. Over five hundred Banda supporters and Italian community leaders in evening dress filled the glittering Italian-run venue. The evening was compered in an almost cabaret style by the Banda’s dynamic president and featured a six-course
meal, many speeches, a concert by the Banda, an expensively produced glossy program containing congratulatory messages from sponsors, and dancing to a professional ‘Italian-Latin’ dance band. The concert involved the Banda’s full complement of musicians, arrayed like a symphonic ensemble, plus three guest opera singers. But the program followed the general pattern of festa concerts: military and symphonic marches, an overture (to Bellini’s Norma), four operatic arias including ‘Nessun dorma!’ from Turandot (Puccini) and ‘Largo al Factotum’ from Il Barbiere di Siviglia (Rossini), and a concluding medley of four well-known Neapolitan songs (see illustration 3).

The Festa in Melbourne and the Festa Banda
The community support that continues to sustain the Banda Bellini’s existence has much to do with the importance of the festa in Italian-Australian community life, an importance that has in fact increased markedly in recent years and is directly associated with the nature of post-war Italian migration and Italian religiosity.
The Italian term, festa, translates as feast(-day), holiday or festival, but the type of festa in which the banda has an integral role reflects a tradition of popular religion and culture that has been a central part of Italian provincial life, especially in southern Italy. These feste are held in honour of a patron saint: usually the patron saint of the particular provincial town or village where it is celebrated. The festa was traditionally an annual carnivalesque day, or days—sometimes lasting up to a week—of both religious expression and communal celebration and excess, when everyday norms and routines were put aside, social rules were subverted, social divisions forgotten, and food and entertainment were in abundance. Accounts and recollections of patron saints' feste in Italy invariably mention the presence of one or more banda, with particular reference being made to the aural impact of and excitement generated by the sound of the arriving banda, its participation in the procession, and the banda concert of operatic music played from a platform in the piazza.
Feste were introduced to Australia by Italian migrants in the face of considerable initial resistance from the Irish-dominated Australian Catholic church, which regarded their trappings and practices, such as pinning money on the statue of the saint, processions in the streets, noisy bands and fireworks, as irreverent, superstitious, even pagan. Conversely, Italians found the Australian Catholic church quite alien. Sociologist Adrian Pittarello suggests that: ‘For Italians religion is primarily a social experience’, and his interviews with Italian-Australians in 1979 regarding their perceptions of religious practice in Italy and Australia revealed that the thing they missed most of all from their religious life in Italy was the festa. Consequently, a notable feature of Italian feste in Australia is that they are authentically grass-roots or ‘people’s’ events, generally initiated and always organised, funded and run by the Italian laity rather than the church, specifically by a committee of (usually) men from the patron saint’s village or town.

Feste—and with them an ongoing role for the Banda—were facilitated by the particular character of Italian migration to Australia. Most migrants were from poor rural areas, especially Sicily, Calabria and Abruzzi, where the festa was of special social and cultural significance. Moreover, their primary identification was with their regional rather than national origins—in particular with their paese (village, town, local area) and their fellow paesani. Regionalism was reinforced by the fact that the first and even only language for many was regional dialect rather than standard Italian. And the pattern of migration in the 1950s and 1960s was one of chain migration, whereby people from the same extended family and village tended to settle in the same Australian suburb. This strongly perpetuated region-of-origin ties and networks and facilitated group, region-of-origin cultural practices, such as the celebration of the home-town patron saint. The actual site of a festa, however, was determined to a large extent by the location of those churches that were prepared to host them and house their statues. In subsequent decades, the Italian community became more prosperous and dispersed into the outer suburbs and further afield, with the result that those attending feste often travel from diverse parts of Melbourne and even country Victoria and interstate. The festa is therefore no longer tied strictly to a physical community, but in Victoria it continues to be confined to the Italian community (unlike some of its interstate counterparts) and to function as a community-type event that is primarily directed at and mainly attracts Italians from a single town or region of origin.
The history of the patron saint festa in Australia is, with a few exceptions, a post-war history and, against all predictions, is marked by a remarkable, exponential expansion in their number, from just a few in the 1950s and 1960s and a gradual increase through the 1970s and 1980s to an explosion of festa activity in the 1990s and 2000s. This trajectory is particularly noticeable in Melbourne. In the 1960s, for example, the Festa of Maria Santissima della Libera, patron saint of Colle Sannita, Campania, was one of several established. Full establishment of a festa was contingent on, among other things, raising the funds amongst fellow townsmen and women to commission a statue of the patron saint in question, a process that sometimes took years. However, the organising committee of the Festa of the Madonna of Libera was able to announce the acquisition of an ‘authentic replica’ of their saint in November 1970, only a year after the first Festa was held. They were also able to hire the Banda Giuseppe Verdi for the occasion. Even by 1982, the number of patron saints’ feste announced in Il Globo’s community notices pages had not increased substantially. By 1994, however, there were over twenty feste honouring the patron saints of Italian towns, and the number continued to grow in subsequent years. Among them was the Festa of Maria SS. Annunziata at Mount Evelyn, described above, which dates from 1998. In 2005–06, the annual number of feste in Melbourne and environs that celebrated the patron saints of particular towns and regions in Italy was around 45, with 90 percent of these representing southern regions of Italy. Over half of all these feste included the Banda Bellini or, if it was not available, another non-Italian band. An additional 30 or so feste were held in celebration of national patron saints such as San Antonio, or other saints, although a much smaller proportion of these (around 15 per cent) involved the Banda Bellini or another band. These feste inevitably differ from the home-town feste they have sought to replicate. In particular, they are generally smaller in scale and less elaborate. But they nevertheless exhibit the same ritualised pattern and the same recurring core—or highly desirable—elements, these being: a mass; a procession with a statue or, sometimes, a painting of the saint, banners, a banda, and carabinieri (guards in traditional uniforms); food and drink; diverse music that may include a banda concert; dancing; games and other entertainments; and fireworks. Within the standard festa structure, the banda serves almost as the glue, or bridge, between the sacred and
secular segments.

Aurally, the Banda Bellini’s function at feste is not just to play familiar music but to generate a backdrop of pervasive sound. An important aspect of the festa is its variable but densely textured soundscape, which can include explosions and fireworks, the elevated patter of a master of ceremonies through the public address system, recorded and live music of various sorts, a loudly chattering crowd meeting and greeting old friends, noisy kids, the everyday outdoor sounds of vehicles, birds, etc. and, above all, the banda. This kaleidoscope of sounds, coupled with other visual, olfactory and kinetic stimuli, creates a sensory experience of affect that marks the occasion as special or out of the ordinary and complements, even heightens, the emotion of the religious experience. The Banda Bellini’s role here is therefore much more than a musical one.

Before the evolution of the banda, other loud outdoor-type wind instruments were commonly played in procession at feste in Italy, in particular, the zampogna (bagpipes). Interestingly, a remnant of this tradition has survived in Melbourne, as zampogne were played in the procession at the Festa della Madonna di Servigliano, held at Saint Ambrose’s, Brunswick, on 6 May 2006. Sometimes, non-Italian concert bands—notably the Maltese Melita Band and the Railways Band (usually billed as the ‘Banda della Ferrovia’) — are engaged to play at feste, and various municipal or service all-brass bands have also had to fulfil this role. But research for this study points to a strong and understandable preference for a band that plays the music and has the distinctive characteristics of the bands familiar to festa-goers from Italy, thereby reinforcing the authenticity of the festa experience.

The Italian Community Banda

The Banda Bellini’s more formal concertising role takes it into a different social and cultural space involving a range of Italian and other community functions and official events. The importance of this role for the Banda distinguishes it from the two other Italian bande in Australia, the Banda Giuseppe Verdi of Adelaide and Sydney respectively, both of which are smaller than the Banda Bellini and primarily festa bands.

The Banda Bellini’s public profile remained largely associated with feste until the late 1980s and particularly 1990, when the indefatigably energetic and entrepreneurial Frank Di Blasi took over as president. Community performances have ranged from picnic concerts to official functions
such as Italian National Day celebrations and the January 2006 opening of the Lygon Street Piazza; concerts in major Melbourne venues such as the Royal Exhibition Building and the Great Hall of the National Gallery; festivals that cater for the broader community such as the Lygon Street Festa and the Darebin Music Festival; and concerts for Italian communities all over Victoria and even Griffith in New South Wales. Highlights of the Banda’s official community role include performances as part of the official welcome for the visit of Pope John-Paul II at Tullamarine airport on 27 November 1986 and the Australian visits of two Italian presidents, Francesco Cossiga in 1988 and Oscar Luigi Scalfaro in 1998. There are also special Banda anniversary events, already described, which double as fund-raisers and bring together Banda families and friends with generous business people and supportive community leaders, such as the Consul-General, the director of the Italian Institute of Culture, and the editor of Il Globo.

While the Banda Bellini is always in demand for feste, much of its other activity remains dependent on the hard work of the president and committee in promoting the band, attracting recruits, seeking sponsorship and funds for new instruments, uniforms, stands and such like, identifying appropriate opportunities for performances, and planning and organising them, amongst many other things. The Banda’s presidents have therefore been as influential in shaping its history as its conductors. Founding president Antonio Pennisi owned a shoe factory in Brunswick where the band rehearsed. Pennisi was succeeded in 1972 by Mario Scarmozzino, in 1984 by Michele Grandine, and in 1990 by Frank Di Blasi after he had served two years as vice-president.

Under Di Blasi, Banda Bellini engagements have increased substantially to almost one a week on average. Drawing on his journalistic and organisational skills, extensive community networks gained partly through his various roles in the Italian community welfare organisation, Co.As. It. (Comitato Assistenza Italiani), Di Blasi aims to elevate the Banda’s social and musical standing as a concert band, raise its profile, and make it a community-wide representative of Italian culture. Unlike at feste, concert engagements usually present a band of orchestral scale, currently around fifty players. Moreover, these concerts are generally more classicised with a greater focus on opera as such. Usually, these events are given added cultural gloss by (funding permitting) the inclusion of one or more professional opera performers, who sing the operatic arias, duets
and sometimes trios.

Many of the less official of these concerts have a strong social dimension: combined with dinner, familiar popular music by an Italian dance band, dancing and socialising, they represent—like the Gala Night described above—a ‘night out’ and not just a musical performance. The arrangement of audience and band in the space typically has the band in the centre and ‘guests’ seated at tables around the perimeter and even close to the band. While listening to the Banda Bellini is generally only one of various activities at these events, the Banda is the reason for attending and becomes the primary focus of attention when it is playing, unlike at the festa. The Banda is literally and symbolically embedded in a community that knows the music and expresses its enthusiasm and enjoyment in a demonstrative way by, amongst other things, singing along or clapping in time, applauding, calling out ‘bravo’, or otherwise engaging physically with the performance and performers. Of equal or even greater importance than the quality of the music-making is the fact that the community is able to muster such a large, impressive ensemble and that it has aural and visual impact as theatre: ordered ranks of gleaming instruments, fifty groomed, uniformed musicians, a big sound, a conductor on a pedestal with baton, and local opera stars. Notwithstanding its community-embeddedness, it is framed as ‘art’ and, as Thomas Turino notes, ‘the artistic frame...indicates that something special is being expressed in a mode different from “everyday” interaction’. It is because the Banda performs concerts of this sort that it is able to attract new musicians to swell its ranks.

The Banda Bellini’s Musicians

The Banda Bellini commenced in 1971 as a band of young men who had brought their banda experience with them from Italy. Many of these musicians grew old with the band: some are still playing while others have left in recent years. Among the reasons they joined was a love of playing music and a desire to maintain a meaningful connection with their past lives through the banda tradition. Another important incentive was the prospect of earning some extra cash. For some, however, the amount that a largely amateur band was able to pay its individual musicians did not justify the investment in time, given that their overwhelming need in Australia was to secure themselves financially. For others, work simply took priority. For example, one former member of the band, a trombonist, played in his local banda from around the age of sixteen. He migrated to Queensland
to cut cane and then moved to Melbourne and worked in a factory. While he wanted to join the newly formed Banda Bellini, he knew it would be too tiring to rehearse for hours after a gruelling day’s work. He finally joined after retiring, having not played in a band for forty-five years. A current flugelhorn player had also played in his home-town * banda * in his youth. Arriving in Australia in 1958, aged eighteen, he played in Italian dance bands while working first in timber mills and then on the wharves. He eventually got a ‘proper job’ and stopped playing music until joining the Banda sixteen years ago. 23

While the majority of the Banda Bellini’s present musicians are elderly, the band’s make-up is in fact quite diverse. Playing alongside very aged musicians are a sprinkling of second-generation Italian schoolgirls and boys and others in their twenties, thirties and forties who learnt to play band instruments at school. Some have been urged to join by their * banda-* connected families, while others find the * banda * a satisfying way to continue music-making and, at the same time, contribute to their community. One of these musicians, for example, is a clarinetist who has a Bachelor of Music from Monash and teaches music in a Catholic school. For him, the Banda represents an opportunity to perform and, because of his comparatively greater musical skills, to play important solo parts. But he has neither the time nor inclination to participate in * feste*, and only joins the Banda for its concerts. 24 The Banda also includes a handful of non-Italian musicians from other ethnic groups, amongst them two Greeks, a Hungarian, a Maltese, a Russian, and a Ukrainian, which effectively gives the band a multi-ethnic, European profile and draws in experience from other European wind-band traditions.

The Banda Bellini’s membership is, by necessity, mainly drawn from a limited pool of mostly amateur musicians of greatly differing age and with differing musical backgrounds and reasons for being in the band. Furthermore, existing members and their families are part of the community that supports the band and therefore a loyal player cannot be unceremoniously removed. This of course points to something of a disjunction between the desire of the Banda’s president to continue to raise musical standards and the fact that it cannot be too selective with regard to its players.

**Repertoire, Instrumentation and the Role of the Conductor**

The Banda Bellini’s music library of over five hundred different musical items and its active repertoire both reflect a strong continuation of the
pre-war Italian banda tradition. The bulk of the library falls into three main categories: military and symphonic marches (over 30 per cent of the total); operatic music consisting of overtures, intermezzi, choruses, arias, fantasias, selections, etc. (over 20 per cent); and light classical pieces such as Brahms' *Hungarian Dance No. 5* and *Espana Cani*. There are also some popular non-Italian pieces such as themes from well-known musicals, popular Italian regional and national songs, including Neapolitan songs, sacred items and hymns for use in *feste* and, interestingly, a few locally composed marches and other items by, amongst others, Donato Marcianò and Francesco Coffa, formerly a bandleader in Sicily. The marches in the library are almost all original band compositions but the remainder comprises transcriptions or arrangements for concert band.

New pieces, especially light popular items, continue to be added to the repertoire, but the relative weighting of genres and categories in the active repertoire has not changed significantly, with marches, operatic music and popular classical pieces remaining central. Overall, the repertoire has a very strong classical, or light classical, and continental European focus, which distinguishes it markedly from the more modern, popular, jazz or concert band repertoire of the typical present-day Australian or American concert band. Moreover, the marches and operatic music are overwhelmingly by Italian composers. Thirty-one nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italian operas and only two non-Italian operas, *Carmen* (Bizet) and *Lohengrin* (Wagner), are represented. The most popular Italian composers are Rossini, Verdi, Mascagni and Puccini, but there are also items from operas by Donizetti, Bellini, Leoncavallo, Ponchielli, Boito and Cilea.

The special significance of Italian operatic repertoire is confirmed by the large number of multiple arrangements of individual items; for example, there are four different versions of the overture to *Norma* (Bellini) and three versions of the intermezzo from *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni). Italianness is reflected not just in the nationality of its composers but also in some stylistic features, in particular an emphasis on lyrical melody. This is evident even in some military marches, which are usually taken at a slowish tempo that enables enhanced expression, and especially in the slower, more extended symphonic marches, considered to be a distinctive genre of Italian banda music.²⁵

To a lesser extent, the Banda Bellini also maintains the Italian banda tradition in its instrumentation and the way this instrumentation is scored. Nineteenth-century military band development differed from one European
country to another. A distinctive feature of Italian wind band development—relative, especially, to its British, Australian or American equivalents—is the use of whole families of instruments, especially the saxhorn, saxophone and clarinet families, which permits homogeneous sonorities over a wide pitch range and enables closer imitation of the orchestra and orchestral scoring. Other characteristic features are a slight dominance of reeds over brass, absence or minimal use of oboes and bassoons, the importance of clarinets, and the use of and emphasis on the soprano Bb flugelhorn, or saxhorn (flicorni), instead of or in addition to the cornet. With its warmer, mellow tone, the flugelhorn, as well as other saxhorns, is considered particularly appropriate to represent vocal parts in operatic transcriptions.

The Banda Bellini’s instrumentation varies according to membership at any one time and musicians’ availability for particular engagements, but concert performances generally achieve something like the following, which was the instrumentation for a recent concert: 1 piccolo, 2 flutes, 1 Eb clarinet, 8 Bb clarinets (firsts), 7 Bb clarinets (seconds), 1 soprano saxophone, 1 alto saxophone, 3 tenor saxophones, 1 baritone saxophone, 3 Bb trumpets, 3 trombones, 2 soprano Bb flugelhorns/cornets (firsts), 2 soprano Bb flugelhorns/cornets (seconds), 2 Eb tenor horns, 1 baritone, 1 euphonium, 3 Eb tubas, 1 Bb tuba, 5 percussion (cymbals, bass drum, side drums, timpani).

Mediating and localising the band’s repertoire, style and instrumentation in practice—and therefore its Italianess and debt to tradition—is the conductor and musical director, or maestro, who selects and interprets the ‘book’ of pieces to be rehearsed and played. Traditionally, conductors of wind bands have, of necessity, also been transcribers, arrangers and even composers because of the limited amount of material composed for band and the high degree of variability in band instrumentation. Even commercially available music, whether original or arranged, often needed to be adapted to or re-arranged for the particular band, not only because of national or individual peculiarities but also, in the case of amateur bands, because of the variable musical ability of its players. This has also always been the case with the Banda Bellini, as is demonstrated by the very large amount of hand-written, as opposed to printed, scores and parts in its library. These amount to well over a third of the total. The five Italian migrants who have at times been chief conductors of the Banda Bellini—Luigi Romano, Vincenzo Peluso, Eugenio Milazzi, Enzo Marcianò (orchestral conductor and son of Donato), his brother Virgilio Marcianò, and Guido Bensi—were
all active professional musicians within the community and have all left their stamp on the band and its repertoire to varying degrees.

The tradition of conductor-arranger is best exemplified in the Banda Bellini’s current conductor, Guido Bensi, who also conducted the band for some years from 1983 and again in the 1990s. Bensi is originally from Trieste, where he studied music and played professionally in various ensembles, including the Trieste Police Force Band. In Melbourne, he played for many years in the highly regarded RAAF Central Band before leaving to teach music in various northern suburbs schools. With his impressive and continuous professional band background, he has had a very influential and formative role in shaping the Banda Bellini. In addition to drawing some of his students into the band, he has introduced a substantial body of diverse music into the repertoire, including most of the more modern, non-Italian popular repertoire, which he considers will attract new players and audiences. He has also produced nearly all the manuscript arrangements and transcriptions in the Banda’s library: a prodigious 150 or more (see illustration 4). In arranging for the Banda, he takes into account the

Illustration 4. The first Bb clarinet part from the symphonic march, Anima Calabrese, by P. Valentini, transcribed and arranged for the Banda Bellini by Guido Bensi.
capabilities of individual players. Where, for example, the player of a particular instrument is unlikely to cope with a certain exposed or intricate passage, he will score it for another. 'You have to notice all those things', he said in an interview.

Other aspects of his role can be even more challenging. Rehearsals, for example, must be run in both Italian and English to accommodate the older Italian players and the young second-generation Italian as well as the non-Italian players. There is also the difficulty of working with players who, in general, do not have a culture of home practice or pre-rehearsal tuning up and who, for many reasons including advanced age or lack of formal training, vary greatly in performance ability. Priority in rehearsal therefore has to be given to the 'broad brushstroke' or more expressive and interpretative aspects of the music such as phrasing and dynamics rather than the finer details of rhythmic precision or precise tonal balance and pitch. However, this emphasis on the lyrical, expressive and interpretative is in keeping with and very complementary to the Banda’s ongoing commitment to the operatic tradition.

Community, Tradition, Art and Identity

Mixed reeds and brass bands—like brass bands—are conventionally regarded as populist musical ensembles. Although the Banda Bellini undoubtedly fits this description, it is also a much more complex institution, with multiple identities and meanings that arise from its various community roles, its fluid crossing of musical categories, and the different diaspora—homeland relations it represents through its deep connections to both Italian national cultural history and regional village culture.

The Banda Bellini is an authentic community music ensemble in the sense that it has a strong and reciprocal relationship with Melbourne’s Italian community. It has not been drawn into the wider multicultural arts scene and therefore remains untouched by the politics of multicultural arts or of external arts funding. Even the audience for its 2006 performance for the Darebin Music Festival comprised mainly its usual Italian community constituents. Nor is it part of a broader band culture or ‘musical world’, like for example the Australian brass band movement, which is underpinned by a tradition of band contesting. In this sense, it is quite isolated musically. But unlike most wind bands of today, the Banda continues to be deeply interconnected with the community that it serves, responds to, and draws on for its conductors, presidents, most of its musicians and sponsors, and all
of its ‘audience’. The Banda’s musical ties with the community are, moreover, interwoven with social ties, demonstrated especially in the network of family members, friends, compatriots, business people and community leaders who create the Banda’s own community within a community.

The Italian community has some significant community-wide structures and institutions in the areas of media and welfare, and a large portion of its first generation are bonded by a common migrant experience, but it is not, and has never been, a homogeneous community, as the region-specific festa tradition testifies. Moreover, the Banda engages with different sectors of the community in different ways in its roles as, on the one hand, a vernacular, pre-modern, village folk tradition with an integral, almost ritual role in the festa and, on the other, as a more serious, almost symphonic-type ensemble that has social and musical aspirations as a purveyor of art music and thereby carries some cultural capital. The band and its operatic repertoire function almost as popular music in the one context and almost as art music in the other.

But, in both contexts, the music itself—though it is part of the Banda Bellini’s functionality and identity—does not exceed in importance the iconicity of the band: what it represents as a transplanted tradition for festa and concert attendees. The Banda’s most localised identifications are manifest in the festa, which is an important expression, and marker, of many Italian migrants’ regional identity. Neither the banda itself nor its repertoire have regional characteristics as such, but its traditional role in the festa made, and continues to make, it an integral part of regional Italian culture. But the banda is also a pan-Italian institution, and this is especially so in Australia where the Banda Bellini draws on and caters to all regional groupings. In fact, the Banda and its operatic repertoire are among the few pan-Italian symbols that are universally meaningful for Melbourne Italians, especially to those from southern Italy. It also plays mainly pan-Italian music and has other recognisable pan-Italian characteristics. As such, it cuts across regional differences to represent the community as a whole, and its largely nineteenth-century repertoire ties it to the birth of the Italian nation as well as to Italy’s iconic national high culture. The Banda Bellini thus serves as an emblematic reminder of regional roots and of national allegiances to homeland.
NOTES


5 See, for example, Koehler, p. 102.


14 Pittarello, pp. 55, 39, 48.


Aline Scott-Maxwell — Melbourne’s Banda Bellini

17 Il Globo, 3 November 1970, p. 5.
18 Il Globo, 9 November 1971, p. 15.
19 Il Globo, 21 April 2006, p. 34.
20 Interview with Frank di Blasi; program for ‘Gala Night’, 28 October 2006.
23 Conversations with Banda musicians, 29 November 1998 and 1 September 2006.
24 Conversation, 28 October 2006.
25 Rocco, p. 58.
31 See, for example, Goldman, pp. 15–16.