Cantautori in an Intercultural Comparison: Germany and Italy

English Version

First of all, on behalf of my partners André Castelli, Stefano Dangel and Martin Cordella, I would like to warmly welcome you all.

Today, we have not chosen a legal topic. Nevertheless, let me begin with a disclaimer and assure you that this German-Italian comparison of cantautori was not written by artificial intelligence. There are therefore no unresolved liability issues. We ourselves are responsible for the content.

One small exception at the outset: I asked Gemini where the main difference between German and Italian singer-songwriters lies.

And the answer was that German singer-songwriters place a strong emphasis on language, social criticism and often minimalist acoustic accompaniment, whereas Italian cantautori combine complex musical arrangements, poetic metaphors and the characteristic Italian sense of melody. End of the AI quotation.

Gemini is quite right, although three further criteria should be added on the Italian side: strong local roots, an impact spanning generations, and political positioning.

Among the classic Italian cantautori, we should first mention those whose work is primarily characterised by a poetic quality. This applies above all to Fabrizio De André, whose works we will also hear here later, and Francesco De Gregori. Other cantautori, such as Pino Daniele and Zucchero—who can be included because he writes both lyrics and music—are more music-oriented.

The most important songwriter in Italian popular music of the last century, Lucio Battisti, is not a classic cantautore because the lyrics were not written by him.

On the German side, artists such as Franz Josef Degenhardt, Wolf Biermann and Hannes Wader are regarded as singer-songwriters. And this is the first striking difference: while the names I have mentioned on the Italian side really mean something to every Italian, I am convinced that the majority of our guests here who are not yet retired will not be familiar with these names.

What all three German singer-songwriters have in common, in any case, is their emphasis on lyrics. And unlike the many Italian songs that have also enriched the Italian vocabulary, on the German side I can think of only one song by Franz Josef Degenhardt, “Spiel nicht mit den Schmuddelkindern, sing nicht ihre Lieder”, that still has a certain significance in everyday language.

The far greater importance of Italian cantautori to Italian society, as well as their local roots, can be seen in their funerals.

When Lucio Dalla died in Bologna in 2012, more than 50,000 people followed the coffin, and it was the lead story on every channel. When Pino Daniele died in Naples in 2015, the number of people was considerably higher: several hundred thousand people.

I remember being in Italy when Lucio Battisti died in 1998, although he is not classified as a classic cantautore. In the squares of every Italian city, concerts were spontaneously organised at which local

artists performed Lucio Battisti songs, and throughout the day the concerts—particularly those in the larger squares—were broadcast on state television. Something that would be unimaginable in Germany.

Franz Josef Degenhardt died in 2011. The German public barely took notice of the event.

As for the political criterion:

Lucio Battisti is also not a classic cantautore because he never took a political position and, in the 1970s and 1980s, was always suspected of being politically right-wing, which at the time was a real stigma in cultural circles.

He famously travelled all over Italy on horseback, thereby making an ecological statement, rather like Adriano Celentano, who was heavily criticised by Italy's predominantly left-wing cultural establishment for his hit "Chi non lavora, non fa l'amore" and went on to win the Sanremo competition with it in 1970.

Every Italian knows this song too. "Chi non lavora, non fa l'amore"—in other words, a woman telling a man to go to work and stop striking so that he can earn money. The trade unions were, of course, outraged.

But Adriano Celentano, too, took a radically ecological position from the very beginning of his career. His biggest hit, "Il ragazzo della via Gluck" from 1966, is an indictment of the destruction of nature by civilisation, in which today one can breathe nothing but concrete. He maintained this position consistently throughout his artistic life.

By the way: his most popular song in Germany, Azzurro, which was written by Paolo Conte, is not a cheerful summer song to sway along to, but has highly poetic lyrics about the boredom the author experiences in summer.

The consistently left-liberal outlook of the cantautori continues to resonate today. On 09.08.2026, the annual jazz festival dedicated to Fabrizio De André took place in a Sardinian town. In the front row sat Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, who is known for his repressive stance, particularly on migration. A member of the audience loudly protested against the presence of a politician who, in their view, stood in diametrical opposition to everything Fabrizio De André had lived for. The festival management removed the audience member from the venue, which caused a minor scandal in Italy.

Fabrizio De André's granddaughter wrote a very beautiful post about this on social media, saying that her grandfather would certainly have stopped the concert at that point.

Let us turn to the musical differences:

The confidence with which Zucchero or Pino Daniele draw on internationally established musical genres likewise has no real equivalent in Germany: Zucchero with pop-rock, who was also successful in the USA, the mecca of the pop world, and Pino Daniele with his strong jazz and blues influences.

Now to Germany: I must admit that I have not taken current musical influences into account and have certainly missed quite a few things. But among the artists known to older generations, perhaps only Rio Reiser is comparable to the Italian cantautori. He always took a strong social position, yet musically displayed great versatility, drawing on many different genres, and he also wrote lyrics that, to a certain extent, have become part of general culture, such as lines from "König von Deutschland", "Junimond" or "Macht kaputt, was euch kaputt macht".

According to my research, Udo Jürgens had the greatest influence on German popular culture among artists who set their own songs to music. Here too, one may assume that “Ich war noch niemals in New York”, “Aber bitte mit Sahne”, “17 Jahr, blondes Haar” and “Immer wieder geht die Sonne auf” are familiar to most Germans, at least from their title lines, and are also used accordingly in everyday language.

Hildegard Knef was probably the chanson singer with the most masterful command of the German language, although she did not set her own lyrics to music.

But German singer-songwriters simply did not succeed in leaving a mark on popular culture that also spans generations.

Every young person in Italy knows the gems of the Italian cantautori: “La canzone di Marinella” by Fabrizio De André, “La Donna Cannone” by Francesco De Gregori or “Ci vorrebbe un amico” by Antonello Venditti. The same cannot be said for Germany.

And finally, local roots and local identity: I have already mentioned Lucio Dalla for Bologna and Pino Daniele for Naples. Fabrizio De André stands for Genoa and Antonello Venditti for Rome, to which he dedicated one of his great songs: “Grazie Roma”. And, of course, there is the Milanese school around Giorgio Gaber and Enzo Jannacci, from which Adriano Celentano also emerged.

I hope I have been able to give you a sense of the importance of the Italian cantautori to Italian culture—in comparison with their German counterparts.

For one of the greatest cantautori—indeed, for most Italians probably the greatest of them all—we have found a congenial interpreter for today, who comes from De André’s much-sung favourite region, Sardinia (introduction of Sanna).

Faber Sanner, whom I would like to thank very much for coming.

Postscript:

Members of the audience rightly pointed out that I had forgotten Reinhard Mey (“Über den Wolken”) on the German side and Francesco Guccini, one of the founders of the genre, on the Italian side … quite right; please forgive the omission!

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