

Alessandra Belloni is an Italian musician, singer, dancer, actress, author, choreographer, teacher and ethnomusicologist. She was born in Rome, and began her career there, appearing alongside Anna Magnani in Franco Zeffirelli's play *La Lupa*, and working with Federico Fellini on his film *Casanova*. In 1971 she moved to New York, where she lives and works today. In 1980 she co-founded with John La Barbera the music, folk dance and theatre group *I Giullari di Piazza*, and for several years has been artist in residence at the Cathedral of St John Divine in New York City. Her theatrical productions include *The Voyage of the Black Madonna* (1991), *Tarantella Spider Dance* (2009), and *La Cantata dei Pastori*. Her best-selling book *Healing Journeys with the Black Madonna* was published in 2019 with a Foreword by Rev. Dr Matthew Fox. Selected as one of the best percussionists in the world by DRUM! Magazine, Belloni's work has been acclaimed in *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, and featured in *Modern Drummer* and *Percussive Notes*, amongst other publications. She has appeared in percussion festivals and theatres in Brazil, Argentina, England, Croatia, Poland, France, Italy, Spain, Australia, Korea, Egypt and Israel, as well as throughout the USA and Hawaii. Belloni is a REMO artist and designer of her signature series of Italian tambourines; she is also author of the book and DVD *Rhythm is the Cure*, published by Mel Bay.

This interview with **Jessica Hughes** was recorded on 8th November 2020.

An illustrated version of this conversation is available on the *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies* website: <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2020/belloni>

Jessica Hughes: Thank you very much for agreeing to this interview, Alessandra Belloni. I'd like to start by asking you about the ancient origins of the tarantella, which is something that you write about in detail in your recent book *Healing Journeys with the Black Madonna*. How does the tarantella tradition connect your music to ancient Greek and Roman mythology?

Alessandra Belloni: Well, I wrote a whole musical about that! The first time was called *The Dance of the Ancient Spider* [1996], and the second version was *Tarantella Spider Dance* [2006]. So for many, many years I have been totally immersed in the tarantella, which is the ancient healing tradition – not the social dance that you see now in Italy. I discovered, in the course of my research, a book called *La Terra Del Rimorso* – 'The Land of Remorse' – by Ernesto De Martino. I first got that book in 1982 when I started my group ['I Giullari di Piazza'] and I completely fell in love with it. I've probably read it six times, because it is complex to understand everything he describes. And from that book, I learned that the dance that we call the *pizzica tarantata*, 'the bite of the tarantula', comes from pre-Christian times, from the myth of Arachne, as well as rites of Dionysus and Bacchus.

In the Arachne myth, she's a young virgin, and a skilled weaver of Athens. She's admired by all the nymphs, and they ask her if she learned from Athena. She said no – and even that she was better than Athena. She was a young, proud, girl – actually kind of arrogant! She challenged Athena to a weaving contest, which she won, and Athena, taken by anger, hit Arachne over the head and destroyed her linen into a thousand pieces. Poor Arachne hung herself from a tree, and Athena, taken by pity, transformed her into a spider, and left her to weave her web forever.

JH: And how does Dionysus enter the picture?

AB: Well, after Arachne's transformation (as I also learned from De Martino's book), the young women of Athens were taken by a suicidal mania, drowning or hanging themselves. But then the Sibyl, prophetess of the underworld, spoke and said that these women would be released of depression and suicide if they were allowed to live their sexuality, and embrace the god Dionysus. That's how the orgiastic rites begin. We know certain things about these women: they lived in the woods, they wore deerskin, their favourite colour was orange, they ate herbs. They also had specific way of screaming, as I learned later on from the writer and philosopher Angelo Tonelli.

When I studied in Italy, I studied Latin (not Greek, though I wanted to – they would teach us the Bacchantes were crazy. But they were not crazy. They were shamans, and healers, and they knew how to do these rituals. They also honoured the goddess Cybele, the goddess of the earth, so that is how Cybele's rites are interconnected with the rites of Dionysus – so is the music, especially in the area of Campania. Those rites were completely connected, and they were called the Mysteries. As you can see in ancient frescoes like those in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii – they played the double flutes, and the tambourine was already present. So the tambourine was already used at this point, and it was used as an ecstatic instrument. When I went to the Villa of the Mysteries, I had a real *déjà vu*, I said 'I know that ritual, I was there'. Pompeii does that to me a lot. Sometimes I feel fainting when I'm there!

JH: So how do people think that the Mysteries percolated through into later times to become (or at least influence) the tarantella?

AB: What happened is that this ritual led by women, playing tambourines, dancing and spinning around, continued for a long time, but with the coming of Christianity, of course they didn't want women to be wild, running around naked, and doing these orgiastic rituals, so they suppressed those rituals. They disappeared everywhere except the south of Italy, and that's a very interesting aspect of our culture, where Dionysus never left. They just transformed them. We don't know a lot about them, just that there were these gatherings, especially in the regions of Campania, Puglia and Calabria, where men and women gathered, during the solstice and different times of the year. And then in Renaissance this dance became known as the tarantella, attributed to the bite of the tarantula. The first one to note this was the Jesuit, Athanasius Kircher. He wrote this incredible book in Latin called the *Phonurgia Nova* ['New Science of Sound Production'], where he describes this form of euphoric dance, attributed to the poison of the spider bite, which made people – mainly women – fall into some kind of madness (later known as depression). They had to spin around and dance, and they *became* the spider, stamping their feet and dancing erotic dances, to free themselves from the poison and break the web.

Ernesto De Martino describes it really well in his book. The cases they studied in the late nineteen-fifties and early sixties, of the *tarantate* in southern Italy. The bite was a metaphor. The depression would usually start, in puberty, if they suffered abuse or unrequited love. So the bite is also called *morso d'amore*, ('the bite of love'), and again it goes back to the myth of Arachne, who never knew love. Those dances lasted three days and three nights, with the *tarantate* dressed in white. The musicians were considered like shamans and doctors, because they knew the cure. The *tarantate* would fall on the floor, numb through music and dance, and the important instruments were the tambourine and the violin. The violin hits the high notes, over the 6/8 rhythm of the tambourines.

I'm sure you know Joseph Campbell, and others like Mircea Eliade. Writers like this have been great in our era at describing how the ancient myths affect our lives, no matter what – whether we're familiar with them or not, they are part of our subconscious. The church transformed the ancient rituals, and Dionysus became St Paul, who is the protector of the *tarantate*.

JH: You've played this music yourself for many years, but often in a different devotional context from those old south Italian rituals studied by Ernesto De Martino. In *Healing Journeys with the Black Madonna* you write about your strong connection with 'La Madonna Nera', and introduce us to the many paintings and statues of Black Madonnas which can be found in churches around Italy and Europe, and other parts of the world as well. You also discuss the links between La Madonna Nera and the female deities of Greek and Roman antiquity. Could you summarise some of those links for our readers?

AB: La Madonna Nera does have links with Cybele and other classical goddesses, such as Diana/Artemis, and especially the Black goddess, Artemis of Ephesus, who were very important for women's rituals. But I believe the figure who is most directly linked to the Black Madonna is the Egyptian goddess Isis. There are no accounts of Egyptian tarantella rituals, although there is a ritual in Egypt called Zār (I know because I've been in it), which is an exorcism for women who suffer, and it's done by women using these big Egyptian tambourines, called the Mazhar. There is definitely a link there, although the connection with Isis hasn't been proved. But Egypt is the only other place that has a similar ritual of exorcism.

Isis is also probably the most ancient goddess that we worship still today as the Madonna. The first Madonna and Child is Isis holding baby Horus. Then there's the Trinity of Isis, Osiris and Horus – the Catholic church use that idea too. There's also the whole myth of resurrection, and love [Isis gathering the body of Osiris and putting it back together]. And in many depictions she's Black – the Goddess of the Earth. But also, Egypt is Africa, and I firmly believe that the other archetype we carry is the remembrance of Mamma Africa, the cradle of humanity. She's a very complex goddess to describe in a few words!

JH: You also write that there's a link between La Madonna Nera and the soil of the earth.

AB: Yes, with the black soil of the earth. When you got to southern Italy, that's very clear, right? Vesuvius, Etna, all those volcanic places have lots of Black Madonnas, and it's the same in Hawaii, with Pele. There is this idea of the earth being alive, the volcano and giving birth, and destruction – again, so many different aspects, it's very complex. But I guess that's the great thing about studying these classical things.

JH: In your book, you mention encountering the work of Roberto De Simone, which introduced you to the various stories and legends about the poet Virgil.

AB: Ah yes – his book *Il Segno di Virgilio* ['The Sign of Virgil'] is a treasure! It helped me a lot in writing, and in understanding how Virgil was initiated into the Mysteries. The Neapolitans know that, but most people outside Naples are not familiar with that – how he was such a healer himself, he studied, and we know that he went to Montevergine [in the Province of Avellino], Mount Partenio, where the Temple of Cybele was. They say that he had a garden where he had healing herbs. Probably he was gay – he never married, and they called him the 'maiden', like the *femminielli* [the traditional Neapolitan 'third gender']. He also had the journey in the Underworld, and he was in Cuma, where the Sibyl was. It's so

fascinating. He will always remain one of the most incredible poets of our history. He died quite young, unfortunately but he did a lot! In the Neapolitan culture, there are lots of myths and legends about Virgil, and there are so many songs attributed to him, really beautiful ones like *Jesce sole*.

JH: Had you already read Virgil at school in Italy, before encountering him again through De Simone's work?

AB: Yes, in Italy we have to, first in in junior high school, and then in the *liceo* [college]. I always loved this, it was always one of my favourite things. but I never knew it would affect me so much! And then going back to it later in life, I was so drawn to it. Roberto De Simone is a genius, but very humble. I've met him a few times. His books have never been translated, which is really sad. Someone should translate them, at least into French.

JH: Your 1991 opera *The Voyage of the Black Madonna* had Virgil as the main character, and it was staged in the Cathedral of St John Divine. Can you give a brief synopsis of the play's story for our readers? Why did you choose Virgil as a guide?

AB: As a creative artist and performer, and theatre director, *The Voyage of the Black Madonna* was really the first opera I wrote which was my own – the story is my own. While In the past, I'd done research, like the *Cantata dei Pastori*, and *La Lupa* and other things were they were all based on existing texts, that I readapted with music, with my own take. But the idea of *The Voyage of the Black Madonna* came out of my vision over my hospital bed, when I was healed after I had a surgery, and I felt the the Madonna telling me that I had to follow her path, feel other people's pain, and the pain of the earth, which is being destroyed and is in need of healing. and tell other people about that. My mission was to help bring that to the world. So very complex, obviously, as a subject for theatre, and there was also the question of how to stage these legends from *Il Segno di Virgilio* and all these other books about the Seven Sisters.

That's what I learned from the book – that there were seven sisters, and the last one was believed to be the ugliest, and she ran away to a high mountain to hide, and pilgrims had to find her by climbing on foot to the top. And when they found her. they saw she was black, and the most beautiful of all, and they called her *Mamma Schiavona* – the 'serving mother', the 'slave mother', but in a nurturing way. And that [Montevergine] is the same mountain where Cybele's temple was, and where Virgil was initiated. Those things I learned from Roberto De Simone. And as I continued my research to write the opera, I knew I would include the Seven Sisters – the Seven Black Madonnas as well as the seven most important [classical] goddesses. But I also felt, especially after reading that book, that the lead character had to be what we'd call today a 'super-hero'. I've been thinking about that recently – that would be a great film... Virgil, this sacred healer poet, comes back from a mythical time, to help save the world from self-destruction. I wrote this in 1987, and we're in it right now.

So it was clear that Virgil had to be the main character, who guides us into a journey of initiation, like probably he was himself. And I do know from esoteric studies that there are often seven stages to initiation. And at the beginning it was very important that he is first is visited by Isis, and then he ends on the mountain, where he is visited by Cybele, but during the journey he meets the other goddesses – Diana, Dea Fortuna, Aphrodite.... And each one is then unveiled as the Black Madonna in the south of Italy, who is still alive today. And in each scene, the goddess was a giant puppet; Virgil is a very good singer and performer, Ivan

Thomas, a Black Italian, and I played the Madonna with different masks that were made for me. Now I'd do it in a different way, and I've done a little bit with an African-American singer-actress, so I've been thinking of re-staging that again, in a different way. The most important thing is that Virgil takes us on a journey of initiation, and at the end he realises that the Earth is a living being, and that we must go back to respect her as such if we want to survive – or otherwise we'll be defeated by the plague. Er, hello? Virgil should come back now! Who knows who it's going to be in our age?

JH: Maybe a female Virgil this time?!

AB: Well, yes but I think the fact that he was gay and feminine is also important, because there's that connection with the *galli* – the men who became women [through castration] to go and worship the goddess Cybele.

JH: Right, that was something I wanted to ask you about, because I know that on the feast of the Candelora (February 2nd) there is still an annual pilgrimage to the shrine on Montevergine, traditionally involving the *femminielli* but which has recently become a much wider LGBTQ+ event. Do the people who go on the pilgrimage tend to know and talk about the mythical connections between that place and the cult of Cybele? Does that have meaning for them?

AB: They do. The Neapolitans know the whole history, about Cybele, and Virgil. At least the ones I know do! But I don't think people know outside Naples. I know professors in New York who don't know that, and they're gay too, and also Reverend Matthew Fox, who wrote the Foreword to my book. And they are amazed when they find out.

Let me go back a little bit... I came to New York in 1971 when I was very young, and I lived in Greenwich Village, and I was part of the gay movement, even if I'm not gay myself. That was my generation. Sadly, my best friends died of AIDS in the 1980s. So that has been a big part of my life. And through my music I attracted men, and men who became women, and we became very close. I feel somehow that [transgender men] reach a knowledge, an emotional state, that is more advanced than a heterosexual, and then the worship of the Madonna...they feel it even deeper, because of what they had to go through to change their body. *Femminielli* don't change their sex, by the way – they just live like women.

JH: I was wondering, when I read your book, about the reaction of the Vatican to these ideas about the 'pagan' origins of Christian devotion in Italy – and the reactions of more conservative Christians in America. How do they respond to your work?

AB: [laughs] – well, I don't hang out with people like that! As a performer, of course I attract all kinds of audiences. The Italian-Americans are also my audience, and they are way more conservative and right-wing, much of the time. But it depends on how you stage things. I think I've managed to do it in a way that people got the message. You don't have to be gay or Black to get the message, but I managed to convey that on stage without offending anyone. Also, the way we use the puppets and masks – that is important, how you get to describe myths and legends using other forms of theatre, which is the basics of the *Commedia dell'arte*, the street theatre of the Renaissance, which again comes from the classical theatre of the Greeks and Romans.

JH: Yes, I wanted to ask you about that too, because you do mention in your writing that one of your aims with this production [*The Voyage of the Black Madonna*] and your other work was to bring these old Italian stories to the Italian-American community of New York, who had ‘forgotten’ or ‘repressed’ this part of their heritage after moving to the United States. Can you tell me more about this?

AB: It’s very complicated. The first waves of immigrants from Italy were people who had left very poor places, mainly in the south, and they didn’t have education. Many of them were illiterate. They did know the music and dances, but they lost that knowledge here, because they decided to become Americanised, and lost connection with those myths and the devotion through the years. One of my performers was born here, and he says that there were people who carried this tradition of Montevergine, until probably the 1960s. But by the time I came here in the 1970s, nobody was doing anything connected with this. And they became very right-wing, so this is one thing I’ve been facing now, especially with the elections. A lot of Italian-Americans support Trump, which is shocking, because they are immigrants, Trump is racist, and he would never let them in if he could choose!

I’m Italian-Italian, even if having an American passport makes me Italian-American, I’m not Italian-American, I want to stress that. I’m not right wing – I’ll never be. I come from a leftist family, and I’ve had a lot of problems identifying with this community here. As an audience they’ve been good, they follow me, and they understand me through the images and the music, and the way we portray these things.

JH: You’ve mentioned before that these political critiques are reflected in your work, especially the Christmas production of *La Cantata dei Pastori* [‘Song of the Shepherds’]. Can you talk about that now?

AB: Yes, I can tell you all about the *Cantata dei Pastori*. It was written by Andrea Perrucci in the 1600s, based on a *commedia dell’arte* that was improvised in Naples and that area. It really is an incredible work of art. I started doing it in New York in 1984, and it became our favourite show – it was a classic in New York, and was reviewed by the *New York Times*. But it was very tiring, and at one point I decided never to do it again. I revived it, though, when Trump was elected, and decided to do the whole show again, because the true title of the play is *Il Vero Lume Tra Le Ombre*: in English ‘*The True Light Shall Appear Through The Shadows*.’ It’s all about how Good triumphs over Evil. The play starts with Pluto, King of Hell, despatching his demons onto earth, because God has decided to become Man through Mary, and he [Pluto] wants to stop the birth of the Messiah, because he doesn’t accept that God becomes Man. So you have the Devil speaking, and demons coming to earth to stop the good. And that’s what I felt during the [2016] elections – that we are going back into these times.

So the way I staged it, we start the show with the demons coming out with Pluto, *commedia dell’arte* style, with masks and music, and then story begins: of how Mary and Joseph try to go to Bethlehem, and the Devil tries to kill Mary to stop the birth of Christ, but she always has the help of the Archangel Gabriel, and she meets this funny character, Pulcinella, the typical Neapolitan character, who helps her because he has a good heart. He’s the scapegoat, so the devil always punishes him for helping Mary. In my version, the angel Gabriel is on stilts, so he has this incredible height, and the devil is a sword fighter, so they do actual real sword fights on stage. Then I [playing Mary] wake up and I have the drum, and I send Devil back to hell with my drumming. So everything is really spectacular. And in my version, we

tell the story in English, and then we act in Neapolitan with music. I chose the character of 'La Befana' to tell the story, because I love her very much, and because she's the Earth Mother, who can transform everything, and can punish the people who don't respect her. I have a great actor, a Shakespearian actor, who plays her in the transgender style of the *femminielli*. The audience love La Befana! Most of the times, at the beginning, they can't tell he's a man, and she tells the story, and then we come out and do it with the music, and each scene is quite spectacular. I have a puppet of a dragon, that the Madonna then fights, then there's the tempest scene where they drown, but the Madonna survives - the boat scene is the favourite of the audience.

No matter how many times people sees this show, every time the Madonna comes out and she gets right on the boat, and they do the Neapolitan song with Pulcinella, everyone cracks up laughing. So it's a very funny show, but it's very profound, because you see in every scene what the Madonna has to do, and Pulcinella, to defeat Evil. And it's really about sending Evil back to Hell. And at the end, when the angel Gabriel succeeds, the audience claps, and then Baby Jesus is born, and then we do the Nativity scene, and the Befana brings gifts, and always the children in the audience come and join Mary and us on stage. So it's really special, it's very beautiful, but it's a lot of work!

JH: I'm not surprised everyone loves it! It sounds like an amazing Christmas tradition.

AB: Yes, and in that audience there are a lot of Italian-Americans – lots of Neapolitans who know the tradition, and who can sing the Christmas song. My actor and singer, Giuseppe De Falco, he's from Torre Annunziata, and that's where I went to study the improvisational part of it. His mother did it when she was young, so I spent time there to interview the actors who did it, and I learned a lot about improvisation. My group specialises in that – improvisation theatre. We can play everywhere. That's the name of the group, *I Giullari di Piazza* - 'Players of the Square'. We embody that very well.

JH: So when the Italian-American audience members were singing along, and enjoying the fight of Good against Evil when you were performing that during the Trump era – did people understand the 'hidden' meaning behind the story?

AB: Yes, I actually said it at the end of every show. I did my speech and I didn't care. I said, 'By the way, I revived this show because we just went back into the darkness – we need to fight the Evil, and bring back the Good.' And people got it – they didn't argue with me!

JH: There's another obvious political element of your work that we could talk about, and that's about whether your work on the Black Madonna has taken on a new urgency and importance in these times of the Black Lives Matter protests. I realise that's a big question.

AB: Absolutely, yes. As I said in the book which came out before a lot of these other things happened, when I first came here in 1970s, it was the really important time of the Black Panthers, and Angela Davis was in jail, So again, being in Greenwich Village at that age, I saw everything and more. My first close woman friend in New York was a Black woman who was gay, and that was an incredible impact in my life, for many different reasons. I was already politically inclined towards anti-racism, coming from a leftist family.

When I started my research and I first saw Black Madonnas, I asked myself whether she was African. Then, I saw that she is many things. She's the cosmos where we come from, she's

the woman of the earth, and all the goddesses who represent them. And I got deeper and deeper and saw that she was Isis, she is Egypt, she's African. The famous Madonna in Tindari – they tell you that she came from Ethiopia, and the inscription on the statue says *Nigra sum sed formosa*. In Latin, literally, it can be 'I'm black and beautiful', like in the Song of Solomon. And that was the mantra of Black Panther, 'Black is Beautiful'.

So what I think is so relevant today – and why I want to make my book into a film, and I hope to find the right producers and network – is because in America, most people, including African-Americans, do not know about the Black Madonna. They do not know that we worshipped, in ancient times, black sacred images: Goddesses, Madonnas and Christ. How could Mary and Jesus be blonde and blue eyed? It's ridiculous, right? In those times, North-Africans, Israelis.... they were brown! They were people of colour. And that lie has to stop. Because that could shift the consciousness. I don't think I have the power to change the world – again, as an artist, you do your best. But that concept of the divinity being only white, and blue-eyed, and blonde, has to stop. Because that is where white supremacy comes from.

JH: Alessandra Belloni, thank you very much,

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[Alessandra Belloni's website.](#)

Buy the book [Healing Journeys with the Black Madonna.](#)

Article about Black Madonnas from the ['All About Mary' website](#) at the University of Dayton.

Slate article about [femminielli in art.](#)

Video-documentary filmed at the [2018 Candelora pilgrimage](#) to Montevergine.