

“Protesta per Sacco e Vanzetti”--Compagnia Columbia; “Sacco e Vanzetti”--Raoul Romito (1927)

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Essay by Joseph Sciorra (guest post)*



Frank Amodio



Original labels



Raoul Romito

The 1921 guilty verdicts and death sentences of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti for robbery and the killing of a payroll master and his guard in South Braintree, Massachusetts, set off worldwide condemnation. Those protests and public outcries exposed the trial's biases and the pervasive nativism of the time. Protests only escalated with the approach of the execution date of August 23, 1927.

Sacco and Vanzetti have since become icons of anti-immigrant prejudice, state repression of radicals, and prisoners' rights. Their case has generated an enormous amount of scholarly literature, sparking interest in the wider radical world they inhabited. In addition, they have inspired countless artists working in different media. Some notable US creations include Upton Sinclair's 1928 novel "Boston," Ben Shahn's series of paintings "The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti" from the early 1930s, Woody Guthrie's album "Ballads of Sacco and Vanzetti" recorded in 1947 (and released in 1960), Anton Coppola's 2001 opera "Sacco and Vanzetti," and Mark Binelli's 2006 postmodern novel "Sacco and Vanzetti Must Die!"

The trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti can be regarded as the culmination of a historical era in the international and national struggles for and against the rights of the industrial working class, efforts that in the United States were comprised in large part of European immigrants, and Italians in particular. With the full-blown emergence of industrial capitalism in the late 19th century various strains and organizations of the radical left emerged, including anarchists, syndicalists, socialists, and communists, all of which attracted various sectors of the immigrant proletariat. Political action took many forms, depending on one's political ideology, including but not limited to, establishing newspapers, advocating for the creation of unions, organizing strikes, and, in the case of some anarchists, bombing sites and individuals associated with industrial capitalism and state repression. This intensified class struggle exacerbated existing nativist sentiments and hostility toward immigrants and radicals who were consistently described by the press as well as by local and federal government officials as a threat to US society.

Italian Americans were deeply affected by the *cause célèbre* of Sacco and Vanzetti in part because many could relate to the prejudicial attacks they experienced. By 1920, four million Italians had arrived in the United States, encountering a nation that was anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, and anti-labor. By 1927, Italian Americans of various political stripes were aggrieved by Sacco and Vanzetti's predicament and organized in different ways to save the two men.

Prominent Italian immigrant singers and performers recorded music and spoken-word pieces with US commercial recording companies to rally support for the condemned. These recordings were perhaps the most widely circulated creative works about Sacco and Vanzetti by Italian immigrants. The topical songs are in keeping with other recordings of the time that chronicled and championed various newsworthy stories of concern to Italian immigrants, from the World War I battle at the Piave River to the US presidential campaign of Al Smith.

Four Italian- and Neapolitan-language records, with six works on the topic of Sacco and Vanzetti, were issued in 1927 in the United States. Two Side-B recordings--"E figlia 'e nisciune" and "Core, nun chiagnere"--do not address the case explicitly.

- "A morte e Sacco e Vanzetti" (The death of Sacco and Vanzetti), written by lyricist Renzo Vampo and composer F. Pensiero and sung by Giuseppe Milano (SIDE A).
"I martiri d'un ideale" (Martyrs for an ideal), a spoken-word piece written and performed by F. De Renzis (SIDE B).
Ideal, 5002, recording date unknown.
- "Protesta per Sacco e Vanzetti (Protest on behalf of Sacco and Vanzetti), written by Frank Amodio and performed by the Compagnia Columbia (SIDE A).
"Sacco e Vanzetti," written by lyricist Renzo Vampo and composer F. Pensiero and sung by Raoul Romito (SIDE B).
Columbia, 14288-F, recorded in May 1927.
- "Lacreme 'e cundannate (ovvero Sacco e Vanzetti)" (Tears for the condemned [or Sacco and Vanzetti]), written by lyricist Ambrogio Rizzi and composer Alfredo Bascetta and sung by Alfredo Bascetta (SIDE A).
"E figlia 'e nisciune" (Nobody's children), written by lyricist Luigi Sica and composer Giuseppe Ferraro and sung by Alfredo Bascetta (SIDE B).
Okeh, 9316, recorded on May 5, 1927.
- "Lettera a Sacco (P'o figlio suoio) (Letter to Sacco [For his son])," written by lyricist Ambrogio Rizzi and composer Giuseppe Ferraro and sung by Alfredo Bascetta (SIDE A).
"Core, nun chiagnere" (Heart, don't cry), written by lyricist A. Immella and composer Alfredo Bascetta and sung by Alfredo Bascetta (SIDE B).
Okeh, 9332, recorded on August 29, 1927.

(Song titles listed on US-issued recordings do not always conform to standard written Italian or Neapolitan, including the use of diacritical marks.)

These Italian- and Neapolitan-language immigrant recordings are key sound documents of the Italian American political sentiment regarding the injustices meted out to Sacco and Vanzetti. They are particularly significant because they were recorded by popular immigrant artists of their day and issued by US commercial recording labels.

The two-sided Columbia (14288-F) disc with the Compagnia Columbia's "Protesta per Sacco e Vanzetti" on Side A and Raoul Romito's "Sacco e Vanzetti" on Side B is a significant recording in US history. "Protesta per Sacco e Vanzetti" is a 2:50-minute spoken-word recording with an ensemble enacting a rally in support of the two anarchists.

The author of this piece is Frank Amodio, who was an influential lyricist, composer, and publisher of Italian- and Neapolitan-language recordings. Topical songs were one of his trademarks; he composed tunes about Umberto Nobile's expedition to the North Pole and the death of Rudolph Valentino, among other subjects. He wrote comic routines for Giuseppe De Laurentiis and the husband-and-wife team Tito Vuolo and Grace Narciso, as well as melodramatic songs recorded by such greats of the Italian immigrant music scene as Alfredo Bascetta, Giuseppe Milano, and Gilda Mignonette. And he was a prolific writer and performer of ensemble works with several actors for the Columbia, Okeh, and Victor record companies.

Antonio Sciotti, a student of New York City's Neapolitan song tradition, lists the Compagnia Columbia members on "Protesta per Sacco e Vanzetti" as being Frank Amodio, Laura Colombo, Paolo Dones, Giuseppe De Laurentiis, Michele Rapanaro, and Aristide Sigismondi and suggests that the diva of the immigrant stage, Gilda Mignonette, may have also been involved.

"Protesta per Sacco e Vanzetti" presents a scene of a protest rally for the two condemned men. Except for a voice which exclaims once, in English, "Shut up!" the actors speak in standard Italian with individualized voices marked by varied regional Italian accents: Abruzzo (Sigismondi), Bari (Rapanaro), Naples (De Laurentiis and Colombo), and Sicily (Dones). This mix of accented Italian, the very voices of the varied Italian immigrant community, is an auditory convergence united in the protest for justice.

The scene begins with several unnamed characters discussing the guilty verdict, suggesting the lack of knowledge and different opinions among Italian Americans at the time (here in translation):

- A: But those two people told me. I know they're guilty of murder!
B: And you believe it? They say they didn't even steal anything.
A: Not even the robbery?
C: Come on! Enough! Stop saying dumb stuff. Those two poor guys haven't done anything wrong.
A: Oh, well. What do I know, for heaven's sake? They told me what they're accused of and I'm just repeating it.
D: Well, then why are they condemned to die?
C: Oh, my friend. Who knows how many innocent men have been condemned like them?

The dramatization makes explicit the call to individuals, within and beyond the Italian American community, to take action as part of a collective of commitment and empathy and not to rely on heavenly intervention:

A: Oh, we must hope for the grace of the Madonna.

C: Forget the Madonna! We must be the ones to fight and save them. Even more because they are Italians like us.

B: Oh, come on. It has nothing to do with who is Italian or American. When someone is innocent we should help them always.

The idea that different people need to join forces on behalf of justice is stated clearly by the speaker addressing the throng:

E: Friends, you already know what has brought us together here, and I am happy to see in this solemn moment a crowd made up not just of Italians but of people of all nationalities: Italians, Americans, Jews, English, Japanese. At this fatal hour we have come together to form a single race: the human race! With no differences based on age, on class, or on party.

The speaker galvanizes the crowd in a call-and-response finale to proclaim unequivocally the recording's political message:

E: And now, people, raise your voices in protest. If Sacco and Vanzetti go to their deaths, what will the law be committing?

Crowd: An injustice!

E: And what are the condemned men?

Crowd: They are innocent!

E: What are Sacco and Vanzetti waiting for?

Crowd: For a pardon!

The record's flip side is of the tenor Raoul Romito (October 23, 1882–August 19, 1952) singing "Sacco e Vanzetti." The tune was written by lyricist Renzo Vampo and composer F. Pensiero, a musical team also responsible for "A morte 'e Sacco e Vanzetti," recorded by Giuseppe Milano in 1927 on the Ideal record label.

According to Romito's brief biographical statement published in "The Brattleboro Daily Reformer" on April 15, 1913, Henry Russell, the managing director of the Boston Opera Company, discovered him when he was working as a fisherman in Naples (despite being born in Livorno, in the region of Tuscany). He arrived in Boston on October 14, 1912 and made his debut as Turiddu in "Cavalleria Rusticana." But it was as a singer of popular tunes that Romito made his mark with an extensive recording career with the major US labels Brunswick, Columbia, and Okeh.

In addition to the 3:07-minute recording "Sacco e Vanzetti," Romito also paid tribute in song with his 1919 recording about anarchist Sante Geronimo Caserio, who assassinated French President Marie François Sadi Carnot in 1894. While these two recordings may suggest

Romito's left-leaning sympathies, he also recorded Fascist-themed songs "Inno a Mussolini" and "Inno a fascisti" in 1922 (or 1923) for Columbia, the year Benito Mussolini became Italy's prime minister.

Judging by the performance of the recorded musicians one can assume they were part of an in-house Columbia company orchestra, as was common with other "ethnic" recordings that did not involve folk instrumentation. The song, in 6/8 time, consists of three sets of two verses and a chorus (each with different lyrics) which are interspersed by a musical refrain. The violins' pizzicato during the singer's verses adds a slight sonic unease to the song.

The song begins with a summary of the arrest, the global protest, and the guilty verdict for "this spurious charge." The second and third verses are in the voices of first Sacco and then Vanzetti, paraphrasing words the men had publicly issued. Sacco proclaims the men's innocence and states that "it is class hatred that condemns" the two. Vanzetti, "the other martyr," follows "speaking in a calm voice and with no fear" to directly challenge the judges:

*One day you'll feel a terrible remorse.
It is true our ideas are advanced
but we shouldn't have to die for that.*

The tune's final lines speak to the international condemnation of the verdict and scheduled execution:

*The world watches and waits
and still cries out, saying:
They shouldn't die in the electric chair!*

This two-sided US record offers a sonic window into how Italian immigrants thought, felt about, and addressed the political persecution and pending capital punishment of the two conational anarchists. This commercial recording, along with others, contributed to the creation and maintenance of an acoustic and politicized Italian immigrant community. On this near-century-old disc one can hear the sound of Italian American protest against xenophobia and injustice and a clarion call for collective action on behalf of compassion and humanity.

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