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RECONTEXTUALISING FRANCESCO PAOLO TOSTI'S ITALIAN ART SONGS WITHIN LATE NINETEENTH- CENTURY VOCAL CULTURE

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Abstract:

Francesco Paolo Tosti's Italian art songs have long remained marginal in musicological discourse or merely often dismissed as sentimental salon repertoire or treated merely as elementary material for vocal pedagogy. These categories are inclined to obscure their aesthetic significance and historical value in the late nineteenth-century vocal culture. This article recontextualises Tosti's Italian art songs within the stylistic, poetic and performative language of the Belle Époque, with special emphasis laid on the connections to the bel canto tradition and contemporary salon practices. The study employs close readings of selected musical scores and poetic texts to discuss musical repetition, text—music interaction, vowel treatment, dynamic nuance, legato phrasing, and declamatory style. Instead of the pedagogical reading of the works, the analysis focuses on the way they function as micro-dramatic structures that convey intimacy and expressive nuance within a compact musical form. The article reestablishes Tosti's songs within a historical vocal context, advocating for their reassessment as Italian art-song repertoire and as vital evidence of turn-of-the-century performance practice.

Keyword:

Bel Canto Tradition, Belle Époque, Italian Art Song, Performance Practice, Vocal Culture



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Introduction

Francesco Paolo Tosti's songs continue to occupy a visible place in vocal recitals, where they are valued for their singable melodic contours and their direct, lyrical appeal. Despite this sustained performance presence, their position within musicological scholarship has remained uncertain. They are most often encountered either as sentimental salon repertoire or as introductory material within vocal curricula, and consequently they have attracted relatively limited analytical attention in broader musicological debates (Sanvitale, 1996; Munson, 2018). Approaching the repertoire primarily through these functional categories has tended to sideline the specific historical circumstances in which Tosti's songs circulated, as well as the subtle compositional choices that shape their musical language. In many cases, the qualities performers and audiences find most appealing—the sense of ease, immediacy, and apparent naturalness—have also contributed to a long-standing reluctance to treat these works as objects of sustained scholarly enquiry. Rather than signalling compositional simplicity, however, such surface fluency often reflects a highly refined engagement with text, vocal gesture, and contemporary listening practices.

This article returns to Tosti's Italian art songs from an explicitly musicological standpoint, treating them as evidence of late nineteenth-century vocal culture situated between bel canto inheritance, Belle Époque salon practice, and everyday operatic expression. Rather than extending existing biographical narratives, the discussion concentrates on aspects of vocal writing, Italian prosody, and recurring stylistic patterns across a selected group of works.

Attention is given to the interaction between poetic rhythm and melodic design, as well as to features such as legato shaping, dynamic nuance, vowel-centred vocality, and declamatory inflection. Read together, these elements suggest that Tosti's songs operate as compact, micro-dramatic forms in which expressive detail carries cultural meaning. From this perspective, the repertoire can be reconsidered not as marginal salon material, but as a revealing lens through which performance practice and musical taste in the Belle Époque may be more closely understood.

Scholarship on Francesco Paolo Tosti has developed unevenly, with attention distributed across biography, performance-oriented commentary, and pedagogical discussion, while broader musicological recontextualisation has remained comparatively limited. Existing studies have provided a solid factual basis for understanding Tosti's career and the practical circulation of his songs, yet they have also tended to reinforce an understanding of the repertoire primarily in functional or instructional terms.

The most substantial foundation for Tosti studies is provided by the work of Francesco Sanvitale. His early monograph *Francesco Paolo Tosti: Vita e opere* (1991), together with the later *Il canto di una vita* (1996) and its expanded English version *The Song of a Life* (Sanvitale, 2004), offers essential biographical documentation and a detailed chronological framework for situating Tosti within his historical context. These studies, however, remain largely documentary in orientation and engage only selectively with questions of musical style, vocal

aesthetics, or broader cultural meaning. This emphasis on documentary richness has also been noted in Anglophone scholarship. Contemporary reviews of Sanvitale's work tend to foreground its archival and historical value, while leaving issues of musical language and stylistic interpretation largely unexplored (Allsop, 2006).

Subsequent research has built upon this biographical groundwork primarily through approaches grounded in vocal performance and studio practice. Studies by Munson (2018) and Kano (2016), for instance, concentrate on technical challenges, interpretative considerations, and applied performance issues, positioning Tosti's songs as resources for vocal development. These perspectives may be further situated within broader discussions of vocal pedagogy and tenor vocal aesthetics (Potter, 2009). While such practice-based studies do not aim to develop sustained musicological argument, they nonetheless attest to the ongoing circulation of Tosti's songs within applied performance contexts and pedagogical traditions in higher music education, as reflected in graduate recital documentation and performance-based theses (Cai, 2025; Hawkins, 2016).

More recent contributions have begun to move tentatively beyond this framework. Groth and Seesholtz (2025), although still operating within a *bel canto*-oriented technical perspective, raise broader questions concerning aesthetic tradition and the processes of repertoire canonisation within Italian vocal literature. From a different angle, scholarship on Italian musical migration and vocal pedagogy in London has highlighted how vocal practices circulated across pedagogical, salon, and professional spheres, providing a broader cultural context for composers such as Tosti who operated within these transnational networks (Rutherford, 2021).

Taken together, existing research has made significant contributions in the areas of biography and performance-oriented application, yet a clear gap remains in the systematic recontextualisation of Tosti's songs within late nineteenth-century vocal culture. In particular, there is limited scholarship that situates these works within the aesthetic environment of the Belle Époque, examines the interaction between poetic text and musical design, or considers their role as micro-dramatic forms bridging salon practice and operatic sensibility. The present study addresses this gap by re-examining Tosti's Italian art songs through a musicological lens, aiming to recover their historical, aesthetic, and performative significance beyond the long-standing label of sentimental or merely functional repertoire.

Analytical Framework for Recontextualizing Tosti's Italian Art Songs

This study approaches Tosti's Italian art songs as products of a specific late nineteenth-century vocal environment, shaped by *bel canto* inheritance, salon conventions, and contemporary operatic sensibilities. Rather than treating the repertoire primarily as pedagogical material, the analysis considers performance as a historically situated expressive practice, attentive to the ways musical detail, text setting, and vocal gesture interact within particular cultural contexts. The scope of repertoire examined is deliberately restricted in order to allow for close, work-centred analysis. Four songs—*L'ultima canzone*, *'A vucchella*, *L'alba separa dalla luce l'ombra*, and *Malia*—are selected as case studies because, when considered together, they bring into focus recurring stylistic and expressive tendencies within Tosti's output. Unless otherwise indicated, musical examples and analytical references in this study are based on Ricordi editions of these works (Tosti, 1984; Tosti, 2003).

Each song foregrounds a different aspect of vocal and expressive design: extended legato phrasing and sustained continuity in *L'ultima canzone*; vowel-centred lyricism and dialect-inflected articulation in *'A vucchella*; refined dynamic shading and messa di voce in *L'alba separa dalla luce l'ombra*; and flexible declamation shaped by speech-like rhythmic inflection in *Malia*. Taken collectively, these works span a spectrum from intimate lyricism to heightened dramatic expression, making them particularly suited to examining Tosti's characteristic micro-dramatic approach to vocal writing.

The analytical discussion proceeds along two closely connected lines. On the one hand, attention is directed towards the musical score itself, with close reading used to identify features of vocal construction such as phrase design, register negotiation, portamento, and the shaping of melodic ascent and descent. In this context, particular emphasis is placed on vowel treatment and tonal consistency, in dialogue with established discussions of Italianate vocal production within the bel canto tradition (Miller, 1986). On the other hand, these musical observations are situated within their broader expressive, linguistic, and historical setting. This involves close engagement with the poetic texts, consideration of salon performance environments characteristic of the Belle Époque (Parker, 1989), and examination of how emotional meaning is articulated through specific musical gestures.

These two perspectives are treated as inseparable. Technical features are not discussed in isolation, but are understood in relation to questions of style, meaning, and historical practice. Read in this way, Tosti's Italian art songs emerge as compact yet sophisticated forms of vocal expression, whose apparent immediacy is underpinned by a carefully calibrated interaction between musical design, poetic nuance, and performance convention. Rather than functioning merely as utilitarian repertoire, they can be approached as culturally situated artefacts that reflect the vocal aesthetics and expressive priorities of their time.

Analytical Perspectives on Vocal Writing and Expressive Design in Tosti's Italian Art Songs

Legato and Breath Management in the Extended Phrase

Tosti's handling of extended melodic writing is clearly evident in *Malia*. The opening phrase unfolds across a relatively wide span, often extending over two to three bars without internal pauses or explicitly notated breath marks. Rather than presenting discrete, segmented units, the vocal line is shaped as a continuous melodic gesture, one that relies on sustained airflow and carefully balanced support to maintain its stability (see Figure 1).

10 CANTO *p*
Co - sa e' e - ra ne' l fior che m' hai da - to?.. For - se un

pp

Figure 1: Francesco Paolo Tosti, *Malia*, Opening Phrase (Bars 10–14), Illustrating Extended Legato Design and Breath Continuity.

Source: Tosti, *Malia*, Voice and Piano Score, Ricordi Edition.

What is particularly striking is the way breathing is implied rather than prescribed. In *L'ultima canzone*, for instance, long phrases frequently reach a point of melodic descent accompanied by a momentary relaxation of piano texture. These passages create a brief expressive suspension, within which a breath may be taken without disrupting the continuity of the musical line. Such moments function as musically articulated breathing points, allowing extended phrasing to be sustained across successive sections. The interaction between melodic contour, harmonic support, and expressive pacing plays a central role in shaping the coherence and the flowing quality characteristic of Tosti's vocal writing.

Dynamic Nuance and Messa di Voce

In *L'alba separa dalla luce l'ombra*, Tosti employs *messa di voce* as a central expressive device to articulate the shifting imagery of light and shadow at dawn. The poetic contrast embedded in the text is translated into precise dynamic organisation within the vocal line. Ascending melodic motion associated with the word *luce* is frequently accompanied by a controlled crescendo, while references to *ombra* are marked by immediate dynamic withdrawal, often to *piano* or *più piano* (Figure 2).

At climactic moments, sustained pitches are shaped through clearly indicated dynamic expansion and contraction. The notation of *crescendo–diminuendo* on a single pitch demands exceptional stability of intonation and the timbral consistency across dynamic change. Comparable techniques appear in *'A vucchella*, where sudden contrasts between accented and immediately withdrawn dynamics contribute to a playful and expressive vocal character. In both cases, dynamic nuance functions not as an ornament, but as an integral component of musical meaning.

CANTO *con anima*

L'al - ba se - rà dal - la lu - ce

l'om - bra..... e la mia vo - lut - tà..... dal mio de -

Figure 2: Francesco Paolo Tosti, *L'alba Separa Dalla Luce L'ombra*, Climactic Phrase (Bars 2–5), Showing *Messa Di Voce* And Dynamic Shaping On Sustained Pitch.

Source : Tosti, *L'alba sepàra dalla luce l'ombra*, Ricordi edition

Vowel Purity and Italianate Tone

In *'A vucchella*, Tosti places particular emphasis on the acoustic and expressive potential of open Italian vowels as a means of shaping an Italianate vocal timbre. The title itself foregrounds resonant vowel sounds, which are frequently positioned at melodic peaks or sustained tones. Such placement highlights the forward resonance and clarity associated with *bel canto* vocal aesthetics (Figure 3).

The image shows a musical score for tenor and piano. The tenor part is on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The lyrics are: 'na vue - chel - la nu po - co po - co - ril - lo ap -'. The piano part consists of two staves, treble and bass clef, with a key signature of one flat. The piano part features chords and melodic lines in both hands, with some notes marked with accents and slurs.

Figure 3: Francesco Paolo Tosti, 'A Vucchella, Vocal Phrase Featuring Open Vowels At Melodic Peak (Bars 20–23).

Source: Tosti, *A vucchella*, Ricordi edition.

Closed vowels in the upper register are treated with comparable compositional sensitivity, particularly in *Malia*. Rather than assigning sustained high pitches to acoustically restrictive vowels, Tosti often integrates them within stepwise or passing melodic motion. This compositional strategy facilitates subtle vowel modification within fluent melodic movement, supporting tonal uniformity and timbral coherence across the range. These passages reflect a sophisticated understanding of the interaction between vocal production, linguistic articulation, and melodic design.

Text Declamation and Agility

Tosti's art songs exemplify a close integration of music and poetry, a quality particularly evident in *'A vucchella*, set to a text by Gabriele d'Annunzio. The predominantly syllabic setting aligns musical rhythm closely with the natural prosody of the Italian language, allowing verbal stress patterns to shape melodic articulation. This approach results in a declamatory vocal style in which musical rhythm serves linguistic clarity and expressive immediacy.

At the same time, Tosti introduces passages requiring agility and rhythmic flexibility to intensify textual expression. In *Malia*, ornamental figures and rapid passing notes evoke the unsettling sense of "charm" or "enchantment" suggested by the text. These gestures demand clarity and precision while remaining subordinate to poetic meaning. Agility here is not deployed as virtuosic display, but as a vehicle for heightened expressive nuance, enabling a seamless fusion of text and music at the micro-level.

Contextualizing Tosti within Italian Vocal Culture

Moving Beyond the Cliché of the Sentimental Label

For much of the twentieth century, Tosti's songs have frequently been described as "sweet," "sentimental," or simply as salon music—labels that render them pleasant yet trivial and risk obscuring their artistic and cultural depth. To move beyond this view, his work must be situated within a broader historical and aesthetic frame. What is often dismissed as Tosti's sentimentality can instead be understood as a small-scale manifestation of late nineteenth-century Italian realism in chamber vocal music. Rather than projecting the public, explosive conflicts associated with works such as *Cavalleria rusticana*, Tosti directs the realist gaze inward, toward private emotional experience, tracing subtle tremors of longing, loss, and memory.

In a song such as *Non t'amo più* ("I No Longer Love You"), the music does not simply indulge in sadness. Through restrained harmonic language and speech-like, quasi-recitative vocal writing, it articulates a clear yet painful emotional resolution, offering a highly concentrated form of expressive truth. More broadly, Tosti's art songs may be heard as a sonic reflection of post-unification Italian bourgeois culture. They responded to the expectations of middle-class and aristocratic salons that valued accessibility and elegance without sacrificing emotional depth. Within the formal constraints of the genre, Tosti consistently achieves a balance between concentrated affect, refined compositional control, and pointed poetic expression. To reduce his output to mere sentimentality is therefore to overlook the subtle compositional strategies at work, his finely calibrated treatment of Italian prosody, and his role as a stylistic bridge between the bel canto tradition and emerging popular vocal idioms of the early twentieth century. Seen from this perspective, Tosti's songs emerge not as minor sentimental artefacts, but as finely tuned micro-narratives of everyday emotion situated within the aesthetic horizon of the Belle Époque.

Poetic and Linguistic Analysis in Dialogue Between Text and Music

Much of Tosti's expressive success lies in his acute sensitivity to the musical potential of poetic language. His songs frequently grow out of a close engagement with textual rhythm and imagery, allowing music and poetry to function in a mutually reinforcing dialogue. Selective in his choice of texts, Tosti set poems by prominent literary figures of his time, including Gabriele d'Annunzio and Renzo Cikoni, using musical means to intensify, extend, or subtly reframe poetic meaning.

At the most fundamental level, Tosti demonstrates careful attention to the natural cadence of spoken Italian. In *Aprile* ("April"), for example, the vocal line closely mirrors the rise and fall of speech, aligning melodic stress with linguistic accent to such an extent that the sung phrase approaches a form of heightened, musicalised declamation characteristic of late-nineteenth-century Italian vocal practice. Elsewhere, Tosti translates visual and sensory imagery into sound. In *Malecalte*, continuous, wave-like arpeggiation in the piano accompaniment evokes the shimmering surface of the Bay of Naples, while in *L'ultima canzone* ("The Last Song") extended descending chromatic motion conveys emotional irreversibility and loss. Harmonic inflection further shapes poetic atmosphere, particularly in settings of d'Annunzio's symbolist verse, where semitonal shifts and tonal ambiguity contribute to a hazy, dreamlike sound world. In this sense, Tosti's songs are not simply musical adornments of pre-existing texts; rather, they

constitute joint artistic creations in which poetry and music complete one another, transforming the poem into a script for intimate musical drama.

Stylistic Interpretation Through Belle Époque Performance Practice

Any historically informed reading of Tosti's songs must take into account the performance contexts in which they circulated, particularly the vocal aesthetics associated with Belle Époque salon culture. In contrast to the expansive, overtly dramatic style of the opera house, salon performance favoured intimacy, immediacy, and expressive flexibility. Within this environment, vocal delivery prioritised nuanced timbral variation over sheer volume, allowing singers to move fluidly between confidential softness and warm lyrical projection. This quasi-whispered mode of expression played a central role in shaping listeners' experience of Tosti's songs and contributes significantly to their affective impact.

Rhythmic flexibility likewise formed a core element of Belle Époque vocal practice. Notated rhythmic values functioned less as rigid prescriptions than as expressive frameworks, within which performers exercised interpretative elasticity. Subtle lingering at emotionally charged moments and fluid transitions through narrative passages enhanced the speech-like quality of musical delivery. Contemporary accounts further suggest that restrained ornamentation—such as discreet appoggiaturas, vibrato shading, or brief cadential embellishment—was both acceptable and expected, particularly in repeated phrases. Crucially, such expressive interventions were understood as serving emotional trajectory rather than virtuosic display. Recovering these historically grounded conventions is essential for moving beyond strictly score-bound modern readings and for restoring the intimate expressive character that originally defined Tosti's vocal works.

The Bridge to Grand Opera

Although widely associated with the art-song repertoire, Tosti's musical language remains closely connected to the traditions of nineteenth-century Italian grand opera. His songs may be understood as condensed dramatic utterances—miniature counterparts to operatic arias—capable of projecting psychological depth within a compressed formal span. This affinity helps to explain why celebrated opera singers such as Enrico Caruso and Beniamino Gigli regularly included Tosti's songs in their concert programmes.

The vocal writing in these works supports the projection of sustained melodic arches, dramatic contrast, and role-based expression comparable to operatic practice. Extended legato phrasing nuanced dynamic shaping, and shifts in vocal colour function as tools for character construction rather than as displays of technical prowess. In songs such as *Ideale*, the musical design invites the articulation of a complete psychological arc, progressing from yearning through intensity to emotional disillusionment. In this way, Tosti's art songs occupy a distinctive position between salon intimacy and operatic drama, offering singers a medium through which bel canto technique and realist expressive impulse are fused within the scale of chamber music.

Conclusion

Taken together, the discussions made in this paper indicate that Italian art songs by Francesco Paolo Tosti are worth being reevaluated in the context outside their traditional links with salon shows or practical singing. A careful examination of a few representative songs reveals a certain

standard of compositional awareness in the vocal writing and text setting that is frequently ignored. These songs do not simply provide pleasant tonal backgrounds, but they form small but precisely focused emotional scenarios, where the vocal line, the rhythmic cycle of the poetry, and the expressive gesture are woven into one another.

When viewed within the aesthetic space of the Belle Époque, Tosti's songs can be interpreted as the manifestations of the vocal culture that appreciated intimacy, immediacy, and expressive delicacy. Aspects of extended legato phrasing, dynamic shading, vowel-focused timbral organisation and speech-inflected declamation are not only technical effects but stylistic reactions to modern listening and performance practice. In this regard, the repertoire is not merely a collection of well-rendered miniatures but rather a glimpse of the normal vocal expression at work but independent of the operatic tradition at the time.

To be more general, the approach taken from this perspective tends to be an orientation toward the other repertoires of the song, which are also called "light" or "peripheral." By restoring technical specificity and poetic form, as well as historical context, a re-evaluation of such work becomes possible; it is now heard on its terms, not in terms of the large-scale forms of drama. In this perspective, the Italian art songs of Tosti, rather than appearing as peripheral accompaniments to the operative culture. They can be seen as the artefacts of expressivity, which are directed to express a specific vocal sensibility, that is, a sense of realism, refinement, and emotional restraint, and whose value in Italian musical life in the late-nineteenth century is therefore worth consideration.

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