



THE MANY MEANINGS OF MINA

POPULAR MUSIC STARDOM
IN POST-WAR ITALY

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Introduction

Mina is the greatest Italian singer of all times, but not only. For Italians, Mina is an icon equally important as the biggest and best known names about which they boast as proof that Italy has the highest quality everything in the world, like Ferrari or Fellini. In the Italian collective imagination, Mina is a national treasure to be proud of and jealously guarded. During the '60s and the '70s Mina embodied the very essence of the ultra-talented superstar on stage, in TV and in her records. She made television history and then suddenly, inexplicably decided to retire. She sang Italy's greatest hits, which for over 40 years have been the leitmotiv of the everyday life of the Italian people. Nowadays Mina releases one record a year. She is perhaps the only artist in the world that does not offer herself up to the media – as a matter of fact, she does not grant interviews, has not appeared in concert or made any other public appearance for more than 20 years. Yet, all her new albums reach number one in the national hit parade.

(Mina Mazzini Official Website 2020a: n.pag.).

Mina (born Anna Maria Mazzini, 1940) is arguably the best-loved and most successful female Italian popular music artist. Since the start of her recording career in 1958, she has to date released 72 studio albums and scored eight number one singles in Italy alone. In 2018, Mina celebrated 70 years as an active popular music artist and her popularity showed no signs of waning: the 2018 solo album *Maeba* charted in the number one spot upon its release in March and had sold more than 25,000 copies in Italy alone by 11 June 2018, thus achieving gold record status.

Yet as the above excerpt from Mina's website suggests, the popular music star is famous for being much more than just a singer. In addition to her recording career, Mina was the face of Italian Saturday night variety television during the 1960s and 1970s, hosting popular series such as *Studio Uno* ('Studio One') (1961–65), *Canzonissima* ('Lots of Songs') (1959, 1960, 1968), *Teatro 10* ('Theatre 10') (1972), and *Milleluci* ('A Thousand Lights') (1974); she starred in twelve *musicarelli* movies between 1960 and 1967;¹ and she was the face of the advertising campaigns for Industria Italiana della Birra (the Italian beer industry), Barilla, and Tassoni during the 1960s and 1970s, and then the voice for Barilla again in the 2000s, and for the telecommunications giant TIM in the 2010s. Her private life has been the focus of magazines and newspapers

from the end of the 1950s, with articles on her relationships during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the scandalous birth out of wedlock of her son, Massimiliano, in 1963, and her family life during the 1960s and 1970s, including the tragedies of losing her brother in 1965 and her first husband in 1973, both killed in car crashes. Following Mina's retirement from live and television appearances at the end of the 1970s, her contact with the public has been mediated by her record label, PDU, currently managed by Massimiliano. When the company decided to stream live behind-the-scenes footage of Mina in the recording studio in 2001, WIND telecommunications as server host for PDU received 50 million hits, which crashed the system (Mina Mazzini Official Website 2020a: n.pag.).

Mina, then, is part of Italian everyday life. Yet whilst the website biography is perhaps not the most objective of sources, it makes an important point about the status that Mina has achieved within Italy. In demonstrating how Mina has come to signify talent, quality, and greatness, and is a part of Italian cultural heritage of which her countrymen and women can and should be proud, the site creates a story about Mina that renders her an icon of Italy. She is presented as the best that the country has to offer to the rest of the world, and as constituting a reference point for values and ideals for all Italians.

This book focuses on the story of Mina. More precisely, it focuses on the stories that are created through the different phases of her career by the recording industry, the print media, television, the film industry, advertising, fans, and social media. After all, it is the stories that society tells about its celebrities, stars, and icons which generate this status and then perpetuate it, ensuring that the famous person remains famous. It is clear that, in this case, these stories do not necessarily always reveal the real Anna Maria Mazzini, the individual: rather, they function to construct Mina, the star persona. Some aspects of private life are of course revealed but my primary aim in this book is not to reconstruct Mina's biography. Instead, I want to concentrate on the persona of Mina, and to track how this persona has been created within Italian popular culture from the 1950s onwards. By revealing the stories that are generated, and tracing how these stories persist and interact throughout Mina's 60-year career, I want to demonstrate what Mina has come to mean within Italian culture and, perhaps more importantly, how these meanings have been produced and how they have continued to circulate and thus inform our understanding of Mina as Italian popular music star and icon.

By using Mina as a case study in this way, we can also examine Italian culture from the 1950s to the present day, as the star becomes a cultural symbol who sheds light on the traditions, values, and ideals that have shaped and continue to inform Italian society.² Because Mina was involved in and made famous through so many different media throughout her career, she is well placed to reveal the

societal norms, trends, and values that were and are at work across Italian culture in the second half of the twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries. But the fact that Mina is a star across different media also means that she becomes an exemplary case study for reading the very nature of stardom and, specifically, for understanding how meanings are created and circulate within a star persona. This book therefore sheds light not only on the meanings of a popular music star in an Italian context but also on the processes by which meaning is generated, star personae are created, and stories about stars circulate and interact to produce new significances for audiences in this case.

But how do stars come to mean what they mean? Star meaning, or what Richard Dyer calls the star image, is ‘made out of media texts that can be grouped together as *promotion*, *publicity*, *films* and *criticism* and *commentaries*’ (Dyer 1998: 60, original emphasis). Promotion refers to texts which deliberately create a particular image of a particular star, whilst publicity is what the press finds out or what the star ‘lets slip’. Criticism and commentaries are what is said or written about the star by critics and writers. Film is important to Dyer’s analysis as his focus is on film stars specifically; in the context of popstars, we need to think about music and the other various media in which the popstar performs.

Dyer also acknowledges the need to focus on the blending of media texts in order to understand the nature of the star image, which, thanks to this blending, is established in its own right. To develop our understanding of this process, I would suggest that we can think about the star image as providing a snapshot of star significance at a particular moment in the star’s career. This significance becomes concretized over time, ultimately resulting in a star persona that can be seen as a totality in terms of a star’s status and overall significance. Building on Dyer’s reading of star images, Stephen Lowry explains how important the blending of media texts is to the production of this image, but also, I would argue, of star persona. He suggests that ‘stardom appears not as a more or less unified entity, but as the intersection of different systems’ (Lowry 1997: 209). As such, ‘star images cannot be grasped essentially, but only as the points of intersection of multiple processes – textual, intertextual, institutional, cultural or subcultural, psychological, and semiotic processes’ (Lowry 1997: 317). Star image and thus meaning is produced by the intersections of different texts, intertexts, and contexts, with the star persona and overarching significance the result of the accumulation and intersections of different star images from across a star’s career. It is this idea of intersection that is helpful in establishing how stars develop specific meanings. After all, as Homi Bhabha explains, the interstice is a crucial ‘in-between’ space that provides the opportunity for the negotiation of identity and meaning (Bhabha 2004: 2). Thus my aim with Mina is to examine

examples of these intersections of processes, in order to identify and interrogate her significance as a star.

We can also draw on Barthes' conceptualization of myth to shed light on how meaning is produced and stars come to signify whatever it is they mean: Barthes argues that

myth is a system of communication, [...] it is a message [...] a mode of signification, a form. [...] Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no 'substantial' ones.

(Barthes 1972: 107)

The star as an example of myth communicates particular messages and significances to her audiences; yet these significances arguably know no limits. Every significance that each audience member identifies is potentially as important, possible, and appropriate as the next. The limits to the myth, according to Barthes, come in forms. But what might constitute the forms for our popstar Mina? Barthes suggests we look at 'the way in which myth utters its message'. In the case of Mina, these ways are the means, or 'mediums', through which the audience has access to her and which then shape her message (or significance). As is apparent from her career trajectory, these mediums include the popular music industry, album covers, television, film, the press, and advertising, as well as scandal, tragedy, and absence, and the broader historical, cultural, and social context of twentieth-century Italy. These mediums all intersect to produce Mina's star image, to which specific media texts also contribute. There is an important distinction to make between media text and mediums (hence my use of the word 'mediums' in this way). Each has a different function in creating and shaping Mina's star image and thus her significance. In this book, I use the idea of 'media text' to refer to a cultural artefact about Mina or featuring Mina that is produced (so an advertisement, a song, a film, or a review, for example), the content of which is shaped by the medium or mediums to which it belongs. These mediums, such as the popular music or television industry, dictate the types of media text that can and cannot be produced, as well as their content, according to the expectations for the medium in question, which govern what is or is not appropriate in that context. Mediums also therefore influence the type of star image that can be produced, and limit its potential meanings, acting as a prism through which we can read the resultant star significance.

Identifying and analysing the interaction of mediums at work here is fundamental to interpreting 'the many meanings of Mina', and it is for this reason that I propose the framework of intermediality as a practical model to draw upon in order to analyse the intersections and interactions of mediums. Such a framework

acknowledges the importance of the media (or medium in our case) but allows for an exploration of what happens when these intersect. The creative potential of the 'in-between', the interstice, is picked up by Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt in their analysis of intermediality in theatre. They define intermediality as the intersections created when 'art forms of theatre, opera and dance meet, interact and integrate with the media of cinema, television, video and new technologies, creating profusions of texts, inter-texts, inter-media and spaces in-between' and argue that 'intermediality in theatre and performance is a creative and mental space that operates in-between the arts, politics, science and philosophy' (Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006: 24). What they argue is that, in the context of theatre, the intersections of media provide an intermedial space that encourages 'the exchangeability of expressive means and aesthetic conventions between different art and media forms' (Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006: 12) and the production of new meanings.

Thinking about intermediality in this way and in the context of the theatre specifically also enhances our understanding of Mina and her star image as an intermedium, the product of the intersections of mediums, where new meanings are produced through the exchange and interaction of expressive means and aesthetic conventions. Moreover, we can see the person and body of Mina as the stage upon which these mediums intersect and interact to produce new meanings and the site where media texts blend. The power of the interstice to create new significances is particularly important in the case of Mina as a star who transcends her original medium of popular music, becoming an intermedium thanks to, for example, her television and film appearances. Her resultant status of star in Italian popular culture then has the power to reveal the values and ideals that shape and govern Italy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The book is structured as chronologically as possible, to reveal the ways in which meanings are created and then build on and interact with other meanings as Mina's career develops. However, each chapter takes as its focus a particular medium that was particularly important during the time period in question for shaping the story and Mina's resultant star persona. Chapter 1 provides the context necessary to analyse Mina as an Italian pop music star. After providing an introduction to Mina and her key achievements, it outlines the key cultural, social, and political changes of the period in Italian history when Mina has been active. This cultural context informs our understanding of the dominant values and ideals at work within Italian society in the post-war period, establishing a benchmark against which we can analyse Mina's cultural significance. But given that Mina is a pop music star, it is also important to consider how that particular type of stardom is constructed, in order to shed light on how Mina's star status has been constructed. The chapter thus concludes with an overview of how we can read popstars.

The remaining chapters focus on one key medium in turn, as a way of tracing the development of Mina's star status and meaning during her career. In Chapter 2, I explore how the Italian music industry of the late 1950s and early 1960s shaped Mina's significance at the start of her career in 1958. I examine how her star status was informed by two popular genres of the moment: *urlo*, Italy's answer to rock 'n' roll, and the *canzone all'italiana*, Italian traditional song epitomized by the Sanremo Festival in this period.³ Chapter 3 then outlines how these early significances were confirmed through Mina's performances in a series of *musicarelli* movies in the early 1960s. These films acted as a showcase of the young music stars of the moment and functioned to promote both the singer and their songs. As a result, these film appearances underscore and magnify Mina's initial star status, and disseminate it to increasingly larger audiences.

Chapter 4 focuses on two mediums that were crucial to introducing new significances to Mina around the family and her role within it as a young woman in 1960s' Italy: scandal and tragedy. Scandal arrived for Mina in 1963 when she announced she was expecting a baby out of wedlock. Tragedy would then hit her family in 1965, when her younger brother was killed in a car crash. These two mediums shape the media response to these events in Mina's private life that were made public thanks to her status as star. But the events would also introduce new meanings to Mina's star persona: she was now a mother and a member of both a traditional family unit and an unconventional one with her son, Massimiliano, and her partner, Corrado Pani.

Chapter 5 again analyses Mina's presence in the Italian media but this time, I focus on the medium of television. During the 1960s and 1970s when Mina was performing on Italian television, RAI was the only broadcaster and thus played an important role in shaping her star image according to accepted perceptions of gender roles and of how to be a woman, at least in her early performances on television. Mina would go on to become a popular host of Saturday night variety programmes for the broadcaster until her decision to retire from television performances at the end of the 1970s. Television would therefore play an important role in disseminating Mina's star status and meaning to large audiences in this period. Mina's performances for the advertising programme *Carosello* ('Carousel') (1957–77) were also important in this regard: these are my focus in Chapter 6. Between 1961 and 1977, Mina would be the face of Industria Italiana beer, Barilla pasta, and Tassoni soft drinks. Given the cultural and social importance of *Carosello* as a tool for educating Italian viewers on the modernization and commercialization of Italian society in the 1960s and 1970s, these advertisements also functioned to educate the audience about Mina's star significance, as well as proposing new meanings during the period.

Chapter 7 explores how Mina's album and single covers have contributed to and shaped her significance during her career. Album covers are an important

medium in shaping the significance of a popstar for the consumer, given their function to inform the audience about what type of music they can expect from the singer, and about the singer's talent and appeal. During Mina's career, her album covers reveal the extent to which the star becomes an essentialized figure. As a result, Mina remains as popular as ever with audiences even following her decision to withdraw from public life in 1978: her name and a fleeting visual reference to the star are enough to attract audiences, who continue to buy her albums thanks to their ongoing fascination with the star. This fascination is particularly evident in the activities of the Mina Fan Club, Mina fans on Facebook, and of Italian television when celebrating Mina's 80th birthday in 2020. These three examples constitute my focus in Chapter 8, where I analyse how the medium of absence in fact encourages fans, listeners, audiences, and consumers to create new, personalized meanings of the star.

All of these meanings emerge thanks to Mina's intersection and interaction with the various mediums with which she has been involved during her career. The meanings that are created as a result of these intersections, generate a star persona that embodies a specific set of significances. Mina is then the stage on which this significance is created and the meaning-making process plays out. And it is thanks to this process that Mina becomes a piece of Italian heritage of which her fellow countrymen can be proud.

NOTES

1. *Musicarello* is a genre of film in Italy from the late 1950s to the early 1970s and has no direct English equivalent. The films featured the popular pop singers of the moment and promoted their songs. They were particularly popular with young audiences. See Chapter 3 for more information about the genre.
2. I am building here on Stephen Gundle's work on Italian cinema stars having the ability to 'function as a cultural symbol and conduit for ideas about gender, values and national identity' (Gundle 2008: 263).
3. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of terminology and citations from the original Italian are mine.