

POPULAR MUSIC STUDIES IN ITALY: A HISTORICAL/POLITICAL OVERVIEW

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Where to begin? When? Let me jot down a few schematic notes: later on, I will put them into a proper chronological order.

If by ‘popular music studies’ we strictly mean the inclusion of popular music-related subjects in the syllabuses of Italian academic institutions (universities and conservatories), then a historical overview could only start at the end of the 1990s, or at the beginning of the 2000s. If we enlarge the focus to include the appearance of dissertations on those subjects (in the absence of formally organized courses), we have to go back to the late 1970s or, more consistently, to the mid-1980s.

I may be wrong, but the very first course at an Italian university referring to ‘popular music’ in its title was my course at the University of Turin, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, in the academic year 2001–2002: before then, the term had not been accepted in the Italian academia, despite the existence of an Italian branch of IASPM, since 1983, and despite the fact that the Second International Conference on Popular Music Studies had been held in Italy in the same year. This suggests that a historical/political overview must not be limited to the periods of time when popular music studies have existed, but has to be extended back in search of the reasons why such studies were prevented from coming to existence previously. This problem is not specifically Italian, of course. An obvious example is offered by the fact that the first international conference convened in Amsterdam in 1981 was called ‘International Conference *on* Popular Music *Research*’, and that the association established on that occasion, at the end of the conference, was called ‘International Association *for* the *Study* of Popular Music’. If names have a meaning (and we can bet they had, for the kind of people

that founded IASPM), then we have to assume that the Amsterdam conference had been intended as a survey on the state of the art of popular music *research* (that is, of investigations mostly conducted by individuals, outside of the academia, or anyway outside of official syllabuses), while the association was meant as an instrument to promote the inclusion of popular music *studies* in the academia, as clearly affirmed in its Statutes. At that time, there was an agreement that the easiest and most straightforward way to define ‘popular music’ was ‘music that is not taught or studied in the academia’.

A negative definition similar to the previous one was very common in Italy in the 1970s: *musica extracolta*, that is, music located outside of the ‘territory’ of cultured music or the one considered art. (*Musica extracolta*, then, would include not only popular music, but also folk music – although it was becoming an academic subject just in the mid-1970s, in Italy – and jazz). That decade is relevant to this overview also because popular music, as well as folk and jazz, was at the centre of a broad movement of *scuole popolari di musica* (popular schools of music). Teachers and pupils in those unofficial schools were confronted practically every day with theoretical and historical issues, for which there was no coverage in traditional teaching. It must be noted that questions about popular music as a subject for school teachers are an important reason for the growth of early popular music studies in the 1970s, also elsewhere: a topic almost forgotten or marginalized today, yet very important in the early 1980s¹.

Still earlier, since the late 1950s, discussions on popular music in Italy had been focused mainly on folk revival and topical songs vs. commercial songs, under the labels of *canzone diversa* or *nuova canzone* and *canzone di consumo*.

If we accept such labels, and the subtle linguistic distinction put forward in Amsterdam in 1981, we can roughly divide the history of popular music research and studies in Italy in the past sixty years as follows:

¹ See: N. Josephs, *Popular Music Research: Its Uses in Education*; O. Straarup, *Popular Music Research: Needs and Uses in Education*; P. Tagg, *Music Teacher Training Problems and Popular Music Research*, [in:] *Popular Music Perspectives*, Papers from The First International Conference on Popular Music Research, Amsterdam, June 1981, eds. D. Horn, P. Tagg, Göteborg – Exeter 1982.

- 1960s – individual research and public debates on *canzone diversa*, *nuova canzone*, *canzone di consumo*;
- 1970s – unofficial/individual research on *musica extracolta*, debates on *canzone politica*, *canzone d'autore*, jazz, Italian rock;
- 1980s – early IASPM conferences (1983: Reggio Emilia), the establishment of IASPM-Italy, dissertations and seminars at some universities (Bologna, Rome, Milan);
- 1990s – more conferences (1995: *Analisi e canzoni*, Trento), early courses on subjects related with popular music;
- 2000s – another International IASPM conference (2005: Rome), popular music courses at some universities;
- 2010s – popular music courses in some conservatories, and discussions about the formal inclusion of popular music studies into the existing musicological disciplines.

Of course, there is no clear division between these decades: topics, methodological trends, degrees of institutional refusal/acceptance flow from one period to the following one. However, is there anything worth considering before the late 1950s?

Definitely, yes. For the purpose of this paper, I would suggest to add what I called elsewhere *Il Trentennio*², that is, the period including the two decades of the Fascist rule (called *Ventennio* in Italian) and the first decade after the Second World War, which, as far as popular music is concerned, are politically and culturally similar: it is a time when the 'official' approach towards *musica leggera* (light music) was created and administered by the State-owned broadcasting company (URI, since 1924, EIAR, since 1928, and RAI, since 1944–1946). That is also the period when the Italian philosophical debate was dominated by two scholars/politicians, the liberal Benedetto Croce and the fascist Giovanni Gentile, who held music – in different ways – in low esteem as compared to other arts: little more than a *soubrette* (Croce), an activity for young ladies (*signorine*, Gentile), contaminated by technique and practice, devoid of the purity of poetry (Croce). And Gentile, Minister of Education in the early years of Fascism,

² F. Fabbri, *Il Trentennio: 'musica leggera' alla radio italiana, 1928–1958*, [in:] *La musica alla radio, 1924–1954. Storia, effetti, contesti in prospettiva europea*, ed. A.I. De Benedictis, Roma 2014.

was responsible for the reform of public instruction (1923), which still today constitutes the basis for the marginalization of music teaching in Italian schools.

Another consequence is that until the end of the Second World War there was very little room for music studies at universities (whereas conservatories were reserved, and still are, to technical training, with very little space for historical/theoretical courses). Still in 1959, the situation of musicology in Italy was described as fundamentally meager, with some occasional chairs established for purely hedonistic reasons³, and only twenty years later a co-authored survey could proudly state that „specifically during the 1960s and 1970s, Italian musicology achieved the solid academic status that it had previously lacked”⁴. As I have hinted above, ethnomusicology entered the Italian academia in the mid-1970s. The late elevation of musicological and ethnomusicological studies to a ‘solid academic status’ is mainly responsible of some of the polemics that have taken place in recent decades, when popular music scholars raised the issue of the admission of popular music studies into Italian academia: that academic status, as a matter of fact, was not so ‘solid’, musicologists were but a minority in the humanities, ethnomusicologists a very small platoon, popular music scholars risked tipping the existing balance of power, and to endanger the well established paths to academic careers for existing disciplines.

Anyway, our travel through the past does not finish with the *Trentennio*. We have to acknowledge another period in Italian and European history, extending from the 1850s to the early decades of the 20th century, when the new concepts of ‘classical music’ and ‘absolute music’ were created and gradually accepted, and when the third type of music (apart from ‘classical’ and ‘folk’) was identified as substantially devoid of any other value than commercial value, and labels like *Trivialmusik*, vulgar music, popular music, *musique de variétés*, *musica leggera*, began to circulate. When Guido Adler systematized musicological studies in 1885, there was obviously no room for popular music, and even the study of folk/traditional music, conceived

³ R. Allorto, C. Sartori, *La Musicologia italiana dal 1945 a oggi*, „Acta Musicologica” 1959, Vol. 31, No. 1, p. 10.

⁴ A.F. Gallo [et al.], *Vent’anni di musicologia in Italia*, „Acta Musicologica” 1982, Vol. 54, No. 1/2, p. 7.

(in the so-called comparative musicology) as a means to trace the origins of great European art music, left no room even for urban folk music (Béla Bartók *docuit*). The fact that popular music was basically ‘wrong’ and unworthy of any study became a commonplace, and remained such for a long time, at least until Adorno’s *On Popular Music*⁵, a fascinating second-hand sociological study of Tin Pan Alley⁶, aimed at demonstrating that popular music did not deserve any serious musicological study.

Mentioning Adorno is inevitable in this context, because his writings on music had a paramount importance in Italian debates, since the late 1950s. Although *On Popular Music* was only translated in 2004, other essential books appeared in Italian earlier than in any non-German speaking countries, especially *Dissonanzen*, the collection of essays including *Über den Fetisch-charakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens*⁷, which was published in Italian in 1959, with a translation by Giacomo Manzoni (a music critic and one of the best known Italian avant-garde composers). Also *Philosophie der neuen Musik* was translated by Manzoni, and published in the same year, 1959. The fact that Manzoni was a friend and close collaborator of the group of intellectuals at the centre of the debate on *canzone diversa*, *nuova canzone*, and *canzone di consumo* in the late 1950s and early 1960s⁸ suggests that some of the theoretical themes emerging since the 1850s have been influencing attitudes towards popular music until very recently.

To sum up, we have a couple of additions to our chronology:

- 1850s – 1910s – restructuring of the European musical semantic space into three large sets: ‘classical music’, ‘folk music’, and music not

⁵ T.W. Adorno (with the assistance of G. Simpson), *On Popular Music* (1941), [in:] *Essays on Music*. Theodor W. Adorno, ed. R. Leppert, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2002.

⁶ D. MacDougald Jr., *The Popular Music Industry*, [in:] *Radio Research 1941*, eds. P.F. Lazarsfeld, F.K. Stanton, New York 1941.

⁷ T.W. Adorno, *On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening* (1938), [in:] *Essays on Music...*, op. cit.

⁸ See: M.L. Straniero, S. Liberovici, E. Jona, G. De Maria, *Le canzoni della cattiva coscienza*, Milano 1964 (with *Prefazione* by Umberto Eco); U. Eco, *La canzone di consumo*, [in:] idem, *Apocalittici e integrati. Comunicazioni di massa e teorie della cultura di massa*, Milano 1964; idem, *Apocalypse Postponed*, Bloomington 1994.

belonging to the previous two categories (i.e. *Trivialmusik*, vulgar music, popular music, *musique de variétés*, *musica leggera*); formalization of musicological disciplines, with the exclusion of popular music;

- 1920s – 1950s – *Il Trentennio*. The role of the state-owned radio. Croce, Gentile and the devaluation of music. Late development of musicology and ethnomusicology. Adorno's influence.

Let us turn, now, to an important point in our historical overview: the years following the International conference of IASPM, held in Italy in 1983, when the term (and concept of) 'popular music' gradually appeared in Italian discussions, initially as a possible synonym of terms like *musica leggera*, *musica di consumo*, *canzone* or *musica extracolta*, and later as an alternative, based on a critique of the existing terminology.

Young Italian scholar, Roberto Agostini wrote an article titled *Studiare la popular music* („Studying popular music”) for a book edited by Gino Stefani (*Dal blues al liscio. Studi sull'esperienza musicale comune*), where the results of some pioneering Italian studies were collected (they were all extracts from dissertations at the University of Bologna, at a time when such studies were flourishing, thanks to the efforts of Stefani, Mario Baroni and Roberto Leydi). Agostini said:

The recent discussion on the subject of popular music originated from this sort of *intuitive popular music concept*, which at a general level is substantially agreed upon, but at a deeper level reveals an outstandingly multifaceted character and prompts disagreement. Within our contemporary musical universe it is possible to delimitate intuitively a vast set of musical activities which aren't 'serious' or 'folk', ranging from punk to rock'n'roll, from reggae to hip-hop, from ambient music to commercial jingles, from film and television music to songs of any kind, reaching areas where categorization is more difficult, like jazz, progressive rock, tango, minimalism. Now, in spite of evident differences, we have anyway the impression of facing a certain degree of homogeneity, some common elements. Indeed, all these music activities:

- are not studied in public institutions (conservatories, universities, schools of any type, research institutes);
- take place in the context of complex activities (multimedia communication, subcultures and countercultures, background of public and private environments);

- circulate largely in reproduced form (mass media, records, tapes, CDs, etc.) and are mainly produced in recording studios;
- systematically make use of modern electro-acoustic technologies;
- are encountered every day, even when one is not willing to;
- are generally approached in a 'distracted' mode; sometimes they aren't even 'listened to', but simply 'sensed';
- aren't subsidized by public money, but are based on free market;
- are professional activities;
- are widespread in modern industrialized society, where they are the music industry's more representative products;
- generally are not accompanied by any musical or aesthetic theory of their own;
- can often be found in the lowest social classes.

It is this impression of homogeneity that is indicated by the expression 'popular music'⁹.

As I commented years ago¹⁰, one can disagree radically or partially with each of Agostini's points, but to do him justice it must be said that the above 'intuitive concept', so articulated, is precisely what Agostini, in the following part of his article, criticized and deemed to be obsolete, or in need of a much more refined articulation. As he suggested, however, it was a very good snapshot of the situation at that time (1992) in that place (Italy), or an expression „of the feelings of researchers who in the 1970s had an interest in those musics that public institutions continued to ignore”¹¹.

At the end of the 1990s the first academic courses on popular music subjects were started, and the issue could not be ignored anymore. Some musicologists, who until then had used to call popular music *musica di consumo* (i.e. commercial music, which is only relevant because it is sold) or *musica leggera* (using the same category officially adopted by Fascism for classifying radio programs), started to become worried by the growth of popular music studies in the Italian academy. A well-known comment by one of those musicologists, uttered in 2002, was: „What will happen

⁹ R. Agostini, *Studiare la popular music*, [in:] *Dal blues al liscio. Studi sull'esperienza musicale comune*, ed. G. Stefani, Verona 1992, pp. 169–170.

¹⁰ F. Fabbri, *What is popular music? And what isn't? An assessment, after 30 years of popular music studies*, „Musiikki” 2010, No. 2.

¹¹ R. Agostini, op. cit., p. 171.

when someone who graduated with a dissertation on rap holds a chair of music?” On the one hand, those musicologists and ethnomusicologists were still strongly influenced by old prejudices against popular music; on the other hand, the Italian academic system, based on the institutionalization of disciplinary fields, was (and is) still rooted in the nineteenth-century taxonomy of music studies, and allowed for the existence of just two disciplinary fields, musicology (including Adler’s historical musicology and music theory) and ethnomusicology. In Italy, SSDs (Settori Scientifico Disciplinari) are the backbone of academic power: research and careers are administered within their boundaries, and virtually nothing exists outside of them. In the most recent official document, the 2011 decree by the Ministry of University, aimed at a reform of hiring procedures, the musicological SSDs are defined as follows:

The object of musicology is music intended as art and science, including paleography, theory, organology, philosophy and the study and management of documents (*documentalistica*) as applied to music, music teaching and the conservation of musical heritage. The object of ethnomusicology is the plurality of forms, objects and behaviors in societies and cultures (especially those characterized by a prevailing oral tradition), *le musiche popolari (anche contemporanee)*, their production and circulation (also mediatized), the relations between musical and cultural systems¹².

In the context of Italian ethnomusicology (and of Italian linguistic usage) *musica popolare* corresponds to folk/traditional, orally transmitted music, and *anche contemporanee* (also contemporary) is a way to allude to popular music without actually mentioning it. It is a truism that the object of ethnomusicology includes contemporary traditional music, also when media-distributed: so, the whole sentence keeps conservative ethnomusicologists on the safe side, while to others (‘progressive’ ethnomusicologists?) it offers a chance to expand their research activities, without acknowledging that in many other countries popular music studies are not a sub-discipline of ethnomusicology, but an interdisciplinary, autonomous field.

¹² Decreto Ministeriale 29 luglio 2011 n. 336, attachment B, available at: http://attiministeriali.miur.it/media/174801/allegato%20b_def.pdf [accessed 26.02.2020].

Popular music, therefore, is not mentioned in the description of the existing disciplinary fields. Although the study of popular music is now possible in Italian conservatories (where only instrumental practice and history are taught, however, and no research is done), hostility against popular music studies in certain musicological and ethnomusicological circles became commonly acknowledged in the 2010s, and manifested in a variety of behaviors, from the unfair management of academic policies to pathetic ideological battles (more recently, mentioning our object of study as '*cosiddetta* popular music' (the so-called popular music).

On the one hand, the issue is not music-specific, but is related to the small (or even minuscule, in the case of ethnomusicology) dimensions of the musicological SSDs: simply, there is no room (or money, or academic power) for others. It must be added that many researchers and professors, from almost any discipline (both in the humanities and in 'hard' science), are against SSDs and suggest that their abolition would be one of the most necessary steps for the progress of Italian university. Guess who wants to keep them?

On the other hand, the issue is not the popular music per se, but the fact that the very existence of popular music studies brings the blanks and omissions in conventional music studies to the surface. And this, I believe, happens not only at Italian universities.

Studying popular music implies taking into account a large body of music practices with a historical perspective, spanning over at least two centuries; it also implies examining those practices in relation to non strictly musical practices and conventions; and it also implies considering music that could be as well classified as 'classical' or 'traditional'. In short, studying popular music implies invading repeatedly the fields of existing musicologies, and this helps explain why most conservative musicologists are against popular music scholars, but not against sociologists or cultural studies scholars, most of whom avoid any reference to music as a structured language, and declare themselves incapable of dealing with the alleged 'technical' aspects of it; nor against media scholars, for similar reasons; nor against sound studies scholars, as they include music in the more general category of sound, but definitely not in a Cagean or music-anthropological perspective, the result being that – in many studies on sound – music as an independent concept seems to disappear; nor even against rock criticism, as the idea to confine popular music history and practices in the Anglophone mainstream from

the 1950s onwards is, for conservative musicologists, soothing. Any music critic or scholar who is content with the hegemony of conventional musicology, and not willing to point at the inconsistencies of the discipline, is welcome¹³.

Popular music studies were established with an explicit reference to interdisciplinarity, as indicated in the Statutes of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music: „The aim of the Association is to provide an international, interdisciplinary and interprofessional organization for promoting the study of popular music. A guiding principle should be that a fair and balanced representation of different continents, nations, cultures and specializations be aimed at in the policy and activity of the Association”. Whoever follows that guiding principle, it seems, is dangerous for the pre-existing hierarchies and disciplinary boundaries established in the academia. A question: only in Italy?

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¹³ For a comparative overview of conventional musicologists' attitudes towards popular music see also: F. Fabbri, *Quelle musicologie pour la chanson?*, [in:] *Chanson. Cartographier un genre en mutation*, eds. P. Abbrugiati [et al.], 1st ed., Aix-en-Provence 2019.

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Popular Music Studies in Italy: A Historical/Political Overview

Courses on popular music were sparsely introduced in Italian universities in the late 1900s – early 2000s, and are still included under the umbrellas of other disciplines (ethnomusicology, media and communication studies, sociology). An official disciplinary sector including popular music does not exist. However, research on popular music has existed in Italy at least since the 1960s, two important international conferences took place in Italy (as early as in 1983, and in 2005), and Italian popular music scholars are known internationally and have been members of associations, editorial boards, scientific committees. To explain this contradiction, a long historical period has to be overviewed. It's a very specific Italian story. Or maybe not.

Keywords: Italian popular music, Popular music studies, history of popular music research