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MA MÈRE L'OYE AND THE MISFORTUNES
OF THE MUSICAL CANON

He who considers this matter seriously, should not be surprised if his heart bursts into tears. But if one looks at it mockingly, like Democritus, one could not but burst into laughter. That is how deceitful the world can be.

SEBASTIAN FRANCK

Foreword

What originally inspired the lecture I gave during the Study Session of July 6th 2012, was the idea of analysing a set of theses against the Musical Canon (henceforth MC). The aim was to understand their premises and underlying notions, which in real life go hand in hand with the tough opposition of many junior high school teachers against an extensive use of art music in Music Education curricula. The study was part of a larger project, described in the title I chose at the time, *Ricostruire la nozione di Canone musicale*. It had, however, to limit its scope to the *pars destruens*, as a consequence of an unusual fact that had emerged at the research stage: in Italy, the adversaries of the MC are more numerous and aggressive than one may believe, and whoever tries to approach their arguments is confronted with an inextricable tangle of puzzling statements, ranging from equivocal to completely groundless.

As the article progressed, its negative part expanded to the point that the theme announced by the title was relegated to the epilogue, so it seemed appropriate to change at least the title in view of the publication. Between the new title and the exergue, I have tried to condense the result of my ride through a jungle of resentful thoughts, commonplace remarks and sheer nonsense, all proclaimed with the same haughtiness. It was, and still is, the account of a “dirty job”, as it was described, without a hint of sarcasm, during the debate that followed the lecture. And since the chatter on the MC discussed here recalls, *si parva licet*, the joke that Hegel addressed to the pedantic arguments of philosophical scepticism – «the quibbling of stubborn children»¹ –, I decided to

This essay is a modified, expanded version of the paper I gave at the XIX congress of the International Musicological Society, held in Rome between July 1st and 6th 2012.

¹ G. W. F. HEGEL, *Fenomenologia dello spirito*, It. trans. by E. De Negri, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1963, vol. I, p. 173.

group these arguments under the titles of a fairy-tale classics collection.

My choice to restrict the analysis to online texts from Italian websites also has to do with the original project. In Italy, and elsewhere, the web is the best place to evaluate the state and level of MC “discourse”, in the German sense of the word *Diskurs*, i.e. a debate, however heated, an exchange of opinions about ideas and notions as they are used every day in the media, with all the simplifying and deforming that inevitably comes with it. (In order to distinguish this genre of discourse from the, largely revisionist, debates that dominate the ever-growing academic literature on the MC,² from now on I will use the expression “discourse on the canon”.)

In addition, any debate on available Internet material must reckon with the constant appearance and disappearance of websites. Here are the data provided by Google in June 2012, when this paper was written (the figures are approximate, by admission of the search engine itself):

“Canone musicale”: 2.350 websites

“Canone musicale occidentale”: 300 websites.

At that date, a comparison with German, and especially English, websites was already predictably unfavorable: the expression “Musikalischer Kanon” gave 3.430 results, and as many as 183.000 for “Western Musical Canon”, even though, as is known, numbers can be deceitful in this type of search – for example, the figure should not include the (back then) about 14.400 sites that merely reproduced a statement (actually rather banal) by Brian Ferneyhough on the MC.³

After almost one year (the data have been reviewed in early May 2013, at the time of completing this text) there was a drop in the number of results, except for the English-speaking area:

“Canone musicale”: 2.180 websites

“Canone musicale occidentale”: 229 websites

“Musikalischer Kanon”: 2.850 websites

“Western Musical Canon”: 197.000 websites.

(Whereas the number of websites quoting the Ferneyhough statement climbed to 27.400.)

² See for example T. DENORA, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius. Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792-1803*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995; M. CITRON, *Women and the Western Art Canon: Where Are We Now?*, «Notes», LXIV, no. 2, 2007, pp. 209-215.

³ “The Western musical canon came about not merely by accumulation, but by opposition and subversion, both to the ruling powers on whom composers depended for their livelihoods and to other musics”. Note, however, how the intellectual level of many specific statements, both in German and English-speaking sites, is higher than that of our own Italian textual production. A good example is the profile for MC, written with a critical eye, and yet insightful and well researched. It can be found at <http://juye.quazzen.com/arts/art-history/western-musical-canon/>.

The picture that emerges from the following considerations is anything but attractive. However, possible accusations of partiality, or excessive criticism against documents of minor literary and intellectual stature, can be countered by referring to an illustrious precedent. For it is actually the minor evidence, the weakest attempts that turn out to be the most significant when evaluating the actual state of discourse on the canon, as well as the argumentative patterns used by its discontents. Applying to our subject the words of Walter Benjamin about the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, we could say that the form of these patterns «becomes evident precisely in the lean body of the inferior work, as its skeleton so to speak».⁴

Ma mère l’Oye

It is imperative to begin with the mother of all encyclopaedias of our time. Wikipedia lacks a specific entry for the musical canon, in the sense I have attributed to it. However, the entry titled *Canone Occidentale*, which the disambiguation page for Canon refers to, contains the following description:

In letteratura [il canone] sta a significare un *compendio* di grandi opere e importanti autori che si reputano ‘ufficiali’, ‘originali’, di illustre valore artistico e che, insieme al canone in arte e al canone in musica, è stato il più influente nel modellare la cultura, in questo caso occidentale. Tale Canone è importante per la teoria del *Perennialismo educativo* e lo sviluppo dell’alta cultura. Sebbene tenuto precedentemente in grande stima, il Canone Occidentale è stato centro di infuocati dibattiti a partire dalla metà del XX secolo. In pratica, discussioni e tentativi di definire il Canone si limitano ora a compilare elenchi di libri di vario genere.

[In literature [the word canon] describes a *compendium* of major works and important authors, regarded as ‘official’, ‘unique’, and possessing high artistic value. Along with those of art and music, the literary canon has been the most influential in shaping culture, Western culture in this case. The Canon has a significant role in the theory of *Educational perennialism* and in the development of high culture. Although previously held in great esteem, the Western Canon has been the object of fierce debate since the mid-20th century. Today, virtually all discussions and attempts at defining the Canon stop at compiling lists of books of different genres.]

As is often the case for Italian Wikipedia entries, this is the (not impeccable) translation of the English entry for *Canon*. What is most interesting about this text is the neutral, objective tone with which it points out the questioning of the claim to universality made by the canon and, implicitly, also by the MC. A discussion of the notion of ‘educational perennialism’ is somewhat more complex, and leads to a side reflection on the scientific inconsistency of this kind of websites, which are all too often taken as reliable

⁴ W. BENJAMIN, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Eng. trans. by J. Osborne, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, New York, Verso, 1998, p. 58.

working tools. Between the late spring and the early summer of 2012 (the exact date is impossible to determine), the entry for *Perennialismo educativo* appeared to have undergone a reworking, from a more detailed version to a more concise, abridged one. What can still be read is the English original, *Educational perennialism*, of which the Italian text only reproduced a few sections. The article, however, is preceded by a significant caveat: «This article’s **tone or style may not reflect the encyclopaedic tone used on Wikipedia**» (boldface in original). In a nutshell, Wikipedia’s take on educational perennialism would be a sort of *philosophia perennis* based on the belief that there are transcendent values, independent of historical events, which ultimately suggests a mystical conception of the universe.⁵ The fathers of perennialism mentioned include not-so-attractive figures such as René Guénon and the pro-Nazi philosopher Julius Evola.

Undoubtedly, the idea that someone can associate the notion of musical and literary ‘canon’ with these schools of thought is enough to give one the shivers. However, a new check revealed something rather peculiar: the Italian entry was deleted from Wikipedia on July 29th, 2012.⁶ In and of itself, this event can be read positively – as is well-known, Wikipedia encourages its authors to work accurately, rely on strong documentary evidence, and report entries that are inadequate or contain inaccuracies. It is the procedure used to delete the article that may cause concern.⁷

⁵ The notion of *philosophia perennis* was popularized in the 20th century by Aldous Huxley in his book of the same title, written in 1945. Huxley claims that the definition goes back to Leibniz, yet the very same idea (although seen from the perspective of the primacy of Christianity), namely that a common core of truth underpins the whole history of philosophy and religion, forms the basis of the treaty *De perenni philosophia libri decem* by the erudite Lateran canon Agostino Steuco, printed in Lyon in 1540 (and subsequently in Basel «per Nicolaum Bryling et Sebastianum Francken» in 1542).

⁶ I stumbled on this after clicking on the term ‘Perennialismo’, marked as a hyper-textual link in the article on the Western Canon. I thus found myself confronted with the following, vaguely intimidating message: «Attenzione: stai per ricreare una pagina già cancellata in passato. Accertati che sia davvero opportuno ricreare questa pagina; potrebbe essere cancellata di nuovo senza preavviso. Puoi chiedere consiglio allo sportello informazioni» [Warning: you are about to recreate a previously deleted page. Make sure it is really necessary to recreate this page. It could be deleted again without notice. You can ask for advice at the information center].

⁷ The Wikipedia removal register is available, although not easily accessible. In any case, I think it is worth disclosing it to the reader. Only two “*referees*” appear, the first is «Gierre», a “Wikipedian” since 2006, who contributed 935 items including entries and revisions (among them an extension to the article *Filosofia della musica*). Here is his opinion: «Movimento esoterico non si sa quanto diffuso, che viene definito “movimento, non movimento, che fin dagli albori si è contraddistinto per un elevato grado di autoreferenzialità, e di dogmatismo”, al di fuori, nonostante il richiamo nel nome alla “filosofia perenne”, di ogni vera connotazione filosofica. Il perennialismo

Anyway, let us go back to our reflection on perennialism and its relationships with the Western canon. If things were really as stated by Wikipedia, then the adversaries of the MC would be perfectly right. The discourse on the canon, especially among the younger generations, starts from the assumption that the notion itself is dubious, something left over from a past that would be best done away with. Many such sons of *ma mère l’Oye* (of which the two mentioned in note 7 are an eloquent example) have grown up in the shadow of normative notions that lead to such a conclusion. The progressive erosion and warping of expressions such as “musica d’arte” (art music), which today is invariably placed between inverted commas or qualified by the adjective “so-called” in order to forestall any accusation of elitism etc., have resulted in the spread of surrogate expressions that weaken its denotative power, lending themselves even more easily to critical dismissal. If “art music” becomes synonym with “high music”, and someone thinks about contrasting it to “low music”, then one could feel free to react as follows (I am quoting literally, except for one person name, from a classical guitar forum):

non concordo con l’ultimo intervento di *** che riporta la discussione sulla trita e ritrita questione “musica alta vs. musica bassa” che, francamente, nel 2012 la ritengo piuttosto obsoleta.

annovera tra i suoi teorici autori sconosciuti [sic] interessati a temi teosofici e a tutto ciò che sa di mistero» [An esoteric movement, nobody knows how widespread, defined as ‘a movement - non movement which, since its dawning, has stood out for being strongly self-referential and dogmatic’, and which, despite the claim to ‘perennial philosophy’ contained in its name, does not appear to have any real philosophical value. Among its theorists, perennialism includes unknown [sic] authors, interested in theosophical matters and in everything that is redolent of mystery]. The following is a comment by another Wikipedian named «Sanremofilo», whose avowed passions, as can be inferred from his profile, include the Festival di Sanremo singing competition, and football: «mah. x es. ne parla laurant [sic]. JEAN-PIERRE LAURANT, *René Guénon. Esoterismo e tradizione*, ed. by P. L. Zoccatelli, It. trans. by D. Giardini, Rome, Edizioni Mediterranee, 2008] poi in un manuale generale [he is referring to GIOVANNI FORNERO, SALVATORE TASSINARI, *Le filosofie del Novecento*, vol. 2, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2008] e in genere come concetto che si oppone al modernismo. imo [sic] com’è stubbato [an Italian adaptation of *stubbed*] si potrebbe lasciare. Giusto un paio di righe (così da 3 mesi e mezzo), eventualmente la si riscrive» [Well, for example is it discussed in Laurant ..., and also in a general handbook, and on the whole the notion is perceived as opposed to modernism. imo [sic] the way it is stubbed, it could be left as it is. We might just add a couple of lines (it’s been like this for three and a half months), or possibly rewrite it]. The final verdict is: «La procedura di cancellazione in modalità semplificata è terminata. La discussione è chiusa. Questa procedura viene archiviata e protetta. Come da regolamento, la pagina viene cancellata.--**Kōji** [sic] (*msg*) 00:33, 29 lug 2012» [The deletion procedure in simplified mode is over. The discussion is closed. The procedure is archived and protected. In accordance with the rules, the page is deleted].

Qui le questioni in ballo mi sembrano altre, e un poco più serie; in particolare la mia critica è rivolta al seguente concetto: la “musica classica” non rende le persone “migliori” e “cittadini consapevoli della polis”. Questa, oggi, è pura illusione. All’epoca della stesura della Repubblica di Platone aveva una sua importanza. E non posso che parlare per esperienza personale: non ho mai conosciuto musicisti (o forse le dita di una mano sono già troppe per contarli) formati dentro l’accademia a suon di “educazione musicale Alta” che si sono fatti attraverso la Musica interpreti in Vita di una più o meno conscia “humanitas” (o altre virtù umane) di quanti invece ne abbia conosciuti al di fuori dell’accademia tra persone cresciute a caramelle e Rolling Stones.

[I do not agree with the last comment by ***, which brings the discussion back to the worn-out issue of “high vs. low music” – that seems to me rather obsolete in 2012.

I think the issues at stake here are different, and a little bit more serious. In particular, I am critical of the following notion: “classical music” does not make people “better”, nor does it make them “enlightened citizens of the polis”. Today, this is sheer illusion, although it had its importance at the time when Plato’s Republic was written. Speaking from personal experience, I have never met more musicians (or maybe the fingers of one hand are already too many to count them) who, through music, have become living examples of a more or less conscious “humanitas”, among those educated in an academic setting, at the sound of “High music”, than I have outside academia, among those who grew up with the Rolling Stones and pop culture.]

I fear that the author, unless he is trying to be ironic, holds positive illusions about the *humanitas*, which he thinks dominated at the time when the *Republic* was written. However, if we start to look for possible teachers, i.e. less young critics who think they have much to blame on the MC, and teach a politically correct form of hostility towards this expression and its meanings, the picture that emerges is extremely colourful. The following are three texts I have chosen to match Cicero’s *tria genera dicendi*, as examples respectively of grand, middle and plain style. And I have renamed them with pseudonyms, to guarantee anonymity – and stay on topic, again drawing from Perrault.

Barbe-Bleue

The first text is a review, written in 2002 and still available online, of the contributions to a conference, held in Bologna in 2000, about directions in music history in the 21st century, which saw the participation of, among others, Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Wilhelm Seidel and Renato Di Benedetto.⁸ Here is what our reviewer has to say:

Il canone si fa da sé; assurge al rango di attore protagonista nella narrazione storica. ... Il canone è il Bene (e fa il bene) della storia della musica, soprattutto in termini didattici: apocalisse della cultura prefigurata con terrore dai più è quella in cui il canone che va da Mozart a Strawinsky non sarà più il nucleo centrale dei programmi

⁸ The proceedings were published in «Il Saggiatore musicale», VIII, 2001.

di insegnamento. Con la scusa di salvaguardare un patrimonio inestimabile (non credo che nessuno neghi il ruolo fondamentale dei Grandi della musica), si difende l’idea di canone, che rappresenta malauguratamente la disinvoltura di informare in maniera acritica e auratica. Insegnare Bach, Mozart, Beethoven come *il* canone è sottrarre qualsiasi problematizzazione e complessificazione nell’approccio storico dei fenomeni culturali; è creare una sproporzione enorme tra il valore del documento e la legittimità di ogni singolo sguardo pertinenziale. L’idea di canone è altamente antipedagogica, è fissazione di valori senza origine, naturalizzazione di scelte storiche, sottrazione della riflessione estetica.

[The canon creates itself. It rises to the rank of protagonist in the historical narration. ... The canon is the Good (and creates the good) in the history of music, especially when it comes to teaching: the apocalypse of culture, anticipated with fear by most, will happen when the canon, which ranges from Mozart to Stravinsky, will no longer form the basis of school curricula. Under the pretext of rescuing an inestimable heritage (I think nobody can deny the fundamental role of the music Greats), they defend the idea of canon, which unfortunately carries with it a presumptuous attitude and an inaccurate, auratic way of conveying information. To teach Bach, Mozart, Beethoven as *the* canon means to avoid problematization and complexity when approaching cultural phenomena historically. This creates a huge disproportion between the value of a document and the legitimacy of every single pertinential view. The idea of canon is highly anti-pedagogical, it establishes values without motivation, naturalizes historical choices, and removes aesthetic reflection.]

The very first remark on the MC contains a ‘historical myth’ and deserves a reflection. It is obvious that the MC does *not* create itself. It is even embarrassing to remind how it has taken shape in the course of history. It has not accepted or refused anything at all. The musical canon has expanded, just like its literary and artistic equivalents, against which nobody has, until now, raised any serious objection. Hanslick on one side, and the followers of the New German school on the other, would be horrified to learn that in the 20th century, the musical canon has expanded to include both Wagner and Brahms. But it is likely that the author of the above text found the notion detestable in and of itself, perceiving it as something imposed from above, as the product of authoritarian thought. However, his very words suggest a personality which is influenced by the principle of authority – a trait that manifests itself as the Freudian Oedipus complex, a rebellion against the father which, in the words of Adorno, already contains the will to bow one’s head. There is no other way to explain the unusual, naïve slip of the pen, which the reader will have already noticed: «Under the pretext of rescuing an inestimable heritage (I think nobody can deny the fundamental role of the music Greats) ...». Is this really a *lapsus calami*? What “pertinential view” on the “removal of aesthetic reflection”, one naturally wonders, can legitimize such a pathetic expression? May it be the trace left by a “false musical conscience”, at least from the point of view of the critique to the reactionary ideology inherent in

the formation of the MC, which the reviewer is apparently conducting? But if *Barbe-Bleue* is really convinced that such a thing as “great music” exists, then what is the point of his battle against the expression? Uttering the words MC, for those who are interested in content and not in the words that somehow try to signify it, is the same as saying the words quality and artistic value. The adversaries of the MC would then be those who, in order to defend “an inestimable heritage”, fill their speech with empty rhetoric – and yet, if all that this heritage can do is inspire trite expressions, such as “the music Greats” complete with a capital ‘g’, then the problem seems to be first of all one of language. One hates a significant, the verbal clothing which syntactically denotes the «inestimable heritage» of Western art music, and at the same time one is careful not to deny the «fundamental role» of the latter. What is being attacked here is words, not their referent. But this attack on words simultaneously aims at creating an aura of political correctness in the face of those who, being totally unfamiliar with art music thanks to the demise of the educational system, raise their voice about the rights of the “other” music, which they see as suffering endless discrimination. On the other hand, it is a good pretext to wash one’s hands of the cultural emergency we are facing today. The “music Greats” cannot defend themselves on their own. Whoever teaches music and musicology, and has eyes to see, can experience every day the vanishing of “great music” from the conscience of the younger generations. The canon has long disappeared from core curricula. The arguments of those who acknowledge the fundamental role played by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven etc., while simultaneously attacking the label attached to them, thus accelerating *de facto*, on the level of ideology, their agony, ultimately support a negationist thesis.

Where does this negationism come from? I think it has to do with a vindictive attitude. One hates everything that sounds like normativity, pyramid structures, or “summits”. It is a parody of class struggle conducted at the level of superstructure.

Le Chat Botté

Other, more recent, attacks on the MC have come up with rather cursory arguments, expressed with a style that focuses on immediate intelligibility, avoiding the technical jargon and intimidating tone of the previous critique:

Questa idea di ‘canone’ che sto provando a spiegare, l’idea di repertorio costituito da capolavori incontestati, che appare doveroso ascoltare e riascoltare nel corso di una vita intera, è in realtà molto problematica ed è stata messa seriamente in discussione in anni recenti. Da qualunque angolo lo si consideri, questo canone mostra incrinature di vario genere. ... tanto, tanto tempo fa ... osservai come questo canone sia costituito da opere di compositori soprattutto tedeschi (un po’ meno francesi e italiani), di sesso maschile, e deceduti da molto tempo. A pensarci, già questo fa venire qualche dubbio. Nel canone troviamo poi soprattutto alcuni generi e non altri: sinfonie, oratori,

melodrammi; cose grosse quindi. Sembra che una tarantella per mandolino o una marcetta per banda, per definizione non possa entrare a far parte dell’Olimpo.

[This idea of ‘canon’, which I am trying to explain, the idea of a repertory made up of undisputed masterpieces, which you are morally obliged to listen to over and over again throughout your life, is actually highly problematic, and was radically questioned in recent years. From whatever angle you look at it, this canon shows several cracks in its façade. ... a long time ago ... I noted how it is largely made up of works by German composers (the French and Italian are fewer), of male gender, and long deceased. If you think about it, this is already enough to raise doubts. In the canon, certain genres are more present than others: symphonies, oratorios, and melodramas. Rather big things. Apparently, a mandolin tarantella or a band march cannot be admitted into this Olympus.]

In real life, *Le Chat Botté* is a cultivated, bright musicologist. The simple question then naturally arises: so why is he talking like that? In whose name, and on whose behalf is he doing this? Probably, in the name and on behalf of the allegedly underprivileged, outcast, rejected. The alleged victims of élite culture, who, luckily for them, have long learned how to emancipate themselves, and are in perfectly good health. Our author may be talking in the name of, and on behalf of, those who love *folk* or *popular music* and think they have good reasons to despise art music. His way of writing is bound to earn him the love of the zealous crowd that leaves traces of its daily passage on the web, and has practically stolen the scene. Unwittingly, maybe even unknowingly, he is running to the aid of the winners.

Excursus: La Belle au Bois dormant

A special discussion must be devoted to the complaint (published in 2010) by a well-known adversary of the MC about a text issued by the Department of Education concerning the then to-be-established music high schools:

Nel leggere la prima volta il *Profilo generale e competenze* e gli *Obiettivi specifici di apprendimento* relativi alla disciplina Storia della musica per il Liceo Musicale sono stata colta da un tale sconforto da sperare di essere incorsa in un errore ... Credo che la cosa più importante sia analizzare brevemente i punti principali elaborati dal Ministero e suggerire alcune legittime “strategie” per superare i vincoli del documento e ipotizzare un’attività didattica utile per gli/le studenti. [sic] ... La prima frase del *Profilo generale e competenze* è lapidaria: «Nel corso del quinquennio lo studente dovrà acquisire familiarità con la musica d’arte di tradizione occidentale». Viene subito tracciata perentoriamente la cornice entro cui attuare l’insegnamento. Per eliminare eventuali dubbi si ribadisce: «Al termine del percorso liceale lo studente dovrà padroneggiare il profilo complessivo della storia della musica occidentale di tradizione scritta». E più oltre: «Lo studente dovrà infine cogliere le differenze che delimitano il campo della storia della musica rispetto al dominio di due territori contigui, ad essa peraltro collegati da importanti connessioni: da un lato, lo studio delle musiche di tradizione orale (con un’attenzione particolare per la musica popolare italiana, da nord a sud);

dall'altro, la prospettiva sistematica nella descrizione e analisi dei fenomeni musicali (estetica musicale; psicologia della musica; sociologia della musica; ecc.)). Chi ha steso il testo ritiene che esista un'unica storia della musica, quella di tradizione colta occidentale: nessuna precisazione nel delimitare la prospettiva assunta, nessuna motivazione per giustificare l'esclusione di altri generi, repertori e pratiche. Il redattore (o i redattori) manifesta inoltre una presunzione sconcertante nel momento in cui distingue il campo della storia della musica dai due "territori contigui" delle musiche di tradizione orale e della "prospettiva sistemica" proponendo questa divisione come un "dato di fatto" e non come una delle possibili impostazioni culturali e metodologiche. ... la prospettiva culturale di chi ha steso il documento diventa unica ed esclusiva, al punto che negli OSA per il quinto anno si legge: «Nel contempo andranno tematizzati i principi della storiografia musicale (finalità e metodi della musicologia storica), differenziandoli dagli approcci che contraddistinguono la musicologia sistematica da un lato, l'etnomusicologia dall'altro». Credo che sarebbe stato corretto proporre una "panoramica aperta" sui diversi indirizzi musicologici. Ciò avrebbe però comportato un'attenzione allargata e seria alla semiologia musicale piuttosto che al rock; e invece si è voluta deliberatamente delegittimare ogni "incursione" in territori – difficile comprenderne il motivo – ritenuti estranei alla formazione scolastica. L'accenno al "jazz e alla musica leggera", da contemplare "a margine" nel quinto anno di studi, conferma le perplessità. Cosa vuol dire "a margine"? "A margine" di cosa o di chi? E si precisa infine: «Nell'accostamento alle musiche di tradizione orale, europee ed extraeuropee, non può mancare uno sguardo almeno panoramico sulle musiche popolari dell'Italia settentrionale, centrale, meridionale e insulare». ... Perché mai le musiche dell'est Europa (è solo uno esempio), così rilevanti per le scuole nazionali tardo-romantiche e del Novecento, non meritano "analogo trattamento"? E le influenze dei repertori afro-americani sulla musica colta a cavallo tra Ottocento e Novecento (da Dvřrak a Strawinskij [sic], per intenderci, passando attraverso Debussy, Satie, Milhaud, Ravel, Weill, Casella eccetera eccetera) non sono pertinenti? In ogni modo, il docente non deve scoraggiarsi. Poiché si "impone" la centralità della musica colta, occorrerà investire tempo e intelligenza per definirla e specificarla attraverso confronti per individuare analogie e differenze ... con altri generi, repertori e pratiche; possiamo facilmente "riaprire la porta" che era stata chiusa.

[When I first read the documents titled *Profilo generale e competenze* and *Obiettivi specifici di apprendimento* concerning the subject of Music history in the Music high schools, I was so discouraged that I hoped I had misread something ... I think it is important to briefly analyse the main points formulated by the Department, and suggest a couple of legitimate "strategies" to overcome the obstacles described in the document and propose teaching activities that can be useful for students. ... The first stage of *Profilo generale e competenze* is rather succinct: «In the course of the five-year term, students will have to get acquainted with the art music of Western tradition». The framework for didactic activity is immediately and peremptorily set. In order to dispel possible doubts, the document emphasizes that: «At the end of the high school period, students will have to be familiar with a general outline of Western music history of written tradition». And further below: «Finally, students will have to be aware of the differences that mark the boundaries between music history and the two neighbouring domains, which are connected to it through two main links: on the one

hand, the study of the music genres of oral tradition (with special regard to Italian popular music, from North to South); on the other hand, a systematic perspective in the description and analysis of musical phenomena (music aesthetics; psychology of music; sociology of music, etc.)». The author of this text believes that there exists only one history of music, namely that of the Western learned tradition: no qualification whatsoever for such a rigid perspective, no motivation is given to justify the exclusion of other genres, repertoires and practices. The author (or authors) also shows a disconcerting presumption in differentiating the field of music history from the two “neighbouring territories” of traditional oral music and “system-oriented perspective”, positing this distinction “as a fact”, not as one of several possible cultural and methodological superstructures. ... the cultural perspective of the authors appears single-minded and exclusive, to the point that the OSA [specific learning objectives] for the fifth, and last, high school year read as follows: «At the same time, discussions will have to focus on the principles of musical historiography (goals and methods of historical musicology), distinguishing these from the approaches of systematic musicology on the one hand, and ethnomusicology on the other». I think it would have been fair to propose an “open overview” on the different branches of musicology. This, however, would have entailed paying extensive, serious attention to musical semiology rather than rock; instead, they deliberately delegitimize (for reasons I can hardly understand) any “foray” into territories that are considered foreign to school education. The hint at “jazz” and “musica leggera”, to be included “marginally” during the fifth study year, only adds to my perplexity. What does “marginally” mean? “Marginally” to what or who? Finally, the document specifies that: «In approaching the music genres of oral tradition, both European and non-European, at least a cursory glance has to be cast at the popular music of Northern, Central, Southern, and Insular Italy». ... Why not at the music of Eastern Europe (to name just one example), which was so influential on the national late Romantic and 20th-century national schools, don’t they both deserve “equal treatment”? And what about the influences of the Afro-American repertory on learned music between the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries (ranging from Dvůřak to Strawinskij [sic], and including Debussy, Satie, Milhaud, Ravel, Weill, Casella etc. etc.), are they not relevant? In any case, teachers should not get discouraged. Because the central role of art music is “imposed”, it will take time and intelligence to define and specify it through comparison, in order to identify analogies and differences ... with respect to other genres, repertoires and practices. We can easily “reopen the door” that was closed.]

I have given plenty of space to the author’s discontent because it shows the “human face” of the MC’s adversaries. While they do not reject it en bloc, they want to radically reconsider it, so that learners will no longer have to breathe the stifling air that blows from the “forced” teaching of “highbrow” music. As concerns primary high school, the threat of asphyxia is averted, and the closed doors have been reopened a long time ago, in the most blatant possible ways – I know of didactic approaches that substitute lessons of art music history with the watching of such films as *Amadeus* and, by way of antidote, *The Blues Brothers* and *Sister Act*, maybe even several times in the same term, without a word of introduction to the musical content of the videos, and

without making any distinction between first- and third-year students. Are those who always smell elitism in every proposal inspired by mere common sense aware of such ravages?

Petit Poncet

But there is even worse to come. As we move from the, as it were, more reflective comments to everyday chatter, the problems keep growing, as does the sense of their unsolvability. A representative example of this is the following document:

Il problema è che il termine Folk è a dir poco riduttivo: esso infatti mette insieme tutte le espressioni musicali di una determinata cultura, o più in generale indica l'insieme di tutte le musiche tradizionali, contrapponendolo al cosiddetto canone occidentale, per intenderci quello classico, che ha stabilito ad esempio che la scala di Do maggiore è la scala fondamentale del modo maggiore. Quindi, la scala pentatonica, propria del Blues, ma anche della Cina, del Giappone, e dei canti gregoriani, è solo una devianza dal canone. E così via.

Questo, a mio giudizio, è assolutamente sbagliato: le musiche Folk possono essere infinitamente più complesse e colte di molta roba classica, il problema è che il canone occidentale le ha relegate a semplice “musica etnica”, come fossero un’insieme [sic!] di sonorità popolane che possono essere usate solo se si vuole dare un tocco un po’ più “strano” al proprio sound.

[The problem is that the term Folk is reductive, to say the least. It condenses all the musical expressions of a certain culture or, more in general, it describes the totality of traditional music genres, as opposed to the so-called Western canon, that of classical music, to put it simply, which establishes that, for instance, the C major scale is the fundamental scale of the major mode. Which means that the pentatonic scale, typical of the Blues, but also of China, Japan, and of Gregorian Chant, is nothing but a deviation from the canon. And so on.

In my opinion this is absolutely wrong. Folk music can be infinitely more complex and learned than much classical stuff, only the Western canon has labelled it as merely “ethnic music”, as if it were an aggregate of peasant styles, to be used whenever you want to add just a touch of “strangeness” to your sound.]

At this level, vindictive thoughts degenerate into utter primitivism. We may wonder what experiences in art music listening someone who uses the expression “classical stuff” might have. What teachers he may have had during the school years, when at thirty years of age (or so can be deduced from the pseudonym he uses on the website) he is still repeating the same old prejudices, nourished by sheer ignorance. Or what ideas he might have about his cultural identity as a European citizen. Let us face it: whoever thinks and writes like this is an accomplished product of the educational model, not just musical, that has held sway in Italy for decades.

Thus, in order to rebuild the notion of MC, we should first of all think seriously about getting rid of the expression itself, in order to promote its actual contents and reorganize the musical discourse. We should not forget that the Canon, as Giuseppina La Face writes in her editorial for the issue of «Il Saggiatore musicale» that contains the proceedings of the above mentioned conference, is an «istituto paradossale, che fertilizza il senso della storia presentificando il passato, e al tempo stesso ne sterilizza l’evoluzione stabilendo il preponderante predominio dell’arte di ieri su quella di oggi» [paradoxical institution, which fertilizes the meaning of history by making the past present, and simultaneously sterilizes its evolution by establishing the absolute primacy of the art of yesterday on that of today]. The paradoxical side of this reflection lies in the fact that today even the nearest past is falling into oblivion: many young people (I am talking from experience) find it hard to recognize the performing style of Jimi Hendrix, and there is an increasingly pervasive attitude, which Adorno, half a century ago, hesitated to include in his infamous list of types of musical conduct, i.e. that of the entertainment listener “to whom *music is entertainment and no more*”.⁹

In a world where there is a widespread idea that the past is more dangerous than useful, that the effort to recall contents worthy of being remembered is all but useless – in such a world, if one wants to continue focusing on the despised ‘artistic value’ factor, it will be sometimes necessary to resort to cunning, so as not to irritate those who view this factor as nothing but a remnant of authoritarian thought that escaped cultural cleansing. In order to explain what artistic value is, we will have to start from such rock classics as *Sunshine of your love*, or the much-celebrated David Gilmour solo in *Shine on you crazy diamond*, and from there go back in time, in the first case to the idea of musical allusion as expressed in the compositions of Schumann and Brahms, and in the second case, possibly reach as far back as Magister Leoninus, as Pink Floyd’s piece appears to be an updated version of his melismatic *organa*. (In several close listening sessions, I have confronted my students with both of these worlds, which are separated by eight centuries of history, stressing elements of continuity as well as differences, and I have always met with wonder and interest, eliciting questions that were never banal.)

By way of conclusion, browsing through the many posts of an already mentioned forum, I have found two comments on the MC and its related topics. I am cutting and pasting them below. I am in complete agreement with the thoughtful reply of the second speaker:

Ma cosa vuol dire capire la Pastorale di Beethoven secondo te? commuoversi perché ci tocca nell’animo? saperla cantare e riprodurla sullo strumento? e perché questo dovrebbe farci girare al largo dal Tunz tunz, ci sono momenti nella vita in cui

⁹ T. W. ADORNO, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, Eng. trans. by E. B. Ashton, London - New York, Continuum, 1988, p. 15.

va molto bene il tunz tunz anzi, è davvero ciò che ci fa stare bene rispetto ai nostri casini, ci diverte e basta, senza chiederci altro, attenzione e studio...e altri in cui è bello entrare in un mondo diverso, per nostra scelta intima e cosciente. Dai non facciamo i talebani, siamo nel mondo per migliorarlo, non per guardarlo e giudicarlo.

Nelle scuole private in cui insegno si fanno delle lezioni-guida all'ascolto, e anche i bambini delle elementari riconoscono un'introduzione da un finale. Se una persona cerca un'alternativa ai suoi casini non va ad anestetizzarsi con gli altoparlanti a tutto volume con due note ripetute per un'ora. Non sono talebano perché ho passato la mia adolescenza in giro per le discoteche e i concerti rock, ma man mano che le conoscenze aumentavano...perdevo interesse per le altre cose, gli interessi cambiavano. E con questo non ho lapidato nessun esponente della musica tecno ecc. Questa è la mia visione, se dobbiamo come dici tu cambiare il mondo non lo si cambia di certo abbassandosi alle mode commerciali, così è il mondo che cambia noi.

[But what does it mean, in your opinion, to understand Beethoven's Pastoral? To be moved because it touches our soul? To be able to sing it or reproduce it on an instrument? And why should all this make us steer clear of dance or techno music? There are moments in life when these sounds are appropriate, they may even make us feel better or distract us from our messy situations, they amuse us, and that is all, they do not require anything else of us, no attention or study...and there are other moments in which it is good to venture into a different world, if we intimately and consciously choose to do so. Come on, let's not be ultra-orthodox, we are here to make this world a better place, not to observe and judge.]

[In the private schools where I teach, we do guided listening lessons, and even primary school children can tell an introduction from a finale. If you are looking to find relief from your messy situations, you will not want to go anesthetize yourself with full-blown speakers and two notes repeated for an hour. I am not ultra-orthodox as I have spent my adolescence hanging around discos and rock concerts, but as I broadened my knowledge...those things lost their appeal, and my interests changed. Despite this, I have never condemned any techno music composer etc. This is my view – if we must change the world, as you say, we will not do it by giving in to commercial influences, otherwise the world will change us.]

(Translation by Elisabetta Zoni)