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## TEACHING MUSIC HISTORY: A DIDACTIC AND CULTURAL CHALLENGE

The topic I aim to discuss is of the kind that could lead to a maze of questions: which music? Why not talk about ‘musics’, or simply sound artifacts? Why should we write the history of music? And how should we go about this task? How should we periodize this history? And how should we tackle the interconnection among ‘Techniques’, ‘Styles’ and ‘History’? Not to mention the more practical aspects, such as: should we reconstruct this history in a handbook? Should we organize it in a straight line? And I could go on and on, not to mention that each of these points could be the subject of pages and pages of argumentative discussion, bibliographies, general postulates, and practical proposals. The website of SagGEM provides excellent suggestions and online materials, which should be enough to quench the thirst for preliminary knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

Although the list is already long enough, let me add some more questions, even if they can sound a little generic – indeed, they certainly are! –, and maybe more suitable for a cocktail chat: why should we feel morally compelled to justify our desire to share *The marriage of Figaro* with the largest possible number of people? Should we really go as far as debating whether those who are not put in a position to get passionate about Bach (just because they do not know him) are deprived of a priceless experience? Is it really necessary to be so passive in the face of a present that aims at jettisoning, as quickly as possible, what gave rise to it?

In short, I have a feeling that even those who teach Music History as a profession (in high schools, conservatories, and universities, i.e. the settings I will examine in this article) are starting to harbor some doubts about what they do. Asking questions about one’s own discipline, and how to approach, re-read and transmit it, is always a healthy practice, and should always run in the background – provided it does not cause us to “lose the faith” (if I may put it this way), to doubt the very need for Music History, or to question its claim to existence and full citizenship. Let us not waste time and energy in convincing ourselves that we are not wrong in enjoying the music of Schubert: let us think about how to make Schubert indispensable for those who do not yet know

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<sup>1</sup> Besides the contribution by F. DELLA SETA, “Musica nella storia e musica come storia” (in *Educazione musicale e Formazione*, ed. by G. La Face Bianconi and F. Frabboni, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2008, pp. 379-386) I would like to recommend the not less significant *Canone retrogrado* by M. GIANI (*ibid.*, pp. 200-209).

him. Is history tired? I doubt it: it is just having trouble moving on, bogged down as it is in the quagmire of today and pop subculture. Let us prevent it from being swallowed by it, and leave it its detractors the burden of proving its supposed uselessness.

I know that self-citing is frowned upon, but I cannot do otherwise because I have not changed my mind since I wrote the following words a few years ago:<sup>2</sup>

Some believe that studying the history of a discipline means delving into the past. This assumption could not be more mistaken. Those who live in countries with a thousand-year-old history, like the European countries, have a ‘natural’ relationship with the persistence of history, both in its material and immaterial aspects – in the form of landscapes, monuments, environments, artifacts ideas, visions, listenings. They are always immersed in this heritage, and constantly come across individual pieces of it, in a fruitful dialogue with the present. The walk we take daily to the kiosk where we buy newspapers follows roadways that may go as far back as Roman times or the Middle Ages. It can run alongside archaeological remains, Romanesque churches, Renaissance palaces, theatres and concert halls, where we go to see works created in the present time, but more often in past centuries, and often kept in libraries and archives we walk past. All this is just as contemporary to us as today’s news: because what is current is certainly what meets our look today, but no less contemporary is that which constantly reappears, or which has never really vanished from our horizon. The contemporary aesthetic introduces brand-new items into a heritage seasoned by the passing of decades and centuries – and recreating past events is nothing but a way of gauging the historical significance of the present in which we live.

Not only have I not changed my mind, but I have constantly been confirmed in it. Just to give an example, every morning in Ferrara, walking to my Department, I pass by a doctor’s office, whose owner exhibits the title of “medico chirurgo” [surgeon-doctor]: on this topic, a historian of medicine could hold many lectures, just as a music historian could have a lot to say about a theatre bill that announces *La bohème* conducted by a “concert master”. Moving on, I come across a butcher’s shop that often displays the notice: “Oggi castrato” [mutton today]. I have stumbled upon the same notice, advertising the availability of mutton meat, in the windows of similar shops in Ravenna, Pesaro, Rimini, sometimes in Bologna, but only in the eastern part of the town. If you know a bit about history, you cannot help notice that the eating habit these notices hint at survives in territories which, over a millennium and a half ago, were the heart of the Byzantine Exarchate, which was traditionally linked to sheep farming, as opposed to the Langobardic practice of rearing pigs in the wild. Hence the dispute I witnessed years ago on a summer evening, in a beach resort on the Adriatic sea, between a Romagnola cook who championed the mutton chop and an Emiliana lady who swore by

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<sup>2</sup> P. FABBRI, “Prefazione”, in *Musica e società. Dall’Alto Medioevo al 1640*, ed. by P. Fabbri and M. C. Bertieri, Milan, McGraw-Hill, 2012, p. XIII.

the superiority of the pork chop – may this episode be read as an extremely late, unconscious skirmish in the Greek-Gothic war?

In short: what was yesterday often lives on today, to varying degrees and in different ways. I do not know whether failing to learn how to decipher the more or less deep layering we are embedded leads to mistakes in planning our future, but surely it makes us blind (and deaf) to the present. This also applies to the music of other epochs, whose persistence (materially and immaterially, as I have mentioned) is a remarkable phenomenon. This would be enough, I think, to warrant the need for a reconstruction and transmission of the history of this music.

Is a didactic tool like the handbook still necessary to make things easier? This is what we asked ourselves, among other things, in one of the meetings that SagGEM promoted some years ago. I believe that it is (and I even tried to do more than just declaring it verbally). Indeed, today more than ever I find it indispensable to provide readers and students with a guide, lest they be lost in the increasingly varied, overflowing multitude of data available on the web. In the didactic domain, the historiography condensed into a handbook always has the goal of selecting what seems significant and representative, by scanning the undifferentiated, endless flow of events in order to building interpretive grids consisting of nodes and links, relations of temporal proximity and affinities that can be read as more or less extended conceptual focalizations. In addition to these traditional tasks, I think we should also (more or less explicitly) focus on the ability to find our way through the all too overabundant forest of available materials – which today can be easily found at mouse-click, but risk being confused with one another in the hue and cry raised by the theoreticians of crossover, and by those who claim to deny their different density and weight. The handbook does not provide a barrier to contain and control this flooding stream (it would be impossible to do both), but it does provide a strong rope to cross it.

It can be taken as a map, a series of indications about “milestones” that should not be overseen. Trying to put these highly significant stations in a historical perspective will provide occasions to observe how this Pantheon of milestones can in turn be historicized as the product of a slow, but steady adjustment and updating of knowledge and taste, and should in no way be taken as a meta-temporal entity. We know very well that values in art and culture have changed over time, but when we visit new countries and cities, do not we use road maps and travel guidebooks? Why should we not do the same when trying to find our way through unexplored parts of knowledge? Keeping an eye on a *Baedeker* certainly does not prevent us from taking a break and enjoy sites that are not marked as essential, or to hunt for that minor museum we are so curious about. It is only when we have interiorized the proposed path, and the canon that underpins it, that we are able to make adjustments to it, or even to change it completely. Otherwise we are doomed to grope in the

darkness of the undifferentiated and the indistinguishable. Proposing models is not an unacceptable act of force: it only becomes such if we keep silent about the historical and cultural relativity inherent in it. This is why the study of history, in particular, should be an essential step in developing a well-motivated, as opposed to arbitrary, critical attitude, which should be one of the main goals in education – although building a critical mind is very different from practicing skepticism and doubt: the latter are individual inclinations which I think should not be transmitted or taught, just like ideological, cooking, or sexual preferences.

Today, technology offers opportunities for multimedia and interactive combinations that can greatly mitigate the rigidity of the former paper-only blueprint, making its structure much more flexible. The task of the teacher is to know how to use these tools sensibly and effectively, adjusting goals and setting destinations according to the materials proposed. A predominantly chronological division and a network of milestones/stations generally regarded as compulsory (or canonical) – these operative ideas seem essential to me, but at the same time they do not impose excessively narrow and oppressive constraints.

Those very technologies miraculously come to the rescue of a discipline that is based on the paper-related qualities of writing (musical writing, but also the writing of documents and historical narrations) and on the temporal dimension of performance. It is a very fertile link which, in my opinion, can also preserve music history from the abstractness of a predominantly conceptual and ideological historiography. Personally, I tend to believe that the history of music (as well as that of literature and art etc.) should be taught not so much because it is important to know the history of music, literature, art, and so on, but because no literate person can ignore it. The purpose of all these Histories lies, in my opinion, in spreading the knowledge and comprehension, and hence a more satisfying experience, of the “objects” they deal with: it is these objects that should be taken as the central focus of these narrations. Inserting them into the time stream of history will help “read” them in the appropriate way, thus avoiding any chronological or cultural misunderstanding. Yet they remain the ultimate goal – the musics, not the history you turn them into. And, of course, trying to adjust their position to place them in the appropriate context, does not mean nailing them down to their respective epoch. It is just a preliminary action of “tiding up” and identifying relevant knowledge: a sort of “general philology” applied to contexts instead of texts. Today, we can use a music piece from the past as we please, in the ways we think are more in keeping with our current goals. I think that learning about its functions and distinctive features is a necessary premise, even for those who do not aim at reproducing and re-presenting the piece in its (alleged) authenticity: it is about the need to develop awareness and intellectual integrity, in order not to adhere slavishly to a shallow present.

A very representative example of this is the general program of a concert season, which juxtaposes – usually in the same hall, on the same stage – a series of very different musical experiences, conceived for the most disparate purposes: liturgy (such as the *B Minor Mass*), highbrow entertainment (Brahms' Fourth symphony), social entertainment (W. A. Mozart's Concerto K 595) or artistic experimentation (Varèse's *Ionisation*). For season subscribers, these distinctions are erased, replaced by the generic category of concertgoing and quality entertainment, which redefines the function of these artifacts from the past. If you believe that J. S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* is a concert piece just because it is presented as such today, then is this not equivalent to approaching it in a misleading way? What I find absolutely essential about the historical context is the reconstruction of the functions that different musics have performed in the course of time: "a structural history that explains a musical product on the basis of its social function", as Dahlhaus advocated already forty years ago.<sup>3</sup> I do not think that this goal is outdated. Ideally restoring the (cultural, but also functional) links that connected musical forms of expression to the societies of their time has to do not only with the desire to reconstruct a more appropriate, and certainly more evocative, historical background, but is primarily a method to convey the idea that music was never an optional activity, something that only concerned a minority of experts. Ignoring music history, therefore, means you are not only neglecting a type of cultural production but also obscuring some key aspects of social functioning. Therefore I believe that the primary goal should be to bring music back *into* the broader context of general history. This larger grid – firm, secure, but flexible and wide-mesh, will accommodate specific histories (genres, techniques, styles, instruments and, why not, people).

In piecing this picture together, an essential contribution obviously comes from documents of the time, descriptions of the occasions in which music played a role, theoretical and practical reflections on the manifestations of sound. I do not think that all this should remain in the dark, a hidden introduction to the narration. On the contrary, I believe that some notion of all this constitutes the first, indispensable step in developing a listening perspective that is appropriate for the object.<sup>4</sup> Drawing the attention of readers to a reasoned, representative selection of period documents is an interesting choice from a methodological point of view, for several reasons: first of all, it juxtaposes a different type of (verbal) evidence with the musical evidence

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<sup>3</sup> C. DAHLHAUS, "Was ist und wozu studiert man Musikgeschichte?", *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, CXXXV, 1974, pp. 79-84; quoted and translated from the Italian version: C. DAHLHAUS, "Che significa e a qual fine si studia la storia della musica?", *Il Saggiatore musicale*, XII, 2005, pp. 219-230: 224.

<sup>4</sup> This is the underlying purpose of the handbook series *Musica e società* (voll. I e II, Milan, McGraw-Hill, 2012 e 2013; vol. III, Lucca, Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2015), the first of which is mentioned here in footnote 2.

provided by listening (we should not forget that each new performance of a piece is ultimately the echo, however distorted and mutated, of a voice that has not entirely faded away, and hence constitutes, in and of itself, a piece of evidence, and a living one at that): this gives readers a direct glimpse of some stages in the historiographer's work, making them aware of its scientific quality. Secondly, it suggests that is it possible to get the most out of a history lesson by paying detailed attention also to terms and circumstances.

The same attention should be paid to the practice of listening.<sup>5</sup> In societies like ours, which tend to stop at the surface of things, and in everyday life relegate musics to a background that is perceptible but is not really there, teaching how to listen is, in my view, crucial not just for musical purposes, but for education in general – if we want to contain the hyperactive frenzy that makes us inadequate when it comes to more long-term experiences; and if we want to train ourselves to stop and think, to study things in-depth. The ability to analyze things, unravel them, deconstruct them layer by layer and then put them back together, which is essential for the purpose of conscious listening, can become a good training ground for a comprehensive education; and the habit of building mental music maps can be a useful exercise in logic and memory.

The privileged role assigned to period evidence – be it in document form or in sound form, will also turn out to be useful when it comes to periodization. The fact that Kant, in 1784, took the trouble to answer the question *Was ist Aufklärung?* seems to me much more significant than labeling him as an Enlightenment thinker *today*. Giving preference to “original” notions and terms certainly does not prevent us from using other words, coined afterwards; but if we do, we should say so explicitly and accurately, and this, too, will help develop the very kind of historical-critical sensibility to which the teaching of history is instrumental. In this way, the document functions not only as evidence, but also acquires a relativizing function.

I do not believe that a historical-musical design should tell a single story, one that is linear and straight. Rather, it should put together multiple sets of (smaller or bigger) histories, weave together (shorter or longer, more or less lasting) threads. It does not always advance at a regular, constant pace. I have the impression that, sometimes, skepticism about the effectiveness of historiography goes back to the difficulty of identifying reading keys that are universally valid, and building general systems in which everything can fit in and be explained. Given the complexity of phenomena, maybe it is not wise at all to try and reduce everything to *one* theory, *one single* narrative path; and we should also remember that not everything can be explained. I can certainly draw attention to the growing number of signals, in practice and in theory,

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<sup>5</sup> The issue is addressed, for instance, in *La didattica dell'ascolto*, ed. by G. La Face Bianconi, a monographic issue of *Musica e Storia*, XIV, 2006.

which suggest the imminent breakthrough of the tonal system, yet I was never able to really explain to me, or to my students, why all this happened. Acknowledging that not everything can be explained is obviously no justification for not explaining anything. However, I believe this, too, is an intellectual issue that may somehow perform an educational function, by reminding us that we are not almighty, so maybe it would not be off the point to share these reflections with our students. Provided that we do not forget about the usefulness of the historiographical practice (even at the level of handbooks) for those who carry out research. The need for a constant change of perspective forces us to alternate between close analytical examination and general overview, between magnifying lens – or even microscope, and the naked eye that sweeps across the landscape. I have found this to be a very healthy exercise: I am not suggesting that each one of us should periodically write a handbook. But I believe that imagining chapters of it would not be pointless.