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WHICH WORDS WORK FOR TEACHING MUSIC HISTORY IN ITALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION? SOME COMMENTS ON THE QUALITY OF MUSICAL DISCOURSE

The teaching of music history in Italian universities can be traced back to about a century ago when, in 1913, the University of Rome entrusted Fausto Torrefranca with the first *libera docenza* – that is a lectureship – in music history and musical aesthetics. Later, in 1941, Torrefranca's great renown led to his appointment as full professor of music history at the University of Florence, and to the first chair of musicology in an Italian university. Since the time of Torrefranca, when the university was socially and culturally an elitist institution, much water has passed under the bridge: the number of chairs of music history has greatly increased and, despite the recent cuts in state funding for higher education, it is fair to say that music history is no longer the Cinderella of the humanities in Italy.

Although the teaching of music history did progressively take hold in Italian universities, this was a “web-like” process, as it were, not always accompanied by the degree of depth required by specialized teaching (in fact, few universities offer degrees with a major in musicology). There are several reasons for this lack of vertical development: first of all, the age-old Italian separation between curricula and institutions in the fields of music and musicology; on the one hand, in universities the course are essentially historical, theoretical and critical in nature; on the other hand, the conservatories offer a kind of training that is basically technical and practical. Obviously, this distinction has repercussions on the skills of students, whose training is more or less biased toward one side or the other. And while until a few years ago it was not unusual for students to attend both university and conservatory courses at the same time, recent legislation has put a stop to this amphibious practice (first by banning, and then by limiting its extent), or at any rate has made it more difficult, despite the fact that it actually produced a significant cultural osmosis.

The aim of this short introduction was to explain why talking about music history in the Italian university system today is a problem, to which there are no easy solutions. The student body is made up for the most part of young people with little or no technical-musical training, and one of the reasons for this is the lack of music education in our secondary schools. Our students often go to university to study other disciplines, such as cinema, drama, art history, literature or foreign languages. These are all subjects whose technical language can be learned directly during lectures, without the need for a specific

background, which is instead a pre-requisite for the study of music history. In order to understand what a sequence shot is, students of cinema do not need to have studied film theory for many years, or to have learned how to use a camera. Similarly, art history students can understand the oil painting technique without ever having picked up a brush or spent many hours of their life pondering colour theory. It is much more difficult, however, to explain the nature of musical forms, in particular when it comes to harmony and counterpoint, to students who are musically illiterate.

Thus, teachers must resort to immediately understandable indications, such as the different instrumentation in the themes of Rossini's symphonies, which are useful for explaining the bi-thematic model of the sonata form (although the development is missing). In this perspective, the quality of the discourse on music – the verbalization model used in teaching – takes on tremendous importance: this is an issue which Italian musicology neglected until the early years of this century – along with many other problems relating to pedagogy and teaching. From the 1970s to the 1980s, musicological language had shown a tendency towards radical specialism, which was evident above all in analytical studies.¹ The language of Italian musical analysis was indeed characterized by an overly cryptic terminology, which was also the consequence of a rebellion – a legitimate one at the time – against a traditional musical culture anchored to the old adherents of idealistic criticism.² There was a proliferation of new lexical items, which technified terms that were already technical, through a process we might define “hyper-technification”: the advocates of the various analytical schools employed language tools as an explicit indicator of diversity and belonging, not unlike an insider jargon. Let me name a few examples: from the Italian term for the musical rest (*‘pausa’*), words like *ipopausa* (hypopause), *isopausa* (isopause), *iperpausa* (hyperpause) and *metapausa* (metapause) were derived, a technification produced by adding prefixes to the general word ‘pausa’ (pause).

For going beyond such positions and shifting the focus towards the issue of speaking about music, we are indebted to the work of Giuseppina La Face who, since the late 1990s, has concentrated her attention on how to communicate verbally with students – both at university and non-university level – when dealing with complex structures like those of art music. In her introductory *paper* to the New York study session, La Face illustrated a series of

¹ See, for example, M. DE NATALE, *Analisi musicale. Principi teorici. Esercitazioni pratiche*, Milan, Ricordi, 1991.

² I mean here, with the necessary distinctions, the generation of Massimo Mila and Fedele d'Amico. For a study on their musicological language, see R. COSTA - A. TRUDU, *La lingua di Massimo Mila e Fedele d'Amico negli scritti sul teatro musicale del Novecento*, Florence, Olschki, 1994.

strategies to follow in the verbalization of musical discourse.³ In this paper – also due to time constraints – I will limit myself to point to the urgent need for a didactic approach that takes into account the preliminary knowledge of students in verbal communication. The use of appropriate language that is functional to the didactic transposition of musical knowledge can only be good for the construction and representation of the meaning which musical works are capable of transmitting: a message whose educational value transcends the musical facts themselves and reaches the individual primarily through words. For, as Eggebrecht wrote, “in the – subjectively founded – choice of verbal expression, all analyses of the same music differ ineluctably; even when they recognize and interrogate identical issues”.⁴

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³ See G. LA FACE, “Italian Musicologists and the Challenge of Music Pedagogy”, in this issue on pp. 1-18. See also, by Giuseppina La Face, “Testo e musica: leggere, ascoltare, guardare”, this journal, II, 2012, pp. 31-54.

⁴ H. H. EGGBRECHT, “Comprendere attraverso l’analisi”, *Il Saggiatore musicale*, IV, 1997, pp. 373-384: 374.