

## Popular music studies in Italy: a historical/political overview

### *Os estudos sobre música popular na Itália: uma síntese histórica/política*

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**Abstract:** Courses on popular music were sparsely introduced in Italian universities in the late 1900s – early 2000s, and are still covered 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 is a very specific Italian story. Or maybe not.

**Keywords:** Popular music; Musicology; Ethnomusicology; Italian music studies

**Resumo:** Os cursos de música popular foram timidamente introduzidos nas universidades italianas entre o final dos anos 1900 e início dos anos 2000, e ainda sob disciplinas “guarda-chuva” (etnomusicologia, estudos de mídia e comunicação, sociologia). Uma área disciplinar oficial dedicada à música popular, ainda não há. No entanto, a pesquisa sobre música popular existe no país pelo menos desde a década de 1960. A Itália sediou dois importantes congressos internacionais (em 1983 e 2005); ademais, os pesquisadores italianos em música popular são conhecidos internacionalmente e participam como membros de associações, conselhos editoriais, comitês científicos. Para explicar essa contradição, um longo período histórico deve ser revisitado. É uma história italiana muito particular. Ou talvez não.

**Palavras-chave:** Música Popular; Musicologia; etnomusicologia; Estudos sobre música italiana

Where to begin? When? Let me jot down a few schematic notes: later on, I will put them into 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 an historical overview could only start at the end of the 1990s, or at the beginning of the 2000s. If we enlarge the focus to the appearance of dissertations on those subjects (in the absence of formally organised 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 in an Italian university including '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 hadn't been accepted in 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 was held in Italy, on that 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 to exist previously. This topic isn't 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 that was very common in Italy in the 1970s: 'musica extracolta', that is, music located outside of the 'territory' of cultivated, or art, music ('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 vast 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 marginalised today, but very important in the early 1980s (see Josephs 1982, Staarup 1982, Tagg 1982).

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:

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 in some universities (Bologna, Rome, Milan)

1990s more conferences (1995: 'Analisi e canzoni', Trento), early courses on popular music related subjects

2000s another International IASPM conference (2005: Rome), popular music courses in some universities

2010s popular music courses in some conservatories, and discussions about the formal belonging of popular music studies to existing musicological disciplines

Of course, there is no clear division between decades: topics, methodological trends, degrees of institutional refusal/acceptance flow from one period to the next. 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' (Fabbri 2014), that is, the period including the two decades of Fascist rule (called 'Ventennio' in Italian) and the first decade after the Second World War, which, as far as popular music is concerned, is politically and culturally similar: it's a time when an 'official' point of view on '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 a low consideration 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, ministry of Education in the early years of Fascism, was responsible for the reform of public instruction (1923), which is still today at the basis of the marginalisation 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 in universities (and 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 meagre, with some occasional chairs established for purely hedonistic reasons (Allorto and Sartori 1959, 10). 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 previously lacked' (Gallo et al. 1982, 7). As I have hinted above, ethnomusicology entered the Italian academia in the mid-1970s. The late admission of musicological and ethnomusicological studies to a 'solid academic status' is mainly responsible of some of the polemics that took 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 a minority in the humanities, ethnomusicologists a very small platoon, popular music scholars risked to change the existing balance of power, and to endanger well established paths to academic careers for existing disciplines.

Anyway, our travel through the past isn't finished with the 'Trentennio'. We have to acknowledge another period in Italian and European history, that from the 1850s to the early decades of the Twentieth century, when the new concepts of 'classical music' and 'absolute music' were created and gradually accepted, and when a third type of music (aside of '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 (in so-called comparative musicology) as a means to trace the origins of great European art music, left no room even to 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* (1941), a fascinating second-hand sociological study of Tin Pan Alley (see MacDougald 1941), aimed at demonstrating that popular music didn't 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' (Adorno 1938), 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 1960s (see Straniero, M.L., Liberovici, S., Jona, E., De Maria, G. 1964, and also Eco 1964a, 1964b, and 1994) suggests that some of the theoretical themes emerging since the 1850s have influenced 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 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 State-owned radio. Croce and 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.

Italian young scholar Roberto Agostini (1992) 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*, Stefani 1992), 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 recoding 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' (Agostini 1992, 169-170).

As I commented years ago (Fabbri 2010), 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 musics that public institutions continued to ignore' (Agostini 1992, 171).

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 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 programmes), started to be 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 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:

Musicology's object 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. Ethnomusicology's object is the plurality of forms, objects and behaviours 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 systems.<sup>1</sup>

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 it offers others ('progressive' ethnomusicologists?) 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.

Popular music, so, 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), a hostility against popular music studies in some musicological and ethnomusicological circles became commonly acknowledged in the 2010s, and manifested in a variety of behaviours, from the unfair management of academic policies to pathetic ideological battles (more recently, mentioning our object of study as 'cosiddetta popular music' (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 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, is not happening only in Italian universities.

Studying popular music implies considering a large body of music practices with a historical perspective, spanning over at least two centuries; it also implies considering those practices in relation to non-strictly musical practices and conventions; and it also implies considering music that could be also 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

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<sup>1</sup> Decreto Ministeriale 29 luglio 2011 n. 336, attachment B, available at: [http://attiministeriali.miur.it/media/174801/allegato%20b\\_def.pdf](http://attiministeriali.miur.it/media/174801/allegato%20b_def.pdf), accessed July 15th, 2020.

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 to 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 welcome (for a comparative overview of conventional musicologists' attitudes towards popular music see also Fabbri 2019).

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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