

## 5 An ‘intricate fabric of influences and coincidences in the history of popular music’

### Reflections on the challenging work of popular music historians

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What we now call ‘popular music’ is not simply the Anglo-American mainstream from the Tin Pan Alley era (or even the 1950s) onwards, with the optional addition of a handful of local genres, styles and scenes: it is an extremely varied set of music events that became visible and audible almost simultaneously in many places around the world since the early decades of the nineteenth century. If we accept this idea, then a popular music historian has to face a number of challenging questions. Which sources are available? How reliable are they? In which languages were they conceived, written or recorded? Within which theoretical framework can they be studied?

#### **In the year 1878**

Let me start by commenting on two pictures. The first is the famous photograph portraying Thomas Alva Edison and his tinfoil phonograph: it was shot in Washington in April 1878; Edison had patented his invention at the end of February.<sup>1</sup> In my courses on popular music history I always show this photograph, along with a short video demonstrating the phonograph’s actual functioning, other images showing how recordings were made and technical details about the evolution of the ‘talking machine’ and of its rival, Berliner’s gramophone. Usually, at this point of the course, students seem to be relieved, and to finally acknowledge that the course is *really* about popular music: even if recorded music they listen to every day mostly originates from digital files, they respect what they call ‘the vinyl,’ or even the CD (some of them identify the CD with any phonogram in history), and are interested in the origin of sound recording and reproduction. But, especially, they incline to identify popular music, and its history, with recorded sound. They are in good company: with the exception of those (and they are not few in number) who think that popular music coincides with the Anglo-American mainstream from the late 1940s on, many popular music scholars and musicologists seem to adhere to the commonplace that the history of popular music begins with Edison’s invention, with very few precursors (often limited to Stephen Foster and the minstrel show).

The other picture is more problematic. It shows the *Estudiantina Española*, a *tuna* (an amateur string band formed by students) from the University of Salamanca, acclaimed by the crowds in Paris, on Mardi Gras, 4 March 1878, just a few weeks before Edison was photographed in Washington, and a few days after the phonograph was patented. More than one illustration can be found about the huge success of the *Estudiantina* during that visit, on the occasion of the Exposition Universelle.<sup>2</sup> The Expo that music historians usually remember is the one that took place in 1889, when the Eiffel Tower was completed, and a Javanese gamelan orchestra gave a performance, which a certain Claude Debussy attended and listened to attentively. But the *Estudiantina Española*'s performances were no less influential: soon that ensemble of (mostly) plucked strings instruments and singers – seen and heard in the *ville lumière* – became the model for many other similar bands, which were called *estudiantinas* even if they were not amateur bands formed by students, but groups of professional entertainers whose most common instrument was not the Spanish *bandurria*, but the Neapolitan mandolin.

So, we come to the question: is the *Estudiantina*'s picture as clearly relevant to popular music history as Edison's phonograph? *Tunas* had been in existence for centuries, long before concepts like 'popular music' were acknowledged, and this is a very good example to discuss the problematic issue of how popular music from the nineteenth century can be related to pre-existing traditions, be they rooted in 'folk' or 'art' music from the preceding centuries. If the tradition and the music of the *tunas* existed from the thirteenth century, does that mean that it isn't popular music? Or that popular music had been existing since then? The basic misunderstanding that creates such dualistic (and useless) interpretation lies in assuming that belonging to a class in a taxonomy (or a 'category', or a genre) is an essential quality of the music, rather than determined by the way music is conceptualized within a community, which is what actually happens. The key for understanding if and how the *Estudiantina Española*'s music can be related to popular music is the process by which, in the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries, the ideas of 'classical music' and 'folk music' were invented, and 'popular music' became the conceptual space where music not belonging to the classical canon or to the Romantic idea of folk could be placed. In 1878 that process was well on its way.

Although canons later became an important feature of popular music as well, its origins as a *refugium peccatorum* – as music that obviously did not comply with the necessary features prescribed to be classical (of universally accepted value, composed by geniuses from the past, or in a similar style) or folk (peasant, illiterate, exotic) – made innovation (or novelty) and imitation two contrasting but equally important impulses for the creation of new material. The role of the *Estudiantina Española*'s Parisian success can be understood within this framework. Success in Paris, at that time in history, meant success anywhere else in Europe (and beyond); on the other hand, anywhere else an *estudiantina* was new, for a while, compared to existing orchestras and repertoires. This has to be proven, though. A few methodological issues arise: which documents can we find, in order to demonstrate and understand the spreading of new ensembles, styles and genre conventions? Are such documents reliable? Historical musicologists

are familiar with such issues, but popular music poses special problems here, as a kind of music that – by definition – does not need to be saved for the future: scores, photographs, posters, ads, magazines and records, are easily thrown away. Sure, there are collectors of such items, but usually they collect what remained after attics or cellars were ‘cleared’ from ‘useless’ stuff, at some point in the nineteenth or twentieth century. Only a few years ago, RAI (Italy’s state radio and television) got rid of all singles’ sleeves in its huge record library; and public libraries (in Italy, again) destroyed many collections of entertainment weeklies and youth magazines from the 1950s and 1960s. When a field of study has a low academic status, and its object is considered culturally and socially irrelevant, disdain percolates down to decision makers at all levels.

Such a shortage of original documents also explains why the Internet can be a good source only for certain periods in history: anything that was shown on television sooner or later ends up on YouTube, but printed matter (including photos) is much harder to find. It is easy to find, for example, television appearances of bands with two electric guitars, an electric bass, and a drum kit, around 1960. When I want to discuss with my students how The Ventures and The Shadows contributed to the canonization of that line-up, I have ways to entertain them.<sup>3</sup> But it is not as easy if the subject is plucked-string ensembles between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Let me go back to two or three decades after the beginning of their international success, considering the repertoires of Greek/Turkish *estoudiantínas*.<sup>4</sup> Such small orchestras were popular in Istanbul and Smyrna in the 1900s and 1910s. Mandolins and mandolas were their main instruments; they performed in cafés and in sporting clubs established by and for Levantines (Western European citizens, who lived and made business in Ottoman cities) and were chosen as performers during recording campaigns by Western European record companies. The success of some of those records and songs can be demonstrated by the fact that different recordings and matrices exist for the same title. One of those hits is ‘Smyrniopóula,’ a song recorded in Istanbul for Odeon (58579) by the Smyrnaikí Estoudiantína Kostantinópoli (1908–1909) and in Smyrna for Gramophone (6-12688 and 6-12688X) by the Ellinikí Estoudiantína (1909). The former version is scored for violin and piano (or *santúri*, or cimbalom), the second for a small wind ensemble (brass was substituted for strings in many arrangements in the age of mechanical recording, even with bands who used strings for live performances of the same song). The (male) voice sounds lighter in the former, more operatic in the latter.

Information about *estoudiantínas* and their recordings can be found in *Σμύρνη. Η μουσική ζωή 1900/1922. Η διασκέδαση, τά μουσικά καταστήματα, οι ηχογραφήσεις δίσκων*<sup>5</sup> (Kalydiótis 2002), and one of the versions of ‘Smyrniopóula’ is included on a CD that was sold with the book. ‘Smyrniopóula’ is a Greek adaptation of ‘Nanninella,’ by Antonio Barbieri and Vincenzo Di Chiara, released by publisher Bideri: in Naples it had been a big success in Elvira Donnarumma’s performances at the Eldorado theatre in 1906;<sup>6</sup> the song was also recorded by I Figli di Ciro (1909), a group of *posteggiatori* (three violin players and a mandolin player/singer) performing only in restaurants.<sup>7</sup> I have not been successful in my efforts

to find a copy of I Figli di Ciro's recording (on Gramophone/Zonophone), neither was I able to determine if their recording was made earlier or later than the *estoudiantína*'s versions, although the most probable channel for the transmission of the song across the Mediterranean was the score. In the twentieth century Italian music publishers sold scores for voice-mandolin and/or accordion (just the melodic line and chords), which were known in the business and by musicians as *mandolini*.<sup>8</sup> So, to say that the mandolin was one of the most powerful media for the dissemination of popular music from the nineteenth century up to the mid-twentieth century should not raise eyebrows among music scholars.

### Smyrna and Naples<sup>9</sup>

Let us go further with mandolins and *estoudiantínas* in the early decades of the twentieth century, namely with 'Tik-Tak,' one of the most popular songs from Smyrna, recorded for Orfeon Records in Istanbul around 1912 by the Estoudiantina Tchanakas Smyrne (Orfeon 11578) and covered since then by many important Greek musicians, from Markos Vamvakáris (1905–1972) to the Estoudiantina Néas Ionías (established in 1998) to Glykería (1953). The song is now credited as 'traditional' (*παραδοσιακό*). However, authors were not credited on records in Greece and Turkey until the 1920s (Kalydiótis 2002, p. 132), so any attribution of 'Tik-Tak' to anonymous authors is posthumous and is not based on any evidence. The authors of 'Nanninella' are not credited on the label of 'Smyrniopoúla,' but their absence does not make 'Smyrniopoúla' traditional. Of course, I am aware that suggesting a non-traditional and maybe foreign origin for 'Tik-Tak' – one of the songs that embody the feelings of a number of Greeks about Asia Minor's *katastrofi*<sup>10</sup> (as expressed in the comments of the several versions uploaded on YouTube, for instance) – can be very unpopular among Greeks. However, until the equivalent of 'Nanninella' is found, we can only observe some facts. First, when 'Tik-Tak' was recorded in Istanbul, 'Smyrniopoúla/Nanninella,' recorded by an *estoudiantína*, it had been one of the greatest hits in Smyrna and Istanbul for three years. Second, like 'Smyrniopoúla,' 'Tik-Tak' is based on a repeating progression from a minor mode verse to a major mode refrain. Third, verse and refrain (in both songs) are based on an alternating tonic-dominant pattern, respectively in the minor and major mode. Fourth, there are two similar melodic phrases, one at the end of the verse of 'Smyrniopoúla,' the other at the end of the refrain of 'Tik-Tak,' when the harmony shifts back to minor mode. Fifth, the main subject of 'Tik-Tak' (the heartbeat of a lover sounding like a clock) was common in European popular songs at the beginning of the twentieth century, one example being 'Ticchete tti tticchete ttà,' a 1902 Neapolitan song composed by Vincenzo Di Chiara (the author of 'Nanninella') with lyrics by Giovanni Capurro (known for being the lyricist of 'O sole mio'). One can guess at least that the unknown authors of 'Tik-Tak' had been exposed to examples of Western European (including Neapolitan) popular song and that their work was influenced by them.

The harmonic-melodic character of 'Tik-Tak' is irreducible to Asia Minor's (makam-based) music styles. The song is described in the booklet of the

Estoudiantína Néas Ionías CD (*Smyrna*, EMI Music Greece 7243 5980462 0, 2003) as based on the ‘makam Nihâvend with Tsargiah;’ but the explanation in the next line, ‘minor scale that changes to major,’ is more convincing, especially if referred to the Estoudiantína Néas Ionías’ performance itself. The same applies to the recording [of ‘Tik-Tak’] Markos Vamvakáris made in the 1960s, although the addition of a diminished chord in the instrumental intro and breaks, played by an accordion, gives the song a more Slavic (*hasaposérviko*) flavour. But the minor-major verse-refrain progression and the alternate tonic-dominant patterns are there as well.

I was struck by the song’s irreducibility to Greek ‘oriental’ modal styles even before I started considering the possible influence of Neapolitan models (Fabbri 2009, p. 189). On the island of Tilos, during religious festivals in the summer, at some point (certainly after the publication of the Estoudiantina Néas Ionías album) one distinguished member of the community, an amateur performer and an expert of local music traditions, asked the invited professional musicians to play and accompany ‘Tik-Tak.’ I was present at the event and knew the song already, and I wasn’t surprised to hear that the musicians (a very competent trio resident in Rhodes who performed traditional songs and dances at festivals all around the Dodecanese) ‘could not’ play the song as I knew it. It was difficult for them to even conceive a dominant (fifth degree) to tonic (first degree) relationship of the kind that structurally informs ‘Tik-Tak.’ Usually, when they are requested to accompany a melody that suggests such a relationship, they use different ‘dominants,’ either on the second or on the flat seventh degree, but of course the harmonic flavour of the song changes accordingly. That’s why the performance of ‘Tik-Tak,’ during Tilos *paniyiria*, never took off.

Of course, we have to consider Finnish musicologist Risto Pekka Pennanen’s warning, when he writes that some researchers

consider modal harmony without noticing that characteristic chord progressions for some makam-based *dhromoi* do not differ from those of common practice harmony. Apparently these researchers have not been able to identify these *dhromoi* and have taken them for Western major.

(Pennanen 1997, p. 76)

But ‘Tik-Tak,’ in my opinion, is beyond the borderline, and I wonder if Pennanen’s remark shouldn’t be reversed here: why try to interpret ‘Tik-Tak’ as makam-based, when it is so clearly a Western-styled piece? Moreover, as I went on listening to the Tilian version of ‘Tik-Tak’ year after year, I realized that another reason for the uncertain melodic and harmonic shape of the song was the fact that the singer, after the second line of the section in major, went on with the melody and lyrics of *another* song, ‘Dhen se thelo piá’ (interestingly, another piece featuring in the Estoudiantina Néas Ionías album: it was originally recorded by the Ellinikí Estoudiantina in 1908). ‘Dhen se thelo piá’ is very similar to both ‘Tik-Tak’ and ‘Smyrniopoúla’: this made me wonder if the authors could be the same. But ‘Smyrniopoúla’ was originally ‘Nanninella’ by Antonio Barbieri and Vincenzo Di Chiara: what about the authors of ‘Tik-Tak’ and ‘Dhen se thelo piá’?

My doubts about the origin of the two songs could not be solved by investigating local sources: their Greekness appeared to be unquestionable, there was something ‘sacred’ in their belonging to the pre-*katastrofi* Smyrna repertoires. The musicians of the trio from Rhodes maintained that ‘Tik-Tak’ had been brought to the islands by a ‘viol player’ from Nysiros; I didn’t dare to reply, noting the coincidence of the song’s arrival to Tilos with the publication of a CD. So, I finally decided to ask a distinguished scholar of Neapolitan song, Raffaele Di Mauro, who in the first instance could only confirm my suspicions, without any proof. But later he circulated the recordings of the two songs I had given him to a few record collectors; one of them, *Ciro Daniele*, recognized the songs immediately. Di Mauro then provided me with the scores and original recordings. The version of ‘Dhen se thelo piá’ with Neapolitan lyrics (i.e. the original), is ‘Mbraccia a me’, by Antonio Barbieri and Vincenzo Di Chiara, published in 1908 by Bideri, Naples.<sup>11</sup> The version of ‘Tik-Tak’ with Neapolitan lyrics is ‘Questa non si tocca?’, by Antonio Barbieri and Vincenzo Di Chiara, published in 1910 by Bideri, Naples.<sup>12</sup> On the score, below the title, writing informs that the song was presented at the ‘Tavola rotonda’ contest during the 1910 Piedigrotta Festival.<sup>13</sup>

If we add the information provided by Kalydiótis (2002, p. 130) about ‘Nanninella’/‘Smyrniopoúla,’ we find that three Neapolitan songs by the same authors, published by the same publisher, became hits in Smyrna, with Greek lyrics, in 1908, 1908–1909 and 1912. The fact that the names of the authors (either the original lyricist and composer, or the Greek translator/adaptor) do not appear on record labels is not surprising, and does not imply unethical copyright practices, if we remember that phonomechanical rights were first introduced (in the US) only in 1909. Rather, the ‘string of hits’ of 1908–1912, if it is not the result of a very unlikely series of coincidences, suggests that in the 1900s–1910s (at least) a significant communication channel existed between Neapolitan publishers and Smyrnian musicians; we are informed by Kalydiótis that music shops in Smyrna were owned by Italian or French entrepreneurs, and that the majority of piano teachers for the rich Levantine families were Italian. Unfortunately, the great fire of 1922 must have destroyed all possible evidence of such musical exchanges.

We could even go further, at the risk of departing completely from the entire *rebetiko* scholarship. Let us consider a song composed and recorded in 1927 by *Andónis Diamantídhis*, aka *Dalgás* (1892–1945): ‘Mánghas,’ whose status in the canon of *rebetiko* is similar to that of ‘Funiculì funiculà’ in Neapolitan song. ‘Mánghas’ could easily pass for a Neapolitan song. Its melody and chord progression are similar not only to several Neapolitan songs, but also to songs in Neapolitan style composed in the 1950s and 1960s by singer-songwriters like *Georges Brassens* or *Fabrizio De André*, with their turnarounds in minor mode featuring changes to the major seventh (flattened) degree and third degree (relative major), like in the instrumental intro (and breaks) in ‘Mánghas:’ i – iv (= i – V – i) – bVII – III – V – i – V7 – i.

In this case, we are probably closer to the territory where *Pennanen’s* remark is valid, although *Philip Tagg’s* objections to conventional musicologists’ dichotomy between ‘tonal’ and ‘modal’ should also be considered. According to *Tagg*,

tonality is a concept that refers to all kinds of tonal relations, including modality; so, Western popular music can be described as ‘tonal’ only inasmuch as it is, largely, modal (Tagg 2009).

Again, we have to take into account a few musical and paramusical factors as well: Dalgás was born in Istanbul and became one of the best-known musicians in the Asia Minor exile community in the late 1920s; like these other musicians he had no familiarity with the bouzouki. In fact, his recording of ‘Mánghas’ does not feature bouzouki, with the result that one of the songs most closely associated with a canonic rebetiko character, the *mánghas* (the lyrics consist of a woman’s complaint against a particular *mánghas*<sup>14</sup>) is not accompanied by that canonic rebetiko instrument, but by violin, *santúri* and guitar. As an Anatolian Greek, Dalgás was certainly familiar with Italianate *kantádhēs* (a genre that included Italian operatic arias and parlour songs, as well as Neapolitan popular songs), no less than with more ‘oriental’ genres. So, the idea of ‘Mánghas’ as a hybrid shouldn’t sound overly strange, but it would serve to date the influence of Neapolitan song on rebetiko back by a couple of decades.

## **Influence**

But, what is ‘influence’? It is a widely used critical concept in music journalism, and also adopted by artists and the recording industry. It connotes similarity, and so it functions like classification concepts such as genre, style, scene and school, as a workaround to avoid more specific descriptions of the lyrical or musical text, or of the way they are performed or recorded. Recommender systems on the Internet (Celma 2010) try to fulfil the same need (to create associations among similar items, without describing them). Influence appears as one of the recommendation factors in the iTunes Store.<sup>15</sup> There is also a recommender system fully based on influence, *infloenz.com*, which promises to ‘Discover who influenced your favorite artists.’<sup>16</sup> Influence adds a hint of causality, suggesting a reason for similarity, and this may explain the concept’s success among music critics, who often seem to be aiming at a (rather trivial) rationalization of music history.

But influence is not a trivial concept. When similar content elements or stylistic traits are found in different texts, influence may be (or may not be) operating. Here I will concentrate on the poietic aspects of influence, rather than on its post factum effects. Harold Bloom elaborated a theory of influence in literature, developing the idea of anxiety generated in poets by the implicit challenge posed by precursors who influenced them; Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) was considered at the time of its publication as one of the foundations of a new approach to literary criticism. Bloom’s insistence on hierarchic values, and on the opposition between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ poets, as well as his faith in the dominance of the Western canon, make his theory old-fashioned in our age. However, some of Bloom’s suggestions could probably be applied to songwriters, without implying any resemblance or identification with poets. The six basic concepts, or ‘movements,’ or ‘revisionary ratios’, developed by Bloom in order to explain various modalities of influence – *clinamen*, *tessera*, *kenosis*, *daemonization*, *askesis*,

*apophrades* (Bloom 1973, pp. 14–16) – apply independently of their author’s canonic views. One of the most important suggestions we can draw from these categories is that influence is an *active* (rather than passive) process on the side of the influenced. In other words, the influenced is the agent of influence: which should be obvious, if we were not misled by the usage of a passive form. Also, to some respect ‘to be influenced by someone’ is a euphemism for emulating, imitating, copying or even stealing from someone. If we were to adopt Bloom’s hierarchies, we could say that ‘stronger’ songwriters would admit they stole from someone, while ‘weaker’ ones would maintain they were influenced. Of course, the idea of influence as exerted actively by an influencer onto an influenced is implicit in constructs like acculturation, commercial and media dominance and cultural imperialism, but it must also be noted that often in music history processes of influence were initiated before influencers were massively visible/audible in the context of the influenced. A paradigmatic example is offered by Bob Dylan. It wasn’t until the publication in 2004 of his *Chronicles* that Bob Dylan disclosed he had been strongly influenced by Bertolt Brecht, ‘the antifascist Marxist German poet-playwright whose works were banned in Germany’ (Dylan 2004, p. 272), and especially by ‘Pirate Jenny,’ one of the ballads in *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), to which he was exposed during an off-Broadway performance of Brecht songs in the early 1960s (Dylan 2004, pp. 272–276). After listening to that and other pieces, dismounting and reassembling them many times, for weeks, Dylan would compose and sing ‘in a few years’ songs such as ‘It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding),’ ‘Mr. Tambourine Man,’ ‘A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,’ and others: in 2004 he maintained that without Brecht’s example those songs would never have been born (Dylan 2004, p. 287). In the same autobiographical book, Dylan wrote that he was also influenced by French existentialist playwright and novelist Jean Genet: ‘The songs I’d write would be like that’ (Dylan 2004, p. 89). None of Dylan’s critics before 2004 ever dared to suggest an influence on Dylan by the best-known German communist poet in the twentieth century, or by one of the exponents of the Parisian intellectual scene that had produced *engagé* songs, such as Boris Vian, Georges Brassens and Léo Ferré. Models and their copies are created out of the desire that they be transported into a new context: as Borges said, ‘poets create their precursors’ (quoted in Bloom 1973, p. 19). Communities of any magnitude whose members adopt the conventions of a certain genre or style may be formed by and around examples offered by individual works (i.e. music events) or by other genres or styles (Fabbri 2012).

### **Displaying information**

Usually, relations among genres, styles, scenes and individual artists are displayed visually using geographical maps (a good tool anyway, if one wants to show how the Romani people moved from Rajasthan to Andalusia, or how elements of Uruguayan *candombe* and Cuban *habanera* were incorporated in tango), or conceptual maps, where genres or styles are represented by bordering surfaces (a metaphor that became popular in music journalism in the 1980s, despite its limits

and undesirable consequences, see Fabbri 2007), or by parallel flows (Cichowlas and Lam 2014), a system that looks very convincing, even when data are unreliable, or by ‘bubbles’, as in Paul Lamere’s *Music Popcorn*.<sup>17</sup> But in my opinion the complexity of such relations can be represented more effectively by means of digraphs or directed graphs.<sup>18</sup> An elementary example is the digraph (Figure 5.1) that summarizes some of the relations among genres and individual artists I commented on in an essay on singer-songwriters (Fabbri 2016a).

A better-looking digraph, albeit probably far too complex, is the one created by the application *Music Genre Mapper*, based on Wikipedia.<sup>19</sup>

Finding ways to display visually the complex web of relations that constitutes the ‘intricate fabric’ of popular music history is very important for teaching. It is even more important nowadays, when students have easy access to all sorts of information on any kind of music, but often have no clue on how to relate those pieces of information to one another. And I would add that spatial metaphors – more than simply visual representations – have been the conceptual backbone of many historical accounts of the arts, and especially of music. For example, the

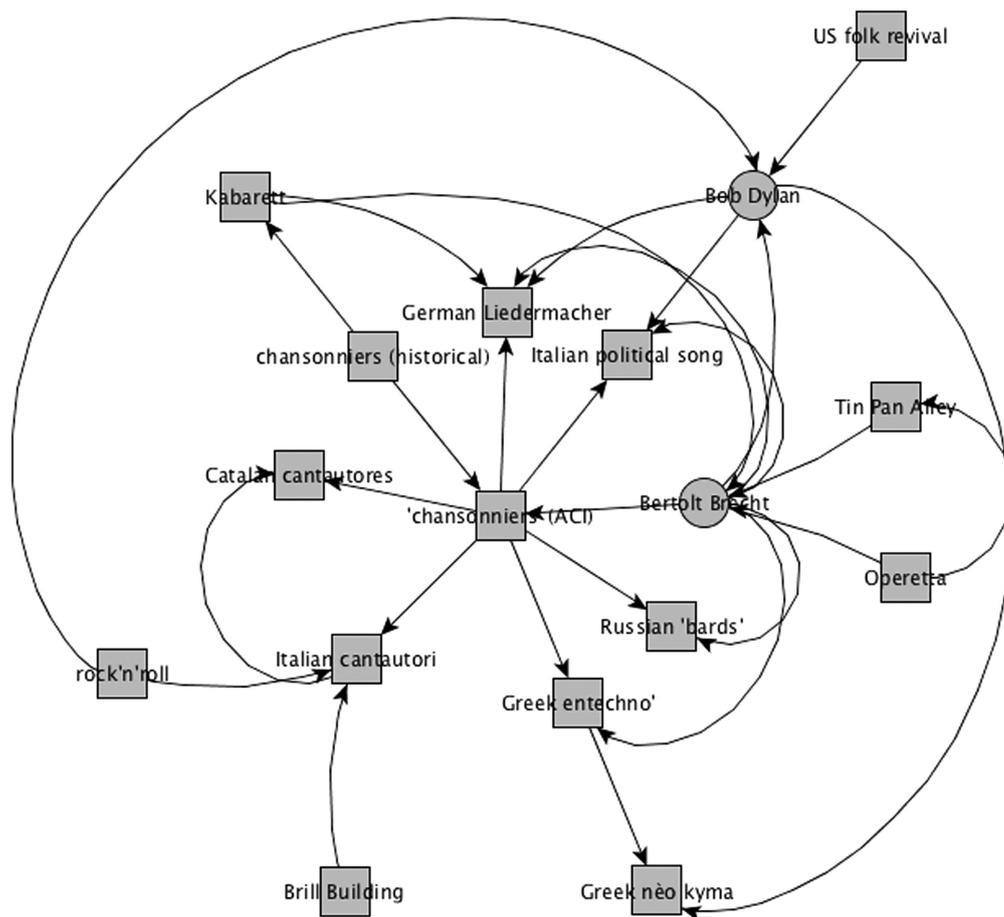


Figure 5.1 Digraph summarizing some of the relations between genres and individuals.

canon of European ‘classical’ music, since the mid-nineteenth century, has been based on the idea of a ‘line,’ progressing from Renaissance polyphony to the age of basso continuo, then to the ‘classical style,’ Romanticism and late-Romanticism, so-called atonality and expressionism, dodecaphony and serial composition, and so on, with names like Bach, Beethoven, Brahms and Boulez as points on the line. On the other hand, all critics of the idea of such a unidimensional music world have pointed their fingers at the incongruities of its underlying graphical representation, showing that there is music – also ‘classical’ music – outside the line, be it Italian and French opera, Sibelius, Ives, Bartók, Šostakovič, Britten or Cage (and we should not wonder if one of those critics was Adorno). Of course, there is a full multidimensional music world outside that line, which includes art music from non-European cultures, traditional music, jazz, popular music and whatever else communities in the world call ‘music’. This is, I believe, the best contribution that individual musicological disciplines like ethnomusicology and music anthropology, jazz and popular music studies, could give to the development of musicology in general: showing that the music universe is multidimensional, and that the ‘line’ is an old scheme, created mainly for political reasons, which lost all its original heuristic value, if it ever had any. But this, of course, is not without consequences.

### **Conclusions: so-called popular music**

In Italian official musicological circles, they now call it ‘*cosiddetta popular music*,’ so-called popular music (and ‘popular music’ is italicized, in order to clarify that it is a foreign expression). Schubert’s Lieder are ‘i Lieder di Schubert’ (not italicized), Rossini’s Overtures are not ‘so-called’ (nor are they translated into ‘Aperture’) and people in those circles would not say ‘il cosiddetto *flamenco*,’ nor ‘il cosiddetto *jazz*,’ nor even ‘il cosiddetto *rock and roll*.’ Some older musicologists, who until recently 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), are 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, are still strongly influenced by old prejudices against popular music; on the other hand, the Italian academic system, based on the institutionalization of disciplinary fields, is still rooted in the nineteenth-century taxonomy of music studies, and allows for the existence of just two disciplinary fields, musicology (including Adler’s historical musicology and music theory) and ethnomusicology. Popular music is not mentioned in the description of those disciplinary fields. Although the study of popular music is now possible in Italian conservatories (where only instruments and history are taught, however, and no research is carried out), the hostility against popular music studies in some musicological and ethnomusicological circles is commonly

acknowledged. Once a cinema scholar met one of my PhD students, and told him: ‘Alas, you are one of those who study popular music? In my department they burn them!’

If cosmopolitanism, as a critical concept, can be contrasted with universalism (Beck 2006; Scott 2018), then nothing is further apart from cosmopolitanism than the Eurocentric universalism of some Italian historical musicologists. Besides, historical studies seem to be outside the field of vision of most Italian ethnomusicologists. So, the issue is not popular music, 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 (for a comparative overview of conventional musicologists’ attitudes towards popular music, see also Fabbri 2019).

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 also be classified as ‘classical’ or ‘traditional.’ In short, studying popular music implies invading repeatedly the fields of existing musicologies, and this helps explain why most conservative musicologists are against popular music scholars, but not against sociologists or cultural studies scholars, most of whom avoid any reference to music as a structured language, and declare themselves incapable of dealing with the alleged ‘technical’ aspects of it; nor against media scholars, for similar reasons; nor against sound studies scholars, as they include music in the more general category of sound, but definitely not in a Cagean or music-anthropological perspective, the result being that – in many studies on sound – music as an independent concept seems to disappear; nor even against rock criticism, as the idea to confine popular music history and practices 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. 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 academia. And, I would add, is dangerous exactly in the same way as those who have been accused of cosmopolitanism in history, because they have no homeland, no faith, no obedience. In both cases, you will never hear or read an explanation for the resulting prosecution: one is cosmopolitan, therefore dangerous, as Ždanov would say; as a popular music scholar one is dangerous because one’s ideas are dangerous, and they are dangerous because such ideas are the ideas of a popular music scholar.

So, it would make little sense for me to go any further than this, in order to show proofs of the obstacles popular music scholars find on their way, especially in Italy. When a system is based on the control of a territory and on a conspiracy of silence, evidence is hard to find and – when found – it is boring, or seemingly inconsistent (like that ‘so-called’, appended with suspect regularity to all references to popular music). Rather, I have followed a different and, I hope, more entertaining path to demonstrate my argument, that is, that the historical study of popular music implies the reference to an extreme variety of sources, which in turn demand responses to a variety of methodological issues, sometimes disturbing quiet assumptions established in the history of existing disciplines.

## Notes

- 1 It can be seen here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phonograph#/media/File:Edison\\_and\\_phonograph\\_edit1.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phonograph#/media/File:Edison_and_phonograph_edit1.jpg).
- 2 One picture can be seen here: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Estudiantina\\_Espagnola\\_défile\\_en\\_voiture\\_à\\_Paris.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Estudiantina_Espagnola_défile_en_voiture_à_Paris.JPG).
- 3 See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owq7hgzn3E> (The Ventures) and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8COV\\_x7MB4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8COV_x7MB4) (The Shadows).
- 4 *Estoudiantína* is the transliteration of the Greek name for these orchestras (εστουδιαντίνα).
- 5 Smyrna. Music life 1900/1922. Entertainment, music shops, recordings.
- 6 According to Kalydiótis (2002, 130) the song – described as ‘an Italian success from 1905–1906’ – was recorded several times in Smyrna, and also in the USA.
- 7 About the success of ‘Nanninella’ in Naples, and about I Figli di Ciro, see Pesce 2005, 20, 89.
- 8 The writing under the title was: ‘Canto – mandolino e fisarmonica’, or ‘Canto – mandolino o fisarmonica’.
- 9 This section is based partially on Fabbri 2016b.
- 10 Greeks usually call *katastrofi* the disasters of 1922–1923, from the killings and fire in Smyrna to the displacement of Ottoman Greeks that followed the Treaty of Lausanne.
- 11 A recording by Vittorio Parisi can be listened to here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BUw8vby1QjY>.
- 12 A 1916 recording by Amelia Bruno, with King’s Orchestra conducted by Edward T. King, Victor matrix B-17664 (recorded in New York on 11 May 1916) is listed here: [https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/700002698/B-17664-Questa\\_non\\_si\\_tocca](https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/700002698/B-17664-Questa_non_si_tocca).
- 13 Piedigrotta is a traditional religious festival held annually in Naples in the night between 7 September and 8 September. In 1839 (some sources indicate 1835) a song contest was established, which lasted until 1860, and then from 1876 until the 1960s.
- 14 A *mánghas* is a ruffian or rogue.
- 15 Contents are provided by All Music Guide.
- 16 Developed by Argentinian programmer Hernán Gauna, Infloenz is powered by APIs provided by Last.fm, YouTube and Rovi (by Rovi Cloud Services Documentation). Here is a comment on Infloenz by recommender systems specialists: ‘... influence is a wider concept than similarity: while still related to a starting point (the favorite artist), the user can come up with new music that it’s not (sic) “more of the same”,’ see <http://www.programmableweb.com/mashup/infloenz>. Accessed 22 July 2018.
- 17 <http://static.echonest.com/popcorn/>. Accessed 22 July 2018.
- 18 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Directed\\_graph](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Directed_graph). Accessed 26 July 2018.
- 19 <http://blog.dr-ivan.com/2009/10/18/music-genre-mapper-now-available/>. Accessed 22 July 2018.

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