

Negative reactions from some music academics inside the Italian system

a short report by Philip Tagg

Intro

Our petition¹ has, unsurprisingly, not exactly pleased every music academic in Italy. This text addresses those expressions of displeasure and seeks to clarify some of the confusion they create.

Given that years of patient and diplomatic efforts by Franco Fabbri and others to secure a real place for popular music studies in Italy met with so little success,² the only course of action available to those of us working to save our area of studies for future generations was, in May 2014, to start a petition in a bid to avoid further damage to the subject and to those involved in it. Our reasoning about the petition, as well as the petition itself, have caused hefty reactions from some of those working inside the very system that excludes popular music studies. Some of those reactions were in my view petty and vindictive and are best ignored. Others have adopted a more reasoned sort of tone.

The Pavia/Cremona document

One document adopting a more reasoned tone was produced by the Board of the Department of Musicology and Musical Heritage (*Consiglio di Dipartimento di Musicologia e Beni Musicali*) at the University of Pavia/Cremona. It was emailed by Gianmario Borio, Full Professor of Musicology in the same Department,³ to a few signatories of our petition, some of whom then forwarded it me. The Pavia/Cremona document criticises “claims made in the [our] petition” and seeks to present “facts [that] can contribute to a realistic evaluation of the quantity and impact of studies in popular music in Italy”.

Among the facts listed in the document are the following activities covering the twelve-year period 2001-2013: [1] three modules⁴ offered in Borio’s Department since 2002: one on *musiche popolari contemporanee* (contemporary popular music), one on *canzone* (song)⁵ and one on jazz; [2] three PhD theses on popular music, of which two published as books, and two books by members of staff; [3] six one-off seminars touching some area of popular music and given by visiting music scholars;⁶ [4] around one hundred ‘theses’ on a jazz- or popular-music-related topic.

To appreciate the full weight of these facts, it’s essential to understand the following:

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1. The petition and thereto related documents are accessible at → <http://tagg.org/html/Petition1405.html> [140620].
 2. See ‘Why the Italian university system excludes popular music studies (the SSD problem)’ → <http://tagg.org/xpdfs/ltSystemBkgdV2.pdf> [140620].
 3. SSD L-ART/07 (see SSD document referred to in footnote 2).
 4. ‘Module’ is UK university jargon for a named ‘course’ (USA, Canada), typically one session per week and lasting typically one semester. ‘Modules’ (courses), usually elective, are elements in a ‘course’ (UK) or program (USA, Canada) as part of a ‘degree programme’ (UK).
 5. Reference in the document is probably to Stefano LaVia’s modules ‘History of Poetry for Music’ and ‘History of *Canzone d’Autore*’.
 6. Those scholars were (in chronological order) Franco Fabbri, Philip Tagg, Steven Feld, Nicholas Cook, Allan Moore and Vincenzo Caporaletti.

[1a] the module on ‘song’ is an extension of the conventional musicology module ‘History of Music for Poetry’; [1b] the jazz module no longer exists;⁷ [2] one of the published books is riddled with factual errors evident to any serious scholar of Italian popular music;⁸ [3] in the 1990s, at the Institute of Popular Music (IPM) in Liverpool, we used to have around six one-off seminars by visiting speakers in one semester (half a year) rather than over a period of twelve years; [4] the hundred theses referred to in the document and produced over a period of twelve years are mostly end-of-module BA mini-theses (typically 50-60 pages); I estimate that I must have marked and graded at least 500 such offerings during my seven years teaching *musiques populaires, musique et images en mouvement*, etc. in the *Faculté de musique* at the *Université de Montréal* (Jan., 2003 - Dec., 2009).

In other words, the Pavia/Cremona document seems to me to be the strangest sort of *excusatio non petita*. While it mentions some popular music activities in the Department – some excellent, others less so by international standards – the list is painfully short compared to what you’ll find in many universities in other countries, where the same amount of popular music studies activities occur every one or two years rather than every six or twelve. A very similar list could be compiled to cover the activities of the tiny group of young scholars led by Franco Fabbri at the University of Turin, in far fewer years. If the Pavia/Cremona document’s facts are true – and I have little reason to doubt them – and if they “contribute to a realistic evaluation of the quantity and impact of studies in popular music in Italy”, then what we say in the petition is indeed true: popular music studies in Italian universities *are* marginalised.

So, why did people from the Pavia Department feel the need to produce such a document? I can only speculate, but some contextual information might help solve the riddle behind the Pavia/Cremona document’s “own goal”.

Popular music studies have very rarely been an issue of public debate in Italy’s official musicological and ethnomusicological circles. Two IASPM international conferences (1983 and 2005) took place in Italy, but representatives of Italian musicological or academic societies didn’t even send a welcome message or acknowledge these important events in any other way. The only occasions when popular music studies were addressed by Italian musicologists or ethnomusicologists in a position of academic power were: [1] a conference in Bologna in 2002 on “consumption music” (where one musicologist famously warned that a scholar with a PhD about rap might one day become a professor of music); [2] the conference “Ethnomusicology and popular music studies: why should they converge?” held at the Fondazione Cini, Venice, in January 2005; [3] a conference on British experimental rock in Cremona in October 2005; [4] one on song form in Cosenza in 2007; [5] one on the possible interrelations between ethnomusicology and popular music studies in Parma in 2007.

Except for the Bologna conference on “consumption music”, which was a blatant attempt to isolate existing popular music scholars,⁹ and for the Venice conference, all other conferences dealing with popular music were at least co-sponsored by IASPM

7. Searching for “jazz”, “afro-american*”, etc. produced 0 (zero) hits in the Pavia/Cremona online syllabus and module descriptions. See *Corsi* at <http://musicologia.unipv.it/dipartimento/corsi.php>; and *Studi di musiche popolari* at <http://musicologia.unipv.it/organizzazione/guida/programmi/201415/pdf/190.pdf>, as well as *Musiche popolari contemporanee* at <http://musicologia.unipv.it/organizzazione/guida/programmi/201415/pdf/188.pdf> [all accessed 140615].

8. It would be petty to give details of this work. We can all make mistakes!

Italy. Other conferences were organised by members of IASPM in collaboration with universities and conservatories, and modules/courses were started, notably in Turin. For years, IASPM Italy's website was the only source of information about university courses on popular music, listing all of them (very few, but still *all*). That list included the Pavia/Cremona module/course *Musiche popolari contemporanee*, which still exists.

I find it hard to understand why people from the Pavia/Cremona Department wanted to produce a text demonstrating the paucity of their popular music studies activities because, by so doing, they eloquently confirmed the issues we raise in the petition about the marginalisation of popular music studies in Italy. But the question still remains: why did they oppose the petition rather than signing it and joining forces with other popular music scholars, in Italy and elsewhere? The only possible explanation I can think of is that they actually support the policies of those in positions of power inside the Italian academic system: they persist in the notion that popular music studies can never be more than a mere sub-sector of ethnomusicology (or an occasional occupation for a musicologist) and they attempt to obfuscate any evidence, including their own, of the marginalisation of popular music studies.

The ADUIM reaction

In the same email as that covering the Pavia/Cremona document, just discussed, Gianmario Borio provides a link (see below) to a text produced by the *Consiglio Direttivo* of ADUIM (the executive board of the Association of Italian University Music Teachers). It's a short letter to the Minister of Universities and contains the following statement.

“[T]he accusations against ‘academic musicology’ moved in the petition, without adequate information and with the most apparent ignorance about the state of the art of musicological teachings in Italian universities, are devoid of any foundation, and damage seriously both the professional dignity of members of SSDs L-ART/07 and L-ART/08, and the autonomy of structures (Departments, Courses, Doctoral Schools) whose tasks are promoting scientific research and organizing academic teaching at all levels.”

I'm unable to give an exact translation of the letter's bureaucratic power jargon but I hope that readers get the drift of its rhetoric.

The letter containing the above quotation is signed by Franco Piperno (Full Professor of Musicology and History of Music, SSD L-ART/07, University of Roma “La Sapienza”), Lorenzo Bianconi (Full Professor of Drammaturgia Musicale, SSD L-ART/07, University of Bologna), and Mila De Santis (Associate Professor, SSD L-ART/07, University of Firenze). It ends by offering the Minister a thorough explanation of the status quo of “the complex articulation of academic musicology teaching”. You can read the complete letter (in Italian) at

→ http://www.aduim.eu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=592&Itemid=1,

where you will also find the Pavia/Cremona document (in both Italian and English).

Of course, our petition never made any accusations against academic musicology —if it had, I would, as a university professor of musicology, be attacking myself!—, nor was it generally addressed to “members of SSDs” (many of whom actually signed it). Nevertheless, the ADUIM letter states that the policies on popular music of SSDs, such as in Pavia/Cremona, are representative of the “professional dignity” of teachers and of the “autonomy” of structures. Some Italian popular music scholars are also university

9. The Bologna event was organized by leading authorities in the musicological SSD. Only one IASPM member was invited and the programme failed to mention that this person was Secretary of IASPM Italia.

music teachers in music but it seems no attempt was ever made, by the President and Vice-President of ADUIM, to hear the comments of those individuals on their professional situation. Whose “apparent ignorance” are they talking about, then?¹⁰ Readers of this text should be informed that the signatories of ADUIM’s letter are well known in Italian university circles for being among the leaders of the SSD L-ART/07 Musicology and History of Music. If you want to understand how academic relationships and power structures work in Italy, and how popular music studies and scholars are represented in official documents by official musicological bodies, you need look no further.¹¹

“Censorship”

Finally, we learnt from several signatories to our petition that Gianmario Borio, in an email circulated to them, stated that the Dean of the University of Pavia’s Department of Musicology and Musical Heritage (*Dipartimento di Musicologia e Beni Musicali*) sent their document to IASPM’s webmaster with a request for it to be published on the IASPM international list. Now, since that Dean, as far as we are aware, is not an individual IASPM member and his Department is not an institutional member, neither he nor his Department can claim the same rights and privileges as those who have paid their IASPM membership fees. As we all know, access to the list is free for members, and any IASPM member who is also member of the Pavia/Cremona *Dipartimento* (there are some) could have easily posted the document, and thereby made themselves available to answer eventual reactions to it from IASPM members worldwide. But they chose not to do so. I don’t know why. I was also informed independently by several signatories to our petition who received Borio’s email that IASPM’s refusal to publish an external document on the list was described as “censorship”.¹² So much for the respect of the rules of international associations, including IASPM, and for a democratic, egalitarian exchange of opinion.

Perhaps I need to explain to the authors of the Pavia/Cremona and ADUIM texts the simple ethics of equality and democracy underpinning IASPM’s statutes and rules of procedure. But is it worth the effort? I think it may be difficult for them to accept that it matters not if you’re a prestigious public institution, a powerful corporation or a lone student interested in *cúmbia*. The voice and vote of each member has the same weight and value as those of every other member. I’m proud to say we have in IASPM no unwritten rules or assumptions about power, prestige or privilege.

10. If you want to see which modules/courses are on offer in Pavia/Cremona for 2014-15, go to → <http://musicologia.unipv.it/dipartimento/corsi.php>.

11. We neither attacked musicology as a university discipline, nor any of its teachers. The petition is *in no way* anti-musicology. Its focus is Italy’s rigid institutional *system* of disciplinary definitions and its negative effects on innovation and reform. The marginalisation or exclusion of popular music studies is one such effect. It seems the authors of the ADUIM letter have confused *institutional system* with *academic discipline*. If that is so, it does not bode well for the future of the academic disciplines involved.

12. No international association that I know of accepts postings from non-members on their list or discussion forum. However, any IASPM member wishing to post a document they receive is at liberty to disseminate its contents on the list, as long as they take personal responsibility for the posting and are prepared to enter into discussion with members responding to it.