

Why are Popular Music Studies excluded from Italian Universities?

*The SSD problem explained by Philip Tagg*¹

“We felt we could operate more efficiently by freeing ourselves
from the bureaucratic shackles of the Italian state.”
(Umberto Eco)²

SEVERAL of those who signed the petition have told us that the situation of popular music is just as bad in their own country as it seems to be in Italy. They want to know what makes the Italian situation particularly hostile to our subject area.

The root cause of the problem is the Italian university system, more specifically the way in which subject areas and disciplines have to fit into a fixed administrative grid that leaves no room for the reform or renewal necessitated by changes in society, technology, or in the state of knowledge responding to those changes. The key concept underpinning this fixed grid of subject areas and disciplines is the *Settore Scientifico-Disciplinare* — ‘disciplinary-scientific sector’ or SSD for short. These SSDs are previously established university disciplines whose areas of activity are tightly defined and whose administrative powers are quite exceptional.³

According to current Italian law, all university professors, lecturers and researchers must belong to one of 370 SSDs, grouped into 14 subject areas and 28 sub-areas.⁴ You’ll find a complete list of SSDs on line⁵ but you won’t find “popular music” there, nor “semiotics”, nor “cultural studies”. Another problem is that, apart from extensive usage of the word “science” (strange, at least in Anglophone ears), you’ll find some bizarre overlaps and/or incoherent distinctions. One example is the placement of ethnomusico-

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1. Italian members of IASPM have provided me with sources and insights useful in the formulation of this text.
 2. Cited from review of Eco’s *Reading Reality* (2003) — ‘Bestselling academic Umberto Eco tells Domenico Pacitti why he thinks contemporary philosophy lacks common sense and what Kant would have made of a platypus’ — see http://www.justbookreviews.net/Reading_reality.html (← clickable) [140619]. Whether the initial quotation about why Eco founded a university in the independent Lilliput state of San Marino relates to the bureaucracy of *Settori Scientifico-Disciplinari* (SSDs) in particular is unclear; but please note that semiotics, like popular music studies, has no place in the system. Italian university bureaucracy is also partly responsible for the nation’s alarming brain drain — try an online search for *l cervelli in fuga* or *Italian brain drain*, incl. the track *Goodbye Malinconia* by Caparezza (rapper from Puglia) and Tony Hadley (of Spandau Ballet) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8lmVZstFqIU> (← clickable: popular music research!) [140618].
 3. This issue is dealt with in the introduction to *Made in Italy* under ‘An Egg of Columbus: How Can Italian Popular Music Studies Stand on their Own?’ See especially the section on ministerial descriptions of musicology and ethnomusicology on page 4 in F. Fabbri and G. Plastino (eds.), *Made in Italy. Studies in Popular Music*. London & New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 1-12. For a thorough explanation and critique of the *Settori Scientifico-Disciplinari* (SSDs), see online article (in Italian) ‘Toy soldiers and collateral damage in the world of the SSDs at <http://www.roars.it/online/soldatini-e-danni-collaterali-i-settori-scientifico-disciplinari/> (← clickable) [140614]. The “tight definitions” for musicology and ethnomusicology are given on page 2.
 4. The SSDs areas are: 01 Mathematics (MAT) and Informatics (INF); 02 Physics (FIS); 03 Chemistry (CHIM); 04 Earth Sciences (GEO); 05 Biology (BIO); 06 Medicine (MED); 07 Agronomy (AGR) and Veterinary Sciences (VET); 08 Civil Engineering and Architecture (ICAR); 09 Industrial (ING-IND) and Information (ING-INF) Engineering; 10 Sciences of Antiquity (L-ANT), Philological-Literary Sciences (L-FIL-LET and L-LIN), Historical-Artistic Sciences (L-ART) and Oriental Sciences (L-OR); 11 Historical Sciences (M-STO); Philosophical Sciences (M-FIL); Pedagogical Sciences (M-PED); Psychological Sciences (M-PSI); Demo-anthropological sciences (M-DEA); Geographical Sciences (M-GGR); Sciences of Motor and Sport Activities (M-EDF); 12 Juridical Sciences (IUS); 13 Economic (SECS-P) and Statistical (SECS-S) Sciences; Political and Social Sciences (SPS).
 5. <http://www.miur.it/UserFiles/115.htm> (← clickable link) [140615].

logy in the subject area “Historical-Artistic Sciences” (SSD code “L-ART”), separated from Anthropology (“M-DEA”). The SSD codes for Musicology and Ethnomusicology are “L-ART/07” and “L-ART/08”, i.e. as “Historical-Artistic Sciences”, separated from Political and Social Sciences (“SPS”), as well as from Psychology (“M-PSI”), Economics (“SECS-P”) and Anthropology (“M-DEA”). No wonder Popular Music Studies don’t fit. So why do the SSDs exist?

SSDs were originally created to regulate hiring procedures. When new teaching posts were created, each would be assigned to a specific SSD, and the jury of the hiring contest (*concorso*) would consist of members of that SSD only (for further prerogatives, see below). More recently, juries for the national qualification process (*Abilitazione nazionale*)⁶ have been formed by full professors in each of the sub-areas forming the so-called *settori concorsuali*, which means, for example, that publications by prospective musicologists or ethnomusicologists can also be examined by scholars of cinema, television, theatre, and communication. Be that as it may, SSDs still have authority over: [1] the local hiring of professors certified by the *Abilitazione nazionale* (see above); [2] the creation of new research posts; [3] the assignment of temporary teaching posts; [4] the hiring of new researchers; [5] planning and development of teaching programmes.

It’s in these five ways that SSDs have full power over most decisions influencing the careers of individual scholars, as well as over the development of entire fields of study. In the past and still to this day, SSDs have provided the formally acknowledged basis for the creation of cliques, often called *baronie* (fiefdoms) or *mafie accademiche* (academic mafias), which have administered academic power in the interest of a few privileged scholars. Of course, not all SSDs, and not all members of individual SSDs, have been involved in such dealings, but the issue of ‘university barons’ (*baroni universitari*) protecting their relatives or favourite pupils, offering them fast-track career advantages, has been a topic of considerable interest in the Italian media over the past few decades.⁷

Now, you don’t need to cite such extreme cases of corruption to understand how Italian popular music studies can be affected by the system because, quite simply, popular music studies just don’t and can’t exist inside it. In *Made in Italy*, Fabbri and Plastino (2013) cite the ministerial definitions of the SSDs Musicology and Ethnomusicology as follows:⁸

‘Musicology is the study of music intended as an art and a science, including palaeography, theory, organology, philosophy, and the study and management of documents (*documentalistica*) [archives] as applied to music, music teaching, and the preservation of musical heritage.’

‘Ethnomusicology is the study of the plurality of musical forms, objects and behaviours in societies and cultures (especially those characterized by a prevailing oral tradition), of *musiche popolari* (*anche contemporanee* [see next paragraph for explanations]), their production and circulation (also mediated), and the relations between musical and cultural systems.’

Fabbri and Plastino comment those definitions as follows.

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6. National competence accreditation (*abilitazione nazionale*) is a separate procedure that officially establishes the qualifications and competence of an individual at the national level. Decisions about the actual hiring of an individual are, however, the prerogative of local representatives of the relevant SSD (see the five points in the subsequent sentence).
 7. For example, ‘The university mafia barons’ in the respected Italian weekly *L’Espresso* at > <http://espresso.repubblica.it/palazzo/2007/01/18/news/la-mafia-dei-baroni-1.2441>.
 8. F. Fabbri and G. Plastino (eds.), *Made in Italy. Studies in Popular Music*. London & New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 1-12.

‘In the context of Italian ethnomusicology (and of the Italian language) *musica popolare* corresponds to folk/traditional, orally transmitted music, while *anche contemporanee* (‘also contemporary’) is a way of indirectly alluding to popular music without having to mention it. To say that studying ethnomusicology includes the study of contemporary traditional music, also when media-distributed, is a truism. It’s also a phrase that keeps conservative ethnomusicologists on the safe side while offering others a chance to expand their research activities, all without acknowledging the fact that in most other countries popular music studies are not a subdiscipline of ethnomusicology, but an independent, interdisciplinary [...] field of studies.’

In the same way that it would be absurd to claim that popular music studies can contain the totality of ethnomusicology just because ethnomusicological approaches are among the disciplinary items in our subject area’s epistemic arsenal, it is ridiculous to pretend that ethnomusicology can act as the major set of practices and ideas of which popular music studies is a mere subset. But that pretence is clear from the way in which the SSD Ethnomusicology is defined.

According to a 2007 survey, there were at that time in Italian universities 121 teaching posts in various musicological disciplines (such as music history, music theory, etc.), 14 teaching posts in ethnomusicology, and 0 (zero) in popular music studies. The first two numbers have changed slightly since; but not the third one. There are still no Italian university teaching posts in popular music studies, nor can there ever be under the current system. That’s why Franco Fabbri is not Professor of Popular Music Studies but a lecturer under the SSD Ethnomusicology.⁹ Moreover, as stated in the Petition, he could well be asked to retire soon, before even being able to apply to have his full professorship —already certified in the national qualification process— duly recognised in one Italian university. Popular music scholars are in this way “aliens” in both the Musicology and Ethnomusicology sectors (SSDs). In general, the powers of the SSDs and their related institutions can be used to regiment scholars, to direct or to block careers, to stop research projects, etc. The case of Franco Fabbri and of many other Italian colleagues clearly illustrates this state of affairs.

As can be seen in the online article ‘Toy soldiers and the collateral damage of SSDs’,¹⁰ many Italian scholars are suggesting that SSDs are useless and counterproductive, and that they should be abolished. That said, cliques (the academic fiefdoms described on page 2) have shown a remarkable ability to regroup quickly when new regulations seem to threaten their power base. Abolishing all SSDs may take years, while the “lords and barons” of existing SSDs can continue to wield their power. So, while the abolition of SSDs may be the best long-term aim, it is at this stage more strategic to propose the immediate creation of a new SSD for popular music studies in Italy. All those signatures to our original petition will help us make the case for that course of action and it looks as if a proposal along the lines just mentioned will be formulated soon.

9. Ethnomusicology is SSD L-ART/08 in the Italian system. (SSDs are explained on page 1 of this document.)

10. <http://www.roars.it/online/soldatini-e-danni-collaterali-i-settori-scientifico-disciplinari/> (← clickable, in Italian).