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## CANTAUTORE: THE SINGER-SONGWRITER IN CONTEXT

When we talk about cantautori, ACI (“auteurs-compositeurs-interprètes”), Liedermacher or singer-songwriters, what exactly are we talking about? Popular culture scholars and historians usually begin with this basic question, and every time they try to answer it by drawing a list of general features, the answer turns out to be elusive. When they do not focus on a single author according to the logic of celebrity, even the writings of film and music critics – be they published in magazines, on platforms, on blogs or made available on podcasts – engage primarily in a “critic’s game”, taking a stand on the phenomenon rather than explaining its constitutive mechanisms in depth.

Only recently has the transnational dimension of the singer-songwriter phenomenon been stressed and problematized by academics<sup>1</sup>. Attempts were made to reconstruct its historical roots, starting with the French *chansonnier* culture<sup>2</sup>, the German-speaking *Liedermacher*<sup>3</sup>, and passing through the various strands of the Anglo-American folk tradition<sup>4</sup>. New lines of historical research also explored its connections with the time-honored tradition of political and protest singing<sup>5</sup>, not to mention musical practices aimed at individual appropriation, and defined by gender roles<sup>6</sup>.

The first step toward a definition of the singer-songwriter is to place emphasis on

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<sup>1</sup> S. Green, I. Marc, “European Popular Music: A Polycentric Dialogue”, *Journal of European Popular Culture*, 4, 1 (2013), 3-7; D. Looseley, “Authenticity and Appropriation: A Discursive History of French Popular Music”, in D. Holmes, D. Looseley, eds., *Imagining the Popular in Contemporary French Culture*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013, 47-84.

<sup>2</sup> P. Hawkins, *Chanson. The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day*, 2000, Aldershot-Burlington, VT: Ashgate; D.B. Scott, *Sounds of the Metropolis: The Nineteenth-Century Popular Music Revolution in London, New York, Paris, and Vienna*, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, 196-218.

<sup>3</sup> D. Elflein, “In Germany After the War: Broadening the Discourse on the *Liedermacher*”, in S. Green, I. Marc, eds., *The Singer-Songwriter in Europe*, London-New York: Routledge, 2016, 109-122.

<sup>4</sup> D. Shumway, “The Emergence of the Singer-Songwriter”, in K. Williams, J.A. Williams, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 11-19, 55-66; A.F. Moore, “Singer-Songwriters and the English Folk Tradition”, in K. Williams, J.A. Williams, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 55-66.

<sup>5</sup> E. John, D. Robb, *Songs for a Revolution: The 1848 Protest Song Tradition in Germany*, Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020; D. Robb, ed., *The Protest Song in East and West Germany Since the 1960s*, Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> A. Cordier, “Chanson and Tacit Misogyny”, *Journal of European Popular Culture*, 4, 1 (2013), 37-49; R.D. Lankford Jr., *Women Singer-Songwriters in Rock: A Populist Rebellion in 1990s*, Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2010; S. Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity*, London-New York: Routledge, 2000.

the figure's professional and performative character. In the *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*, Tim Wise introduces the eponymous entry noting that the term has been used since the 1960s to describe a category of popular musician who composes and performs his or her own songs, typically to acoustic guitar or piano accompaniment, most often as a solo act but also with backing musicians, especially in recordings<sup>7</sup>.

It is indeed a useful factual description, which goes with a historical-economic definition while complementing it at the same time. In this entry, the singer-songwriter and his songs are seen as a creative product regulated by recognizable lines, that is, a "formula" – or, in the language of contemporary media, a "format"<sup>8</sup>. Yet the sociology of popular music taught us that even the most basic definition is subject to negotiation between different interests, different discursive levels, and that it should always be conceived as an ongoing process. Thus Simon Frith, who insists on production formulas being produced and consumed differently depending on the "sales process", the "playing process", and the "listening process"<sup>9</sup>. On this account, the songwriter might be described as a singer and an author whose dual identity is fragmented in the construction of his (or her) individual production path.

This nuclear – almost "tautological"<sup>10</sup> – dimension is fundamental if we are to explain the singer-songwriter phenomenon. It is all the more essential since it made it possible for the latter phenomenon to become a transcultural and transnational phenomenon. Moreover, when crossing borders between regions, nations, or even generations, it acquired different connotations. In many countries, the singer-songwriter became a mythical figure in popular imagination, a bridge between varied and contradictory forms of experience, both culturally and socially. In the Italian context, social historians interpreted it as a symptom of collective traumata<sup>11</sup>, while popular music scholars addressed the *cantautori* as successful pop icons<sup>12</sup>, a genre<sup>13</sup> and – consequently and most provocatively – an ideological construction<sup>14</sup>.

But what does it mean to define the singer-songwriter as a "production formula" or a genre? Here, we may distinguish two lines of reflection, both of which had consequences on the choices we made when selecting the essays gathered in this special issue. The first line, which comes from pragmatic semiotics, reflects on genre as a "communicative pact". This is the line Stuart Green and Isabelle Marc choose when they rely on Franco Fabbri's proposal to interpret the singer-songwriter as a multidimensional set of communicative rules<sup>15</sup>. In doing so, Green and Marc underline the conventions that guarantee the effectiveness of a pact between the listener and the performer; and these con-

<sup>7</sup> T. Wise, "Singer-Songwriter", in J. Shepard, D. Horn, eds., *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*, VIII ("Genres: North America"), New York: Continuum, 2012, 430-434 (430).

<sup>8</sup> T. Wise, "Singer-Songwriter", 432. The term "format" might be misleading: it is used to indicate single products contractually limited to very precise technical-aesthetic canons rather than open formulas.

<sup>9</sup> S. Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, 75, 87, 88.

<sup>10</sup> R. Altman, *Film/Genere* [1998], Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2004, 135.

<sup>11</sup> M. Bonanno, *Anni affollati: L'Italia e i cantautori 1973-1983*, Foggia: Bastogi Editrice Italiana, 2009; M. Santoro, *Effetto Tenco: genealogia della canzone d'autore*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> E. Gentile, *Guida critica ai cantautori italiani*, Milano: Gammalibri, 1979; G. Borgna, *Storia della canzone italiana*, Bari: Laterza, 1985.

<sup>13</sup> F. Fabbri, "A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications", in D. Horn, P. Tagg, eds., *Popular Music Perspectives*, Gothenburg-Exeter: The International Association for the Study of Popular Music, 1982, 52-81.

<sup>14</sup> J. Tomatis, *Storia culturale della canzone italiana*, Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> S. Green, I. Marc, "Introduction. More Than Words: Theorizing the Singer-Songwriter", in Idd., eds., *The Singer-Songwriter in Europe. Paradigms, Politics, Space*, London-New York: Routledge, 2016, 5-6.

ventions, of course, have an intrinsic value in the “formula”, considering they encourage the listener to perceive “some kind of philosophical, social, psychological or emotional meanings” interpreted through the “prism of authenticity”<sup>16</sup>. Here is a convincing and widespread consideration: the personal dimension that is built through the importance given to the lyrics, the way the singer-songwriter places himself (or herself) in the public debate, his or her performative style and the attempt to create a coherent musical universe all give the listener a foothold in a privileged relationship – a relationship that will eventually have a “quality of personality”<sup>17</sup>. Still, this implicit value also (mainly?) turns out to be a use value. After all, the generic value of any cultural product (a book, a film, a song, a songwriter) is what it represents for us, and what we do with it<sup>18</sup>.

As Stig Hjarvard and Line Peterson observe, “Mediatization theory suggests that growing media authority and the integration of media into nearly all cultural practices evoke cultural change”. Concurrently, “cultural practices in other domains become dependent on the media and their various affordances”<sup>19</sup>. This leads us to our second line of reflection: the mediatization of music that induced, during the second half of the twentieth century, a progressive dissolution of a “pure” musical experience into a multiplicity of institutions and media experiences, most of them audiovisual<sup>20</sup>. Here, the concept of genre returns to its original historical-economic function, that of a production formula rather than a musical product – or, strictly speaking, a media content that may be reinterpreted according to the platform and the format in which it is integrated. It thus assumes an exchange and commodity value, even though, in the last analysis, it is always up to the end user to define its scope.

The starting assumption for this collection is that the singer-songwriter production formula, as it has been defined by the recording industry, was influenced by experiences in France<sup>21</sup> and North America<sup>22</sup>, and that it emerged in Italy in response to the social crises of the 1960s and 1970s. It offered a poetic account of the shared understanding of the time, as well as stylistic models and fruition experiences that were perceived by the public as “authentic”. It also gave life to an all-round communicative model that could be used in different contexts – a model that is even likely to be re-emerging in contemporary media culture. In fact, such a model is still relevant today when addressing the pact of “authenticity” between a performer and a listener, or when considering the singer-songwriter as a discursive product integrated into the new audiovisual communication platforms (in short, a media content).

<sup>16</sup> Green, Marc, “Introduction”, 7, 9. See also K. Williams, J.A. Williams, “Introduction”, in *Id.*, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 1-7.

<sup>17</sup> S. Frith, *Performing Rites*, 184. David Shumway links the emergence of the singer-songwriter phenomenon in the United States around 1970 to a confessional form of performance. Shumway, “The Emergence of the Singer-Songwriter”, 11.

<sup>18</sup> T.O. Beebee, *The Ideology of Genre: A Comparative Study of Generic Instability*, University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1994, 257.

<sup>19</sup> S. Hjarvard, L.N. Peterson, “Mediatization and Cultural Change”, *MedieKultur*, 29, 54 (2013), 1-7 (2). See also A. Bratus, M. Locatelli, M. Mera, eds., *To Each Their Own Pop. The Mediatization of Popular Music in Europe (1960-1979)*, special issue of *Cinéma & Cie*, 19, 31 (2018).

<sup>20</sup> B. Krämer, “The Mediatization of Music as the Emergence and Transformation of Institutions: A Synthesis”, *International Journal of Communication*, 5 (2011), 471-491; T. Pontara, U. Volgsten, “Musicalization and Mediatization”, in O. Driessens, G. Bolin, A. Hepp, S. Hjarvard, eds., *Dynamics of Mediatization: Institutional Change and Everyday Transformations*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 247-270.

<sup>21</sup> F. Fabbri, “The Songs I’d Write Would Be Like That’: Transnational Influences between Poets, Composers, Singer-Songwriters”, in Green, Marc, eds., *The Singer-Songwriter in Europe. Paradigms, Politics, Space*, 23-35 (33 ss.).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-35 (28 ss.).

The path we build in the present issue covers this conceptual arc. First, it continues reflecting on the poetic instance, and on the professionalism of the singer-songwriter as a creative potential that allows practices of individual and collective identity appropriation. At the same time, it places the figure of the singer-songwriter in a (wider) context defined by the mediatization of music, the song's reification – that is, its conversion into a commodity – and the author's transformation into a pop icon and media content. In sum, the communication model we're referring to works within a field of contradictory tensions.

The starting point is offered by Thomas MacFarlane, who re-examines a “textbook case”: Don McLean's flagship project *American Pie* – a 1971 LP conceived as a whole, and yet driven by a single (its title track) whose overwhelming success made it an evergreen. In addition to questioning the album's homogeneity in terms of its musical conception, MacFarlane analyzes its genesis and graphic output, providing us with another key to explain that founding moment in the making of a singer-songwriter culture: the visual and experiential structuring of an entire concept. In this respect, McLean opens to a wider understanding of the singer-songwriter, who enters into dialogue with other artistic fields, and ultimately stands for a more complex, ideal model of “total” art. The American-style singer-songwriter asserts himself (or herself) as creative, visionary, but also well aware of the all-round communicative operation he (or she) is carrying out.

Entering more directly into the Italian case (which constitutes the core of this special issue), it is no coincidence that we find ourselves faced with an analogous proposal. Stefano La Via tells us about Paolo Conte's poetic character and uses his transculturality (his mastering a mestizo, heterogeneous, and finally syncretic language) as an interpretative key. Devoid of political references, his songs are made of music, stories, atmospheres and cultural heritage, which certainly helped him become one of the best-known Italian singer-songwriters abroad.

Another *cantautore* who was able to gain attention outside the borders of Italy is Lucio Dalla, and he is an atypical singer-songwriter too (assuming such a thing as a “typical” singer-songwriter ever existed). In her contribution, Céline Pruvost stresses his relating to the poetic word and examines his collaboration with poet Roberto Rov-ersi. She maintains that their working together enriched Dalla's writing skills – having started as the composer of his songs, he was finally encouraged to add the more recognizable dimension of the singer-songwriter to his hazy image by signing his own lyrics. As for Lucio Spaziante, he emphasizes Dalla's peculiarity at the time of the making of his media icon: basically apolitical after he used to be listed among the politicized *cantautori* of the 1960s and 1970s, exaggeratedly elfin after cultivating a folk soul for years, he became successful at the turn of the 1980s with two albums, *Lucio Dalla* (1979) and *dalla* (1980), when he gave an accomplished form to his composition style, his authorship and his own image, now crystallized in a pair of glasses and in a beret.

Giovanni Ciofalo offers a more general reading of the 1980s, which he sees as the decade of television and de-politization in Italy – and many other western countries. After introducing the reader to the changes that were then occurring in the local record market, he reminds us of the way the singer-songwriters were used by Italian television. He makes it clear that even in the case of the *cantautori* (and perhaps even more significantly in their case), this was the period when the relationship between media and pop music changed from mediation (a relationship in which the musical performer expresses a media vocation and dialogues with mass media contexts in order to broaden its audience) to mediatization (a relationship in which the musician is essentially an actor within audiovisual formats). As he argues, this transformation was instrumental

in the process that resulted in performers such as Claudio Baglioni being recognized as *cantautore*.

Finally, the journey ends with an essay of an openly critical nature: the ethnography conducted by Jacopo Tomatis in the “sacred” rooms of the leading festival dedicated to the celebration of songwriting culture in Italy, Premio Tenco. Tomatis addresses the Tenco Club as a ritual structure with strong limitations, particularly in terms of hierarchy and gender – a structure that defines the canons instead of being defined by its objects. Put differently, the contextual component (the “formula”) becomes dominant and ends up overshadowing both the textual product (the song) and the songwriter. From this angle, nonetheless, the singer-songwriter music scene appears to be functioning as a mechanism that still requires passionate study and understanding: akin to a nature reserve, the cultural institution must sometimes exclude in order to protect.

Tomatis’s contribution also highlights a blind spot in the singer-songwriter scene, namely the female singer-songwriter – a blind spot that actually shows up through this collection of essays. Of course, this responds to historical evidence given the small number of women authors, particularly on the Italian side of the latter scene<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, gender issues are being given more prominence in the debate, and they will certainly inspire further developments in a near future.

Other issues that will require attention, both from a historical and a theoretical standpoint, relate to the singer-songwriter’s identity in a media landscape that is being increasingly defined by social media. How does this impact on his or her vulnerability? How does it give rise to new possibilities of (problematic) authenticity, and how does it impact on fans<sup>24</sup>? Such issues we shall leave to a forthcoming – and hopefully in-depth – volume.

<sup>23</sup> J. Tomatis, “Rediscovering Sisters: Women (and) Singer-Songwriters in Italy”, in Marc, Green, eds., *The Singer-Songwriter in Europe. Paradigms, Politics and Place*, 79-91. See also Williams, Williams, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*, 199-264 (Part III, with essays by K. Fellezs, J. Taylor, K. Williams, C. McDonald, M. Berry, S. Boak).

<sup>24</sup> L. Bennett, “Singer-Songwriters and Fandom in the Digital Age”, in Williams, Williams, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*, 329-339; S.A. Gross, G. Musgrave, *Can Music Make You Sick? Measuring the Price of Musical Ambition*, London: University of Westminster Press, 2020.