

The Sound of Žižek

Musicological Perspectives
on Slavoj Žižek

Edited by
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Table of Contents

<i>Foreword: If Žižek Be the Food of Musicology</i>	vii
MAURO FOSCO BERTOLA	
<i>Introduction: Slavoj Žižek's Aesthetics of Music. From Romanticism to Modernism</i>	1
MAURO FOSCO BERTOLA	
I. Did Somebody Say Musicology? Žižek and Musicology's Sublime Object(s)	19
1. <i>Musicology's Second Death(s)</i>	21
CARLO LANFOSSI	
2. <i>The Sublime Object of Music Analysis</i>	41
AMY BAUER	
II. Opera, Ontology and Capitalism	65
3. <i>C Major or E-Flat Minor? No, Thanks! Busoni's Faust-Allegory</i>	67
SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK	
4. <i>Post-Kantian Dreams. Kaija Saariaho's Operatic Ontology and Its Dreamscapes in L'amour de loin</i>	89
MAURO FOSCO BERTOLA	
5. <i>Singing in the Age of Capitalist Realism. The Pervert's Guide to (Post)Opera</i>	113
JELENA NOVAK	

III. Music and the Political	137
6. <i>Cage, Reich, and Morris: Process and Sonic Fetishism</i> SAMUEL J. WILSON	139
7. <i>Subjective Destitution in Art and Politics</i> SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK	163
<i>Contributors</i>	177



1. Musicology's Second Death(s)¹

CARLO LANFOSSI

Prompted by inflamed reactions to a variety of musicological events and publications, in recent years the role of music studies as a scholarly field within the humanities, and as an academic discipline with a specific historiographical tradition, has been put into question and even declared dead. Calls for a renewal of its theoretical apparatus, or for a return to its presumed origins, are not a new phenomenon, though. As this article shows by tracing the narratives about its history in the West, the discipline has always demonstrated a particular inclination for self-reflexivity, featuring cyclic instances of crisis and recovery which ultimately account for its very own state of being.

By re-reading the history of the discipline in the United States and Europe (with a focus on the 'Italian difference' as case study) through the lens of Lacanian theory, this essay aims at redefining the intellectual coordinates of musicology's 'split' identity, particularly in relation to the other fields within the humanities, and to understand its anxiety with language and critical theory.

For many people engaged with the field of musicology, especially those operating in English-speaking countries, 2016 will be remembered as the year the discipline died, broken by the online reactions to an apparently simple question: "What is musicology?". In August 2016, music critic Norman Lebrecht wrote on his well-known blog *Slipped Disc* a piece titled "What Musicology Is For in 2016" (Lebrecht 2016: unpaginated). There, Lebrecht announced the publication of a new musicology book, *Just Vibrations*, in which the author, William Cheng, among other things, called for a more affective, accessible approach to scholarship, musicology, and music-making. Free from the neo-liberal logic of the job market, such an approach would bring academia (and

1 This article is a revised, shortened, and translated version of my introduction to the Italian edition of Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek's monograph on opera (Dolar/Žižek 2002), see Lanfossi (2019). The original contribution was specifically intended for Italian scholars unfamiliar with the most recent trends and debates in Anglo-American musicology, thus the present translation excludes portions that would be redundant for readers overseas. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

our world) a better place to work and live in (Cheng 2016a). To Lebrecht's rhetorical question "And you thought [musicology] was about understanding the history and meaning of music? How very quaint," the internet—in this case, an assortment of anonymous individuals, professional *trolls* and real-life musicians—reacted vigorously. A few posts were particularly hostile towards the author of the book, but some of them targeted musicologist Susan McClary, guilty of having signed the volume's Foreword. In the "Comments" section of Lebrecht's blog post, McClary's scholarship—a long-term critique of the biases behind the construction of the Western musical canon (and beyond) from the perspective of power relations, subjectivity/subjectivisation, and gendered discourses which has been deeply influential in the development of the so-called New Musicology—was even labelled as "Crazy Musicology."

Soon, the same heated discussion landed on *Musicology-L*, the American Musicological Society's moderated electronic listserv,² where any possible subject related to present-day music and musicology is presented and debated (mostly from a North American perspective). The reference to Lebrecht's post on *Just Vibrations* brought to the surface a few contradictions inherent to the discussion. The more Cheng's book pointed in the direction of a more caring academic debate involving reparative endeavours, the more its online critics condemned the volume for "politicising music, like what happened in Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany" (John Bortslap's comment in Lebrecht 2016: unpaginated). The irony is that commentators used politics to denounce music's supposed politicisation. The discussion urged other big-shot musicologists to participate, including Richard Taruskin:

Ah, just when we thought New Musicology was getting old.... But the antagonists are the same old ones, so maybe it is. "Let sleeping dogs lie" applies to mangy lions like Lebrecht too. Nothing to get wrought up about. (Also no point poking them with sticks either.) Peace. Richard Taruskin (Taruskin 2016: unpaginated).

Cheng's reply highlighted the inherently political nature of the debate, exacerbated by the looming presidential vote which in November 2016 elected Donald Trump as the next President of the United States:

We could also roll our eyes at the never ending debates about what is or isn't musicology. Yet we can't deny that "Build that wall!" is (besides emerging as a terrifying chant of this political season) a prevailing ethos of our own disciplinary gatekeeping (Cheng 2016b: unpaginated).

2 *Musicology-L* has been since replaced by the AMS Forum (<https://hcommons.org/groups/american-musicological-society/>) as the official venue for online discussions.

It seems now evident that in late 2016 there was still no agreement on what constituted musicology as a field of knowledge and inquiry. That was already apparent when another 2016 musicological “case” erupted, preceding Cheng’s by just a few months. From the pages of AMS-sponsored blog *Musicology Now*, confrontation arose out of an allegedly inopportune post about an opera class held at the Eastern Correctional Facility (Napanoch, NY) by musicologist Pierpaolo Polzonetti. The Italian professor argued that having inmates acquainted with the world of opera (in this case represented by Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*) would be beneficial for their own control of emotions and ethical thinking (Polzonetti 2016a: unpaginated).³ More than the article’s main thesis, what prompted the most vitriolic comments was some of the language used by Polzonetti, especially the description of rap music consisting mainly of “blatant lyrics and pounding beat” (Ibid.). Andrew Dell’Antonio reprimanded Polzonetti for not being “aware of the deep institutionalised racism that underpins the US prison-industrial complex”, while Tom Perchard noted that “the heritage of the colonial civilizing mission hangs over the whole enterprise” and that Polzonetti’s “universalist rhetoric... disavows the extremely complex processes of identification and tradition that are always at play in music.” Robert Fink went as far as suggesting that “in 2016, referring to rap music as ‘blatant lyrics and pounding beats’ is the musicological equivalent of using the N-word. It has the effect of invalidating anything else you say”.⁴

Language politics and political language. This was reminded to each member of the AMS by its then-president, Ellen Harris, in an unprecedented e-mail sent with the intention to appease the debate: “*how* one tells a story matters”, a message implicitly directed to both the article’s author and his critics. Language was also at the centre of a new 2017 AMS listserv discussion. This time the prompt was a nostalgic remark, made by several tenured professors, about a supposed “decline” in language requirements for graduate

3 A revised version of Polzonetti’s text (with different “wording... in a few critical points”) was then published on the journal *Musica Docta*, see Polzonetti (2016b).

4 AMS *Musicology Now* has undergone several updates in terms of its statute and responsibility, including the availability of comments to individual posts. As of March 2022, *Musicology Now* “operates with editorial independence from the rest of the Society and the posts published here represent the positions, research, and views of their respective authors alone” (<https://musicologynow.org/about-musicology-now/>); it is also no longer possible to read comments to the posts here mentioned, although cached timestamps of the original posts are available through WayBack Machine (see Polzonetti 2016a: unpaginated).

programs in musicology. Will Cheng's sardonic reply highlighted a few core issues:

Polylingualism can aid in efforts to dismantle the Anglo-/Euro-centrism of musicology and its literatures. When it comes to tearing down walls and joining hands across the world, a semester of "Reading German" can do far more than, say, a silly hypothetical recommendation for AMS-L commenters to read/catch up on the last two decades of postcolonial theory, disability studies, critical race theory, queer of color critique, and other gay nonsense (Cheng 2017: unpaginated).

A rift between a "progressist musicology" and a "neoliberal musicology" emerges with an intensity that seems to echo the 30-years-old dichotomy between an old musicology and the New Musicology. Similar to present-day concerns, in the 1990s critical theory was invoked to get out of a fundamentally linguistic deadlock: *how* do we talk about music? In the wake of New Musicology, the object of concern was musical analysis. Joseph Kerman, among the most fervent supporters of an emancipatory return to hermeneutical exercise as 'critique,' already in 1980 posed the famous question: "How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out" (Kerman 1980).⁵ The spirit was of a decisive anti-formalism: in reference to a 1992 article by Lawrence Kramer titled "The Musicology of the Future" (Kramer 1992), in 1997 Kofi Agawu was already claiming that similar positions would only end up as "a prophecy about the death of musicology" (Agawu 1997: 300).⁶

Thus, for musicology to change it needed to die and, possibly, rise again. Some thirty years on and the same debate is once again experiencing an enthusiastic (and quite violent) comeback. Even though the geo-political scenario of cultural wars has dramatically changed (and made it into mainstream debates), nevertheless the epistemological anxiety regarding musicological language and the status of the discipline's discoursification (both within and without academia) is still the same. This article aims at providing an intellectual context for such anxiety, while arguing about the reason for its very

5 On Kerman's call for a return to hermeneutical critique see Kerman (1985).

6 This is not the place to go over the various discourses and controversies surrounding New Musicology, as it has already been done by many scholars both in the United States and in Europe. Among them, Kevin Korsyn's 2003 fundamental volume *Decentering Music* resonates deeply with my inquiries, as not only it critically examines the "crisis" of musicology at the dawn of the 21st century, but it also articulates it around the problematic relationship between music scholarship and language/discourses in a way which could apply to the present-day "crisis" almost word for word; see Korsyn (2003). Even the heated reception of Korsyn's book (thoroughly recounted by Pieslak 2008) mirrors some of the debates described in this article.

existence and the ideologies behind it. It will first focus on the microhistory of Italian musicology, not only because of the author's personal history and engagement with it, but also for its peculiar "split" status, the many narratives around its supposed crisis, and the troubled relationship with a distant big Other (Anglo-American musicology) which seems to mirror more general ontological issues faced by musicology and the humanities in the West. After focusing on more recent identity debates within American academia, the article will then return to the so-called "Italian difference" to provide a renovated framework for understanding musicology's "late" status and its global death drive.

Split Heirs: The Genealogy and Legacy of Italian Musicology

Over the course of the last decade, several Italian musicologists have attempted at unveiling the origins and reconstructing the history of the discipline at home, from the role of late 19th-century positivism (Cavallini 2005; Carocchia 2008; Bertola 2012 and 2014) to the development of nationalism and its peculiar idealist counterpart between the two wars (Basso 1991; Fronzi 2017), up to a meticulous examination of the rise of the Società Italiana di Musicologia (Besutti 2000). Mostly silent about issues that today would be considered more pressing—such as an inquiry into the political bias and ideologies behind the establishing of Italian and European musicological societies, or a self-reflexive questioning of Italian musicology's position regarding global trends and debates in the Humanities—such contributions have nevertheless brought to light interesting contemporary discussions around the notions of "music history" and "musicology" while at the same time highlighting the peculiar (and overwhelming) roots in idealist philosophy (especially its local declination represented by Benedetto Croce).⁷ With a few exceptions, what emerges is a historiography still firmly rooted in positivist thinking and "history of events" methodologies, coupled with scepticism and event hostility towards continental philosophy and critical theory. For instance, Paola Besutti describes the influence of Michel Foucault's writings after the "cultural turn" as an instance of "'Foucault-itis', the epidemic that spread among Anglo-American musicologists in the early 1990s" to which Italian musicologists were supposedly "more immune" and interested exclusively "in relation to the hermeneutics of music in the pre-modern and early modern ages" (Besutti 2000: 84).

7 On the relationship between the writings of Benedetto Croce and the development of Italian musicology and music criticism, see Giani (2008).

Theory is a virus. Far from essentialising Italian musicology to a small and partial selection of writings and authors (whose scholarship extends beyond the subject of music historiography), the point is that when Italians reflect on their own academic history, they often do it by means of comparison with the North American situation, as if Italian musicology exists only according to what it is *not*.

At the dawn of the 20th century, Italian musicology was already in a state of “crisis” due to a rift between one of its most prominent figures, Oscar Chilesotti, and the rest of his colleagues regarding the potential affiliation with the newborn “Internationale Musikgesellschaft” (IMG 1898).⁸ The “Associazione dei Musicologi Italiani” (AdMI) was thus established in 1908 and chaired by Chilesotti’s “rival” Guido Gasperini, in a climate made even more tense by the uneasiness of being associated with European musicology’s internationalist drive. Fausto Torrefranca, one of the most fervent supporter of an idealist approach to music criticism and aesthetics, shared with Chilesotti the wish for an active engagement with IMG (in disagreement with Gasperini’s and AdMI’s localism). Torrefranca was sceptical about the prospect of a “history of Italian music,” a project he considered “lacking in any historical or even practical sense” in a country where music libraries were mostly inaccessible and to which international scholars had already “very little regard” (Torrefranca 1911: 139). The polemics between Torrefranca and Gasperini, which appeared on the *Rivista Musicale Italiana* in 1911, outlined what will be a recurrent trope in discourses over the nature of Italian musicology, i.e. the dichotomy between archival research vs. critical/speculative inquiry. Gasperini used to call himself a “peaceful worker of [bibliography] cards” in open opposition to Torrefranca, who battled for a scientific, systematic, and philosophically-driven musicology inspired by Croce and German idealism.⁹

Following a period of rediscovery and promotion of Italian composers—as part of the competition with analogous nationalist editorial projects by Germany and France—a new “Società Italiana di Musicologia” (SIIdM) was then established in 1964 under the auspices of “European and American [musicology], which greeted the birth of SIIdM with unexpected enthusiasm” (Barblan 1965: 9). Guglielmo Barblan, its first president, went as far as supplying a list of respected international scholars who showed interest in the newborn society:

8 See Caroccia (2008: 350–352) and Cavallini (2000).

9 See Fronzi (2017); see also Pestelli (1981) and Antolini (2009).

Many of them (Blume, Bessler, Fellerer, Grout, Strunk, Osthoff, Schenk, the late Schrade, to name but a few) not only kindly welcomed our new society, but – while applying for membership – they also glorified the birth of SIIdM as historically essential and even necessary, in the land which provided international musicology the greatest amount of musical material (Barblan 1965: 9–10).

The need for American musicology's approval was then made explicit on the second issue of the new *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia* (RIIdM, SIIdM's house organ),¹⁰ with the publication of a letter titled “Congratulazioni all'Italia” sent from the president of AMS, Jan La Rue: “we [AMS] welcome the aid of our sister society to accomplish the many tasks that lie ahead—goals that surely cannot be achieved without continuing international cooperation” (American Musicological Society 1967: 288).¹¹ With a slightly paternalistic tone, the highest offices of American musicology fondly welcomed their “sister society”. Yet, the young unruly sister was still busy fighting demons—i.e., its own ontological conundrum of being born out of archives and libraries whose partial destruction by the Allies' bombs created the void to be filled by Italian musicology as archivists, against humanistic, critical-philosophical drive.¹² I believe it was not by chance that the subject “Italian musicology” was formally constituted only after two decades of post-war repression, as a split subject whose void/lack (its object-cause of desire, its *objet petit a*) came into “being”, as it were, thought the efforts of its own big (br)Other—i.e., American musicology.

The history of musicology in Italy was thus inherently tied to the socio-political situation in post-war Europe. It was president Barblan who highlighted such connection by comparing SIIdM with Italy's recent economic boom (the so-called “economic miracle”, 1958–1963):

Even Italian musicology... can proud itself of a little “boom”... of straight moral affirmation. As usual, when comparing music's historical trajectory with that of other disciplines, the musicological “boom”, too, followed analogous trends in the humanities (not without some delay); as a matter of fact, it materialized at the same time as other fields started getting into recession (Barblan 1965: 7).

Italian musicology thus organised and (briefly) bloomed around a presumed state of “recession” in other fields of knowledge and over an economic *jouissance* promoted by the controversial relationship with its Anglo-American

10 On the history of RIIdM, see Besutti (2005).

11 The Italian translation (“Congratulazioni all'Italia”) was published on the *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia* 2/2 (1967): 452.

12 On musicology in Italy during the immediate years after the end of World War II, see Sità (1999).

counterpart, a tension which will characterise musicological scholarship for decades to come, and which will be among the reasons for its recurrent self-analyses over the pages of its house organs. For instance, take the essay “Musicology: Which one, though?”, where Pierluigi Petrobelli made an explicit parallel between late 1970s Italy and early 1930s North American academia, “when it only existed one (efficient) university course in musicology (i.e., Otto Kinkeldey’s at Cornell).” According to Petrobelli, this situation prompted the foundation of AMS in 1934, which was then able “to catch and interpret the real core of the problem—i.e., the need for an organic structuring... of scholarly activity in music studies, both systematically and historically” (Petrobelli 1979: 185). Such comparison with musicology overseas reads as a warning for missing a proper critical-historical approach in Italian scholarship, while in the United States “music history is placed among the historical disciplines, of which it must embrace methodologies and principles of inquiry” (Ibid. 186).

Further on, in 1982, several professors of music in Italian universities (Agostino Ziino, Giulio Cattin, Lorenzo Bianconi, Elvidio Surian, Antonio Serravezza, Tullia Magrini) contributed to an issue of the International Musicological Society’s journal *Acta Musicologica* with a roundtable titled “Vent’anni di musicologia in Italia” (Twenty Years of Musicology in Italy). There, after claiming that the 1960s and 1970s were a period of “very strong academic relevance, which [Italian musicology] previously lacked,” the contributors denounced the excessive role devoted to music bibliography and critical editions at the expense of a strong academic publishing industry “of national interest: it is this lack which constitutes the most serious structural fragility of Italian musicology” (Bianconi/Gallo: 7, 11). The dichotomy textual criticism *vs.* hermeneutics saturated the musicological debate in Italy between the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, effectively representing the Italian response to the main intellectual trend of the time—i.e., the “cultural turn” and its counterpart “New Musicology”. Even though, as we have seen, the opposition between bibliographical attitude and critical thinking was as old as the first musicologists operating in Italy, it nevertheless periodically resurfaced, especially after postwar efforts in preserving damaged archives with the blessing of Anglo-American musicology. No wonder it was brought back by the Italian reception of New Musicology’s debates. In 1986, Lorenzo Bianconi criticised Joseph Kerman’s seminal book *Contemplating Music* (Kerman 1985) for having misunderstood such dichotomy: for Bianconi, positivism (philology) and criticism (hermeneutics) are linked under the aegis of history and historiography (Bianconi 1986: 112). Bianconi’s remarks were made in the context of a peculiar conference, *For the*

protection of musicological labour (Per la tutela del lavoro musicologico), where it was made clear that such issues had long-standing political and economic implications. At stake was the status of critical editions: their legitimacy, their methodologies, and more importantly their copyright value for the editors. At the Venetian conference, even the Italian Communist Party (PCI) was involved in such discussions, as the main goal of the various roundtables was to finalise a bill proposal that would amend Italian copyright laws by acknowledging the (economical) role of critical editions. The Communist Party, though, had a distinctive take on the issue:

if music is not understood as *opus* but rather as event, it seems all too obvious that in philology [...] the emphasis would shift from authentic texts to include inauthentic ones. The latter would now gain the same status of historical sources as the authentic. This would read as an *Ereignisgeschichte* (History of Events) turning into a *Strukturgeschichte* (Structural History) which posits reception as its historical reference. Naturally, our position [...] is to protect and safeguard not simply critical editions (a position hidden behind a pseudo-notion of freedom) but rather what is restored from authentic texts (*good*), not from inauthentic versions (*bad*) [...] that can only have historical significance at the expense of a legal, philological one (Malaguti 1986: 135).

Francesco Degrada highlighted the Hegelian derive of such debates on critical editions and “the idea (perfectly fine in itself) that the past—what is dead—can only be brought back from the perspective of the living”, ultimately warning against “its latent, anti-historicist violence: the presumption (à la Stravinsky) that the past is irrecoverable in and of itself, that we need to breathe new life into dead corpses” (Degrada 1986: 105). For Degrada, “the issue of the critical editions calls upon the entire structure of music’s culture and production in our country” (Ibid.: 110). Bianconi echoed the political call by reminding that musicology “should carefully balance the urgency of current events with working *für ewig* (for ever, following Gramsci). [...] In Italy, it is easier to organise seven conferences than to publish an academic book—or a critical edition” (Bianconi 1986: 118). In 1990, another conference, devoted to the scrutiny of the discipline’s identity and status, brought together musicologists from Italy in an attempt to contain “the undeniable spreading, over the last 15 years, of neopositivist trends among selected branches of Italian musicology” (Pozzi 1995: xxi); the conference featured Joseph Kerman as a special guest, who named four North American musicologists as champions of a new, progressist “change” against conservative tendencies—i.e., Carolyn Abbate, Susan McClary, Richard Taruskin, Gary Tomlinson (Kerman 1995).

The innate tendency of Italian musicologists towards self-reflection, crises of regeneration, and oedipal furore—against the backdrop of New Musicology—led inevitably to the “Great Schism” of 1992. On the first issue of SIdM’s new “*Bollettino*”, the outgoing president Agostino Ziino wished SIdM “prestige and credibility not only on a national level, but international, too. [...] It certainly is important to try and solve our own issues at home” (Ziino 1991: 1). He did not specify what kind of problems were afflicting Italian musicology. Thanks to a report from the June 1991 meeting in Bologna, dedicated to the re-structuring of musicology classes in universities, it seems likely that the issue at stake was the political role of music studies in academia. Lorenzo Bianconi vehemently insisted that “the main problem is the gaining of true power by musicology professors within their own departments” and asked for “the formation of a SIdM workgroup made of particularly distinguished personalities” (Various 1991: 4). Among such “distinguished personalities”, one musicologist felt left out: long-standing SIdM member Guido Salvetti, who more or less represented the kind of musicology taught in conservatories of music (as opposed to colleges). Salvetti reminded Bianconi of the possibility of cooperation between universities and conservatories at post-graduate level, particularly with regards to the training of music teachers. The proposal ignited a “heated discussion” (Ibid.: 4), officially starting a rift between conservatories and universities, a division intrinsic to the nature of both institutions (roughly speaking, critical hermeneutics in the university vs. music analysis made in the conservatories), superficially depicted as a bureaucratic matter. During the December 1992 general meeting, “with many disagreements” and “serious conflict” (Besutti 2000: 6), the vote for the modification of SIdM’s statute and regulations saw two opposite motions. On one hand, Di Benedetto, Serravezza and Bianconi suggested keeping the absentee ballot in order to preserve the Society as “an orientation organ, rather than an operational one” (Ibid.: 7). On the other hand, Salvetti’s motion called for a direct vote which supposedly would made SIdM more participative and inclusive, but also more controlling. Salvetti’s motion won with 231 votes (Various 1992–1993: 5). SIdM was essentially in the hands of “conservatory” musicology.

Tensions carried over to the next general meeting in 1993. After a public reading of Salvetti’s proposed legislation, Sergio Durante called for “a clarification of [the journal’s] political role,” Federica Riva voiced “a widespread dissatisfaction among members”, asking to “shift the attention from formal aspects to actual cultural issues,” while Teresa Camellini questioned “the official role of Giuseppina La Face as part of the Executive Board” (Various 1994a: 3–5). La Face admitted she “self-attributed the role of ‘critical

conscience' within the Board, where she would represent the resigning members" (Ibid.). In December 1993, an extraordinary resolution regarding La Face's role passed with five abstentions and not a single nay: "we deem inappropriate to keep within the Executive Board a representative of the 'critical conscience', as such role can exclusively be carried out at a general meeting through constructive discussion. The general meeting itself should work as critical conscience" (Various 1994b: 6).

The schism was official. During the Fall 1993, the "dissidents" founded a new society called "Il Saggiatore musicale," with the University of Bologna as operational (and symbolical) headquarters, with an associated academic journal by the same name. The goal would be "to cultivate a 'critical musicology' attitude" and "to foster intellectual debates on music broadly understood as integral to culture" (Various s.a.: unpaginated). This came as a direct reply to the musicology "of too many conferences, too many catalogues, too many bibliographies [...] a musicology devoted to data and information accumulation, [...] more populist than democratic, considering that while it may open a lot of 'construction sites' and give some form of immediate employment to many [scholars], it also encourages a submissive attitude instead of free thinking [...] promoting] an infatuation for any given unknown primary source, for a militant philology, for the celebration of anniversaries, jubilees, and centennials, while postponing critical thinking indefinitely. [...] From this kind of musicology, we distance ourselves".¹³

The fascination with foreign musicology, and the lack produced by its distance, was further analysed at the roundtable "La musicologia europea oggi: quale identità?" (European Musicology Today: Which Identity?) held in Bologna by "Il Saggiatore Musicale" in 2004. Fabrizio Della Seta's introductory paper opened with a surprising remark: "the question within the title of this roundtable would have been considered odd thirty or even twenty years ago" (Della Seta 2006: 307). As we have seen so far, the opposite seems valid: Italian musicology has *always* interrogated itself on its identity, since its very inception. Della Seta proceeded describing musicology overseas as

13 Such obvious reference to SIdM's musicological activity and its scholarship appeared on the first issue of the journal *Il Saggiatore musicale* as a sort of manifesto (Various 1994c: 3–4). The manifesto was signed by the editor-in-chief (Giuseppina La Face Bianconi) and the editorial board (Claudio Annibaldi, Gianmario Borio, Giulio Cattin, Francesco Degrada, Fabrizio Della Seta, Paolo Fabbri, Paolo Gallarati, Franco Alberto Gallo, Roberto Leydi, Giorgio Pestelli, Antonio Serravezza). Ironically, right after such a progressist musicological agenda, the first article on the inaugural issue was devoted to the discovery of a previously-unknown medieval primary source (Cattin 1994).

a branch of European culture, a phenomenon due to the vast migration of scholars from the old continent during the first decades of the 20th century. He then provided a definition of New Musicology as a “composite, very aggressive trend, far from constituting the majority of American academia” (Ibid.: 310). Della Seta admitted that New Musicology had been the only methodological trend worthy of interest since the 1980s, but he added that its reliance on post-structuralist “cultural references” such as Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and Barthes was, according to Della Seta, a “problem [...] because such authors] have contested and put into crisis the roots and beliefs of modern humanism and European Enlightenment” (Ibid.: 311). European musicology’s ostensible indifference towards its own intellectual history is justified by its scepticism towards “discourses [which] seem less novel than they appear elsewhere”, its awareness of postmodernism’s “old and deep irrationalistic roots”, and finally for its rejection of “intellectual mumbo jumbo” (Blah blah intellettuale), which he compared to a form of “creative critique” that had “its momentum among us decades ago” (Ibid.: 313). I beg to disagree: in 2004, European musicology—minus the pre-Brexit British musicology, which Della Seta noted was possibly “following international politics [in] dialoguing more with the United States than the rest of Europe” (Ibid.: 310)—had still barely ever dealt with critical theory and postmodernist methodologies.

Della Seta’s disbelief in both New Musicology and the everlasting European atrophy translates into an invitation to “cultivate original projects, even in dialogue with the most recent American musicology, to possibly foster the rise of a fifth generation” of scholars committed to the discipline’s renewal (Ibid.: 313). If musicology overseas is the offspring of the European one, it follows that European musicologists must also look at their very own self with suspicion: thus the old continent’s tireless promotion of such self-reflective gaze through cyclical conferences, each time declaring a new death of musicology. This is Italian musicology’s fundamental deadlock, its foundational trauma: i.e., the inability to conceive such dichotomies (hermeneutics/philology; history/theory) as *intrinsic* to musicological language and its identity politics. The never-ending discussions on its academic position (university courses at the expense of conservatories of music), the political use of local archival resources (the economic exploitation of primary sources through critical editions at the expense of a genuine “University Press” marketplace), and the refusal to engage with a continental philosophy that was never engaged in the first place, all mirror the archetypal dichotomy us/them, Europe/USA. Such fundamental conundrum lies at the core of any form of subjectivation, thus in “creating” an American musicology (the

20th-century scholars diaspora around WW2) it also constitutes itself as subject, as European (Italian) musicology. The desire for New Musicology thus automatically erupts into cycles of love and rejection, enjoyment and lack, which translates into perennial declarations of new deaths. To paraphrase Lacan's famous formulation, *there is no* Italian musicology, as such entity exists within the space formed by its Other overseas: a will to its own annihilation, "the very 'undead' life of the eternal longing 'between the two deaths'" (Dolar/Zižek 2002: 111). By "Italian musicology" I therefore refer to a discursive formation whose subjects, far from coalescing around a "school" of professional specialisation or a homogeneous tradition, are not only fundamentally split ("barred," to use another famous Lacanian term), but they also exist and act out (of) the impossibility of enjoying its object, as its Big Other is an obscene, libidinous version of itself, of which Italian musicology is at the same time its Name of the Father and its daughter. An American musicology which, today, is also interrogating itself over notions of identity, as it questions its own origins and status and elaborates the identity politics of its various constituents.

The Non-Origins of Musicology and Its Second Death

I have focused on the Italian case for two reasons: first, it is part of my personal scholarly background, thus my own subjectivity is at stake; having spent an important fragment of my educational life in the United States, I experienced first-hand the dialectical impossibility of categorising "Italian musicology". Second, I believe that its history and its genealogy not only mirror the crises and death narratives that characterise musicology in general, but they *are* part of the problem.

So let us return to the end, to the (in)famous 2016, the year of the "Death of Musicology" (see the first section). On a recent issue of *Current Musicology*, devoted to "Music Studies and the Political," several musicologists contributed on "this moment of institutional and intellectual reflexivity [...] not to suggest specific solutions or political programs but to open up and deepen the pressing questions that face the study of music and sound" (Wetmore 2018: 5, 8). Among the topics presented (from labour and power relations in academia to disability studies, from the role taken on by new models of social theory to a rethinking of the notion of musical archive), one stood out for its pressing matter: the history of the American Musicological Society.

In this essay, Tamara Levitz analyses and critiques the recent efforts in "decolonising the discipline" (Levitz 2018: 10) by uncovering the problematic origins of musicological studies in the United States through the scrutiny

of the archival sources and the international personalities who contributed to the foundation of the AMS. Levitz concludes her article by first taking into consideration the issue of language requirements in graduate programs (see *supra*), then analysing a recent proposal by the Music Department at Harvard University which, in 2017, offered a new “decanonised” and musically-diverse curriculum to students who otherwise would not benefit from the usual white-centred and patriarchal model of Western music history.¹⁴ Yet, the Harvard project reads as a form of displacement: “I worry,” she notes, “about administrators and faculty extracting identities from [the students’] social, intersectional context and mapping them onto music for the purpose of imbuing their teaching with moral purpose, and reinvigorating the humanities as a social justice project” (Levitz 2018: 46). Levitz highlights how such allegedly progressist and “liberal” proposals can actually act as a distraction from the still undebated and profoundly unequal selection of students’ applications (a process still marked by classism and implicit bias), and from the iniquity of adjuncting in academia. “The survival of the disciplines is at stake,” she reminds, echoing the prophecies of the death of musicology, as “the current focus on curriculum may be, in part, a diversion that allows academic musicologists to evade the job market crisis, class and racial inequality in higher education, the erosion of their profession, and labor injustices” (Ibid.). Levitz’s unmasking of neoliberal logic is reminiscent of the Žižekian’s critique of ideology,¹⁵ albeit the Slovenian philosopher—as most of the Eurocentric, poststructuralist theory which enabled Levitz to articulate her critique—are never referenced.¹⁶

A similar kind of Žižekian approach was also employed by Pierpaolo Polzonetti in his answers to the American scholars who criticised him for being indifferent towards racial issues and stereotypes when teaching *Don Giovanni* in a correction facility (see *supra*). There, he denounced the double standard in using terms such as “microaggression” and “racism,” reminding that

14 For a summary of the changes in Harvard’s music curriculum, see Leiper (2017).

15 “Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel” (Žižek 1989: 45); “an ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it, that there is a rich human person beneath it: ‘not all is ideology, beneath the ideological mask, I am also a human person’ is the very form of ideology” (Žižek 1997: 27).

16 See also on this point Žižek (2008).

the risk of deploying PC language irresponsibly is to devise a new technology of power through the control of heavily policed language. It looks “liberal,” but is in fact reactionary in the way it attempts to police thought and language. It appears to combat institutionalized racism, but it perpetuates a culture of apartheid by limiting communication through an encoded language that only permits the expression of certain ideas.¹⁷

Musicology, after all, is the science of writing about music: inscribed in its own name, there lies an issue. *Can* we write about music? Both Levitz’s and Polzonetti’s arguments, albeit from different positions and backgrounds, remind us that what is at stake with musicology’s identity is once again *language*.

I believe this recent crisis narration in musicology (intrinsic to the discipline’s own being, as we have seen) to be the offspring of a more general issue within the humanities and continental theory with language as such. Today, philosophy (the very same discipline called upon to “save” musicology from an excessively analytical approach, while also being rebutted for its lack of historicity) can no longer provide an appropriate language for these kind of problems, being as it is in the middle of its own crisis, in what Roberto Esposito (one of many Italian philosophers much more successful abroad than at home) defines as “the antiphilosophical... consequence”:

The fact that the entirety of contemporary philosophy... places itself in the self-confuting framework of its own end, yielding to that attraction for the “post-” that dominates the entire semantics of late modernity, is precisely connected with its subordination to the linguistic sphere.

[...]

The present task of philosophy is apparently a self-critical refutation of its own hegemonic claims to a Real that is located outside its reach. Whence its necessarily negative tones, in both a general sense and a technical sense: contemporary philosophy affirms itself only by negating itself (Esposito 2012: 6–7).

Esposito draws the attention towards the new wave of Italian theory and its peculiar position with respect to the three major traditions which have posited language at the core of their reflections (analytic philosophy, critical theory, poststructuralism): for him, the answer to such deadlock lies precisely within the so-called “Italian difference”, its predisposition for “questioning the transcendental primacy of language” by inextricably linking it to biopolitics and history “since its inception” (Ibid.: 9–10).¹⁸ Esposito identifies three paradigms through which Italian thought has been able to “achieve a

¹⁷ Polzonetti (2016a), comment posted on 21 February 2016.

¹⁸ “Italian difference” is the title of a seminal collection of essays on contemporary Italian thought; see Chiesa/Toscano (2009). See also Claverini (2016).

perspective that would otherwise be unattainable” (Ibid.: 11): (1) the “immanentisation of antagonism... the idea that conflict is constitutive of order”; (2) the “historicisation of the nonhistorical... the inoriginarity of history”; (3) the “mundanisation of the subject... deconstructed and reconstructed as a category of life which, in its turn, is always determined by its particular configurations” (Ibid.: 24–31). Going back to the peculiar tradition of Italian musicology and its constant positioning with and against itself, we can see how such trajectory fits within Esposito’s paradigms. If Italian theory is a better interpreter of the contemporary impasse within the humanities regarding language and identity, then maybe Italian musicology may be of some use for understanding the more general current crisis in musicology.

Musicology’s prejudicial status of “being late to the game” compared to the rest of the humanities is thus not an exception, but rather its very own ontological status, its foundational lack as existential drive. In its delayed repetition of what every other discipline already knew and already heard, musicology acts as a sort of fantasmatic *revenant*. Old Musicology, New Musicology... Dead Musicology? Much like Lacan’s Antigone lingering between the two deaths, but probably more like a character out of Italian opera, musicology keeps looking for the next crisis, for the next second death.

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