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Nationalism, Virtuosity and Their Sublime (Musical) Objects

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Resumo

Este artigo debruça-se sobre o entrelaçamento do nacionalismo com o passado musical em Itália. Em especial, centra-se no tópico das tradições musicais e no papel que tanto a disciplina musicológica como a radiodifusão desempenharam na construção de uma nova compreensão da tradição musical italiana no início do século XX. Na primeira parte, são delineados os principais traços que caracterizam a abordagem social construtivista do estudo da tradição. Numa segunda parte, são tratadas as transmissões de rádio italianas durante os anos 1920 e 1930 como um caso de estudo que exemplifica o poder do nacionalismo, não apenas em reformatar o passado mas também em forjar o futuro, tendo em consideração o seu posterior envolvimento com o fascismo. Na terceira parte, apresentam-se algumas observações finais sobre os limites da abordagem social construtivista no que concerne a música aflorando a questão do virtuosismo do ponto de vista da teoria do objecto sublime de Slavoj Žižek.

Palavras-chave

Tradição; Itália; Fascismo; Virtuosismo; Slavoj Žižek.

Abstract

The present paper reflects on the entanglement of nationalism with the musical past in Italy. In particular it focuses on the topic of musical traditions and the role that both the musicological discipline and radio broadcasting played in constructing a new understanding of the Italian musical tradition at the beginning of the 20th century. In the first part, the article outlines the main traits characterising the social constructivist approach towards the study of tradition. In the second part, it considers Italian radio broadcasts during the 1920s and 1930s as a case in study that exemplifies the power of nationalism, not only in reshaping the past but also in forging the future, by considering its further entanglement with Fascism. In the third part it makes some concluding remarks on the limits of the social constructivist approach with regard to music by briefly touching upon the issue of virtuosity from the perspective of Slavoj Žižek's theory of the sublime object.

Keywords

Tradition; Italy; Fascism; Virtuosity; Slavoj Žižek.

In a short essay on Franz Kafka from 1951, the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges enumerates a series of writers who can be considered from a contemporary perspective as 'precursors' of Kafka, i.e. in their texts we can find elements (style, topics, imagery, etc.)

which seem to point directly at or anticipate specific traits which deeply characterise Kafka's writing. Those traits—such as labyrinthine bureaucracy, confusion of spatio-temporal categories, powerful metaphors with an unclear or uncertain meaning, etc.—we now generally label as 'Kafkaesque'. Borges asks himself in what sense the writers he lists anticipated Kafka. Are they really his 'precursors', and what does this mean? Allow me to quote Borges's conclusion at the end of his essay:

> In each of these texts we find Kafka's idiosyncrasy to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had never written a line, we would not perceive this quality; in other words, it would not exist. […] The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.[1]

The point Borges is trying to make here is the following: every true artist and every true artwork has the power to reshape our perception of the past, making it resemble our present condition. Without Kafka, we could not be aware of certain traits already present in earlier works from other writers; or we would still perceive them, but we would not be able to understand them in the same way as we do *after* Kafka. *Mutatis mutandis*, has a better description of what nationalism is ever been written? Nationalism, as scholarly research over the last thirty years has amply revealed, is one of those cultural products that creates our future by rewriting our past.[2] During the nineteenth century, nationalism was able to reshape the political map of Europe on the basis of a very specific claim, namely, that a nation has always meant to be as such—a nation—even before the concept of the nation-state was created. One of the recurring thought patterns among nationalists is precisely the idea of the nation as a 'sleeping beauty', i.e. that the nation is already there, and that they just have to awaken it from its slumber.[3] The case of Italy is in this respect paradigmatic in its own paradoxical fashion: the idea of an Italian nation-state was successfully realised in the second

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This article reproduces with only marginal adjustments the keynote speech the author gave at the conference *Virtuosidade e Nação: Colóquio em homenagem a José Viana da Mota (1868-1948)* held at the Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal in Lisbon in October 2018.

[1] Jorge Luis BORGES, 'Kafka and His Precursors (1951)', in *The Total Library. Non-fiction 1922 - 1986* (London, Penguin, 2001), pp. 363-5, at p. 365.

[2] On nationalism see John HUTCHINSON, and Anthony D. SMITH, *Nationalism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994), especially pp. 3-14; Anthony D. SMITH, 'The Nation: Real or Imagined?', in *People, Nation and State. The Meaning of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, edited by Edward Mortimer and Robert Fine (London, Tauris & Co., 1999), pp. 36-42; Christian GEULEN, 'Nationalismus als kulturwissenschaftliches Forschungsfeld', in *Handbuch der Kulturwissenschaften. Grundlagen und Schlüsselbegriffe*, edited by Friedrich Jaeger; Burkhard Liebsch (Stuttgart-Weimar, J. B. Metzler, 2004), pp. 439-57; Timothy BAYCROFT, *What is a Nation? Europe 1789-1914* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 1-13; Hans-Ulrich WEHLER, *Nationalismus, Geschichte, Formen Folgen* (München, C. H. Beck, 2007). See also the next section of my article for a more in-depth discussion of the socio-constructivist approach characterizing a large part of the research on nationalism during the last three to four decades.

[3] See Ernest GELLNER, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1983), at pp. 39-58.

half of the nineteenth century, but only through the work of an elite of committed people and in spite of what the vast majority of the population thought on the subject at the time.[4] Ultimately, the mobilising power of nationalism resides in its ability to reorder or reshape the past and make out of it an apparently logical chain of events leading exactly to the claim that nationalism has previously made as its point of departure; nationalism's inherent power is its genuine teleological essence.

In this respect, culture itself, and especially the arts, become a powerful tool for spreading, sustaining and channelling this purely virtual, or, to put it in Benedict Anderson's famous words, merely 'imagined community' of the nation.[5] By overtly dealing with their own history and different styles, music, paintings, sculptures, literature, poetry, and so on make the impalpable entity of the nation audible, visible and tangible—in one word, perceivable—for us, and thus 'real'. By means of culture, the nation—as a discursive entity *par excellence*—becomes something that exists on its own.

In this article, I intend to reflect on the entanglement of nationalism with the musical past in Italy by focusing more closely on the topic of musical traditions and the role that both the musicological discipline and radio broadcasting played in constructing (or rather inventing) the idea of a national musical tradition. In the first part of my article, I will briefly outline the main traits characterising the social constructivist approach towards the study of tradition, which I adopt in my research, as well as those traits' entanglement with nationalism. In the second part, I will consider Italian radio broadcasts during the 1920s and 1930s as a case in point that exemplifies the power of nationalism, not only in reshaping the past but also in forging the future, by considering its further entanglement with Fascism. In accordance with the main topic of the October 2018 conference in Lisbon on the Portuguese composer and piano virtuoso José Viana da Mota and the link between musical nationalism and virtuosity—from which this paper originated—in the third part of my article, I will make some concluding remarks on the limits of the social constructivist approach with regard to music by briefly touching upon the issue of virtuosity.

Nationalism and Musical Traditions: The Social Constructivist Approach

In 1999, the English sociologist Anthony Giddens dedicated the second of his five *Reith Lectures* on BBC Radio 4 to questions about the role of 'tradition' in a globalised world.[6] In this talk, he refers to the well-known study of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger from 1983, in which the two

[4] See Emilio GENTILE, *La grande Italia. Ascesa e declino del mito della nazione nel ventesimo secolo* (Milano, Mondadori, 1997), p. 10.

[5] See Benedict ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, Verso, 1983).

[6] The five conferences were then elaborated by the author and published as a monograph; see Anthony GIDDENS, *Runaway World. How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives* (London, Routledge, 2000).

authors reflect on the invention of 'traditions' and relate the slightly paradoxical history of the kilt: the kilt—the famous Scottish 'traditional national costume'—has its origins not on some misty moor at the beginning of time, but rather in the innovative spirit of one of the first members of the Industrial Revolution in early eighteenth-century Lancashire. Like Hobsbawm and Ranger, Giddens thus comes to the conclusion that traditions are often 'made up' and are not as old as they are usually thought to be. He also remarks that in the humanities, there are 'endless discussions of modernization and what it means to be modern, but few indeed about tradition'. Twelve years later, the research context had changed. But let us proceed in order.

Three years after the publication of Hobsbawm and Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition*, the renowned cultural historian Peter Burke wrote a mixed review of this seminal book. At one point, Burke writes:

> 'The invention of tradition' is a splendidly subversive phrase, but it hides serious ambiguities. […] Hobsbawm contrasts invented traditions with what he calls 'the strength and adaptability of genuine traditions'. But where does his 'adaptability' […] end, and invention begin? Given that all traditions change, is it possible or useful to attempt to discriminate the 'genuine' antiques from the fakes?[7]

The idea of an 'invention' of traditions was indeed subversive at the time, as it directly challenged the hermeneutic orientation shared by a large number of historians back then. Hobsbawm's clumsy attempt to somehow distinguish between true and invented traditions and Burke's concerns that the two historians with their collected volume had just opened a Pandora's box—ultimately undermining every possibility at drawing a line between genuine and fake, between fact and fiction—very well reflect the general anxiety of the historical discipline: how could we work as historians if there are no facts but mere 'inventions'? That seems the disquieting question Hobsbawm and Ranger inadvertently placed on the table with their concept of an 'invention of traditions'.

And indeed, the anthropologist Richard Handler had already in 1984 in a straightforward review of Hobsbawm and Ranger's book drawn the only possible conclusion from their work, writing:

> He [Hobsbawm] distinguishes invented from 'genuine traditions' by claiming that in the former case, continuity with the 'historic past' is 'largely fictitious'. Hobsbawm argues that the invention of tradition is universal, but occurs most frequently during periods of 'rapid' social change, when the 'functions' of invented traditions are to legitimize 'relations of authority' and to establish or

[7] Peter BURKE, 'The Invention of Tradition by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Review', *The English Historical Review,* 101/398 (1986), pp. 316-7, at p. 317.

> symbolize 'social cohesion' […]. This functional theory suffers from several unexamined assumptions. By what criteria does it distinguish rapid change from social stability, continuity from discontinuity, real from artificial communities, or true from fictitious history? Such distinctions resolve themselves ultimately into one between the genuine and the spurious, a distinction that may be untenable because all traditions (like all symbolic phenomena) are humanly created ('spurious') rather than naturally given ('genuine').[8]

Here, Handler is already opening the Pandora's box Burke (and Hobsbawm) were still afraid of: There are no 'genuine' traditions, as every tradition is in its core nothing but an invention. It is not by chance that Handler is an anthropologist: anthropology was one of the first disciplines within the humanities to accomplish that which some years later was termed 'the cultural turn'. It was the anthropologist David Geertz who in the 1970s with his pioneer works based on his concept of the 'thick description' inaugurated an approach towards the study of human cultures, which during the 1980s spread across the humanities, and from the 1990s onwards came to represent the 'cultural turn' that their dominant paradigm more or less occupies to this day.[9]

The idea behind this paradigm shift was simple but game-changing: symbolic elements and practices have to be understood and investigated not as reflections of some given essence but as a product of cultural factors, as manmade—or, in Handler's words quoted above, as 'humanly created'. Probably the most blatant example of this shift is the discipline of 'gender studies', whose object is not 'woman' (or man) as a specific entity changing (or not) throughout history as such, but rather 'gender', i.e. how at different times and in different cultures, womanhood (or manhood) has been understood and socially constructed.

In a way, the overall idea behind the concept of 'invented traditions' cannot be better put than in the words of Rai, one of the protagonists in Salman Rushdie's 1999 novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*—a novel in which the author of the famous *Satanic Verses* retells the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice by setting it within the rock milieu of the 1950s and '90s. At one point in the novel, Rai frantically asks:

> But let's just suppose. What if the whole deal — orientation, knowing where you are, and so on — what if it's all a scam? What if all of it — home, kinship, the whole enchilada — is just the biggest, most truly global, and centuries-oldest piece of brainwashing?[10]

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[8] Richard HANDLER, '*The Invention of Tradition* by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Review', *American Anthropologist,* 86/4 (1984), pp. 1025-6, at p. 1026.

[9] Clifford GEERTZ, *Dichte Beschreibung* (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2007).

[10] Salman RUSHDIE, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1999), pp. 176-7.

This was in a way the attitude behind the idea of traditions as merely inventions—or, to put it in Rai's words, as merely 'pieces of brainwashing'. But that is not all. Indeed, from the 1990s onwards, so-called 'cultural memory studies'—one of whose leading proponents was Jan Assmann with his theory of '*Kulturelles Gedächtnis*' ('cultural memory')—has significantly contributed to seeing traditions not as 'inventions' but as social constructs. Rather than mere 'fictions', traditions began to be understood within cultural memory studies as the on-going, open-ended results of a continuous mediation or dialectic between remembering and forgetting, an on-going renegotiation between what a specific culture wants to keep or ignore from the past, what it wants to make its own and what it wants to discharge.[11] Memory, and hence traditions, are thus not negated or merely unmasked as fictions, as pure 'pieces of brainwashing'—something that Hobsbawm and Burke acutely perceived as an all-too-simple approach, but were not able at the time to counteract consistently with a more refined theory. Instead, cultural memory studies understand tradition as a constructive process: traditions emerge from a continuous selection process that shapes the past from a point of view based on present attitudes. The focus of the research is not on unmasking the lie but on analysing the reasons for the set of assumptions, ideas, economic and political interests, etc., which lead a definite culture at a particular point in time to perceive a specific selection from, and interpretation of, past events as its own tradition.[12] The examination of how a society selects its past and creates its traditions thus offers an insight into the specific intellectual coordinates, standards, values and worldviews which are constitutive of that very society.

Using this approach within research on *musical* traditions offers one substantial advantage: it shows the close connection between music and social affairs (politics, philosophy, ethics, etc.) Seeing traditions as a social construct allows us properly to understand the societal role of musical traditions. Using this approach makes it possible to understand the potential of musical traditions to convey political messages, especially nationalist political messages. Once again, the power of this socio-constructivist approach is that it simply shifts the question we as music historians have to ask about our object of study: we no longer argue about facts—about the question, for instance, of whether symphonic music is 'German' or not, or if Saint-Saëns's music truly belongs to the French musical tradition, and so on. Instead, we merely ask: What kind of historical, political and cultural discourses made it possible for symphonic music to be perceived as something primarily 'German' during the nineteenth century through to the middle of the twentieth century? How did

[11] Aleida ASSMANN, 'Zur Mediengeschichte des kulturellen Gedächtnisses', in *Medien des kollektiven Gedächtnisses. Konstruktivität, Historizität, Kulturspezifität*, edited by Astrid Erll, and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2004), pp. 45-60, at p. 59. On the cultural memory studies see Nicolas PETHES, *Kulturwissenschaftliche Gedächtnistheorien zur Einführung* (Hamburg, Junius Verlag, 2008); and Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara B. Young, *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (Berlin, De Gruyter, 2010).

[12] See Aleida ASSMANN, *Zeit und Tradition* (Köln, Böhlau, 1999), p. 90.

Saint-Saëns's contemporaries perceive his music? What did they think about its 'Frenchness'? We no longer define 'essences' (Frenchness, Italianness, Germanness, etc.), we no longer ask—as Wagner (unsuccessfully) did in an essay written between 1865 and 1878—*Was ist Deutsch?* [What is German?]. Instead, we investigate what in a specific epoch and in a specific culture *was considered to be* German, French, Italian, etc. This is, in a nutshell, the so-called *cultural turn* within the humanities.

The heuristic power of this socio-constructivist approach can be clearly discerned if we consider the case of Italy and its own musical tradition(s).

Has an Italian Musical Tradition Ever Existed? Ancient Instrumental Music and Fascism

From the end of the nineteenth century through the first two decades of the twentieth century, a fierce debate on the 'true' nature of the Italian musical tradition flared up in Italy. A heterogeneous group of composers, music critics and musicologists such as Alfredo Casella, Gian Francesco Malipiero, Ildebrando Pizzetti, Luigi Torchi and Fausto Torrefranca began to maintain that the genuine Italian musical tradition was not the operatic one, as was the consensus during the nineteenth century. Ignited by the discovery of the old instrumental music of Antonio Vivaldi, Arcangelo Corelli, Francesco Geminiani and others, the idea that the roots of the genuine Italian musical tradition were not in the operas of Verdi, Rossini, Donizetti or Puccini, but precisely in the forgotten instrumental music of the aforementioned composers was vehemently advanced.

In the following section, I intend to focus not so much on the debate itself, as it unfolded from the 1890s up to the 1910s.[13] Instead, I will consider the late 1920s and 1930s, when the rather counterintuitive idea of Italy as 'the land of instrumental music' began to be generally accepted, and was no longer perceived as opposing but rather complementing the widespread perception of Italianness in music as intrinsically operatic. Starting from the late 1920s, the general opinion was that the Italian musical tradition was both operatic *and* instrumental. But this does not mean that a comprehensive, no longer ideologically-biased understanding of the Italian musical tradition was achieved. On the contrary: by considering the presence of the ancient instrumental music of Vivaldi, Corelli, etc. in Italian radio broadcasting from the late 1920s to the late 1930s, I will highlight how the idea of an Italian musical tradition underwent further modifications, and how these changes reflected specific political agendas.

[13] In this respect I refer to my monograph on the subject: Mauro Fosco BERTOLA, *Die List der Vergangenheit. Musikwissenschaft, Rundfunk und Deutschlandbezug in Italien, 1890-1945* (Wien, Böhlau, 2014).

Between 1897 and 1901, Luigi Torchi—one of the founding fathers of Italian musicology—wrote a comprehensive study in which he examined Italian instrumental music of the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries using a positivistic method. The declared goal of his venture was to break with the opinions shared by his contemporaries, who understood Italy as the eternal country of the opera and symphonies as a 'German' genre. For Torchi, instrumental compositions from the past were preliminary to the symphonic works of the German tradition. In an important passage of his study, he wrote: 'Italy had prepared all the necessary material for the development of music towards Beethoven by itself and accomplished everything on its own'.[14] Hence, Beethoven—the icon of German musical culture—would not have been possible without Italy and its 'symphonic tradition'.

This is of course a crystal-clear case of invented tradition. And just how well traditions can blind our perception of historical facts becomes clear if we consider that Torchi understood Vivaldi's instrumental *concertos* as symphonies. He called Vivaldi a '*symphonic* genius' who remained 'superior to Haydn and Mozart with his *symphonic* power'.[15] This pattern of interpretation for the old instrumental music of Italy successfully persisted until the end of Fascism. However, during the 1920s and 1930s, as Fascism consolidated its power over Italy, Torchi's invented tradition underwent some substantial modifications that directly reflected Fascism's political agenda. Let us consider how ancient instrumental music was aired by Italian radio broadcasters during this time.

It was only at the end of the 1920s, after almost five years of regular broadcasting, that the Italian broadcasting company decided to offer a more sophisticated musical programme to its listeners: the daily potpourri of rather randomly-chosen operatic arias, folk songs, minuets, excerpts from classical instrumental works and the occasional broadcasting of operas began to be interrupted more and more by straight symphonic concerts. And here a specific form of symphonic programme can be detected. Below is a paradigmatic example.

On November 22, 1929, a symphonic programme entitled *Nature and landscape in music* was broadcast. Beethoven's Sixth Symphony was performed in the first part, and was then followed by the complete cycle of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. If we take a closer look at the selection and order of the performed works, we can clearly see how the arrangement of the programme was quite openly restating Torchi's narrative of Italian supremacy over Germany regarding the invention of the symphonic genre: Beethoven is directly confronted with the 'symphonic genius' of Vivaldi, whose

[14] Luigi TORCHI, 'La musica istrumentale in Italia nei secoli XVI, XVII e XVIII', *Rivista musicale italiana,* 4 (1897), pp. 582-3; 'Per arrivare a questo risultato [Beethoven], l'Italia aveva preparato da sè ogni specie di materiali, colle sue sole forze tutti li aveva sviluppati ed aveva fatto tutto.'

[15] TORCHI, 'La musica istrumentale' (see note 14), p. 709.

Four Seasons had been rediscovered at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the same time, the programme did not only merely restate Torchi's historical narrative, but implemented it. The radio programme was not only claiming the historical supremacy of Italy in the invention of the symphony, but asserting a *continued* Italian supremacy: indeed, immediately after the *Four Seasons*, two pieces—one by Ildebrando Pizzetti and the other by Ottorino Respighi, the two most important representatives of the Italian symphonic renewal at the beginning of the twentieth century—were broadcast. And it is interesting to note that orchestral songs were chosen, a genre that clearly had a connection to the German musical world and its *Orchesterlied* tradition. At the end of the concert, another two modern symphonic pieces were broadcast: *Sicilia canora* (Singing Sicily) by Giuseppe Mulè from 1924, and *I paesaggi toscani* (Landscapes of Tuscany) by Vincenzo Tommasini from 1922. The explicit regional connotations of the pieces' titles—unifying the 'North' (Toscana) and the 'South' (Sicily) of the country ideationally—aimed once again at emphasising the vitality of the symphonic tradition in Italy, and rendered Beethoven's Sixth Symphony only an intermediate stage within a purely Italian history of instrumental music.

The implementation of Torchi's nationalist agenda in dealing with the ancient instrumental music of Vivaldi, Geminiani, Corelli and others by the Italian broadcasting company is already an interesting case in point for this entanglement between traditions and politics: by suggesting a narrative of primacy, downfall (with Beethoven handing over to the Germans the Italian supremacy in the symphonic genre) *and* rebirth, this typology of symphonic concert fits quite well with the ideological horizon of Fascism as a movement which understood itself as a moment of national rebirth and as a reassertion of Italy's 'civilising' mission in the world after a period of national decay. But that is not the entire story.

Indeed, by investigating the symphonic programmes of 1938-9, we notice a change in focus in dealing with the construction of an Italian musical tradition on the part of the Italian Radio Broadcasting company. The opening concerts of the 'EIAR symphonic season—the most prestigious series in Italian broadcasting in the area of symphonic music—are, once again, a case in point. At nine o'clock in the evening on 22 November 1939, the eighth EIAR symphonic season was opened with a festive concert. At this point—almost unsurprisingly—the programme began with a double concerto by Antonio Vivaldi. It followed a *Burlesca* in G minor for harpsichord by Domenico Scarlatti, arranged for chamber orchestra by the contemporary Italian composer Camillo de Nardis. Over the course of the evening, compositions by Ildebrando Pizzetti and Goffredo Petrassi—both leading exponents of the first and the second generations of Italian composers in the first half of the twentieth century—were also played, thus highlighting (once again, unsurprisingly) the continuity of an Italian symphonic tradition rejuvenated—as the story went back then—by

Fascism's spirit of national renewal. The *Partita* of Petrassi from 1932 is, moreover, an important example of Italian Neoclassicism during the inter-war years. Thus, even on a purely musical level, the idea of actively passing on the 'national tradition' across three centuries found in Petrassi's work an additional, reinforcing equivalent.

It seems that nothing had changed, but by taking a closer look at the content of the broadcast, we can identify something fundamentally new. A key role in this regard had been ascribed to the *Novelletta* by Giuseppe Martucci, one of the few composers in nineteenth century Italy who had devoted himself to instrumental music. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, large sections of both audiences and music critics, including Torchi, accused Martucci of composing anti-national music—or at least, music that adhered too closely to the German tradition.[16] In 1939, however, Martucci's works had appeared in a new light: his compositions seem to have been considered a forerunner of current symphonic music in Italy.[17] Martucci's works thus served as an excellent means of completely excluding German symphonic music from the repertoire of works to be performed in radio programmes.

What we see here is a new understanding of the *Ottocento* (the nineteenth century in Italy) which differs profoundly from that of Torchi or even of the late 1920s in radio broadcasting—namely, as a period of Italian music which includes not only operas but also instrumental works. The Italian musical tradition, especially the instrumental one, was thus articulated anew: we are faced with a narrative of Italy's primacy in the field of symphonic music, which does not include any discontinuities, and suggests the idea of an unceasing process of handing down this tradition across the centuries.

These changes can only be properly understood by placing them in the context of the socio-political developments to which Italian society was exposed during the 1930s. When the Fascist regime invaded Ethiopia on 3 October 1935, the League of Nations imposed economic sanctions against Italy and Mussolini took this opportunity to declare a state of economic 'self-reliance', the so-called '*Autarchia*'. To this effect, this initially purely economic measure promptly acquired cultural implications, which subsequently also affected the domain of music. In 1939, for example, a reform in the study plans of music academies was proposed with the aim of keeping the education of musicians, composers and musicologists in line with the 'principles of autarchy'. Among other measures, an attempt was made to replace all the teaching material written by non-Italian authors with new works

[16] See in particular Luigi TORCHI, 'La sinfonia in re minore di Giuseppe Martucci', *Rivista musicale italiana,* 3 (1896), pp. 128-66.

[17] For the change in interpretative paradigm regarding Martucci's music as well as his historical value in the 1930s within Italian musical discourse see Adriano LUALDI, *Il rinnovamento musicale italiano* (Milano - Roma, Treves – Treccani - Tumminelli, 1932), p. 25.

specifically conceived by Italians. The EIAR—the Italian radio broadcasting company at that time—actively participated in these efforts: the report of all the EIAR's activities for the year 1938 was entitled 'Programmes for the broadcast year 1938. EIAR for autarchy' (*L'EIAR per l'autarchia*). And here, the EIAR explicitly stressed how it was aiming at extending the principle of '*Autarchia*' beyond merely economic and organisational aspects to cultural ones. The new symphonic programme's typology discussed above thus represented one of these efforts.

The far-reaching impacts of Fascism and its nationalist agenda became prominent in yet another way in the symphonic broadcasts of the late 1930s: the anti-German implications at the core of Torchi's historical construct of an Italian symphonic tradition were more strongly reasserted than in previous years, and at the same time remodelled with regard to the geopolitical aims of Fascism at the end of the 1930s. In this respect, let us briefly consider the 'exchange programmes' organised by the German and Italian broadcast services for their respective cross-border audiences in 1938 and 1939.

As had been the case in 1938, these exchange programmes were supposed to prove the 'spiritual closeness' of Germany's National Socialism and Italian Fascism. However, they seem to reflect much more the mutual distrust between the two regimes. Let me clarify this point with an example.

On November 10, 1938, a German-Italian symphonic concert was aired by the Italian broadcasting company as the opening concert for its series of special programmes for Germany. After various German and Italian politicians gave speeches, two pieces were played: Arcangelo Corelli's Eighth *Concerto Grosso* and Richard Wagner's overture from *Tannhäuser.* The choice of an ancient Italian instrumental composition within such a political context carried quite a clear message. Torchi had already explicitly praised the anticipation of Wagner's instrumental style by the Italian composers of the eighteenth century in his musicological works of the 1890s. So again, the choice of repertoire constructs a picture of Italy as the birthplace of Europe's music culture, implicitly polemicizing Germany and its symphonic culture.

If at this point we consider the opening concert that the German radio company organised on January 12, 1939, to inaugurate their series of special broadcasts for Italy, we see how this interpretation of the EIAR concert finds its counterpart: in this concert, an ancient piece of instrumental music was performed together with Wagner's Overture from *Rienzi* and Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. However, this was neither Vivaldi nor Corelli, but instead a prelude and fugue by Bach. During this 'German-Italian' concert, aired in both countries, Italy's presence was only to be found in the choice of Bach's work, which was performed as an orchestral arrangement by Respighi. Neither the modern nor the ancient Italian 'symphonic tradition' was mentioned during the German broadcast. If we consider the other concerts organised on German radio for the Italian public up until the start of the invasion of Poland in September 1939, it is interesting to note that

early Italian instrumental music hardly ever appears. Germany perceived the implications of broadcasting early Italian instrumental music and therefore excluded this repertoire on purpose.

So, all things considered, it is clear that the 'symphonic tradition' had in the highly political context of these German-Italian programmes an additional function: by means of the continuous presence of ancient Italian instrumental music in the course of these 'exchange concerts', the EIAR expressed the claim of Fascism for supremacy within its alliance with Germany and emphasised Italy's civilising mission, becoming a tool for legitimising the aims of a Fascist 'New Order' in Europe.

Are We Still Missing Something? Virtuosity and Enjoyment

In this final section, I intend to switch back to the theoretical issue discussed at the beginning of my article. Even if the following remarks are more of a work in progress than a genuine analysis, I would like to make at least an attempt to reflect briefly on the limits of the otherwise deeply powerful socio-constructivist approach to the study of nationalism and national traditions outlined above when it comes to music.

In the introduction to their monograph on opera from 2002 entitled *Opera's Second Death*, the Lacanian philosophers Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek write at one point:

> In a famous passage from the introduction to his *Grundrisse* manuscript, Marx mentions how easy it is to explain Homer's poetry from its unique historical context—it is much more difficult to explain its universal appeal, that is, why it continues to give us artistic pleasure long after its historical context has disappeared. If we reduce a great work of art or science to its historical context, we miss its universal dimension […]. Such historicizing is especially problematic in the case of Wagner. It is easy to show how *Parsifal* grew out of imperial, anti-modernist anti-Semitism—to enumerate all the painful and tasteless details of Wagner's ideological engagements in the last years of his life (his obsessions with the purity of the blood and vegetarianism, Gobineau and Houston Chamberlain, and so on). However, to grasp the true greatness of *Parsifal*, one should absolutely abstract ideas from these particular circumstances; only in this way can one discern how and why *Parsifal* still exerts such a power today. So, paradoxically, the context obfuscates Wagner's true achievement.[18]

As so often with Žižek, the passage is deliberately provocative: wasn't one of the greatest achievements of the 'cultural turn' precisely to highlight how context forms and constructs the text —how the text is nothing but its context? Or, with reference to our topic, how traditions (our 'texts') are not something from the past, but rather a symptom of the socio-cultural structures of the present (the 'context')?

[18] Slavoj ŽIŽEK, and Mladen DOLAR, *Opera's Second Death* (London - New York, Routledge, 2002), p. 2.

At the same time, the socio-constructivist approach, by reducing historical occurrences to their social, political, and economic causes and somehow rationalising it, misses precisely the 'irrational' moment lurking at the core of cultural phenomena like, in our case, national traditions: Indeed, why do traditions lure us in? Why has the idea of nation and national communities not lost its appeal even after two World Wars fought in its name?

It is here that the issue of virtuosity and its link to nationalism—which was at the centre of the aforementioned conference from which this paper originated—offer the occasion to reflect briefly on these open questions. At first sight, virtuosity seems to have nothing to do with nationalism. And, what is more, virtuosity seems to embody all that which nationalism so deeply despises: virtuosity as manual, rhetorical or somehow mechanical, 'soulless' dexterity *versus* the deeply felt, earnest spirit of the nation. For instance, all the anti-Italian rhetoric in Germany during the nineteenth century, especially by Wagner, develops according to this line of thought: Italian opera was stigmatised as the soulless triumph of pure vocalic dexterity without meaning.[19] The soprano is dying, and at the same time, she is cheerfully chirping and trilling up and down the octaves while the audience, delighted by such vocal beauty, spoons in its freshly-made *sorbetto*.[20] And is the very embodiment of the nineteenth-century virtuoso—Franz Liszt—not the perfect example of the 'soulless' nature of virtuosity? Born in Hungary, he did not speak the language, wrote most of his essays in French and lived between Paris, Weimar, Rome, Budapest and finally Bayreuth. From a nationalist point of view, you could easily say that the 'deep sadness of the heart' Liszt complained about in a letter to his biographer—the German writer and teacher Lina Ramann at the end of his life—is nothing but its rootlessness, his belonging, as a lifelong virtuoso with a true European consciousness, to no nation at all.[21] Virtuosity thus seems to go against everything the idea of the nation stands for.

But, as psychoanalysis teaches us, it is precisely in our alter-ego—or, to put it in more Jungian terms, in our shadow—in that which we despise and repress, that the truth about ourselves resides. Virtuosity in its pure form forwards the aspect of pleasure; it satisfies our need for enjoyment beyond or, as malicious tongues would put it, without meaning. In virtuosity there becomes visible what all the chatter about the civilising power of (some kind of) music, of the profound truths hidden in the depths of the greatest musical works are so keenly trying to stifle, i.e. that we go to a

[19] See for instance Richard WAGNER, 'Beethoven', in *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen in zehn Bänden* (Berlin [u.a.], Deutsches Verlaghaus Bong & Co., s. d. [1914]), pp. 61-126, at p. 84.

[20] On the so called *aria di sorbetto*, see Philip GOSSETT, *Divas and Scholars. Performing Italian Opera* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 39.

[21] Quoted after Alan WALKER, *Franz Liszt. The Final Years, 1861-1886* (Ithaca - NY, Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 437-8.

concert principally for our own pure enjoyment. The deep truths of Beethoven's late string quartets come as a bonus, but they are not the first reason for my going to the concert hall on a cold winter's night, renouncing a fine dinner at a highly-priced restaurant: what I need is to feel the soothing, deep sound of the cello, to be emotionally moved by the acoustic ups and downs of crescendos and decrescendos, to enjoy how the instruments interact, alternating and overlapping their voices and their specific timbres, and—why not?—what I need is to 'get the vibes' from all the people around me attentively listening to the music and, like me, deeply enjoying being there. In one word, I need to feel that dimension proper to the aesthetic experience that the literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls 'presence'.[22]

It is in laying bare our enjoyment, in making visible what really moves us towards music, that virtuosity unmasks the lure at the core of nationalism and of musical nationalism in particular: musical nationalism is not about a timeless being, a given thing, the nation, always already there from the pre-historic ages to the present day, as nationalists claim. But neither is nationalism only about the societal context: the nation and national music are not only a social construct, as most scholars after the cultural turn have claimed. Nationalism and its music are first and foremost a matter of desire, of enjoyment.

Let us consider, for instance, the beginning of the third movement from *Scarlattiana*, a work that the Italian composer and professed Fascist Alfredo Casella wrote in 1926. Basically, it is a concerto for piano and orchestra based on themes from Domenico Scarlatti's keyboard sonatas. Of course, the work is a case in point with respect to the claims of an Italian musical tradition based on instrumental music. Casella's main goal with this piece is to highlight the continuity, primacy and vitality of Italian instrumental music, deliberately going toe-to-toe with German symphonic culture. Today, we are well aware of all the deeply ideological implications behind this work and of that ideology's tragic consequences, culminating in Italy's involvement in the Second World War alongside Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, by listening to this piece, today—as at the time of its premiere—we somehow enjoy it. The freshness of the dancing rhythm, the shimmering, colourful orchestration, the clarity of the form, the virtuosity of the piano parts, all of these elements make this piece deeply gratifying, despite everything else. We enjoy it even if we know its 'meaning' is despicable. This is precisely how nationalism works and is that which the socio-constructivist approach entirely misses.

[22] See Hans Ulrich GUMBRECHT, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford - CA, Stanford University Press, 2004). See also Vittoria BORSÒ, 'Mit der Biopolitik darüber hinaus. Philosophische und ästhetische Umwege zu einer Ontologie des Lebens im 21. Jahrhundert', in *Wissen und Leben - Wissen für das Leben. Herausforderungen einer affirmativen Biopolitik*, edited by Vittoria Borsò (Berlin, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2014), pp. 13-40.

The socio-constructivist approach wholly overlooks the ability of nationalism and national traditions to become, in Slavoj Žižek's terminology, a 'sublime object', i.e. something able to mobilise our enjoyment—something, an 'object', in which we project our libido: we desire it, because we enjoy it. The socio-constructivist approach very well explains how the object (the nation, the tradition) lures us in, claiming a substantiality and an overreaching timelessness that it does not have at all. But what is missing from this kind of scholarly approach is the answer to the more fundamental question of why we need an object after all: the true problem is not how the object claims its sublime aura (its uniqueness, timelessness, its specific substance)—something we can very well explain by examining its societal context—but how are we so ready to accept this claim; why are we so eager and willing to be lured by the object.

To conclude: as the saying goes, behind every nationalism there is a poet. It may sound banal, but in its banality resides its truth: social factors construct the nation and its traditions, but people, our own desire, our own enjoyment, that which the poets—like the composers and musicians—are so able to stimulate and manipulate, this is what makes the nation 'real'. This is what mobilises us, making us ready to fight for it, to overcome our decency, our innate sense of compassion for our fellow beings and commit crimes and atrocities in the name of what is nothing but an imagined community. And that is why it is so important that we as musicologists carefully and unceasingly think about and research this topic.

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