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Monographic Section

Torn Between Neoliberal and Postmodern Trends, Corporatist Defence and Creative Age Prospects: The Ongoing Reshaping of the Classical Music Profession in Italy

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Abstract. In modern industrial societies, strongly associating work to tangible productivity and professions to formal regulation and protection of membership, the music occupation has represented a conundrum for theoretical analysis. In post-industrial societies, however, musicians are being recognised a pivotal role in capitalist economies, as part of a creative class sharing working conditions already defining artistic labour markets, but within a significantly changed regulative framework. Drawing on the literature and her field research, the author adopts a neo-institutional perspective to consider the reshaping of the classical music profession in Italy, exploring how collective and individual actors are responding to neo-liberal trends extending market logic to a music world crossed by processes of cultural declassification. Conclusions reflect over the ambiguities created by creative age prospects, in applying principles of economic hierarchisation within the field of musical production, and over the transient nature of professionalisation processes.

Keywords. Artistic occupations; classical music profession; creative economies; neo-institutionalism; neo-liberalism; cultural declassification.

INTRODUCTION: THE NEW INTEREST ON MUSICIANS AS CREATIVE WORKERS

Within the ideological framework of industrial capitalist societies, setting an oppositional relation between leisure and work and praising productive labour, occupations in music, arts and culture have represented a challenge for theoretical analysis, because of their atypical features and liminoid positioning (Freidson 1989; Turner 1974). Even when scholars have looked at musical and artistic activities as “normal” work resulting from collectively organised action, rather than as the creation of individual genius and exclusive talent, they have emphasised the specific language and conven-

tions organising its production and consumption (Becker 1974; 1953; 1982), often inverting the market logic of the wider economic field (Bourdieu 1983). Similarly, within the debate over professionalism, given the relevance recognised to formal regulation and protection of membership in the creation of market closures and boundaries within different groups (Saks 2016; Abbott 1988; Maestriperi 2016), the music occupation was decried for its defective control over the making of musicians, whose specialised knowledge and skills are often learned outside the paths of standardised curricula of certified training (Frederickson, Rooney 1990), hampering to set a clear line between amateurs, semi-professional and professional workers (Perrenoud 2007).

In post-industrial societies, however, the debate on the strategic development of creative economies assigns a central role to the work of artists and musicians, inserted within the new “creative class”¹. The debate presents human creativity as the ultimate economic resource of contemporary capitalist societies, whose consumption rather than leading to its exhaustion – as for land, labour and capital – feeds virtuous circles of reproduction (Howkins 2001; Florida 2002). Creative workers, however, seem to face a conflicting status: on the one side presented as self-directed primary drivers of development, on the other kept in precarious and socially vulnerable working conditions (Murgia *et alii* 2016; Bellini A. *et alii* 2018). This paradox has also been debated with reference to musicians, whose labour markets display since a much longer time the occupational features describing today’s creative workers: non-routine activities, high levels of unemployment, diffused precarious and undeclared work, strong seasonality, wide income differentials (Menger 1999; Turrini, Chicchi 2013). It is no coincidence that the expression “gig economy”, clearly borrowed from the field of music, is increasingly popular in the debate over creative industries to describe the spread of precarious labour conditions (Cloonan, Williamson 2017; Haynes, Marshall 2018). Despite musicians’ familiarity both with precarious, fragmented and vulnerable labour conditions as well as with the entrepreneurial skills and portfolio careers (Weber 2004), as required by creative economies, studies have outlined the novelty of the gains and strains deriving from the application of economic production logic to the field of artistic production (Banks, Hesmondhalgh 2009). Research, however, has mostly dealt with changes concerning “musicians of the bars and clubs”, i.e. popular, independent or jazz musicians (Coulson 2012; Umney 2016; Haynes, Marshall 2018; Tarassi 2018), leaving largely unexplored the case of “the gentlemen of the musical elite” (Cloonan, Williamson 2017), namely classical musicians, who historically attained a widespread recognition as a professional group.

The article offers a contribution for a widening of the debate, considering the ongoing reshaping of the classical music profession in Italy. The issue is considered adopting a neo-institutional perspective (Powell, DiMaggio 1991), soliciting to look at the changing relationship between professions, organisations and society through time and space, while investigating the role played by professionalisation in broader projects of institutionalisation (Saks 2016). This approach also informed the research on which the article is based: a broad study on modern Italian Conservatories of Music, considered as legitimised organisational forms for the training of professional musicians (Casula 2018). While the research followed a mixed method approach gathering qualitative and quantitative techniques within a common research strategy (Bryman 2012), the article only refers to qualitative evidence, reporting a few excerpts from the semi-structured interviews and focus groups realised with nearly 100 Conservatory students, teachers and other Italian professional musicians from the spring of 2013 to the winter of 2017. Interviews, started through personal contacts, proceeded following snowball sampling, asking first interviewees to suggest further contacts, matching the profiles defined in order to account for the existing variety of groups within the organisational unit considered. Questions aimed at reconstructing musician’s professional path, mainly focusing on the mechanisms defining the phase of recruitment, the training period, entrance and permanence in the labour market. Interviews, of the average duration of one hour and a half, were tape-recorded, transcribed, and analysed following an inductive and comparative approach, based on the coding and assessment of the main sub-categories and the thematic areas emerged (Brinkmann, Kvale 2015).

The article follows five main argumentative steps. First, it sketches a reconstruction of the historical process leading to the professionalisation of the classical music occupation in Western capitalist societies. Second, it out-

¹ The category of “creative class” may include workers associated to both new and traditional occupations in the fields of arts, cultural goods and services, toys and games, research and development (Howkins 2001).

lines the shift from a consideration of classical music as an unproductive but socially valuable activity, justifying State funding in the field, to the deregulation suggested by neo-liberal trends, heading musicians to creative productivity. Third, it clarifies in what ways processes of cultural declassification are undermining the hierarchies founding the exclusive prestige of the classical canon within the field of musical and cultural production. Fourth, it explores how collective and individual actors within the field of Italian classical music are responding to those changes, adopting new strategies to define their professional careers, within the ongoing reshaping of the profession. Conclusions reflect over the ambiguous prospects opened up by the debate on creative economies for a new pivotal role of musical work under the rules of economic production, and over the transient nature of professionalisation processes.

THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF THE CLASSICAL MUSIC OCCUPATION

The historical process reconfiguring the musician from a provider of leisure services for a master to an autonomous worker performing a socially recognised activity has been gradual, diversified and uneven (Goldin 2018; Bellini P.P. 2005; Coulangeon 2004; Rink 2002). In modern Western societies, this was first achieved within a process of cultural legitimisation of “classical music”, a specific canon defined since the second half of the Nineteenth century, based on the organisation in repertoires of great musical works from the past, becoming sources of authority on musical taste (Weber 1992; 1994). From a socio-economic point of view, the musical canon allowed to establish a highly valued and neatly defined product – i.e. classical music – in the field of organised music production, increasingly integrated within a market economy. A series of processes concurred to build the cultural legitimisation of the canon: the diffusion by the aesthetics of Romanticism of an ideal of “absolute music”; the ritualization of performance emphasising the distance between the public and the artists; the sanctification of the great masters of the past (Frederickson, Rooney 1990; DeNora 1995). As well-argued by Weber (1994: 189), those «ceremonial aspects of classical taste provided a grand new means for public spectacle» meeting «the need of the new industrial society to manifest its economic and cultural potency through its grand rites of secular religiosity». However, because also cultural capital, as other forms of capitals, requires valorisation, the musical canon needed a significant institutional effort in order to define and maintain its value (Di Maggio 2009; Bourdieu 1979). Therefore, most Western States, supported by a bourgeoisie eager to assert the new symbols and values of modern industrial societies, enhanced the establishment and development of legitimised organisations for the reproduction and diffusion of a hierarchical system of artistic classification, based on the distinction between high and popular music, setting the classical canon at its summit (DiMaggio 1987; Weber 1992). From the second half of the Nineteenth century, concert-halls and opera-houses – the latter, until then, a typical form of entertainment for the upper classes – were reconfigured as civic “temples of the arts” with exclusive cultural aims (Santoro 2010; Della Seta 1991). Conservatories of music, meanwhile, were turned from vocational music schools based on craftsmanship tradition to élite organisations for the specialisation of talents devoted to the highest form of art²: their training became defined as a selective and lengthy process, increasingly certified by culturally legitimised organisations³, leading classical

² The strategy of converting vocational works in respectable careers to meet bourgeois aspirations, by lining them to a high culture defined in opposition to qualified craftsmanship – already traceable in the process of professionalisation of liberal professions (Freidson 1986) – was particularly evident in the founding of the Paris *Conservatoire*, which became a model for modern Western Conservatories of Music. This passage was only partially realised in Italy, where Conservatories, while granting an average level of professional training, remained strongly linked to the craftsmanship tradition (Maione 2005; Casula 2018).

³ The variation in time and space of the positioning of professional music training in national systems of education (public vs. private funding) or labour markets (compulsory vs. optional certification) has led authors to question the status of the classical music occupation as a profession, on the grounds that «[t]he failure to monopolize and to control the production of musicians remains a central reason for the music occupation’s ambiguous status today» (Frederickson, Rooney 1990: 198). However, as for other artistic fields, and especially for the so-called “fine arts”, where canons are more deep-seated, «there are implicit and informal requirements, which in practice makes formal education almost compulsory» (Svensson 2015). In Italy, for instance, Conservatories are State funded, and

musicians to master a highly specialised and esoteric body of practical and theoretical knowledge and allowing to a strong control over professional jurisdiction (Kingsbury 1988; Hennion *et alii* 1983). On the same vein, general education in classical music, offered privately or within school curricula, established the canon and its rituals as a universal model of musical taste (DiMaggio 1987).

THE “COST DISEASE” AND ITS TREATMENTS: FROM WELFARISM TO NEO-LIBERALISM

From the Twentieth century, with the expansion of modern industrial societies, the work of classical musicians results unsuitable to the logic of productivity, given its inability to introduce labour-saving innovations feeding the accumulation process through the production of surplus-value (Savran, Tonak 1999). The same number of musicians needed to play a Beethoven’s string quartet in the Nineteenth century was also needed a century later, when the real wages of the musicians playing it – following those of productive workers – had meanwhile greatly raised. As such, classical music production was diagnosed – together with the wider performing arts sector – a “cost disease” (Baumol, Bowen 1966), whose treatment was found in public assistance, motivated by the recognition of its social value, and legitimised by the support of Keynesian economics and labour movements⁴.

In Italy, since the end of the 1940s, a social security fund was established for Entertainment and Sports Workers (ENPALS)⁵, though measuring artistic working time with the categories of office jobs. At the end of the 1960s, a specific law was defined⁶ to finance a selection of public theatres for opera and symphonic concerts. The welfarist treatment to the “cost disease”, however, entailed a series of adverse side effects: a taken for granted reliance on public funding; a bureaucratization of the organisations and their workers; an expansion of the costs for artistic productions artistic often wanting in terms of creativity and unable to create synergy with other cultural organisations (Serano 2008; Severino 2010). In the mid-1980s, a new law (No. 163/1985) sets the Unique Fund for the Performing Arts (FUS), financing different performing arts areas (lyric and symphonic Foundations, music, theatre, dance, circus) and the movie sector, but concentrating the bulk of its resources in classical music production (Montecchi 2004). With the delegitimisation of Keynesian ideology, the neo-liberal creed increasingly gains ground, recommending an alternative treatment of de-regulation, gradually administered through the decentralised management of publicly funded organisations for musical production and the flexibilisation of their labour force⁷.

The same trend is traceable in another crucial area of public support to the classical music profession, namely the subvention of organisations for the training of professional musicians. The establishment of State recognised Conservatories of music, as said, represented for classical musicians a crucial step in the in the path towards professionalisation, but also the opening of a prestigious and coherent “pool profession”⁸, in view of the uncertain waters

their certification is a formal prerequisite for classical musicians to access sought-after positions (as in the case of prestigious orchestras or, more recently, music teaching in public schools).

⁴ In Italy, the most influent trade union organisation for musicians were the Sindacato Nazionale Musicisti (SNM), founded in 1946, the Sindacato Musicisti Italiani (SMI), founded in 1954, and the Unione Nazionale Arte Musica e Spettacolo (UNAMS), founded 1979, today the most representative in the sector.

⁵ The ENPALS, established in 1947, was suppressed in 2011, when its functions were transferred to the INPS. The fund entitles artists, after 20 years of contributions, to a State pension; contributory years, however, are made of 120 working days identified with the days of artists’ performances in Italy, without considering the working time needed to prepare their performance, nor the fact that it might be staged abroad.

⁶ The first article of the Corona Law (No. 800/1967) stated: «The State considers opera and concert activities of relevant general interest, in that they encourage the musical, cultural and social education of the national community. For the protection and development of these activities, the State intervenes with suitable provisions».

⁷ During the 1990s, three out of the four radio orchestras owned by the National Radio and Television Company (RAI) were closed, while Lyric-Symphonic Foundations were turned from public to semi-private bodies, increasingly using short fixed-term contracts to hire untenured orchestra members (Cerulli Irelli 2012).

⁸ According to Freidson (1986), the teaching required from academics trained to do research in their respective fields responds to the need to support economically – through the provision of their services to students – their largely unproductive vocational activity.

of artistic labour markets. This was indeed the case for classical musicians in Italy throughout the Twentieth century, when Conservatories were gradually established all over the territory, in order to meet an increasing demand for a (mainly non-professional) music education, largely lacking in school curricula: the growth of the student population, particularly sound between the 1960s and the 1980s, supported the creation of a significant number of tenured positions for classical music courses⁹. At the end of the century, however, a law is approved (No. 508/1999) inserting Conservatories and other State recognised Arts Academies within the higher level of the education system, contemporarily undergoing an extensive reorganisation guided by neo-liberal models of public management (Lynch 2006; Viesti 2016). While the original law draft foresaw the advancement to the tertiary level of education only for a selection of the nearly eighty Italian Conservatories, the powerful action of the trade union of artists and musicians (UNAMS) attained the inclusion of all Conservatories, in the aim to upgrade the legal, economic and social status of their teachers to that of University professors. The paradoxical result of this change, as we shall see, was however a deprofessionalisation of classical musicians, changing the profile of Conservatory teachers and their students (Demailly, Broise, 2009; Casula 2015).

CULTURAL DECLASSIFICATION WITHIN THE MUSICAL FIELD

Challenges to the classical music profession do not only come from neo-liberal pressures for de-regulation and flexibilisation of the sector, but also from the weakening of its cultural authority. The technological innovations brought to the broadcasting industry after World War II lead to the rapid diffusion of various musical genres, besides classical music (from jazz to country, from rock to popular music) increasingly shaping the life of younger generations. At first condemned by critics of capitalism as a product of commercial marketing destined to passive and uneducated audiences, unable to grasp the technical and intellectual complexities of “authentic culture” (Horkheimer, Adorno 1944), those processes are increasingly interpreted in light of post-modern approaches, outlining the coercive power inherent to modern “grand narratives” (Lyotard 1979). As in other fields, also in the musical one, the universality of the legitimised canon is questioned and unravelled as a social construction derived from an ethnocentric civilisation, structured in relations of dominion based on race, social class and gender (Citron 1991; Bradley 2015; Bull 2018). As a result, a valorisation of the multiplicities found in the “little narratives” is sought (Leicht 2016), endorsing approaches considering music-making as part of the human condition, transcending social divisions (Blacking 1973) or looking at music consumption as a practice of negotiation and transformation of social identities (Hall, Jefferson 1976; Santoro 2006). In broadening the field defining arts and culture, the diffusion of less hierarchical and more differentiated systems of cultural classification triggers spirals of cultural inflation in the performing arts sector (DiMaggio 2009) and puts policymakers in front of the dilemma of having to divide an increasingly reduced pie of public resources with a growing number of potential beneficiaries.

In the case of Italy, the dilemma of cultural inflation is largely avoided, by reiterating in the allocation of the FUS the old model favouring the classical music sector, more on the grounds of institutional path dependency – supported both by larger cultural organisations and the bureaucracy – (Giarda 2007), than for the social rootedness of an “art music” tradition (Nettl 1995). Path dependency also prevails in the case of Conservatories of music, remaining structured for the whole Twentieth century within the traditional classical canon. After the 1999 reform, inserting Conservatories within the level of higher education, curricula are entirely redefined, widening the repertoire and career patterns of the classical canon, including and legitimising courses associated to different musical genres (such as jazz, pop music, new technologies), matching the practical study of music with a variety of exams on analytical and theoretical subjects. Despite the wide-ranging breadth of the reform on paper, its implementation followed public management prescriptions aiming to offload the costs of public education from the State to organisations and their actors, from students to teachers (Lynch 2006).

⁹ See Salvetti (2000). In the school year 1966-67, in Italy, there were 35 Conservatories of music, counting 6.026 students and 1.279 teachers; twenty years later, the number of Conservatories had doubled, students were 33.884 and teachers 5.352 (Casula 2018).

THE PROFESSIONAL MUSICIAN: CREATIVE ENTREPRENEUR, MULTI-SKILLED ARTIST OR PRECARIOUS WORKER?

The professionalisation of the classical music occupation historically set as aspirational career model that of the virtuoso solo player, responding to the Romantic ideal of the solipsistic artist (Kingsbury 1988; Wagner 2015). This model was reproduced within Conservatories, where the most demanded classes were those of instruments with a soloist repertoire (such as the piano or the violin) and training was mainly focused on individual performance, even in the classes of typical ensemble instruments. In Italy this model remained dominant throughout the Twentieth century. For students aspiring to a soloist career, the achievement of the Conservatory diploma was followed by further specialisation, typically foreseeing advanced training with internationally well-known musicians, while preparing for competitions allowing to find a position in the most prestigious segments of the classical music market. Another privileged end market for students of instrumental courses was offered by symphonic orchestras, where most proficient students were given – often through the mediation of their teacher – temporary posts, in the prospects of a viable stabilisation. Public and private teaching, as mentioned, represented a precious “pool profession”, offering young classical musicians a fundamental economic and reputational resource to sustain the launching and the maintenance of their artistic careers. The relatively young age at which Italian classical musicians were concluding their studies at the Conservatory – paralleling secondary school cycles – allowed them to dispose of an interim period to further adjust their aspirations to the reality of the labour market, sometimes devising new trajectories, often better matching their personal abilities and life skills (Menger 1999; Miller 1984).

When you undertake the study of something, you do it because you like it, or you are passionate or interested. However, during the journey – which for music is very long – deviations are also created. I say this because I did the Conservatory and continued with the [Pianistic] Academia, thinking and deceiving myself to be able to make a solo career, which I did or do, but obviously is not the first source of income... In the path, I realised that there was a variety of job opportunities, which I had not even considered before, that I would have liked and would have better adapted to my peculiarities. For example, I discovered the fact of reading quickly [music at first sight] only afterwards [...], the fact of playing chamber music – done at the Conservatory, but not very much – I developed it with very good musicians, and I realised that doing a concert in a duo takes the most out of myself, rather than doing recitals alone. [Pianist, orchestra member, female, 35]

These career patterns radically change from the 1980s, when the exponential growth of Italian Conservatories in the previous decades creates in the labour market of classical music an inflationary spiral of oversupply (Menger 1999), given by a growing offer of classical musicians in front of a contraction in demand, both in orchestras and in teaching. As a result, classical musicians' careers become increasingly liable to long-lasting precariousness, dividing and multiplying work time in search of economic subsistence, forms of self-exploitation and psychological distress from the need to keep together a fragmented professional identity. Those professional and existential conditions, already experienced by musicians working in less prestigious fields of musical production, anticipated those currently faced by “creative workers” (Murgia *et alii* 2012; Turrini, Chicchi 2013): «We were pioneers!», laughs with sarcasm the clarinetist of the following excerpt.

I was *precario* [i.e. on a fixed-term contract] from the mid-1980s till 2011, when I became a tenured teacher, both at the Conservatory and at the school, which I then left. [...] I remember the fatigue, the engagement: because I was doing three or four [different] things where music was the leitmotif – I have also worked in social centres with children with disabilities, for instance –, but each one was different from the other... I realised that I wasn't doing well any of them, because there was a great waste of energies, since I had to travel to reach the school, I played [elsewhere] in the symphonic orchestra [...] Then, I realised that my blood pressure was high, I was a bit stressed out: but I couldn't give up anything, because all five things kept the economic balance! [Clarinet player, Conservatory teacher, male, 50]

The crisis of the sector at the national level is set into a broader scenario of growing global competition, enhanced by the expansion of the information and communication infrastructure, dramatically raising the technical standard of classical music performance. For those students aiming at developing a successful soloist career,

early professional music training becomes a crucial asset. In Italy, however, the insertion of Conservatories of music within the tertiary level of education delays students' entry into the labour market. To avoid this competitive disadvantage, families of promising young soloists often turn to private individual teaching, unable to create a sense of belonging to a broader professional community. Increasingly, students of the classical courses are asked to develop, similarly to their colleagues from the new courses, a multi-skilled profile, ready to be flexible to the fluctuating requests of unstable and uncertain creative markets (see the first of the following excerpts). Multi-skilled profiles are also required to be entrepreneurially promoted through a competent strategic use of communicative tools, creating a brand allowing musicians to connect with differentiated audiences, increasingly searching for immediate emotional experiences from cultural consumption (see the second excerpt). Those strategies, meeting the profile of workers required by creative economies (Burnard 2015), need to be carefully managed by classical musicians, in order to avoid deskilling processes, questioning the legitimacy of their status as professional artists (Turrini, Chicchi 2013; Becker 1992).

Today, I was talking with [Marco], a twenty years, old student passionate about music technology. [...] I told him: «[...] See, as [Luca], who has the classical music [career] as his goal, but at the same time plays with me in a popular music group. You have to widen your horizons, because if you also know pop music or jazz, in the classical context, when you happen to play Gershwin or other modern authors you know how to behave, and you don't do the [typical] classical musician, who pretends to speak the jazz language but is not able to...». [Trombonist and composer, Conservatory teacher, male, 40]

If you ask my opinion, the public wants to imagine before hearing. [...] Visual communication in an artist serves to strike the imagination of the listener and brings the listener to the concert or to buy the CD. [...] We, [classical] musicians of my generation, we had to learn how to do this, because I was totally unprepared for this kind of communication... My students getting ready for competitions are very well prepared: they have photos where they seem Hollywood divas or *fin de siècle* writers. [...] We live in a society in which 70-80 per cent of the people attending a concert, on average, don't understand what you're doing. So, in cases such as that of Y [*he names a young, well-known classical musician*], the imagination of the pictures totally stands above the artistic part, I mean: graphics and style are so beautiful, that once they play the concert almost doesn't matter... [Pianist and conductor, Conservatory teacher, male, 55]

The precarisation and individualisation of careers in classical music concern not only students, but also their teachers. The 1999 reform of Italian Conservatories was realised following two opposite logics: on the one hand, unions' claims to safeguard benefits and status for pre-reform teachers; on the other hand, neo-liberal recommendations on budget restraints and flexibility, allowing to set up new courses only with temporary contracts paid with local funds. In this way, the only chance for new teachers – usually of non-classical courses – to aspire to a tenure-track becomes the replacement of a tenured colleague from a classic department, whose course is suppressed. These trends enhance competitive self-interested action resulting in conflictual intra-professional relations (Abbott 1988), among young and old classical musicians, or classical and non-classical musicians (as in the first of the following quotes). The pervasiveness of the neo-liberal approach of the reform is also traceable in the increasing number of technocratic tasks required – after the digitalisation of education management systems – to the teachers, experiencing a decrease of autonomy in their work (as in the second quote); or in the adoption of a logic of marketing, where education is conceived as a commodity whose costs are offloaded onto the students, mainly considered as customers (as in the third quote).

To me, it would have been better to make another music school [for jazz], in order to avoid this conflict [between classical and jazz professors]. Because it's always a matter of [financial] resources, then quarrels [among colleagues] rise, [...] because the jazz department has many professors paid on fixed-term contracts, as external teachers, with the resources of our Conservatory. Therefore, we need to convert the posts of retired tenured professors from the classical department, in order to have tenured jazz professors directly paid by the State. [Today] you can still make it, because there are too many classes of classic instruments [with few students], [...] but from here to make a war to decide which classes are more needed... [Conservatory teacher, classical department, male, 60]

Since the Reform [of Conservatories] my printer has no rest... But: was I a musician? What have I become? It's a continuous: «Fill in the form, the model, the declaration, the evaluation and the report!» (...) With these e-mails, certainly great, but, frankly, I can't take that anymore, because I'm afraid to look to what has arrived (...) always problems in sight, it's not simple... and that's also work;

it steals your time. For me, that I'm a pianist, let's be realistic: if I have to practice a piece, I'm not able to reply every half an hour... [Conservatory teacher, pianist, female, 50]

All these problems are a reproduction of what is already happening at the University, where if the Greek epigraphy course has few students, it closes, while communication sciences faculties etc., those that are trendy, they thrive. [...] Like the audience for television, now we have a share: «How many students do you have? Then, your course is activated!». It's madness, because if one teaches a discipline that is elitist, but finds its own necessity within an artistic field... [Conservatory teacher, pianist, male, 50]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In modern Western societies classical musicians – differently from most other types of musicians, sometimes striving even to simply get their activities recognised as work – have achieved recognition as an exclusive occupational group, carrying out a socially recognised activity and exerting a jurisdiction over a specialised body of legitimised knowledge. Supported by welfare systems during the golden age of post-war capitalist expansion, in the light of the alleged unproductive nature and the recognised social value of their work, classical musicians are today being included within the class of creative workers, considered as primary drivers of economic development. The article focuses on two main dimensions of change in the sphere of classical music work: neo-liberal trends prescribing deregulation and marketisation in the performing arts and higher music education sectors, and processes of cultural declassification, undermining the hierarchies founding the exclusive prestige of the classical canon.

Evidence brought by the article shows that, in the Italian case, the response to these changes has mainly followed a conservative approach, supported by bureaucratic powers and by artists' unions, respectively trying to preserve the existing cultural order and to defend the entitlements previously acquired by older professionals, in front of a broader picture of retrenchment of public intervention and increased cultural declassification. The analysis of the interviews with professionals offers a sample of the complex picture deriving from the intersection of these processes, each one growing in a different direction: the adoption of an insider-outsider logic in the protection of working conditions, for instance, while hampering the assumption of the meritocratic logic expected by market regulation, fosters individualistic and conflictual intra-professional relations, eroding the sense of belonging to a shared working community.

Classical musicians seem to be left with their own individual resources to reposition themselves within a professional field ongoing a significant reshaping prospected by creative economies, devaluing their highly specialised knowledge and skills, while asking for a flexible multitasking profile, and challenging a professional identity typically shaped by vocational and non-commodified values with strong pressures for the adoption of a competitive self-entrepreneurial attitude, leading to the commercialisation of every transaction. Younger professionals appear to be better equipped than their older counterparts to respond to creative markets' requirements, constructing cross-cultural portfolios managed through a proficient use of communication and technological skills. The adequacy of this equipment and the conditions of feasibility and sustainability of its application, however, may significantly vary according to the distribution of personal and social resources and the (structural and infrastructural) endowments of their territorial context. In a scenario of dominant neo-liberal ideology, this unfair distribution of assets is left open to the development of free market forces, creating further social divides in the distribution of career opportunities (Scharff 2018; Bull 2018; Haynes, Marshall 2018).

In conclusion, a first general consideration emerging from the article is that, also for classical musicians, the renewed interest brought to the musical occupation by its insertion within the debate on creative industries does not translate into a greater interest on its specificities and enhancement of its role as producer of culture, but rather on the attempt to superimpose on it heteronomous principles of hierarchisation, derived from the field of market economy. As already noticed in the case of non-classical musicians, market pressures from training or funding organisations asking musicians to be multifaceted entrepreneurs, developing their brand and converting capital, imposes upon them alien categorisations, considering their work to be worth only when having an economic

impact and their entrepreneurial skill as chiefly moved by competitive self-interest (Coulson 2012; Haynes, Marshall 2018). This tension is even more felt in the case of classical music which, like other so-called “fine arts”, is strongly symbolically associated to a “reversed economy”, pursuing the “interest in disinterestedness” as a value (Bourdieu 1983).

A second general consideration is that the neo-institutional approach adopted allows following the parabolic path of the process of professionalisation of the classical music occupation in Western societies, tracing through time and space the different and complex phases of its contingent and transient dynamic. From this view, professions seem better understood as social constructs not having to adapt to a universal and static model (Wilensky 1964), but varying according to original institutional paths, which may include their emergence, growing and establishment as well as their reconfiguration, decline or demise (Abbott 1988; Santoro 1999; Butler *et alii* 2012; Cucca, Maestripieri 2014; Bellini A. 2017).

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