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Boosting gender equality through music production. A case study on two Italian female brass bands

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Abstract

Arts and culture are increasingly recognised as fundamental assets for the development of territories. Their contribution, usually considered with reference to the revitalisation of places within a competitive global economy, is more rarely assessed in terms of enhancement of a more inclusive and egalitarian social fabric. The article focusses on the latter dimension, considering the case of two Italian female brass bands active in different territorial contexts, both contributing to challenge the gendered biases, prescriptions and practices still hampering women's full participation to music worlds and society.

Introduction

The new centrality of the cultural and creative sectors in the socio-economic development of contemporary capitalist societies has brought to acknowledge arts and culture as a fundamental asset for territorial development. The debate has mostly focussed on the potential role of artistic and cultural production in boosting the attractiveness both of cities acting in a competitive global scenario as well as relatively remote locations neglected by standard tourist routes. Less attention, however, has been paid to its transformative action in the social fabric, requiring the analysis to include an ethical dimension within discourses on socio-economic development.

In this article I will adopt the latter perspective, considering the potential contribution of artistic and cultural production to the process of enhancing democratic and inclusive morphologies in local territories (UCLG 2021). The discussion will be based on an empirical qualitative research on two Italian female brass bands, emerging in quite different territorial and organizational contexts, but both contributing to challenge those gender biases, prescriptions and practices still hampering women's full participation both to music worlds and social life in general.

1. The persistence of gender inequalities in music worlds

Women's participation to 'music worlds' [1] has been subjected to various forms of opposition, repression and control (Pendle 1991), varying in time and space. Today in Western societies women are formally acknowledged the right to enter and reside within the different segments of education and the labour market in music, as in other sectors. In practice, however, they are still often exposed to various forms of unequal treatment *vis à vis* men, starting from negative gender biases, horizontal and vertical segregation, sexual harassment, lower incomes, greater job insecurity (Ravet and Coulangeon 2003, Buscatto 2018). Gender asymmetries are present in those music worlds more often overtly displaying sexist cultural narratives, as that of rock and pop (Whiteley 2000, Reddington 2012), as for those where women are more integrated, as classical music (Scharff 2018, Bull 2018, Casula 2019). The acknowledgement of the structural nature of those asymmetries, as detected in other fields of society, has justified the launching of a series of initiatives, in aiming to tackle inequalities both in music education and in the music industry [2].

In Italy, gender inequality in music is rarely perceived as a social issue, but rather dismissed as a matter of individual natural talent and predisposition. The time series of data on distribution of students in the different courses offered by Italian Conservatories of music throughout the 20th century (Casula 2018, 2019) shows the rootedness of socialization to sex typed musical practices, as crystallised in the classical canon, associating girls with those courses (harp, piano, singing) considered compatible with feminine grace and respectability, while discouraging their participation to those with masculine, either technologically complex or requiring postures deemed as licentious (Green 1997, Steiblin 1995). In the last decades of the century the influence of conventional prescriptions weakens: in some courses (violin and flute, in particular) girls' presence becomes fully legitimised; in others, gender typing shows its resilience. In the academic year 2014-15 male students represented nearly 77% of the horn and bassoon classes, 81% of saxophone classes, 90% of trumpet and trombone or tuba classes, 91% and 94%, respectively, of double bass and percussions classes (Casula 2018).

Qualitative interviews with students (Casula 2018) allowed us to identify the presence of girls from rural areas enrolled in conventional feminine courses at the Conservatory, but at the same time playing instruments associated to masculinity in local bands. Grown since the 18th century and still quite diffused in rural areas of Italy [3], local bands are music ensembles associated to semi-amateur proficiency originally open only to male members [4]. Since the 1970s women were gradually admitted and assigned various instruments according to the mutable needs of the ensemble, thus challenging the conventional sex typing of instruments. An even stronger challenge to sex typing in music comes from bands exclusively composed by female members, already celebrated by feminist studies for their historical contribution in promoting women's participation to both classical and popular music (Macleod 2001, Bowers and Tick 1986, Tucker 2000, McGee 2008).

Having identified two female brass bands, we chose to explore the rules, values and processes at the basis of their transformative action in promoting gender equality in music, as in society [5]. The main tools adopted were documental analysis, a focus group with each band (for a total of 22 participants), qualitative interviews with informed actors (nearly 10, including previous band members and band directors, managers and teachers) [6]. Interviews and focus groups were realised between 2018 and 2019, audio-recorded, transcribed *verbatim*, and analysed by the author following an inductive and comparative approach, based on the coding and assessment of the main sub-categories and the thematic areas emerged (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). In 2020 a follow up call with the band managers was realised to have updates in light of the Covid 19 pandemic [7].

2. Introducing the players: the *Big River Marching Band* and the *Girlesque Street Band*

Comparing the bands with reference to two fundamental dimensions, their territorial context and their organizational model, we classified our case study as responding to the 'most different' logic [8]. The *Big River Marching Band* (BRMB) was founded in 2015 in Flumini Maggiore, an isolated village of 3000 inhabitants in the South-West of the island of Sardinia, reporting a declined mining tradition and a present of high unemployment rates, especially for younger generations. The *Girlesque Street Band* (GSB) was founded in 2012 in San Miniato, a commune of nearly 28.000 inhabitants in the region of Tuscany, in a strategic position between Florence and Pisa, representing an important center for leather manufacturing as well as truffles, oil and other wine and agro-food production (see fig.1).

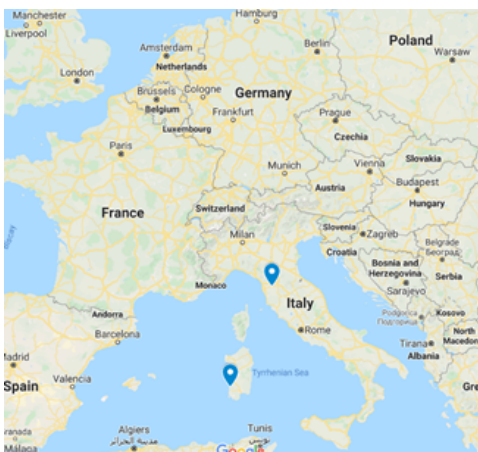


Fig. 1 – The localization of Fluminimaggiore, Sardinia (BRMB) and San Miniato, Tuscany (GSB) within the Italian territory (source: googlemaps)

In the case of the BRMB, the feminine identity of the band was not a target intentionally searched, but rather the result of an historical process of feminization of the local band of Flumini Maggiore. Founded in 1911 to meet the needs of the notables and the community of the village, the civic local band accepted only male members until the end of the 1970s, after cultural changes legitimizing feminine participation, supported by the will of the band's director to include his three daughters (figure 2). Today women represent the largest and youngest part of the local band. In 2015 one of its session teachers, a jazz trombone player trained at the Conservatory and specialized in jazz clinics, sets up a brass band recruiting from the local band nearly 12 girls and one boy (other boys were unavailable, it seems because busy with sports or not willing to engage in demanding activities), from

17 to 33 years of age. Although unintentional, the feminine composition of the band soon becomes one of its distinctive traits, together with a reference to the Afro-American roots of jazz music: both traits are disclosed through its brand (picturing a black woman's head) and its denomination, translating into English the village's name, while hinting to the Mississippi blues tradition (figure 3). The BRMB receives its funding from the local band of Flumini Maggiore, at its turn sponsored by local and regional authorities, and from its performances (in the village, its neighboring areas and the regional territory), during local festivals or fairs, when its members – whose proficiency ranges from semiprofessional to advanced students and amateur level – are flanked by a small number of professionals – their teachers and a few friends – as sidemen.

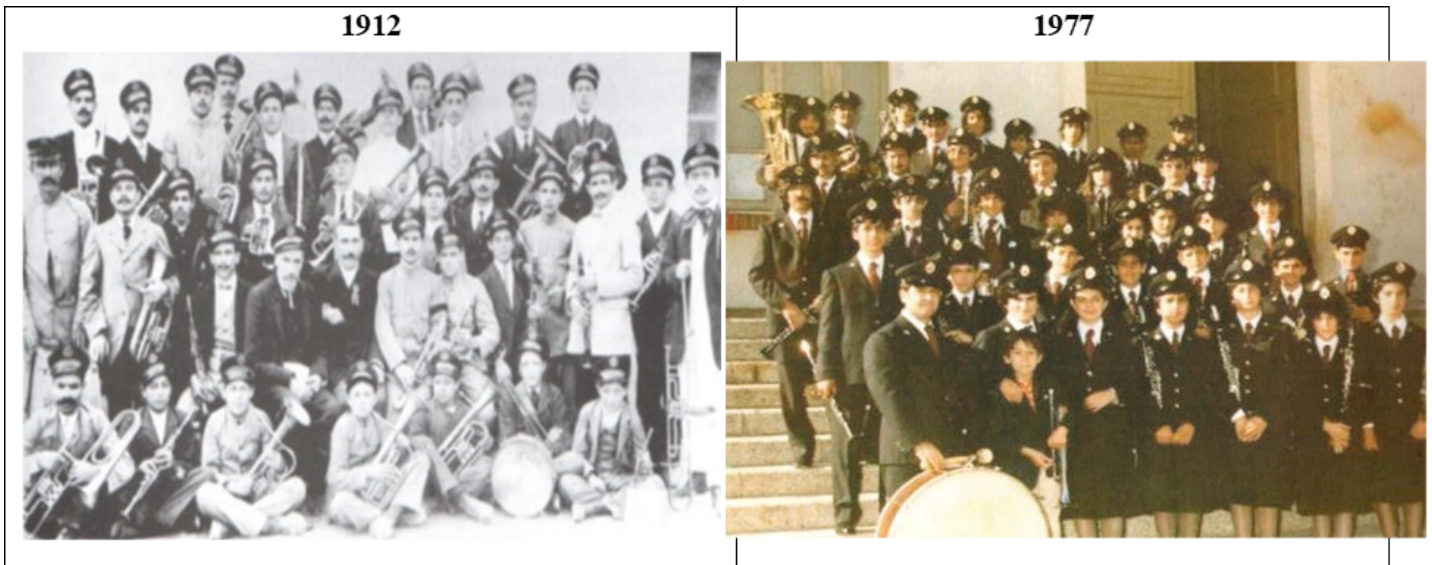


Fig. 2 – The feminisation of the Santa Cecilia band of Fluminimaggiore, Sardinia (source: Pili 2010)



Fig. 3 – The BRMB (Fluminimaggiore, Sardinia): images of logo and live performance (source: band's public Facebook account)

The GSB, by contrast, was purposely founded as an all-female band by a couple of musicians, husband and wife, who had already been members of the *Large Street Band* (she, a saxophonist, as the only female member), a well-known Tuscan band regularly touring within jazz circuits, matching technical ability with energetic choreographies. Having had a baby, the couple left the band to settle down, but used their experience to launch 'the first Italian female street band' within a self-financed musical association. The band's name is built on a word play, cleverly mixing different types of feminine identity: the Anglo-Italian expression 'girl-esc', meaning 'girls-out', refers to women out of the schemes and making music outside; the word 'burlesque', relates to the American tradition of variety shows typically including bawdy comedy and female striptease (figure 4). The composition of the members, recruited word-of-mouth from the whole of Tuscany, was quite wide at the time of the research: 25 members, aged from 16 to 48, with different levels of expertise: advanced students, semi-professional, professionals^[9]. The band tours throughout Italy during the whole year and most intensively during the summer, in occasion of local fairs, jazz or women festivals. They also had a few concerts abroad and published a compact disc.



Fig. 4 – The GSB (San Miniato, Tuscany): images of logo and live performance (source: band's public Facebook account)

Despite territorial and organizational differences characterizing the two ensembles, research results show they share significant features, that we claim to be related to the band as an organizational form offering its members material and symbolic resources enhancing both individual and collective action (Bourdieu 1979). In the following paragraphs I shall focus on some of the main dimensions where girls' participation to the band is seen as setting in motion processes empowering their belonging to popular music (jazz and related music *genres*): role modelling and mentoring, outdoor performance, leadership and improvisation training, gender equality in music as the desired prospect.

2.1 – 'We can do it!' The importance of role modelling and mentoring

A preliminary question considered by the research was how the girls had had access both to instruments and musical *genres* still typically associated to masculinity and precluded to female participation. One of the most immediate aspects of gender segregation in jazz is in fact related to the wider issue of sex typing of musical instruments, strongly influencing female's educational choices and subsequent professional paths of musicians. Historically, brass instruments – from trumpet to trombone, from clarinet to saxophone -, widely used within jazz and related music *genres*, have been strongly associated with male heterosexuality and virility (Caudwell 2012) and the persistence of this stereotype may still discourage female students from taking brass instruments for the musical studies or for a future professional career.

In both bands feminine role modeling and mentoring appear to have played a relevant role in making the association between women and brass instruments unproblematic. In the case of the BRMB, girls were recruited from the local band, where instruments are assigned by the director to new members, largely on the basis of the band's needs and only to a limited extent, taking into account personal preferences or the possession of the instrument (often inherited by other family members). Those preferences appear to be completely open for girls, also because the feminization of the local band offered them multiple examples of female instrumentalists to identify with (as in the following excerpt, where the girl's choice is moved by the desire to imitate her female cousin, besides the aesthetic attraction for the golden instrument).

Adele, saxophone, 18 (BRMB): My idea was to enter [the band] playing the sax because my cousin had it: I liked the fact that it was golden [the other girls laugh, n/a] and that she played it!

In the case of members of the GSB, recruited from different musical backgrounds, the encounter with the 'masculine' instrument is more varied. Some of them share with the BRMB girls the experience of musical training in a local band, usually drawn to brass instruments after having heard them play by male acquaintances (family members or friends). Other times the choice comes unexpectedly, after having started to learn music with a more conventionally feminine instrument (typically the piano), as in the following example, where a Eastern European girl presents her encounter with a female brass band as a sort of epiphany of her musical vocation as a saxophonist.

Tatiana, saxophone, 32 (GSB): I started to study music [in Eastern Europe] when I was 6, my first instrument was the piano, which I always wanted to study (...) I started studying saxophone when I was 14 because in my high school there was an all-female band. These girls played saxophones and I also wanted to play it just for this: because it seemed to me like the best band that could ever exist!

Often there is more than one instrument in the musical life of band members. Polistrumentality is sometimes searched autonomously, for the sake of curiosity and passion (as for one member of the BRMB, playing clarinet, oboe, flute and singing) other times for the band's needs. A case in point is that of Nicoletta, trumpet player and music therapist, mother of three: she had started playing in the GSB as replacement to the trumpet and, wishing to become full member, she was offered to play the sousaphone. This is her recalling of how she won the challenge of learning to play this spectacular instrument, extremely heavy to carry and fatiguing to play.

Nicoletta, sousaphone, 44 (GSB): Without telling anyone I went to a store and I brought home this 15 kilos case with 10 kilos of instrument in it, so 25 kilos of stuff [in total]. I brought it home and tried to blow in it, almost fainting – I had to lean against the door jamb... I said [to myself]: ‘Tomorrow I’ll bring it back [to the shop]!’. Then I said: ‘But, wait, let’s try again: since I have it here at home...’. After a week and a half [of tries], I thought: ‘Come on, I can do it!’. After a month I made the first exit with the sousaphone, for an emergency situation. A couple of months ago I bought my own ...

The more is the distance between the instrument and its association to a stereotyped vision of femininity, the greater the awareness of band members of their potential contribution in encouraging and empowering future generations of female musicians to access and legitimately stay in traditionally masculine music worlds: Nicoletta defines her playing the sousaphone in the band as ‘a sort of mission’, while Adele recalls her feeling of pride about her musical achievements, when realizing to be a role model for the younger girls she was mentoring in the local band.

Nicoletta, sousaphone, 44 (GSB): I don’t know if there are other female sousaphonist in Italy (...) for me to play it, [means] that if a woman looked at me thinking: ‘Wow!’ and she would feel the desire to play, I would be extremely pleased. I feel it as a sort of ‘mission’, both the mission to play it and also the mission to disclose the possibility that a woman can make it.

Adele, saxophone, 18 (BRMB): For example, the last concert I was [playing] close to the little girls and I really liked it, eh, because you feel proud of your journey, since you understand how much they, from my view, needed attention from someone older, playing better: from their point of view I am really good, something to strive for... And this is a beautiful thing!

2.2 – On the road: freedom, empowerment and fun within a safe social environment

One of the elements emerging as facilitating girls’ musical practice with instruments and musical *genres* typically associated to masculinity is linked to the consideration, within their family and social context, of bands playing outdoor for all-age audiences as safe and healthy environment. This positive social connotation distinguishes those bands from other popular music groups, associated to environments considered morally licentious, such as closed clubs or cafes, seeing the occurrence of drinking, occasional sex, smoke or drugs. Jazz, as rock, is often related to the latter environments in the social imaginary, and it has been suggested that this may contribute to discourage women’s participation, influenced by the criteria of feminine social respectability (McKeage 2014). In the following interview excerpt, the brother of a girl playing in BRMB, ex tuba player in the local band and bass player in a group of classic rock, recurs to this argument in explaining the strong participation of girls to the local band and brass band and their absence to other (rock, pop, jazz) music groups, seen as not being ‘the right place’ for girls by their families.

Francesco, 38, ex tuba in the local band (brother of a BRMB member): While in the local band girls are the majority, it becomes difficult to find a music group in which there is even only one female component (...) I think it’s seen as a less clean environment, that of groups and clubs. While the girl who goes to play in a [local] band is supported by families, already as a child, the girl who goes to play in a group is not necessarily supported by the family; in fact, in my opinion, she is often told that this is not the place for them [girls]. They are wrong, of course, but I think that this may be an explanation.

In the case of underage members travelling with the band for rehearsals or tours^[10] the protective role of the band becomes more evident, resting in a sort of pact of confidence between the girl’s family and band’s managers or eldest members.

Nicoletta, sousaphone, 44 (GSB): The first years [of Girlesque] several girls were underage: there has always been a thread with the parents, a dialogue, a communication of protection, both for the girl and for us, to manage in a mindful way any situation. However, these are situations which are already protected by the same fact that they are being dealt with as a collective matter.

The band represents a protective environment for younger members also from the musical point of view, gradually leading them to perform beyond the constraints and prescriptions linked to the rituals of more formal and canonical exhibitions: breaking the distance with the audience, playing without the score and improvising, using their bodies to enhance musical expression. As put it by the band founder, a young trombone teacher and jazzman, this requires girls to win greater inhibitions than boys, linked to their internalized socialization to values – such as modesty, obedience, discipline, posture – traditionally associated to feminine respectability (Bourdieu, 1998).

Federico, trombone player and teacher, founder of BRMB, 35: [The Jazz Big Band] requires you to play outside, to exhibit yourself... The fact of having the score in front of you, in my opinion, is both for boys and girls, but more for girls, [like hiding] a form of embarrassment, a bit like putting your hand in front of your mouth when you laugh. On the contrary, a musical situation that doesn’t provide any form of shelter from this point of view – since you play by heart – and that requires immediate participation blocks them [the girls]. However, when the moment to play arrived and things came out right, afterwards they felt comfortable and fulfilled.

Once deposited their ‘musical shelters’ – stepping off the stage without the scores – band members learn to play in the streets a repertoire – jazz, soul, funk – offering them wide degrees of freedom in interpretation and movements. Though street music performance is highly exposed to audiences’ gaze and listening, mistakes, fuzziness or other small inconveniences acquire a much lower relevance than that assumed in the formal concert setting (Barrett 2012). This allows band members to feel more relaxed in playing, increasingly gaining control of the coordination and integration of their contribution within the band’s performance, promptly adapting to unforeseen situations and accessing a feedback loop of emotions and collective euphoria generated in the public by their own music, unblocking their internalized halt to pleasure and amusement when playing in public. This

learning process has an individual as well as a collective dimension, given by the professional growth of each single member and of the band as a group (as also indicated by the recurring use of the 'we' pronoun by band members, to tell us about their experience).

Stefania, trumpet, 18 (BRMB): At the beginning we were practically as logs, if we had to move, we also felt perhaps a little ashamed, because we were used to the local band, where we sat without moving. Eventually, we decided that we should have had fun and that if we wanted to do it [to play in a Big Band] we had to do it well: so we got used to playing by moving. I believe that all of us, now we have fun and we do what we want at that moment, without thinking about the other people watching us...

Leonarda, trumpet, 44 (GSB): I really like the fact of playing in the street in these situations, it's beautiful: first of all, it frees you so much, because it brings music to people, really. I like to see this thing and you also feel more self-assured, because you can overcome emotions and blocks that you may have, so it helps you a lot... I really like this feedback between the audience and you. Then I like to travel so much, a thousand places that I wouldn't have seen: we went all over Italy, we went to Israel... Then we always go to feasts, this is a beautiful thing... Then, they are wonderful girls, I have so many new beautiful friends... It is also tiring, sooo tiring...

As we shall see in the next paragraph, the increasingly laid-back and relaxed approach to performance is also built through the growing confidence of band members over their legitimate appropriation of tasks and roles organizing musical practice as a degendered and shared experience.

2.3 – Degendering music roles: leadership and improvisation as shared responsibilities

Besides the sex typing of instruments and performances, another dimension of the gendered construction of music concerns role attribution and group dynamics within music ensembles. The hegemonic masculinity order built on a stereotypical binary distinction of gender (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) is still noticeable in Western societies, although to a lesser extent than in the past. Not differently from other spheres of activity, also in music more prestigious roles and tasks within organizations are still more often assigned to men, typically associated with decision-making, creativity, technical skills, competitiveness, self-confidence, stamina, rather than to women, linked to dependency, compliance, submissiveness, technical incompetence, insecurity, emotional and physical weakness. This explains the persistent difficulties more often encountered by women in accessing or making a career as conductors and composers or in taking the part of soloists or improvising performers within musical ensembles of different *genres* (within both classical and popular music). Those roles, in fact, are still often framed within a narrative symbolically referring to the world of war and battles, positing hierarchical, competitive and antagonistic power relations aiming at asserting the individual's primacy over the others (Whiteley 2000, Annfelt 2003, Gibson 2006, McKeage 2014, Bull 2018, Giani 2020).

In female bands, however, also directive and soloist roles are assigned to women. This may not always feel as a 'natural' process for girls who have been socialized to assume more marginal and shaded positions within organizational contexts. Gaia, the young bandleader of the BRMB, recalls her initial reluctance and embarrassment in assuming a standing and responsibility position, requiring to be 'at the center of the others' attention', and of how she gradually appreciated it, especially for the greater agency it offered to her music playing, configured in collective terms. Similarly Ylenia, guiding the GSB, refers to her bandleader role as a responsibility taken with spirit of service and shared with the other members of the band, rather than sought after with the ambition to prevail or stand out from the other girls. Also improvisation, recognized by the interviewees as exposing performance to greater risks, is reframed not as an 'innate' talent of players, but as a specific technique to be learnt with time and experience, gradually understanding its logic and embodying its praxis (Gibson 2006), by following and imitating the teachers – in the case of the BRMB – or those members specifically trained in jazz, rather than in classical music – in the case of GSB – and working on the dialogic interplay among fellow band members.

Gaia, trumpet, 18 (BRMB): The idea of the Big Band was of Federico [the teacher], he passed me the direction because he's not living in Flumini Maggiore and therefore he needed to delegate. Honestly, at the beginning I felt ashamed, even if I am a person who speaks out clearly, that's not a problem [the other girls laugh, n/a]. However, directing is important, because everyone has to follow you and also you have to get [noticed], so you have to be at the center of attention (...) and that's what I don't like, being at the center of attention. However, I like the fact of being able to play on the interventions; now, more with the professionals [teachers and sidemen flanking the band during performances, n/a], sometimes, when there's a change of tone they have to improvise on the theme changing scale: it's a bit difficult but it's nice, because you feel very much part of the marching band and of a group...

Ylenia, saxophone, 25 (GSB): I am the leader, but it is right to decide together, who makes the solos, who makes the themes, then we alternate one section with the other. For instance, within the saxophone section I've always done classical music [she was trained at the Conservatory, n/a], Tatiana does jazz, so she's great with solos. So it's also a matter of managing ourselves: 'Hey, don't worry, two bars before the solo, take a rest'... But it is more a management internal to the sections, rather than dictated by me; even a look, a breath, sometimes, during a choreography: 'Hey, I'm tired'. Sometimes there are also quarrels [mimicking a riled dialogue between two band members, n/a]: 'Hey, I told you I was tired!'; 'But I didn't look at you!' [the other girls laugh, n/a].

2.4- 'Fun would be just the same!': female bands, feminism and men

The process of creation of an all-female identity was significantly different in the bands considered: for the BRMB it came more as an accident than as a choice, after the lack of young men responding to the local band teacher's initiative; for the GST it represented a specific strategy of the organizers, willing to promote feminine access to a typically masculine form of organization for music production and to use the band's exceptionality as a publicity stunt. This major difference is mirrored in the dress code adopted by the bands for performances (figures 3 and 4). The BRMB started by imitating the look of all-male street bands (a men's shirt over a black t-shirt with blue jeans), later shifting to a more gender-neutral outfit (a fluoro orange t-shirt with the band's logo and blue jeans), with the aim of conveying a non-stereotyped vision of femininity ('a feminine grit'). In the case of the GSB, the look was from the start a crucial element of its performances: a series of colored uniforms adapted to different occasions or weather conditions, allowing to combine the seductive and choreographic tradition of (female) majorettes, with the vigorous performance of (male) brass bands. GSB members seem very conscious of the added value offered by glamorous feminine uniforms to their performances, which are

realized through choreographies athletic and dynamic, rather than alluring or voluptuous, so to use the sexualized image of femininity as ‘a nice wrapping’ boosting the potentials of a performance grounded on a consistent musical project.

Roberta, clarinet, 32 (BRMB): We advertise the [Big River] Marching Band as a female band, but that's not a matter of outward appearance, in the sense that we did not use pink, but rather fluoro orange, T-shirts....

Gaia, trumpet, 18 (BRMB): We'd rather bet on being seen as a street band. We had various ideas on how to dress: for example, ripped jeans, sneakers, very street band, not girlie band...

Ilaria, saxophone, 20 (BRMB): Also because our marching band was not born for women only; it's after we made it that we realized we were mostly women, but it was not born just to bring out this....

Claudia, saxophone, 20 (BRMB): Maybe also because we wanted to convey more grit than femininity, a more feminine grit, but not a delicate femininity...

Veronica, saxophone, 18 (BRMB): Not ladylike...

Federica, clarinet, 20 (BRMB): In fact, at the beginning we used a plaid shirt, practically a man's shirt, over a black T-shirt, with jeans and sneakers...

Leonarda, trumpet, 44 (GSB): Given that we are we women, why do we have to take away our femininity? Let's bring it in! Because other big bands are all T-shirts, jeans... For us, it would have been ugly: besides the fact that we would certainly have been more comfortable, if we are women, why shouldn't we also be [when playing]?

Nicoletta, sousaphone, 43 (GSB): The group creates a situation for which we are inside a character, a game (...) There isn't a covering up of our individualities, because each of us is: I am I, she is she, we know each other, so we're at ease and the group also protects against that stereotype supposedly communicated by the dress, because the group overcomes the stereotype, confirms instead the thing holding people together, namely the music, the project, and in that moment it's fine, we are playing, we are amusing, so that the dress is really a wrapping. Besides the fact that, at a glance, it plays a very important part, because surely a choreography with the same clothes [catches the attention] and completes the show, it is an integral and fundamental part [of the show].

Despite their different way of interpreting and communicating their feminine identity, both bands share an anti-separatist approach to their feminist claims: the formation of girls' bands is seen not as an end, but as a necessary step to assert women's rights as a collective – rather than feminine – matter, relying on the social cohesive potentials of music to other spheres (“because, after all, music unites”).

Morena, saxophone, 26 (GSB): If Girlesque would be of inspiration it would be a great satisfaction [for us], to see other regions start more women's bands or to see the involvement of girls within male groups, given that generally street bands like ours are all-male. It would be nice in the future to no longer see this clear-cut distinction: one female group and all others male groups...

Gaia, trumpet, 18 (BRMB): When I joined the band, there were boys of my age in the music courses and I always enjoyed it, because, after all, music unites: we could also gather outside the band, in the sense that if I saw them outside the band, I would speak and went out with them, because music brings people together... So, in my opinion, thanks to the band, the playing together, the fact of making mistakes, of laughing together; it wouldn't change anything if there were boys [in the BRMB] because: ok, the fact of being all girls is a peculiarity, but it wouldn't change anything, because fun would be just the same!

C.C.: [to the other girls]: Do you agree?

Band members [in choir]: Yeeesss!

The lack of radicalism of the feminist approach adopted by both bands can partly explain why interviewees do not fear to be ‘pigeonholed’ on the basis of their sex or to see their presence limited to the marginal sides of music production – a risk that literature suggests as possible drawback of all-women initiatives following an ‘exclude the excluders’ logic (Björck and Bergman 2018). Their performances are in fact inserted in different types of events (from traditional villages’ feasts and fairs to music festivals), only occasionally dedicated to women, often sharing their stage with male bands and musicians.

3. Conclusions

In many Western democracies the increasing acknowledgement of the structural nature of gender inequalities in music worlds has led to the adoption of a series of initiatives aiming to grant the right of equality of women and men not only at the formal, but also at the practical level. In Italy, despite the persistence of gender asymmetries – particularly evident in the case of brass instruments and related fields of music production, as jazz or popular music (Pedrinelli 2011) – the issue is rarely addressed as a shared concern, linked to unequal gender socialization leading to educational and occupational segregation.

Our discussion proves the relevance of the institutional and organizational context in defining rules and values either hampering or promoting women's participation to music worlds. The comparative analysis of two female brass bands shows how the bands' adoption of formal and informal rules breaking the sex typing of instruments favours girls' access to musical practices and repertoires still conventionally associated to masculinity. The two brass bands [11] offer a friendly environment where girls can gain self-confidence and learn to perform overcoming conventional inhibitions and prescriptions to feminine conduct and, when acting as bandleaders or improvisers, asserting the right to hold, as women, positions related to visibility, creativity and power (based on cooperative relations, rather than on the antagonistic challenges posited by the hegemonic masculine narratives) (Wehr 2016, Annfelt 2003). In so doing, the two bands contribute through musical production to boost gender equality, both in music worlds and society.

The research also showed the persistence of structural gender asymmetries limiting girls' opportunities, both at the musical and social level. Girls report that, while finding support in their family and social context for their participation to the band, seen as a safe environment for their leisure, they were more or less overtly discouraged to become professional brass players. Those of them following professional music training confirm the presence of 'hidden curricula' (Acker 1994) discouraging them from accessing courses leading to specialisations typically associated to men (as Conservatories' jazz classes). Last but not least, girls' participation to the band proves to be difficult to balance with their life course, as their caring responsibilities grow: differently from many male colleagues with children – relying on partners' presence at home during their absence for rehearsals or tours – women are often compelled to leave the band – which, at its turn, faces additional difficulties and costs linked to the recruitment and training of new members.

The interconnectedness between music worlds and the wider social context where they are embedded proves that the commitment towards gender equality has to be declined *mainstreaming the gender perspective* in all sectors and territorial levels, as set more than 25 years ago by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (UN 1995). As spheres of governance closest to the citizens, local and regional authorities represent levels better placed to contrast the persistence and the reproduction of inequalities, promoting a fully egalitarian society (CCRE 2013: 3). From this perspective, those forms of cultural and artistic production also enhancing gender equality would deserve to be recognised and supported by local and regional authorities as also responding to this socio-political objective, contributing to improve the social development of democratic societies.

Footnotes

[1] Howard Becker defines an art world as «the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produce(s) the kind of art works that art world is noted for» (Becker 1982, p.x).

[2] At the educational level an example is offered by the creation of the Institute of Jazz and Gender Justice at the Berklee College of Music, directed by Terri Lyne Carrington (www.berklee.edu/jazz-gender-just), while at the occupational level particularly relevant was the diffusion of blind auditions for symphonic orchestras and, more recently, the Keychange programme (<https://www.keychange.eu>), promoting a more inclusive music industry (as in encouraging festivals to achieve a 50:50 gender balance among performers).

[3] See Cresti 2006. More than 2.360 bands have been recorded in a website dedicated to Italian musical bands (<https://www.bandamusicale.it/>, last accessed on 2/3/2021).

[4] For a long time the role of women within musical bands responded to the conventional 'caregiver' role, ancillary to the activities of male musicians: «We must not forget the hidden but decisive role of women, they were and are musicians' wives, mothers, sisters or friends and prepared and prepare everything necessary; they keep in order the rehearsal space, prepared lunches and dinners, rearranged the uniforms, they follow with passion band's services. Since the Seventies there was an increasingly large presence also of female musicians and bands are now mixed» (Cresti 2006, my translation).

[5] The adoption of rules and values inspired to full equality between members is not a prerogative of female bands: for a discussion on the contribution to gender equality of the well-known Catalan Sant'Andreu Jazz Band, see Casula & Cosci (*forthcoming*).

[6] The focus group with the GSB was realised during the IX edition of the Nora Jazz Festival (Pula, 1-13 August 2018), dedicated to women and jazz; that with the BRMB in the band's rehearsal space in Flumini Maggiore (April 2019).

[7] I wish to thank all interviewees for their time and passionate contribution to the research and colleagues of the meetings *Exploring gender dynamics in the music industry* (University of Groningen, 17-18 may 2019) and *Post-democracy and the field of Arts & Music Education* (panel of the 1st International Conference of the Scuola Democratica journal, University of Cagliari, 6-8 June 2019) for precious feedback on my presentation of preliminary results.

[8] *The logic compares cases that are very different* on all but the variable of interest to the researcher (Ragin & Becker 1992).

[9] As the GSB manager told us in our last interview, the number of members declined during 2020, due to a variety of obstacles (logistic difficulties, motherhood, or other duties), widened by the Covid 19 pandemic.

[10] The touring, in particular, seems to create to the managers of girl bands additional difficulties, *vis à vis* those faced with a male one: from identifying which band member may drive the van, to the last-minute arrangements in the case of unexpectedly unpleasant or unsafe accommodations, to the resolution of frequent quarrels linked to an amplified sensitivity.

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