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FOR A THEORY OF MUSIC ECONOMICS

by LUIGI MARIA SICCA* and DOMENICO NAPOLITANO**

Summary

The aim of this article is to explore the various paths open to research and practice communities in confronting issues that new social and technological scenarios have opened up - within economy of music as a discipline, and within the wider frame of inclusion as laid out in the UN 2030 agenda. In particular, reference is made to what is happening in musical subcultures and countercultures, in their interaction with the institutional culture in light of a technological paradigm shift set in motion by the advent of digital platforms. We will propose that organizations which fit within the tradition of management studies have a lot to learn from artistic organizations. Artistic organizations incorporate a strategic management approach which links together processes, communities and practice, they constitute sites of organizational innovation that often arise from countercultures, and are also able to influence wider economic contexts linked to the emergence of digital technologies.

Keywords: economy of music, subcultures, art management, strategic management, digital platforms.

JEL code: B55, M10, O35, Z11

1. Introduction

The UN 2030 agenda sees the concept of inclusiveness as a key point to be defined by nations in their industrial and employment policies in addition to their cultural policies. This approach, if interpreted in a way that goes below the surface (or the mere politically correct)

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entails engaging with the issues of definition and dialectic between margins and center, and between cultural movements and institutions.

This same tension is also internal to the dialectic between areas of knowledge, what in academic terms we know as disciplines (invoking the importance and role of interdisciplinarity), as well as in the application of knowledge in professional practices, and therefore also in music.

For example, among musicians and managers or scholars of music and economics, there is a tendency to consider two distinct and distant systems of meaning, to the point of proliferating clichés, whereby musicians (and, more generally, artists) are typically considered as awkward people lacking in practical sense, while those who do economics and management are exclusively dedicated to actions, by definition alien to abstract thought.

This example also demonstrates the further definition and reproduction of the binary concepts of center-margins, movements-institutions and new-old, a continuous reiteration of a sense of extraneousness and a sense of belonging in a process of mutual marginalization between Music and Economics: if you are an economist you are not a musician and vice versa, or you are strange, or eclectic or brilliant. In our view, Music and Economy are in fact organizational labels (Czarniawska, 2020 [2014]) which need to be seen through in order to understand the meaning of their possible points of contact.

The aim of this paper is to explore various paths open to the research community and the practices of musical subcultures and countercultures in light of new technological scenarios. Within the ‘container’ of Economics of Culture, this area of study offers a space for the rethinking and criticism of the dialectic between margins and center, and the epistemics underlying disciplinary fields which have been kept separate in an artificial fashion, even for (understandable) reassuring taxonomy.

In fact, music has been a privileged vehicle of countercultures since at least the 1960s (McKay, 1996; Whiteley and Sklower, 2014; Bennett, 2014). Acting as a marker of identity and a powerful means of collective aggregation, as well as benefiting from the rise of new technologies that allowed its unprecedented circulation, music found itself in the contradictory position of being an agent of social change and, at the same time, a virgin and potentially gigantic market into which the cultural industry could expand. It is also by means of this tension that the world of music has provided the terrain in which instances of freedom, independence and autonomy have taken hold, in turn contaminating other social fields.

Today, these instances are firmly inserted in a scenario of permanent crisis, in which the prevailing economic theories, offered up as suitable and desirable during the good years, no longer seem to work. This observation brings the theme of countercultures into a cyclical pattern (that has always existed and has never been resolved) that concerns the links between theory and practice: it is now increasingly evident that the marriage between economics and music must transcend the epistemological horror that assumes (with a sort of arrogance) that the constituent categories of a young disci-

pline such as Economics can be «applied» to Music, which is in fact a bearer of much older meanings and languages. Instead, it is our belief that artistic and musical organizations, as bearers of knowledge, practices and languages dating back thousands of years, can provide lessons to businesses *strictu sensu* – that is, to those containers of value creation that are most studied in the tradition of economic theory (Sicca, 1997; 2000; Sicca and Zan, 2005). In light of this, if a useful contribution to the enrichment of the human and social sciences can be found in Economics of Culture as field of studies, looking in further depth at the experiences that move at the margins of the official culture may be of particular interest.

In the next sections we will highlight how work in these contexts can present a crisis for some certainties upheld by prevailing economic thought, which has predominantly simulated regular crisis-recovery economic cycles. We will question the assumption that management and art are discourses and practices that run parallel and only meet on the mutual ground of instrumentality. In section 3, we will look at the background to the concept of «strategic management», with a focus on the processual dimension shared by art and management, recognizing that artistic organizations have much to teach those organizations that are studied most within the tradition of management studies. As a case study, in section 4 we will consider music practices that emerge from margins, subcultures and countercultures, in the framework of a technological reconfiguration of cultural industry within new «platform economy». Some conclusions will follow in section 5.

2. Perspectives beyond Baumol

Studies in Music Economics began in the mid-1960s, when some scholars contributed an economic-public matrix to the debate, starting with the widely discussed Baumol's cost disease (today we find ourselves in a somewhat desolate and lonely landscape after the intensity of that debate). Less attention was paid to this field of study (at least initially) by the group of scholars interested in the world of management studies, committed to understanding performance in terms of efficiency and effectiveness (Sicca, 1998).

A first issue therefore has to do with the implicit division of cognitive labor between researchers who deal with the same object from different perspectives, and sometimes attempt in dialogue to assign internal hierarchies to their theoretical apparatuses in order to legitimize the ways in which the same object functions. In both cases, whether we look at the literature of an economic-public matrix or that of management studies, scholars have often committed that afore-mentioned epistemological horror, assuming the hypothesis that the institutive categories of one (young) discipline or another are able to explain the dynamics of music, which is made up of millenary codes, customs and traditions. This kind of arrogan-

ce of posterity is aggravated by the tendency to defend the research field from spontaneous artistic processes, urgencies emerging from generations of citizens and consumers, artists and also entrepreneurs, which constitute expressions of countercultures and which have only recently formed part of academic research interests.

It is in those spaces that the evolution of Economics of Culture gives way to a new field for rethinking the encounter between arts and cultures and organizational studies. This encounter starts from the attribution of value to the «purposes proper to art», without having to go through the logic of demonstration. From this perspective, art's purposes are ends in themselves: they have to do with the development of the identity and creativity of individuals, especially of the new generations (Hammet, 1989; Kawashima, 1995), and don't need to be justified by some form of «impact» that has direct, induced or indirect effects (Hansen, 1995). This way of looking at the «purposes proper to art» represents a paradigm shift that subsumes a shift in the concept of rationality underlying the behavior of economic actors.

3. The aims of art: beyond bounded rationality

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Looking at the «purposes of art» from an Economics of Culture point of view means recognizing the crisis in our ways of «being together» - taken for granted in times of normal growth and development, but no longer so certain in light of what has been happening in recent years, and especially in the shadow of a pandemic situation (2020-2022) that does not seem destined to be resolved in the short term.

In our opinion, this view requires a reinterpretation of some of the positivist assumptions that have guided the rise of industrial capitalism, with its presumed certainties and temporary reassurances. This reinterpretation moves, in the first instance, towards a renouncing of that *ex ante* rationality that has guided the processes of decision making (Simon, 1947), choosing alternative routes instead. These may not be linear, time-based or time-bound, but are ancient in origin (as art is) and achieve, in a different way, organizational effectiveness and quality of life - the engine and purpose of economic and social well-being, which we consistently pursue and are promised.

In this way, the concept of «strategic management» stands out in relation to the value of the arts and the importance of artistic-musical practices that come from the margins, subcultures and countercultures. Those practices are, in fact, also organizational models and processes that have resonance beyond the art world, for example across digital platforms.

3.1. Strategic management and the value of the arts

If there is such a thing as a sense of reality – and no will doubt that it has its raison d'être – then there must be also something that one can call a sense of possibility [...]. So the sense of possibility might be defined outright as the capacity to think how everything could 'just as easily' be, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not. (Musil, 1965 [1930-1933], p. 12)

The Musil-like absence of quality sheds light on an idea of «strategic management» that asserts itself in line with the decline of the concept of rational decision and in the name of producing new possibilities for action which are not necessarily based on a priori calculation. Calculation belongs by definition to a sense of reality, while strategic management pertains to a sense of possibility.

On this basis, an initial rethinking towards a quality-filled culture of economy emerges, starting from the debate within Economics of Culture.

It is in this sense that the definition of the concept of «strategic management» by Mintzberg (1994) helps us:

To quote one sober planning executive, 'the notion that an effective strategy can be constructed by someone in an ivory tower is totally bankrupt' [...] Effective strategists are not people who abstract themselves from the daily detail but quite the opposite: they are the ones who *immerse* themselves in it, while being able to abstract the *strategic messages* from it.

Managers (those who manage, from the Latin «manu agere», *management* in French) decide and put into action the structure of an organization at all levels, because the relationship between planning and implementing is seamless. This is what we find in the work conducted by those who produce, read and write art (and music in particular), especially in countercultural contexts.

Artists and musicians do spontaneously what – in everyday practice – managers and management scholars do rationally. For a musician, for example, it is taken for granted that in order to play together and achieve an organizational goal (the setting up of a piece) one must listen to others. For management people, this is not so taken for granted: those destined for managerial action must learn and internalize those actions and behaviors cognitively through formal learning processes, to the extent that (paradoxically) all this is discussed, elaborated in theories and organized into training courses. In short, there is a need to specify the importance (in the example) of listening (Hatch, 1999; Brownell, 2006). In the literature on organizational studies, we strive to understand the secrets of work division and coordination based on the ability to listen to each other, to see each other, to look at each other and to seek each other out. From the best literature based on solid theoretical foundations to popular approaches, to texts that are even trivial and also of use to non-experts, we realize that physicality,

the emotions that the body and the senses convey, can be sources of competitive advantage.

This shows what happens along the bridge that joins Economics of culture with the culture of economy: some of this millenary knowledge (or 'experiential practice'), whose acquisition is one of the main targets of those who deal with culture and art, lies at the base of those (non-millenary, much more recent) constructs that we call «companies».

In this context, the problem to focus on is not so much *what* to decide (one decision may be worth another, depending on context, time and other variables), but rather *how* decisions are formed (the limits of a «single best way» approach are now well established), giving space to those who must implement them, with all the variables associated with «who is behind that who». This issue, however, can also be encountered in other artistic forms such as poetry, literature, sculpture and acting, which inevitably involve the use of the eyes or touch, breath, smell, contact with colors, space, etc. – these are, indeed, strategic dimensions in the field of organization and management.

In a book published a few years ago (Sicca, 2013), it was pointed out that doing «strategic management» also means rejecting certain positions, more widespread in academia than in practice, according to which strategy is something that is outside and above management, an exclusive activity of the few (top management, or those who design the processes to be implemented) who have the task of defining the basic lines and the strategic plan, leaving the implementation of the design to the lower levels (promoting a fantasy of reassuring patriarchy). This is, in fact, a concept that had already been rejected as part of the debate around Chandler's (1962) traditional argument, whose empirical reference was the large integrated company of the Second World War, oriented towards a deterministic dimensional development, proceeding towards the loss of owner control and progressive managerialization.

In the economic reality of 2021 there are many companies - especially small and medium-sized companies – which feature a sort of polarization between top management (a depository of strategic thinking and basic decisions) on the one hand, and a base of «operatives» who execute these on the other. But empirical evidence (Fligstein, 1993) amply demonstrates that involvement at different levels and in the various functional areas is an essential requirement to ensure success, making that further distinction between «operational management» (oriented to a short-term horizon) and «strategy» (wrongly considered in function of a long-term horizon) completely inadequate.

In contrast, the *processual* dimension of strategy gives space to the *ways* (the how-to, indicating technique, from *techn?* meaning art in the ancient world) by which managers interpret the world around them and activate the community of people with whom they interact. It is exactly the same problem that the artist encounters in his own work when he poses the (ethical) question of producing significant implica-

tions outside his own environment or point of departure, bringing substance and inspiration to the social sphere. The artist, in short (just like a manager does within his particular context), generates paradigmatic leaps (Kuhn, 1962) which, through technology, can be translated into productivity (thus resolving, at least partially, the question of the «end in itself» value of the arts), to the point of becoming a collective heritage of knowledge. This is what we find in many contexts or «sites» of musical production, within the constant dialectic between marginality and center, between the spirit of research and consolidation of ideas into a collective sense, in short between movements and institutions – an issue widely in much sociological literature, and also in non-academic circles.

4. Margins, subcultures and new technological imperatives

It is important to emphasize the relevance of that complex and sometimes impenetrable world of unofficial organizations – marginal, underground, sometimes clandestine – which have always animated the world of culture, and to which Economics of Culture studies are called to pay increasing attention. It brings to mind, in particular, all those practices ascribable to subcultures or countercultures, often marked by political positions which are strongly antagonistic towards the industrial system (Whiteley and Sklower, 2014). In the case of music, these characteristics are present in practices related to noise (Hainge, 2013), improvisation (Bailey, 1993; Toop, 2016; Bizjak and Sicca, 2017), sound systems (D'Aquino, 2021) and rave parties (Reynolds, 2010), but also to many experiences concerning so-called sound art (Licht, 2007) and, more transversally, the practices of file sharing (David, 2009) and computer piracy (Johns, 2011). We are talking about languages and expressions originating at the margins of the so-called official culture which have influenced and continue to radically influence the forms and modalities in which we think about and enjoy music. At the same time, these experiences are of interest to scholars of organization, since they propose organizational models and social processes and dynamics that resonate beyond the institutionalized boundaries of the artistic-musical world. These models, in fact, not only meet the needs and desires of part of the audience but are often an inspiration for economic actors (who claim to be new) emerging from the cultural industry (Hesmondhalgh, 2013) in the era of digital technologies.

Although stigmatized by common sense and hegemonic culture and often in open contrast with both (Hall and Jefferson, 1991), these practices are important expressions of a motivation integral to the restlessness of art making itself, with all its critical significance and transformative desire.

These practices are often united by a propensity towards the DIY (Do It Yourself) that is as much political as organizational: for example,

for many they express the desire to produce artistic-cultural works and events independently, free from the constraints of the production system established by industrial capitalism and the cultural industry – sometimes seeing industrial capitalism as a mere production system, rather than as a proper «culture» (Banet-Weiser, 2012) and a framework of cohabitation. This desire translates into organizational practices that legitimize themselves precisely because they are «outside» organizations (Czarniawska, 2014), prompting the need to really understand what is inside and what is outside. Among DIY practices, the most relevant ones could be considered in the following thematic areas: (Auriemma, Napolitano and Sicca, 2022): (a) the preference for non-institutional and non-conventional spaces; (b) the centrality of personal relationships and processes over works and products, resulting in a rejection of market logics applied to music; (c) the lack of decision-making hierarchies and the preference for horizontal assembly forms; (d) the sharing of means of production; (e) the rejection of professionalization and the claim for the non-profit and inclusive nature of cultural activities; and (f) the preference for solidarity-based forms of economy.

So what's new about this? In order to answer this question (leaving the issue open to the future of research in Economics of Culture), it can be stated that despite the search for marginality inherent in these practices, they reproduce processes that characterize various ways of making investments (not only in an economic-financial sense, but also in a libidinal sense) in terms of expressive freedom, independence and spontaneity, that have made them phenomena with considerable resonance. If initially they were regarded with suspicion and mistrust, especially by the institutional culture, they have become an inspiration (often despite themselves) for the cultural industry with the backdrop of a recording market crisis and the digital revolution. In this sense, they are manifestations of the dialectical tension between movements and institutions that has been theorized in neo-institutionalism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991).

It is no coincidence that, in the world of digital platforms and social networks (what has been called «platform capitalism» (Srniczek, 2017)), the relational model centered on sharing from below, which recalls the values professed by those very countercultures, has become the new paradigm of reference, often nourished also by an emphatic rhetoric. The sharing of music on the web can be seen as a paradigmatic phenomenon and as a precursor of paths then established in other economic spheres: it has gone, within a decade, from being synonymous with piracy to being the model adopted by the music industry itself to distribute content and works through platforms such as Spotify, YouTube, Bandcamp, iTunes (David, 2009).

Not that this transition has been smooth: the transition from the sale of music on physical media, therefore in a regime of scarcity, to the distribution of digital files infinitely reproducible and non-rival (Johns, 2011), has led to a reconfiguration of the music industry in the direction of monetization systems which are no longer centered on the

marginalistic model. If in the market economy, in fact, the price of a good is dictated by its scarcity, that is, by its limitedness and the impossibility of its indefinite reproduction, in the context of non-rivalrous goods this type of device is undermined at its roots, since goods such as digital information are neither consumed nor perished by the fact of being reproduced and shared. The possibility of extracting economic value from the fruition of digital goods has necessarily required the use of new tools, which also began life within the realm of digital technologies, such as the extensive use of data analysis related to users and their activities on IT platforms. As extensively analyzed in the recent literature (see the monumental work of Shoshana Zuboff (2019)), digital platforms employ algorithmic data analysis systems to «profile» users in order to predict their behaviors, tastes, desires. These predictions allow platforms to sell targeted and personalized advertising space to advertisers for each user profile, thereby turning digital data into economic value.

This valorization mechanism closely recalls the models of the cultural industry (Hesmondhalgh, 2013), but it also radicalizes some of its tensions. Firstly, because it risks exacerbating the asymmetry between platforms and artists, where the former can monetize any artistic content uploaded onto their databases (through the analysis of user data), while the latter are only rewarded when they reach certain levels of visibility (Abidin, 2016). The centrality of advertising, advertising campaigns and membership programs in the platform system thus produces a tension between «long tail» phenomena (Anderson, 2007) and star system dynamics. If, on the one hand, thanks to the connective possibilities of the network, even niche languages – traditionally on the margins of mass markets – have been able to considerably extend their visibility, on the other hand the centrality of sponsorship programs linked to the number of views or listens (which have become necessary for monetization in a context such as platforms where practically all music can be listened to via streaming without the need to buy media) tends to reproduce the logic of the mass market, rewarding only those products that are able to attract large audiences (Cunningham and Craig, 2021).

In this scenario, in stark contrast to the spirit of openness and decentralization promoted by subcultures, we see new forms of centralization by those who control the channels of distribution and data collection, namely IT platforms and technology giants. As a result, the big technology companies end up co-opting (Stark and Pais, 2020) the artistic work, profiting from it without necessarily returning the due compensation to the artists and producers of the contents that run on their platforms. There is also the risk that, through their recommendation systems, platforms will increasingly become gatekeepers on who and what should have visibility, and therefore on who should be paid and what cultural values should be promoted, all according to non-neutral parameters and policy choices embedded in their content evaluation and filtering algorithms.

Alongside these emerging dynamics, the importance of the performing arts is obviously reaffirmed, especially in the world of music: in a context in which the listening of any musical product is available through the Internet, live music seems to be increasingly invested with a decisive role from a socio-cultural as well as economic point of view. At the dawn of the pandemic crisis, high hopes were placed on the fact that the decrease in income from record sales could be compensated by a new, vital centrality of the economy deriving from live music. The halting of much concert activity to prevent the spread of the pandemic necessarily leaves us in a state of uncertainty regarding possible future scenarios - uncertainty also witnessed by the mobilizations of entertainment workers (Branca, 2021).

It is also worth noting an aspect that seems to have emerged in recent years, once again from the margins. Contemporary sound art experiences, in fact, are characterized by their emphasis on the spatial-temporal conditions of the «sound event» (Di Scipio, 2013; 2020), not only from the perspective of aesthetics but also of cultural anthropology (Napolitano and Sicca, 2021). Problematizing the relational and socio-material nature of sound itself, i.e. its dependence on spatial (think, for example, of reverberation), technical (e.g. speakers, their arrangement) and imaginary (the symbolic connotation of places, among other things) conditions, these practices consider performance as a necessarily situated and unrepeatable event and therefore privilege spaces that are not originally designed to host musical performances (Licht, 2007). Once these aspects are highlighted, the live performance becomes much more than a mere repetition of a repertoire of compositions, it becomes a generative, experiential and cognitive moment. This consideration is valid for any kind of musical performance, but it has been radicalized by contemporary sound art, which has explored its potential in terms of a redefinition of aesthetic forms, even beyond what we usually call music. Going beyond concert halls and places traditionally dedicated to music, sound art also makes explicit a structural condition of organizing: art management is not only a set of practices that surround art, but it is fully part of the creative process. The organization of the space, the distribution of the audience and its size, the setting of the fruition and the materials used are not only secondary elements to provide the best support to music that already exists – just as a theater cannot only be seen as a «container» of the musical performance. They transform the sense of the sound event itself, and help to determine its uniqueness in the here and now.

5. Conclusions and new ways for Economics of culture

In this work we have shown how studying the contexts of counter-cultural production fits fully into research material to develop Econo-

mics of Culture literature. Furthermore, it has been said that such contexts do not represent a novelty but are fully part of the dialectic concerning margins and center which is integral to the history of social and economic thought. We have also shown how significant the processual approach of «strategic management» is in such contexts, bringing together management and art.

In the examples considered, it emerges that expressive codes have this «taking charge» of aspects traditionally considered to be pertinent to management as integral to their very existence. For example, much sound art involves the choice of unconventional spaces and intimate situations, where the audience is limited in number. This type of setting contributes to producing a sense of exclusivity (Hennion, 1997) which is threatened by the need for high turnout that often concerns the sustainability of cultural events in the absence of public funding. However, what should be the position of the public funder towards cultural initiatives which by their very nature are less accessible to the public, and not inclusive?

If this question can be considered in light of the UN 2030 agenda, then it clearly lends itself to further reflection and should be considered in the context of the economic and cultural policies of individual States, the country-systems themselves, and their cultures and microcultures. Leaving the question open to further research, we underline in conclusion that from these considerations it becomes clear that organizing art does not only mean thinking in economic-utilitarian terms, but also participating in the construction of the artwork and intervening in the artistic language itself – a further «strategic» lesson that managerial knowledge can inherit from artistic knowledge.

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