



How a cultural institution “doesn’t change”: the case of musical Conservatory in Italy

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Abstract

The empirical research carried out by the author on a significant number of students who graduated from Italian Conservatories in the first Nineties offers a detailed picture of the expectations, conditions and social constructions of aspiring musicians. At the same time, grave difficulties emerge from the different attempts of these young men to start a career in the realization of an actual matching between imagination and reality. From here, a new research work arises the question as to whether a century-old institution as it is the Conservatory can have implications for its students on the process of building a personal professional identity within a radically changed social context. An institution risks to turn its traditional heritage into a useless burden if it does not have the courage to run the risk of comparing itself with the context in which it happens to operate.

Introduction

It is necessary, in primis, to make explicit the characteristically paradoxical and deliberately provocative title of this brief paper: as we know, an institution that does not change, does not exist. It is in the social nature itself, in the creation itself of an institution, in its “institutionalization”, that we find a sort of DNA defining the inevitable change of the institution itself. We know, as cited by Eisenstadt (1990), that social norms are never entirely accepted by all of society: consequently the institutionalization process (that process, that is, that formalizes the “rules of the game” to simplify one’s social interactions) is always incomplete (cfr. Berger e Luckmann 1969, p. 149) and therefore it is in a more or less evident state of constant change.

It is true, however, that an institution can fulfill its “helpful” action only on the condition of its certain stability¹. As noted by Maccarini (1998, p. 290), the trait of stability is implicit in the word “institution” itself: both construct themselves on the indeuropeo suffix “sta”, the durableness, that doesn’t change and so that allows, from a subject point of view, a psychological feeling of safety.

All institutions find themselves working in a sort of attractive magnetic field, between two poles: on one side conservation and static, variation and evolution on the other. Therefore, we can say that the life of an institution is subject to two possible and temporary phases: those phases connected to a period of prevailing “structural conditioning”, in which the institution tends to replicate itself during almost imperceptible social times of change, alternating with periods of prevailing “interaction”, in which the subjects indicated by the institutional life have a larger role in the transformations of the institution itself.

The particular case that I intend to explain is that of a century-old institution that, bearing in itself the signs of a glorious past, is living a period of incertitude in its relationship with the rest of social reality, an uncertainty that hinders the initiation of an adequate process of change. The Conservatory, which with an easy play on words, I would define as “autoconservative”, has tried to bravely resist this inevitable prospect of renewal. More precisely, we plan here to concentrate on a particularly problematic example of the interaction between institution and society: such an interaction process can be synthesized, in our specific case, by the expression “social delay”, which intends to indicate a progressive “lack of sync”, in relative terms, on the axis of “social time”: the Conservatory arc of change most recently seems to present a “not-consistent” velocity with respect to that of changes of society that surrounds it.

To synthetically explain the situation, I will utilize two different forms of documentation: the first examines the principle changes made throughout the historical course of musical institutions; the second, instead, derives from a recent empirical research/study that I conducted, analyzing the current actual situation of Italian conservatory graduates. The nature of these data provides the optimal foundation for analysis in the field of the co-ordinates of search, as formalized by Archer (1995): i) structure necessarily precedes action which in turn generates reproduction or transformation; ii) the need for structural transformation and elaboration inevitably follows the generated changes

At the end of this double path, I will try to draw some conclusions about this clear contradiction and the urgent possibilities for renewal.

1. The History of Musical Institutions

When was the Conservatory born? Historically speaking we can precisely and accurately document its place and date of birth. But our perspective would be erroneous if we did not consider that an institution does not come forth out of nothing: its birth is better described as a “transformation” of a preceding institution (normally less effective in pursuit of

¹ “All human activities are subject to customs: each action that is frequently repeated becomes crystallized according to a fixed scheme, which can be reproduced by exertive economy... customs involve the important psychological advantage that the choices are reduced. It liberates (frees) the individual from the burden of “all these decisions”, providing a psychological relief which has its basis in the instinctual uncontrolled structure of man”. (Berger and Luckmann 1969, p. 82).

its aims or unsuited to meet new social configurations). We can usefully accept, in this case, Archer's affirmation (1995, p. 89): "this is the human condition, to [be] born into a social context (language, beliefs and organizations) that we have not created: the power of an agent is always limited to re-making, whether by reproducing or transforming social inheritance²."

Let us attempt to return to the earliest roots of the institution named, since the late 1500's, Conservatory, trying to identify important points indicating changes in the direction of the organization. Such changes we would interpret as important signs of deep cultural mutations, as choices connected to historical-social evaluations. In this analysis we will examine the history of the institution according to the synthetic perspective provided by Parsons (1990, p. 394) defining an institution as a "system of regulative rules, of norms that govern the pursuit of immediate aims conforming to the boundaries of the common system of values defining the greater social good". Of the definition of these social "aims" and their change will be the focus of this first step of research.

We can affirm that the musical education institution's birth was simultaneous with the birth of musical experience itself. In this case, the term institution assumes a quite generic and skeletal meaning and coincides with the elementary practices and the rules of exchange of aesthetic experiences. Such exchange, in archaic epoch, is characterized by simple oral transmission and by a low rate of institutionalization.

We know with certainty that we can begin to speak of actual "music schools" dating back to the most ancient civilizations: Sumerian, Babylonian, Jewish and Chinese. It is striking to note that the ancient Chinese civilization even institutionalized a *Music Imperial Office*, *National Melodies Archive* and in order to regulate a certain level of standardized pitch an *official diapason*. It is important for us to note two common characteristics of these ancient experiences in relation to musical institutions: the corporative (restricted to sacerdotal college), and the magical-religious. This exoteric imprint will accompany the musical experience until our times, conserving itself throughout periods of radically ideology and strong hostility towards the religious sensibility.

The medieval "scholae cantorum" preserved their religious character, connected to liturgical aims, but introduced - on the verge of Humanism- the important figure of the professional musician.

The Conservatory, as we know it, was born at the end of the XVI century from the encounter and the convergence of the three fundamental elements of institutional transformation analysis: the "structural" level (the pedagogic-musical tradition), the "cultural" level (a certain manner of judging or "feeling" social circumstances), and the level of "action" (in our case, of a *charismatic* nature). Weberian institutions, on merit of their charismatic phenomenon, can help us to clarify the peculiar dynamics that arise between charisma and institution: Charisma provides the power to improvise and to generate in a non linear fashion, thanks to its capacity to renovate and to "signify" existing facts. A charismatic person goes so far as to found new institutions or to radically renovate extant ones.

This is what happened in Naples at the end of the 1500's, coinciding with a series of deadly events: a tumult (followed from tortures, sentences, and hangings), the burst of powder magazines (with devastating slaughters), the famine and even the Vesuvius eruptions caused a desperate social situation, that was characterized by the explosion of the phenomena of "street urchins", abandoned orphans that died of exposure or starvation. It was then that Marcello Fossataro, Franciscan friar, began to gather these boys and educate them for their survival, beginning initially with the simplest and poorest technique: begging. With the profit of the collections, he was able to found the "Poor of Jesus Christ Conservatory".

The term "Conservatory" indicated the will to conserve, that is to preserve the rejected youth (orphans, foundlings and generally poor) protecting them from the dangers of life and teaching them an art or a trade so that they could maintain an autonomous existence. Significant is the fact that the denomination of the word has been practically "conserved" in all of the European languages: in Italian *Conservatorio*, in French *Conservatoire*, in Spanish *Conservatorio* and in Deutsche *Konservatorium*.

In the Conservatory students learned to read, to write and to reckoning, while simultaneously being taught a trade - without gender distinction- ranging from tailor to hatter, shoemaker to goldsmith, or cabinet-maker to musician. The Conservatories transformation into an institution for the formation of professional musicians was made essentially because of realistic economic logic: the frequency of the young student's musical performances at the beginning of the XVII century constituted one of the most consistent "voices" of the economic balances of the institution.

As opposed to the previous educative works, the cornerstones of the Conservatory were laicity, on one hand, and the professionalism, even if in total unprofessional form, on the other. To understand the finality of the institution, it is useful to use the document explaining the municipality's reasons to honor the Conservatory's founding friar: he was the initiator of a work "worth counting among the great works of Naples, because it resulted in a very large benefit and good for the city, by occupying idle and useless people³.

We must mention three aspects before going on to the data of the current situation, three big cultural transformations that concern the social use of musical language and consequently the Conservatories: a) to bloom during the middle of the Enlightenment of a large crowd of "amateurs" (today presents only in the field of popular music)⁴; b)

² See also Berger e Luckmann 1969, p. 91: "An institutional world, so, appears to the experience as an objective reality. It has a history that precedes the birth of the subject and that is not accessible to its biographical memory. There was before its birth, and there will be after its death".

³ Please note, *en passant*, that the adjective "useful", indicates exactly a relationship. It is a matter of a relation of mutual functionality between the subject and the ambient in which it acts and whom characterizes an action through which a convenience is achieved for both. If this process was indisputable in the beginning of the institution, under which conditions can it be confirmed in actual society?

⁴ In the period of the Enlightenment, musical education was an individual kind and was fulfilled inside the house. A new institution, not legalized nor institutionalized, was born together with the conservatory, dedicated to the big demand of musical knowledge, suitable for the non-professionals, the amateurs: the "private teaching" became a *status symbol*,

the “re-sacralization” of the musical language of the romantic era⁵; c) the radical refusal of composers during the early 1900’s to maintain artistic links with the public at large, which took refuge in the “repertoire” and the contemporary invasive diffusion of mass media music⁶. Returning to an open question: to which problem in our current society does a significant production of super-specialized experts of classic musical respond? On which conditions can the Conservatory “preserve” its original function of social work dedicated to resolving the drama of “uselessness”? In front of this articulate and contradictory path, which we have traced in an inevitably concise manner, how did the principal institution in the field of musical didactics react?

2. The informal rules of the Conservatory

Our survey, about which we will relate only the data adherent to the theme of the discussion, followed two trajectories: a questionnaire addressed to students graduated from the Conservatory in the last ten years and telephonic interviews addressed to successful professionals in the musical sector. This has allowed us to compile a rather complete picture of a fundamental aspect of institutional realities: if on one side we defined the “rules” as an essential element to the existence of an institution, it is necessary to specify that not only formalized rules exist. On the contrary: the unwritten rules, “the informal rules”, while presenting grave problems, for a reliable verification process, are often essential to understand completely the latent cultural or ideological context, compared to the official normative framework.

The unwritten rules, that spread almost as if by osmosis, that diffuse a certain conception of the word and therefore about themselves, create the models of social identity that one must follow, when, gone forth from institutional protection, one is forced to reckon with society in all of its complex web. It is in this critical passage that begins the process of radical identity crisis, which Dubar (2004) defines as “restructuring”, much more frequent in social-structural contexts of strong social mobility and, most of all, in those professions of remarkably specialist and traditional nature⁷. Finally, only the unwritten rules touch the vital points of existence because expand themselves in the subject through the cold bureaucratic rule, but ask to be received in “hot” kind, that is free and voluntary (we must not forget that the Conservatory is antipodal to school-leaving age: actually, those who frequent it are normally willing to undertake a double load of studies).

We wanted try to uncover what are the “end goals” of the people that attend this extraordinarily demanding institution, reconstructing these latent normative models, that are as unprofessed as they are radically diffused and effective.

Many of our questions were concentrated on the graduate’s expectations at the time of graduation: the unequivocal fact, faced with about ten professions from which to choose, there was an almost univocal convergence on a very little field, on the most traditional activities of the “executive” ground. The “new professions”, those tied to mass media (from newspapers to majors, cinema, or television) were not even taken into account. This data, sincerely, caught us unprepared. We thought we would succeed in finding, even if only minimal traces, and a propensity towards the field of the communication. That vigilant intelligence that elaborates or reworks the culture for the public at large typical of the “the new cultural intermediaries”, that were photographed by Bourdieu (1983) and Bovone (1994). But we found nothing of that.

Amateurism, then, never entered into the Conservatory: the love of the art itself is not sufficient to confront the hardships of the studies. He, who studies in Conservatory, strongly desires “to do the musician” (practice music professionally). Considering then, that the number of graduates in Italy sextupled from the Seventies up until today, we can formulate the first problematic point: how many classical instrumentalists do we need today? Fossataro also decided to include musical study above all in relation to the demands of the society of the day: today, to which demand does it respond?

To the question: why, of all their choices they had, they felt such a strong connection to the executive praxis, the majority of the graduates responded with the term “vocation”; some preferred the more laic term “dream”. One cannot

the possibility, ostentatiously shown, of attending to activities that, paradoxically, showed off to produce “nothing useful”, to act as a function of a pure aesthetic pleasure. These “amateurs”, which not rarely reached highly professional levels of training, became that vast public without which it would be unthinkable the exorbitant “musical system” of the following romantic era.

⁵ Such “re-sacralization” was no more realised in terms of early Christianity, but in those of “the religion of art”, mostly of music, as a separated reality, the only capable to reveal the Being, without any contact with the rest of the society, to be approached only through the “contemplation”. The musician, as a consequence, detaches himself from the cheap daily activities and becomes a strange demiurgic figure, a guru or a devotee of artistic faith. We must register, with great surprise, the expression that a fine and deeply critical sociologist as Adorno (1963) used to define the music, in the midst of last century: “Its idea is the figure of the Name of God. It is the human attempt, though vain, to call the Name itself, not to communicate meanings”.

⁶ It is Arnold Schönberg, one of the greatest composers of the age, to explain the reasons of that: “Who is really great, always escaped the present to immerse himself in the future, but the present has never belonged so completely to the mediocre men as nowadays. Because, if it is art, then it is not for all and if it is for all, then it is not art. Loyal to this intuition, he gave birth to an unhealed wound between production and the fruition of musical works until our days: the large public remained fossilized (and the bills of Lyric Institution testify it) to the so-called “repertoire”, the music of the past, without contacts with contemporary production. The invasion of the media and their bursting power in the osmotic acquisition of musical taste has finally given (as prophesized by Adorno) the knockout to the “romantic” musical system.

⁷ The restructuring process is often compared to a sort of “conversion”, to “become ad other”: “The life of the previous period to the restructuring is typically annihilated. The biographical fracture begins to be identified with a cognitive separation between darkness and light. (Berger e Luckmann 1969, p. 218).

avoid noting that the esoteric nature of the musical experience resurfaces inevitably during history. However, we find ourselves up against a much more paradoxical situation than that in all preceding epochs. In a context that for more than a century has favored a general social rationalization, a bureaucratization and a disenchantment (to use famous Weber's categories), is it still possible to find one's own social place starting from such cultural horizon?

As we have had occasion to write (Bellini 2005), the career of a musician is not similar to that of an economist, a jurist, an engineer, or a communication expert: from a psychological point of view or social conscience, we could compare it to that of a doctor, a nurse, or an educator (during their ideal peaks), or even better [(without meaning to offend)] to that of a priest⁸. Right or wrong, who professionally approaches art, although a product of his times, whether he be a rationalist, relativist, or a nihilist, shares a more or less confused connection with the sacred, if not the magical or superstitious, confessed or not, for which music is not only an activity nor is it pure technical work: it is something more. And here it suddenly appears with fascinating "anachronism" the romantic tradition of a genius or of a virtuous person with whom there is no other comparison (by divine or demonic power).

It is interesting to note that for many people the choice of a "virtuous" carrier is the natural breath that one breathes in Conservatory. We are in front of a picture in which the professional idea is supported by reasons that we defined as "coercive": He who attends the Conservatory is obliged to think of "being" a certain thing. We can already imagine what could happen when this "being" does not coincide with what one succeeds in becoming: one will feel they are less than that which they were meant to be.

When we ask what activity a musician really does ten years after graduation, we realize that he does basically, that what he least wanted to do. The more one choose it, the less one does it: so, we are in front of a picture in which a large number of artists work in fields which they do not feel to be their own, or are even feel are contrary to that to which they are called.

The definition of ourselves as teacher is another fact: a large majority of graduates chose the term *maestro*, strongly preferring it over *professor* and *expert*. Even the symbolic use of the term brings us to an ancient horizon. The maestro is who gives an absolutely personal imprint, that transmits (*tradit*, from which tradition comes from) to the pupils not only his way of seeing the musical world, but also the world that goes beyond the aesthetic particular, or even better, that aesthetic point of view that crosses the limits of technical training to become a way to see everything else⁹.

It is interesting then to underline that in the graduates, even so many years after the graduation, there remains a consciousness (or maybe a desire) to realize artistic gestures in the profession that they actually practice. It is present even if what they do, it has nothing to do with the artistic field (a traffic warden, for example!). It is like as an indelible imprint, a way to do the things that remains in any case (or wishes to remain) in a creative dynamic; who is formed to be artist cannot be anything else, independent of the kind of work he does.

Most musicians live in a situation incomprehensible to the society context (this is valid, paradoxical, also for those who with intensive and recognized concert activity, and for those who have an intense relation with the public): There is a lamentable communicative poverty even when the public is more selective, more expert: one feels the necessity of spaces where artistic and musical communication can find the immediacy of a spiritual, simply human sharing.

There remains after many years the preoccupation with the value of natural or acquired competence. The "uselessness", that social damage that one wanted to remedy by creating the Conservatory, seems to be in someway, paradoxical, a very frequent eventuality.

Finally, the vocational push that generates a true situation of feverish necessity for improvement, results to be, in spite of everything, very strong.

3. Final Considerations

The Conservatory institution took over many of the prerogatives that stabilize any other kind of institution: for example, an element of strength to assert its institutional reality is the capacity to justify its "rules of the game" within the rules of the "natural" and "cosmic" order. Who, more than the music and its teaching, can have a claim to such curriculum? Also, the Conservatory knew how to defend its image of reality promoting informal rules as ideal support for its curriculum, or in other words what one "must" do to become a musician. It has in one way or another enjoyed, the fruits of which all historical institutions enjoy, those fruits connected to the fact of simplifying social reality, until the subjects are released from thinking in order to concentrate on more urgent aspects, sometimes running the risk of leaving out important things (Douglas 1990).

However, we still think, that the moment of a critic reflection came, the moment to begin to think just "to important things" came, to risk opening again the discussion about what is institutionalized, and to de-institutionalize what no longer has a link to "utility" compared to the society in which the Conservatory, willing or not, is working. Let us not forget that "excess of rigidity of an institution averts a gradual adaptation, pushing the actors to ignore the local stimulus

⁸ With strong intuitive capacity, Berger and Luckmann (1969, p. 199) understand the specificity of the socialization processes that are specific of some activities: "The techniques applied to these cases are designed to intensify the affective charge of socialization process. Normally it involves the institutionalization of a complicated process of initiation, a novitiate, in the course the subject goes so far as to abandon itself totally to the reality that he is internalizing. The subject then abandons himself completely to a new reality: "takes up" the music, the revolution, the faith, not in a partial way, but with what, subjectively, is the totality of his live. The final consequence of this type of socialization is to be ready to sacrifice yourself.

⁹ "A person that desires to become a well-trained musician should be soaked in his subject in a way that would result absolutely excessive for someone who studies to become engineer. The engineering studies can be played with efficiency through official processes, highly rational and emotively neutral; instead the musical education, in general, requires a much more marked identification with the maestro, with an immersion much deeper in the musical reality". (Berger and Luckmann 1969, p. 198).

to adapt, going so far as to render them unable to decipher the world. At that point, when a certain limit of contestation and dysfunction is exceeded, the instability becomes a sudden collapse” (Maccarini 1998, p. 322).

However we must have the courage to think that the stability of an institution is not, itself, a positive value: one should look for the value of an institution in its “functionality”, at the cost of unavoidable and continuous corrections of rout. Douglass North, Nobel Prize in economics, points out that the stability of an institution does not guarantee any sort of efficiency of its rules. Institutional balance is not an inevitable symptom of functionality. Precisely, such balance occurs in these situations in which none of the subjects in field “will be able to obtain an advantage by engaging further resources in order to modify the agreements. We must note that this situation does not mean that everyone is satisfied by the existent rules and the contract, only that costs and benefits relative to a modification of the game are not suitable” (Douglass 1994, p. 129). From here, the possibility comes to be protracted of systems and institutions characterized by manifestly unacceptable performances. In this sense, the evolutionist theory of Darwinian birth, in which the inefficient institutions, sooner or later, are eliminated, is less persuasive than that proposed by Douglass: it is the power of the principal subjects of an institution, their capacity to support internally and externally the “rules of the game”, even when they are not economically persuasive, that guarantees the life of the institution itself.

In the life trajectory of an institution, after its birth it normally passes through a developmental phase of *exploitation* followed by one of *exploration*. The phase of exploitation of the century-old institution-Conservatory has brought us to a problematic point: the data obtained by our research makes us understand that the relation of this institution with society as a whole no longer responds to the efficiency criteria

Those who work in the field (the professionals we are interviewed) confirmed, for example, a progressive devaluation of the title (required only by the public institutions) and, even more serious, the radical contraction of the market, that is the audience (paradoxically concomitant with the exponential growth of graduates). So, often, above all in the compositional field, musicians work without financial compensation when they cannot find someone to finance their work. The majority of those that have the good luck to remain working in the musical field, find themselves doing an activity totally different from that for which their demanding studies prepared them (as Adorno yet sensed half century ago).

If exploitation brought us to this state of affairs, we can start to hypothesize new explorative perspectives: in doing this we must realize that renewal does not consist in the touch-up of particulars, as much as seeing again their particular relationships within a symbolically different universe, which is a universe more organic to everything social. In fact every change implies a different way of ordering the elements of a system and the relationships among them.

In particular, following Merton (1970), it seems that the institution-Conservatory must assume the load not only of the so-called manifest function, which is the capacity to select from the beginning the individuals adapt to exercise the musician role, but furthermore to begin to reckon with the latent function. From this point of view, the orientation of every student towards a particular specialty and kind of exercise, which is towards different careers (just as it happens in the medical field) is a way that remains to be discovered.

Currently, in Italy a conservatory reform is underway. For a formative institution there are two possible points of view this reform can take: that of he who works for the institution (administrative positions and teachers) and that one of who is trained by the institution. A reform can have as an “immediate goal” the tendency towards one or the other reality. If it is true, as Berger declares, that the institutions are trying to have a objectivity that can never be static, it is also true that “for the individual is not easy to make a change only by his own will; if he is alone in this feat, his possibility of success is almost always very small” (Berger 1995, p.88). In a reality such as that which we are analyzing, it is difficult for the perspective of the trainee to have the strength to impose itself, because one is only fully conscious to the state of things after having left the institution, when, that is, one enters in the working world. All things considered, the teaching staff is the reality that *stays* (still the semantic root of word “institution”).

The social times of change of an institution are not quantifiable according merely to chronological logic. It is true that changes in society “surrounding” the Conservatory were, in the century just closed, very fast. The Conservatory must follow these changes so as not to find itself producing the opposite of what it was born to produce, or rather producing “useless” youths.

Society itself, as a whole, must give attend to this situation: maybe it was not totally unfounded the Renaissance saying “*cadente musica cadit res publica*”.

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