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ALBION'S DILEMMA:
TEACHING MUSIC, TEACHING CULTURE

In an essay published in «Il Saggiatore musicale» a few years ago, I offered a critique of Thatcherite policies, with their determination to introduce the processes and values of the free-market economy into the university world. More particularly, I was concerned with the effects of those policies on teaching and research in the humanities in general, and in musicology in particular.¹ Some British colleagues thought my analysis too pessimistic, but in Italy, where it was regarded as containing some uncomfortable parallels with recent developments in the Italian system, it received a generally sympathetic hearing.

That was in 1997. What has happened since? Somewhat predictably, the trend to increase student numbers, inaugurated by Margaret Thatcher and initially followed by the present government, has continued. Tony Blair's New Labour – in practice, neither particularly novel nor particularly socialist – has set itself the objective of creating 500,000 new places by 2003, with the intention that 50% of British young people will then be engaged in some form of Higher Education. At the same time, radical changes to the way that music is taught in the school system – effectively re-defining it as a fact-free, technique-free form of self-expression – has meant that the knowledge profile of the average student embarking on a university course at a British university is now very different from what it was even a decade ago. The narrative which follows touches on aspects of this changing situation and the critical relationship between these two facts, which are quite specific to the British situation, but it will also perhaps conjure up analogies south of the Alps.

¹ I. FENLON, *Mrs. Thatcher's Grandchildren: Music Education in British Universities*, «Il Saggiatore musicale», IV, 1997, pp. 353-371.

For Margaret Thatcher, the policy of increasing student numbers was not so much to do with social equality, a concept in which she showed predictably little interest, but rather with vocational training. In particular, she attributed Britain's declining performance as an industrial nation, and its comparative slowness in adapting to new technologies, to the failings of the educational system. Tony Blair's determination to make Britain a computer-literate society is fuelled by much the same sort of motivation, notwithstanding a certain amount of bogus rhetoric about social equity. In Thatcher's view, the inadequacies of the system and the consequent mismatch between the provision of higher education and the "needs" of the country was not so much the consequence of insufficient provision for the sciences as the result, as she saw it, of the pernicious popularity among students of "useless" subjects in the humanities or, worse, "subversive" ones in the social sciences.

These matters were addressed by a move of astonishing if characteristic audacity. Previously, the British higher education system had been a binary one, with the polytechnics offering largely technical and vocational courses on the one hand, and the universities pursuing more traditional, scholastic objectives on the other. Thatcher's move, enacted by the government of her successor, John Major, was simple. The polytechnics were suddenly, almost overnight, invested with the status of universities; this had the effect of dramatically increasing the number of universities in the country, and the number of students attending them, without providing any additional finance. The effect has been particularly noticeable in relation to research. Needless to say, the dramatic increase in the number of institutions which could compete for central funding for research was not matched by an increase in provision; the cake has remained the same size, while the number of knives in circulation has increased.

These Thatcherite "reforms" not only had the effect of increasing numbers; it also attempted to significantly change the notion of intellectual work and its value. This was intentional, and entirely in line with the government's insistence on the commodification of higher education at the expense of work in the humanities and the social sciences. Readers of my previous article may recall its pessimistic account of the government agency instituted in 1986 with the specific task of scrutinising research activities in individual university departments and allocating funds according to their declared achievements. The statement put out ten years later by this body makes for depressing reading. Under the title "Definition of Research" it runs as follows:

‘Research’ ... is to be understood as original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding. It includes work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce and industry, as well as to the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship; the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances and artefacts including design (where these lead to new or substantially improved insights), and the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes, including design and construction.²

As I wrote at the time, few would disagree with the general statement which occupies the first sentence; it is what follows that gives cause for concern. It is emphasised immediately that research «includes work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce and industry», establishing this from the very outset as a matter of priority. ‘Scholarship’, significantly isolated by punctuation, occupies a slight and lonely position in the ritual incantation of the main business: «artefacts including design ..., improved materials, devices, products and processes», and so on. This rhetoric hardly discourages the view that the culture of British universities is in the process of being radically shifted in the direction of seeing its main purpose as catering for the commodity market. From an ideological point of view, all this is entirely consistent with Thatcherite thinking since the 1980s, a strain of argument that has certainly not disappeared with her removal from power. The prime function of the university is to be a profit-making venture, developing essential links with research parks and industry, and the focus is to be on new technologies and their commercial applications. Not too much room here, you might think, for Homer, Haydn and Hegel.

Thatcher’s move also had the effect of re-casting traditional conceptions of course content, and it is here that we could profitably turn to the specific case of musicology. Previously the distinction between the polytechnic and university sectors had been both deliberate and real, being essentially a question of character and quality. Polytechnic students of music had traditionally pursued courses with a distinct practical bias, perhaps allied to technology, often concerned with didactic matters such as the teaching of music in schools, and frequently directed at performance. Their teachers were more likely to have been trained as educationalists or

² From the official government publication, *1996 Research Assessment Exercise: Guidance on Submissions*, November 1995, [London], Higher Education Funding Council for England, [1995], Annex A (“Definition of Research”); cit. in FENLON, *Mrs. Thatcher’s Grandchildren* cit., p. 363.

peripatetic instrumental teachers rather than musicologists, analysts or composers. In broad terms, the difference between the course content and aspirations of the old polytechnics and those of the universities was equivalent to that between the conservatories and university departments in France or Italy. Now, newly enfranchised as members of the university sector, the new ("post-1992", as they are referred to) universities quite naturally insist upon equal access to central government funds for research, and upon the validity of their view of what research actually constitutes. Needless to say, the content of music courses in many of these new universities, with their emphasis upon technological or applied studies, is much closer to Thatcher's conception of 'utility' than is the study of Fuxian counterpoint or historical musicology, and this reality is reflected in the success which the new institutions have had in attracting an ever-increasing share of government research money. To a greater extent than ever before, the study of music in British universities is being shaped by commercial considerations, by notions of the market and the perceived needs of industry. Here is just one example of the trend, quoted from the website of the Music Department of City University, London:

Our aim is to provide a programme of teaching, training and research whose value lies in its contemporary relevance, application and usefulness. The degree is designed to recognise current developments in the music professions, the music industry and in music education, and to respond to the ever-changing role of music and its applications in society.

«Usefulness» is once again the benchmark, «application» and «relevance» the touchstones, the "needs of society" with its demands for "value-for-money" paramount. Such rhetoric is now common, particularly in the new universities where similar concerns have produced a proliferation of courses on music journalism, television and film studies, jazz and popular music.

This outcome is perhaps the inevitable consequence of the triumph of Thatcherite ideology with its neat categories of 'useful' and 'useless' subjects, categories which pandered – as did so much of the populist Thatcherite style – to the very worst kind of British philistinism. Here, as in so many other government policies of the last few years, Tony Blair has proved to be Margaret Thatcher's most devoted disciple and faithful follower. But the task is not yet complete. As the country prepared to elect Blair's government for a second term in office, it was asserted by no less a

figure than the Prime Minister himself that the reform and expansion of the higher education system was to be a priority. Since then, student numbers have continued to rise dramatically, but the amount of financial support provided by the government has continued to fall. In addition, there is also now a new ideological element. New Labour, while continuing the already powerful momentum of expansion put into position by Thatcher and continued by her successors, have allied it to an apparent concern with 'access'; i.e. with the need to provide higher education for all those who wish to participate. (I use the word 'apparent' quite deliberately, since it is the Blair government which imposed, for the first time in the history of British higher education, a £ 1,000 annual charge to be paid by all university students.) This objective, irreproachable in its own terms, has brought in its wake stern criticisms of the old order. For well over a decade, the policy advisers and commentators who have promoted wider access have also spoken out against what they perceive to be the institutional elitism of the traditional universities, and in particular of their educational priorities as reflected in the content of the courses that they offer. Hence the words of the Chief Executive of the Further and Higher Education Funding Councils for Wales, who recently criticised the «monastic and elitist tradition» of the European university (as it might be Bologna, Cambridge, or Paris). This he contrasts unfavourably with what he believes to be the more responsive, open and variegated approach adopted by some of the civic universities, and in particular by many of the new "post-1992" ones.³ It is at this point that the social agenda of the politicians converges with that of many professional educationalists. And it is at this juncture that the phenomenon of 'cultural studies' enters the picture.

For those unfamiliar with the term, it should be emphasised that 'cultural studies' has nothing to do with the views of Dostoyevsky's "liberal idealist" Stepan Verkovensky, whose defence of culture takes the form of the insistence that Shakespeare and Raphael are «higher than chemistry». On the contrary, cultural studies, at least in Britain, are centrally concerned with the democratisation of culture, through engagement with feminist theory, the sociology of race and its representations, post-colonial studies and other similar approaches. In this scheme of things, study of the traditional canon in the history of music, or literature or painting, is to be

³ See J. A. ANDREWS, *The Wider Educational Scene*, in *Communities and Their Universities: The Challenge of Lifelong Learning*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1996, p. 109 f.

relegated to a position of secondary importance if not actually eliminated altogether. The objective of cultural studies is not only to secure “mass higher education”, but also to place “mass culture” at the centre of enquiry. Historically speaking, cultural studies in Britain – American or Australian versions have quite different pedigrees, histories, motivations and outcomes – are a direct outgrowth of a long-established and respectable tradition of British radical pedagogy, whose philosophical roots lie in the conception of ‘really useful knowledge’, as it was termed by 19th-century working-class self-educators. This programme, carried through into the Adult Education classes of the post-war period, received a further boost during the turbulent years of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when European and North American university campuses were occupied in protest against prevailing educational orthodoxies.⁴ For the demonstrators of ’68, the key demand was that students should be able to participate in developing curricula that were relevant to their needs; their revolt was against what they saw as the repressive conformism of “affluent society”, and their goal was to challenge existing hierarchies and modes of thought.

At about the same time, these currents coalesced in Britain through the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Studies at Birmingham University; this in turn became something of a model for how cultural studies as a distinct discipline could be formulated. In this sense, the history of cultural studies in the specific context of the British university system is barely thirty years old. At the Birmingham Centre there was an emphasis on collaborative work, on student participation in planning seminars, and in practical applications. The latter was an essential feature of the conception; the intention was that students would use their studies to develop those understandings which would enable them to intervene in their social worlds as political actors. British cultural studies was, from the outset, an overly political movement. Between then and now, the field of cultural studies has expanded massively in British universities, as left-wing intellectualism has become increasingly institutionalised in humanities and social science departments throughout the system. (Margaret

⁴ For a brief historical account, see T. STEELE, *Marginal Occupations: Adult Education, Cultural Studies and Social Renewal*, in *Teaching Culture: The Long Revolution in Cultural Studies*, ed. by N. Aldred and M. Ryle, Leicester, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 1999, pp. 7-21. For the interesting perspective of one who was critically engaged at an earlier stage, see R. WILLIAMS, *The Future of Cultural Studies*, in his *The Politics of Modernism*, London, Verso, 1989.

Thatcher's hostility towards these subjects during the 1980s is a clear indication of just how entrenched they had become in British universities in a period of some 20 years.) In this setting, the politics of contemporary culture has become an abiding preoccupation, and 'relevance' a key concept. Some notion of what these concerns might mean in terms of teaching practices can be gleaned from any number of current university prospectuses. Here is the central paragraph from the description of the University of Birmingham's undergraduate course, Media, Culture and Society:

We offer a broad introduction to the shape of contemporary society ... Issues studied include "mass" media and many other forms of representation and cultural production, such as popular music, public and private uses of photography. We look at the same time at contemporary society, social differences, questions of power; at social groups and divisions of class, of gender, of race; at the cultural and political forms which they generate; ... we examine youth and other sub-cultures, investigate cultural production, cultural policies, cultural industries and new communication and information technologies.

As this quotation acknowledges, there is a place in this course for some music, namely "popular music", examined as an instance of "mass" cultural production. The focus here is on images, narratives and representations as they relate to questions of social difference and power. There is plenty of space in this scheme of things for Cat Stevens, Elton John and the Spice Girls; little or none at all for music(s), both western and non-, that are the mainstay of music courses in traditional departments. And, as the influence of cultural studies continues to grow, is the marginalisation of central repertoires, of the canon, an inevitable consequence? Some light might be cast on this dark thought by considering the place occupied by the study of English literature within cultural studies, and thinking about possible analogies with our own subject.

It seems that, having enjoyed at one time an exemplary status within the study of culture, the study of literature as traditionally defined has increasingly come to assume a peripheral position in the literature departments of British universities.⁵ In this process, its previously unassailable position has been largely replaced by the study of popular culture and media studies, at least in those British institutions that have

⁵ The process is outlined in A. SPIROPOULOU, *The Marginalisation of Literature in the Teaching of Culture*, in *Teaching Culture* cit. (here fn. 4), pp. 53-65.

adopted the newly emergent discipline of cultural studies. Indeed, the absence of literary texts, of the study of literature itself, from the courses offered by such institutions is one of their most distinctive features. This immediately raises the question of how and why this process of marginalisation of literature, in a subject which, nominally at least, is supposed to include the study of all forms of culture, has occurred. Part of the reason for the shift of focus away from the study of literature *tout court* to other cultural forms has to do with the main objective that cultural studies, at least in Britain, set for itself. Namely, it was to be centrally motivated by what one of its most prominent advocates describes as a «critique of the humanities», and the «unmasking of the unstated presuppositions of the humanist tradition itself».⁶ This turning away from the traditional aims of the humanities was intended to distance cultural studies from what is perceived as an essentially elitist enterprise. There is little sympathy here for the project, originally defined in the nineteenth century by one influential educationalist, of «teaching through literature and history the histories and touchstones of the national culture».⁷

On the contrary, in the specifically British context, the decline of English literature as an academic subject, at least in the new universities, is directly related to an analysis of its historical role in the formulation of nationalist and bourgeois attitudes, attitudes that are now firmly disapproved of in Tony Blair's Cool Britannia. The most succinct exposition of such an analysis is to be found in Terry Eagleton's book *Literary Theory*, published in 1983.⁸ In this highly influential account, Eagleton, now Professor of English at Oxford University, sketches the "Rise of English Literature" according to the ideological tasks which it was made to serve. In the earliest phase, the study of English literature was institutionalised, for the first time outside the traditional structure of university education, as part of a campaign to educate the working class. This was within the general development of Adult Education, mostly through evening classes held in schools and community centres throughout the country. According to Eagleton, this development was primarily motivated by the political objective of securing working class identification with the values and culture of the higher classes; in the process, the evils of Marxism were to be

⁶ S. HALL, *The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities*, «October», LIII, 1989, p. 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸ T. EAGLETON, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1983.

avoided and a national consciousness which transcended class divisions was put into place. In addition, as Eagleton argues, the high imperialist spirit which Britain was experiencing at the time found in the literature of the national language an appropriate vehicle of justification and dissemination. The wide acceptance of Eagleton's thesis, itself ideologically determined by his public persona as the everlasting child of the '60s, helps to explain the marginalisation of literature in many British university departments.

Are there any lessons to be learnt from this history, any indicators of how the teaching of music and its history may change or is changing under similar pressures? I believe that there are, though it should be said at the outset that the historical parallels are not always precise. The study of music in Britain, the *Land ohne Musik*, has never occupied a role comparable to that of the study of English literature, and attempts to construct a nationalist ideology around the works of British composers has not been noticeably successful, for all that it has been attempted, at different historical moments, through the works of Byrd, Purcell, Elgar and Vaughan Williams. The analogy with the "Rise and Fall of English" studies is more instructive in relation to the history of the canon, a central core of texts including, as it might be, the songs of Machaut, the symphonies of Beethoven and the operas of Verdi, which were once thought to be central to any serious study of the subject. According to the analysis of Eagleton and others, the evolution of a canon of English literature, largely in the wake of its introduction as a university degree subject, was necessarily implicated in a project which, in Eagleton's terms, not only had as its prime purpose the definition and transmission of a national culture, but also the equation of that culture with "high" culture. The recorded struggles in British institutions over the canonisation of English literature, according to genre or author, show that, for some, this literature is seen as a privileged form of culture, indeed almost a paradigm of that culture, and is strongly disapproved of on those grounds alone. It is precisely here that the parallels with the changing shape of course content in British university music departments becomes strong.

The widespread rejection of the equation of culture with "high" culture, as it might be Stepan Verkovysky's view of the world, is intimately associated with the genesis of cultural studies in Britain. With it came the demand that all forms of cultural production be taken into account, and in very particular ways; namely, in relation to socio-historical structures and other cultural practices. But in order to achieve its radical objective of displacing the traditional agenda of the humanities, British cultural studies has defined itself not only in methodological terms, by claiming an interest in interdisciplinary approaches, but also in relation to a new priority: the

study of “popular” culture.⁹ In consequence, the communication, media and cultural studies courses which have gained a significant place in the activities of many British universities since the 1970s, mostly concentrate on a new set of cultural texts that replace the canon with a new one which places emphasis on popular culture and the mass media. It seems that in this Brave New World not all forms of culture qualify as being of equal interest or value, despite the fake impression of inclusivity suggested by the title ‘*cultural studies*’. In many places the old centre has now become the periphery, with all that this implies for teaching and research. A more traditional vision remains in place in a small group of elite institutions including Oxford and Cambridge, a number of the constituent colleges of the University of London, and some well-established departments and faculties in civic universities. The real difficulty for the future is that the dramatic increase in student numbers over the last decade has been allied to an effective reduction in funding (40% since 1976) throughout the entire university system. In this world of diminishing resources, institutions which are routinely criticised as being “elitist” in terms of both their selection process and the content of their courses will not necessarily be at the front of the queue for government funds.

The British higher education system as a whole, which remains largely if inadequately funded by the state, is moving inexorably, painfully, perhaps inevitably towards a different set of educational objectives, broadly analogous to those pursued in France and Germany in the post-war period. But the circumstances of change are very particular. Against a background of declining financial provisions and increasing political interference, it is not clear if the necessary plutocracies can be maintained. It remains to be seen whether, in the British university Music Department of the twenty-first century, Scarlatti and Strings, Sibelius and Seventies Slut Rock can live together, as in the Fairy Tale, Happily Ever After.

⁹ See, among the many books that could be cited, J. STOREY, *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, and the same author’s anthology of texts *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, *ibid.*, 1994.