

Dario Martinelli: *Give Peace a Chant. Popular Music, Politics, Social Protest*. Berlin/New York: Springer, 2017. ISBN 978-331950538-1. 184 pages.

Give Peace a Chant. Popular Music, Politics, Social Protest is Dario Martinelli's tenth scientific monograph and his second one in the field of popular music studies (after *Authenticity, Performance, and Other Double-Edged Words*¹, published in the Acta Semiotica Fennica series in 2010). As Martinelli states himself in the preface (v), the book brings to completion a research project aimed at the development of a semiotic-based theory to analyze the relationship between popular music and issues of social protest of various periods and genres. This research, which was anticipated in 2004 with an essay on sound and instrumentation in the protest songs repertoire,² was developed systematically from 2010 onwards via the study (by the author's declaration) of several hundred songs and albums, 348 of which are explicitly mentioned in the text, either as passing mentions or, in some cases, as case studies for specific analysis.

The monograph presents and develops three main bodies of investigation. The first one (corresponding to chapter 1) focuses on conceptual and terminological problems (such as definitions and stylistic classifications, but also with regard to the intended development of a theoretical structure and a methodological approach to the topic). Martinelli suggests that the traditional definition 'protest song' usually employed to name the types of songs analyzed in the book is not fully satisfying and replaces it with 'song of social protest' (SSP throughout the book) with the following motivation:

With 'songs of social protest', we are able to underline the equally-important aspects of the 'explicit disapproval' of a given state of things (protest), and the 'social' dimension of the latter. Other distinctions, besides these, are not so relevant, as a 'song of social protest' [...] can feature a number of diverse, even contradictory, characteristics, and yet remain as such. There are aggressive and pinpointed SSPs, but also quiet and diplomatic ones, up to soft and corny ones, like charity songs such as "We Are the World" or "Do They Know It's Christmastime?". SSPs do not necessarily have a standard political color, and may easily be leftist, rightist or even anti-political (in fact, the latter option possibly constitutes the majority of SSPs). It may look forwards, backwards, or to the *hic et nunc*. And finally, it may be coherent and 'committed' [...], or it may rather sound like a Facebook user thinking that pressing 'Like' to the picture of an abandoned dog or a starving child is enough to make him/her a person of virtue. (2-3)

In the second and theoretically most developed part of the text (corresponding to chapters 2, 3, and 4), Martinelli presents an “analytical model that intends to connect (social, historical, political) context, song lyrics and music as such [...], as organic and most of all equally important elements that constitute a SSP” (13). The main idea is that, unlike the general discussions on these topics, the author argues against what he calls “an undisputable supremacy of the lyrics over the other two elements” (13), suggesting instead an emancipation of contextual and musical aspects as equally relevant components of what makes a song ‘political’.

When referring to context, Martinelli elaborates on three aspects: firstly, the types of relation between a SSP and the context/occasion it is performed in or conceived for (“specific relation”, “indirect relation”, “general relation”, “phatic relation” and “paratextual relation”); secondly, he suggests that a SSP can also be written/performed by placing the political action in some particular chronological (“before”, “during”, and “after” the protest) and spatial (“exposed”, “clear”, “ambiguous/neutral”, “hidden/rejected”) location (cf. 17); thirdly, by referring to Greimas’s theory of modalization Martinelli distinguishes between protest song as action (“doing/not doing”) and protest song as description of a context, a situation, a character, etc. (“being/not being”).

When it comes to the textual dimension, the focus becomes more historical. The author claims that the development of SSPs (which in Martinelli’s opinion starts in the early 19th century when the modern idea of ‘popular music’ is being established) is finalized during the 1960s with the consolidation of four main typologies of lyrics: analytical lyrics (a song that discusses a topic in a detailed, focused way and then eventually offers a prescriptive ‘slogan’ in the refrain); spiritual lyrics (a song emotionally involved but which is more passive in practice, with a stronger inclination to prayer and hope); universalistic lyrics (a song that is less detailed than the analytical type, with a more general and metaphorical if not anti-ideological approach); and finally satirical lyrics (a song that may use various strategies, with an emphasis on the parodistic, sarcastic effect).

The chapter specifically devoted to music offers five types of song: the ‘simple’ song (performed with basic instrumentations, written with a catchy melody, regular rhythm and so forth); the ‘solemn’ one (which unlike the previous displays a more lavish production and tends to be typical of charity events); the ‘aggressive’ one (more indie or hip hop); the ‘manneristic’ one (mostly quoting past acts and genres that stood out for their political engagement); and the ‘X type’ (which includes all other songs more difficult to classify).

The remaining chapters of the book (from 5 to 8) constitute the third and final body of investigation presented by Martinelli. They contain four case studies representing four different fields of research which have so far received little attention by the dominant scholarship on protest songs. The first of them focuses on ideology (the notions of ‘left’ and ‘right’ in popular music), the second one on a social phenomenon of political protest based on musical events (the Lithuanian Singing Revolution), the third one on a genre (pop-jazz at the era of Mussolini and Fascism in Italy), and the fourth one finally on a musical act (The Beatles).

The topic of the Lithuanian Singing Revolution, for instance, has so far only been dealt with in Lithuanian while Estonian and Latvian scholars had been more active in describing

the role of music in their own country's independence movements. In fact, Martinelli's book is the first to familiarize readers who do not understand Lithuanian with the songs and actions of political bands like Antis, Bix, Katedra, and others.

In the case study dedicated to The Beatles, Martinelli focuses on a repertoire that has not yet been studied for its own sake and on its role within SSP repertoires. While most people will remember the Liverpool band as spokesmen of the pacifist movement (particularly with songs like "All You Need Is Love" or some of John Lennon's solo efforts), Martinelli chooses to discuss the band's environmentalist songs such as "The Continuing Story of Bungalow Bill" or Paul McCartney's songs after the breakup when he engaged in issues of environmental protection and animal advocacy and expressed these concerns in songs like "Wild Life" or "Looking for Changes".

In the case study about jazz and Italian fascism – a topic which has been treated on various occasions as Martinelli admits himself – the main focus becomes the particular interpretation of a seemingly inoffensive light song (Alberto Rabagliati's "Quando canta Rabagliati") as a subtle protest, in mockery form, against the oppression inflicted to jazz by the fascist authorities. Although Martinelli's text presents specific discussions of various individual songs, his work on "Quando canta Rabagliati" qualifies as the most meticulous analytical performance of the whole book.

The remaining case study finally consists of a reevaluation of the ideological opposition left-right in a musical context, an opposition that had been considered as outdated in the postmodern era and as generally inapt to describe the modern, fuzzier dynamics of political ideas and practices. In a less mainstream fashion, Martinelli maintains instead that this political dualism is not really obsolete, particularly in a cultural and musical sense.

Apart from the fact that Martinelli introduces the reader to a number of topics that have been very rarely dealt with in the existing literature, the book presents another 'added value' that is worth noticing, and Martinelli is well aware of this:

I was also interested in emancipating the study of protest songs from a traditional bias that affects popular music studies: their Anglophonocentrism [...], with a particular focus on Great Britain and USA, plus the occasional incursion of Ireland and Canada. I tried to focus on other repertoires as well, particularly those I had direct access to, due to my personal and professional conditions (in particular: I am Italian and I live and work in Lithuania: I suppose there is a reason why two out of four case-studies in this book discuss songs from these two countries).

[...]

Anyway, in the end, [...] 85 non-Anglo-American songs were considered, and about 25 countries were scrutinized. Whether this is a laudable result or not remains to be seen. I certainly feel I could have put more effort in, but at the same time I consider this percentage a clear step forward, in comparison to the average book on this topic (where nearly 100% of the songs analyzed are invariably from UK, USA, Ireland or Canada).
(vi-vii)

It is certainly true that over the years popular music studies have retained a major and almost exclusive interest in British and American repertoires. Not only so-called ‘small’ countries like Lithuania have been refused even a basic form of international interest, but also bigger ones with a remarkable impact on the music industry on both financial and artistic levels (such as France, Sweden or Italy) seem to merely enjoy the ‘leftovers’ of the researchers’ interest in popular music. Perhaps, *Give Peace a Chant* will represent the beginning of a turn in this area: time will tell.

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Notes

- 1 Dario Martinelli, *Authenticity, Performance, and Other Double-Edged Words. Essays on Popular Music*, Helsinki, UMWEB, 2010.
- 2 Dario Martinelli, “S for Singalong – Popular Music and Pacifism”, in: Merja Bauters, Guido Ipsen, Dario Martinelli (eds), *Semiotics from S to S*, Helsinki, UMWEB, 2004, 361-368.