

## SEM21. Literary songs. Literary voices: English literature and popular music

11 September h. 11:00-13:00, Gorr 8

### Convenors

Pierpaolo Martino (Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro) pierpaolo.martino@uniba.it

Pietro Deandrea (Università di Torino) pietro.deandrea@unito.it

Maddalena Pennacchia (Università degli Studi Roma Tre) maddalena.pennacchia@uniroma3.it

### Abstract

Our goal is to throw light on an enthralling and internationally expanding horizon in Cultural Studies, namely the relationship between English literature and popular music. From Early Modern music to Twenty-first century pop, literature and popular music often engage in fascinating dialogues; songs combine a musical composition and a verbal/narrative text, hence we could define pop songs as ‘miniature’ novels, thus paraphrasing Iain Chambers, or we may think of them as poems set to music, highlighting their lyrical aspects. Be as it may, songs related to literature bring the human voice centre stage through singing, thus breaking the silence of the printed literary page. In this perspective the interplay between literature and popular music can also break silence as indifference, expressing themes of humanity, empathy and interconnectedness, as witnessed by Linton Kwesi Johnson giving voice through his words and music to the oppressed Caribbean community in early 1980s London.

Contemporary British popular music is profoundly fascinated by this intermedial dimension and is very often defined by a contamination between the musical and the literary, whether as transmutation of literary works, or as fresh and often experimental forms of song-writing which use literature as an aesthetic prospect from which to construct meaning. The first category implies the translation/adaptation of literary works into songs: David Gilmour, among others, turns Shakespeare’s poems into songs, as did Syd Barrett with James Joyce, and Gavin Friday with Oscar Wilde. The latter category includes songwriters who conceive their music in terms of literary themes and imagery, nourishing their writing with poetic and narrative resources. This approach defines The Smiths’ Morrissey’s poetic songwriting, with his debts to Wilde and Shelagh Delaney, and David Bowie who, besides being fascinated by science fiction, released in 1974 the album *Diamond Dogs* largely based on George Orwell’s *Nineteen-Eighty-four*. Other committed artists working both as poets and singers – from L. K. Johnson to Kae Tempest – have established intriguing dialogues between the two languages inviting their fans to inhabit the threshold between the musical, the literary and the human, turning listening into a critical and ethical process. We invite submissions dealing with, among other possibilities: intermediality in contemporary popular music; writers (from Shakespeare to Rushdie and beyond) and popular music; music, literary orality and the human; pop, rock and intertextuality; literature, music and interconnectedness.

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## SEM21. Papers

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- *Prospero's speech in a female Voice: the cases of Loreena McKennitt (1994) and Beth Gibbons (2010)* (Maddalena Pennacchia, Università degli studi Roma Tre)

- *Metrical translation as musical re-creation: Adapting Edoardo Bennato's Peter Pan – Il Musical for English Performance* (Manuela Francia, Università degli Studi “G. d’Annunzio” Chieti-Pescara)
- *“Wilde personalities. Performing Oscar Wilde in popular music, from the Smiths to the Pet Shop Boys* (Pierpaolo Martino, Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro)

## SEM21. Abstracts

### **Metrical translation as musical re-creation: Adapting Edoardo Bennato's *Peter Pan – Il Musical for English Performance***

Manuela Francia (Università degli Studi “G. d’Annunzio” Chieti-Pescara) manuela.francia@unich.it

This paper explores the metrical translation of songs from Italian to English in *Peter Pan – Il Musical* (2007), a rock-based stage adaptation by singer-songwriter Edoardo Bennato. Unlike most English-language musicals imported into Italy, this production originated entirely in Italian and has never been officially dubbed or subtitled for international audiences. Translating such a musical thus entails a pioneering act of intercultural and intersemiotic transfer (Kaindl, 2005).

Far from a word-for-word rendering, the process adopts a performative perspective grounded in principles of lyrical adaptation, which prioritize rhythm, prosody, and performability (Low, 2017). The translation process follows a performative and prosodic approach rooted in musical constraints. Translated lyrics are crafted to align with the original metric and rhythmic structure, ensuring that stresses, rhymes, and phrasing are compatible with live or recorded performance. This aligns with Franzon's (2008) model of singability, which highlights the need to balance music, lyrical, and phonetic elements in song translation.

Through selected examples, the paper illustrates how metrical translation serves not only linguistic but also expressive and rhythmic fidelity, a process that echoes Gorlée's (2005) notion of vocal translation as a form of semiotic performance. Each translated piece undergoes a vocal testing phase to assess its compatibility with live or recorded performance.

By framing translation as artistic re-creation, the paper sheds light on the challenges and creative potential of rendering Italian musical theatre into English. The case of *Peter Pan - Il Musical* thus emerges as a compelling example of how translation can mediate between cultures, performance modes, and sensory experiences.

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### **Wilde personalities. Performing Oscar Wilde in popular music, from the Smiths to the Pet Shop Boys**

Pierpaolo Martino (Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro) pierpaolo.martino@uniba.it

If pop is all about the *now* then Wilde – who Michael Bracewell defines “the pop star” *ante-litteram* – becomes a paradigm to perform in our *now* and a perspective from which to read and deconstruct our own age. In this paper I focus on pop and rock musicians who – from the 1980s to the first decade of the new Millennium – have *performed and rewritten* Wilde in complex, fascinating and unpredictable ways. A singer considered by many as the late twentieth/early twenty-first century Wilde, is Morrissey, solo artist and leader of Eighties seminal band The Smiths. Morrissey, like Wilde – and like 1970s Wilde-disciple David Bowie before him – put all his genius into his life and only his talent into his work; indeed, the singer, especially in his Smiths years, made a considerable effort in the construction of his *persona*, often using resources provided by Wilde. Besides sharing Wilde's love of flowers, many of the interviews he gave in the Eighties featured a number of Wildean epigrams and paradoxes, while many of his early songs (like The Smiths' ‘This Charming Man’) were nourished by a Wildean imagery. A meditation on the darker and more decadent sides of Wilde's

life and *oeuvre* informs instead the work of Nick Cave who in 1988 published a rewriting of Wilde's *Salomé* in five short acts and the work of the Irish artist and singer Gavin Friday, who in 1989 released on the *Island* label a concept album dedicated to Wilde entitled *Each Man Kills the Thing He Loves*, from a line taken from "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." Two other fascinating Wilde *personalities* are Neil Tennant funding member of the Pet Shop Boys, the ultra-clever pop group capable of establish a fascinating dialogue between seriousness and lightness, drama and comedy and solo artist and Libertines/Babyshambles founder Pete Doherty who, besides writing a song entitled 'Salomé', embraced Wilde's art of the pose and was fascinated by excesses of any kind, constructing a dissonant/noisy/disturbing image of himself and his band. All these artists/singers – with their awareness of the importance of being/playing Oscar in their specific worlds and cultural contexts – show us that Wilde can be conceived as a subversive, critical role one might successfully perform and appropriate, *now* more than ever, inviting U.S. not only to cross, but also to inhabit borders and thresholds, opening ourselves to the charm and the unpredictability of the multiple forms of otherness surrounding and inhabiting us.

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## Prospero's speech in a female voice: The cases of Loreena McKennitt (1994) and Beth Gibbons (2010)

Maddalena Pennacchia (Università di Roma Tre) maddalena.pennacchia@uniroma3.it

The epilogue of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in which Prospero breaks the illusion of the story and speaking directly to the audience announces that his "charms are all o'hertrown" and that the only "strength" he now possesses is his own has been read by many scholars as Shakespeare's farewell to the theatre. The speech has inspired a host of artists over the centuries, but in this paper I will explore in particular the performance by two female musicians who sang those words with their female voices at the turn of the 21st century: Loreena McKennitt and Beth Gibbons. The former included her adaptation of the speech in her album *The Mask and the Mirror* (1994), for which she composed a music very close to the tradition of Celtic sounds, while the latter sang those same words to the music written by Elliot Goldenthal for the long final credits sequence of Julie Taymor's film adaptation of *The Tempest* (2010), in which a female Prospera is played by Hellen Mirren. What happens when this speech is repurposed and adapted or appropriated for a different artistic context and media environment, that is recorded music and cinema? And how does a female voice affect the 'humanity' of the speech? These and others will be the questions I will try to explore in my contribution to the seminar.

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