

Eleonora Fisco

# Italian Spoken Music: Intermediality and Medium Specificity in the Work of Poetry Collective Mezzopalco

## Introduction

It is the fourteenth of December 2018 in Milan at Cox18, an occupied and self-managed social space since 1976, with a strong political commitment against any form of domination. The *Premio Dubito di poesia con musica* [Dubito Prize for Poetry with Music], in its sixth edition, offers a competition between groups of artists with a jury composed partly of experts and partly of audience members. Among the four finalists that night, the three artists of the Mezzopalco collective are facing the audience, standing in a triangle: the poet-narrator Riccardo Iachini front and center, the poet-singer Tommaso Giordani and the beatboxer MolloBeat just a step behind. There are no musical instruments on stage – voices are the only input to their project. Mollo has already warmed up the audience, who are ready to dance to the rhythm of the verses that will lead them to win the prize of two thousand euros and enable them to produce their album. Giordani asks the technicians for some reverb for his microphone to begin with the ritual of a sung epiclesis: the practice in ancient Greece of invoking the gods for inspiration. The pantheon that he invokes through this literary *topos* is not composed of literal gods, however, but rather of historical figures who shaped the group's artistic research. In a sort of preamble, he then guides the audience on a trip that begins on May 26, 2011, when “Ratko Mladić, the executioner of Srebrenica, has just been arrested after years on the run, Miles Davis would have turned 83, and in 17 hours Gil Scott Heron will be dead” (Mezzopalco 2019a).<sup>1</sup> “A memoir” is the title of their first piece: a tribute to Heron as a pioneer of hip-hop and spoken word genres. At this point, Giordani disappears into the darkness; the spectators will hear his voice during the refrain, and in sync with Iachini's, who starts chanting the narrative of Heron's last night, his speaking voice supported by the vibrant hip-hop base of beatbox. Both the percussive rhythm and the pace of his speech accelerate as they build towards a climax – the acme of the death narrated in the text – until the last stanza, when the beatboxer falls silent.

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Italian are mine.

The Olympus to which Mezzopalco makes their initial plea is made up of models for a history of Western oral poetry, the “essentials” who have contributed to the emergence of the artistic form that in the Italian scene is called *spoken music*. This label can be read as a reduction of the extended expression “spoken-word music” and has blurred boundaries that are still being defined by the poets’ practices. In the English-speaking scene, to identify the work of nowadays famous artists such as Kae Tempest, Saul Williams and Moor Mother, the term ‘spoken word’ is more common, regardless of whether the piece is presented with music or a cappella. For protagonists of the Francophone scene such as Grands Corps Malade, who fills concert halls and arenas on his tours, the most widespread umbrella term is “slam.” In contrast, a terminological distinction exists within the Italian movement, which categorizes contemporary performance poetry into three main different forms: slam poetry, spoken word, and spoken music.

The definition of slam poetry is still much debated, but broadly refers to poetry performed using only the artist’s voice and body in the context of a poetry slam competition, where any type of poetry is accepted, from sonnets to haiku to narrative speech. However, the creation of a “slam style” is increasingly observable in the collective imagery, as can also be witnessed by the proliferation of slam poetry workshops and video tutorials (cf. Fisco 2022, 95–112). According to Helen Gregory, slam may in fact be considered a “for(u)m” in its dual nature as both poetic form and artistic forum (2008, 204). Outside of the competitive dimension, a slam performance can sometimes become part of a one (wo)man show of *spoken word poetry*, a label denoting poetry created for an oral performance (cf. Lemire 2021, 4; Ailes 2020, 21). A further step in a poet-performer’s career occurs when spoken word artists initiate collaborations with musicians by interweaving text with music, a practice which the Italian scene identifies as spoken music; in the last twelve years, the main promoters of this concept have been the Dubito Prize I mentioned above, and the publishing house Agenzia X. Moving between the three forms described, a poem can sometimes change a great deal, stretching beyond the maximum time limit of three minutes allowed by the competitive framework, adding repetitions, refrains and adjusting the pauses, rhythm, timbre, and breath of the performance to the music.

The growing popularity of oral poetry has prompted the attention of international scholarship, which is beginning to question the hermeneutic tools needed to study the works of these artists. Lello Voce, founder of the Italian slam scene and pioneer of the practice of spoken music in Europe, laments a still predominantly philological perspective of literary criticism in Italy and argues the need for a “poetic criticism” that highlights performative and musical aspects, alongside those that are more explicitly textual (2023, 351). Just as it has been claimed that music is not reducible to the score and that theater is something more than

the dramaturgical text (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008; Cook 2013), an analysis of oral and performance poetry that disregards the vocal and musical aspects would inevitably neglect the complexity of spoken music.

Among the most important reflections on live poetry are those of Julia Novak, leader of the *Poetry Off The Page* project at the University of Vienna, who has proposed an analytical toolkit that includes paying as much attention to the context in which the performance takes place as to the articulatory parameters of audio-text, body communication, and the relationship established with the audience (2011). For pieces with music, some musicological analyses have been proposed. In his volume *Poesia per musica e musica per poesia*, Stefano La Via (2017) suggests a taxonomy of the possible interconnections between poetry and music, while Chantal Lemire (2021) explores the musical properties of spoken poetry in her dissertation, focusing on three macro examples of Tom Waits' songwriting, Marc Smith's slam poems, and Kurt Schwitters sound poetry. Although these three forms have greatly influenced spoken music, this contribution will investigate its specificity in the Italian scene as poetry "tempered with" music, meaning that the two components hold equal importance in the creative process.<sup>2</sup> They are fused in a kind of counterpoint, where the music is not simply played as an accompaniment. Following recent studies that have spread light on the medial dimension of performance poetry (Schaefer 2015; Voce 2016, 2023; Vorger 2017; Ben-thien 2021), special emphasis will be placed on the intermedia creative process, as well as the artists' choices concerning how to distribute their works.

This chapter draws on semi-structured interviews with some artists belonging to the Zoopalco collective,<sup>3</sup> which from its beginning has taken a stance against publishing oral poetry on paper.<sup>4</sup> In 2022 they founded the first Italian oral poetry and spoken music label, ZPL (Zoopalco Poetry Label), to produce works "of poetry and music or poetry as music" (Zoopalco 2023, 35–36), as well as experimental voice research. Born from the initiative of poet Nicolò Gugliuzza, since 2015 the collective has included a number of members. Today the associa-

---

2 Some of the contents of this article have already appeared in Italian in my essay *Sulla spoken music in Italia: I progetti del collettivo Zoopalco*, see Fisco 2023.

3 Between 2023 and 2025 I interviewed Riccardo Iachini, Tommaso Giordani, Eugenia Galli and Vittorio Zollo. The interviews were conducted via a confidential relationship with the artists.

4 An example of this is the 2018 project *Via dalla carta*, in which the collective's poems were made available through a QR code on a forex sign that was graphically designed to look like a street sign. In Italian, the word "via" indicates both the street of an address and an invitation to leave ("vai via" means "go away"), which also served as an explicit statement of poetics to publish poetry off the page.

tion's board includes Eugenia Galli, Tommaso Giordani, Riccardo Iachini, Vittorio Zollo, Alessandro Minnucci and Gabriele Stera.

In the first section, I will examine the relationship between poetry and music in order to define the specificity of Italian spoken music. I will then focus on the case of the project *IMPRE* by Mezzopalco, which offers a pantheon of models of oral poetry, including musicians, tragedians, poets and singers over all time periods. In particular, I will delve into the example piece *A memoir* with which I opened this chapter. My purpose is to use the artists' narratives to understand how poetry, music, video, and live performances intersect with each other. Their responses have enabled me to attempt a definition of spoken music, based on the main elements of interest that emerged from the dialogue: the focus on the process rather than the final product, the intermedial dimension of their research, and the medium specificity of their works, as well as the differences between their live performances and their record. Other questions pertinent to the investigation concern the target frames of their performances and media publications. On what stages do they perform? What are their models, and how do they position themselves in relation to other musical genres? What are the possibilities for distributing these artistic objects?

## Defining spoken music

From my position as an inside observer of the Italian poetry slam and spoken word movement, which I have been attending as a scholar and artist since 2017, I first encountered the term spoken music in association with the work of the Dubito Prize for poetry with music. For more than a decade the award has been dedicated to scouting for poets and musicians under 35, in memory of Alberto Dubito Feltrin, a poet and rapper who committed suicide in 2012. A scene took shape around the prize to exhibit the work of artists interested in this particular combination of poetry and music, today mainly represented by the collectives Disturbat! Altr! and Zoopalco. The former gathers more than twenty artists, including those so far produced in Zoopalco's label ZPL: "a generation of poets and musicians who knead words and verse with various genres and the most diverse musical languages, from rap to drum-and-bass, from noise to art music to techno" (Disturbat! Altr! 2024, liner notes, n.p.). From this statement, it seems clear that the artists do not think in terms of only one way of making spoken music; rather, music presents itself as a practice with various possibilities and filiations.

Gabriele Stera, winner of two editions of the Dubito Prize and a member of both Zoopalco and Disturbat! Altr!, clearly writes in this regard about the creation of a scene, not a genre:

If a scene has been generated around this Prize, it is certainly not a “genre scene”, because it is the very echoes of Alberto’s work that appear to intersect with hybrid and evolving musical and performative worlds. [ . . . ] this variety of competing proposals does not coalesce to form successful mythologies. On the contrary, it seems to me to be increasingly oriented toward producing a network of relationships, friendships, collaborations and respective encroachments that generate a community of mutual listening and collective reflection [ . . . ]. (Stera 2022, 49–50)

However, the way music and poetry interact in spoken music remains a subject of inquiry. Specifically, does a hierarchical relationship exist between these two elements during the compositional process?

Luca Zuliani has sketched a history of the relationship between text and poetry, which noted a downgrading in status of the figure of the poet. Whereas, until the advent of tonal music, the poet had maintained a greater importance than the various composers who put the same text to music, in the eighteenth century the poet became a librettist in service of the composer, who began to strongly intervene in the text. In 1730, the Italian historian Ludovico Muratori stated in this regard: “there where music once was the servant and waited on poetry, now poetry is the servant of music” (Collins 1984, 16). With the rise of light music, the hierarchical relationship confirmed music’s priority as the starting point of the composition, and the author of the text descended another rung, assuming the role of lyricist: “the one who is in charge of adding the words to the music” (Zuliani 2020, 110). In songs, the melody precedes the words – this is why, according to Zuliani, for song analysis the separation of melody and lyrics does not consider the totality of the formal elements; a silent reading of the text ignores a fundamental part of the work. The lyrics, while important for any piece of music, are in fact secondary to the melody.

Camille Vorger, an expert on the French slam scene, while studying the example of Grands Corps Malade, groups slam and song together because of the brevity of their compositions, from which derives the search for expressive density. In a slam poem with music, the presence of a refrain is not as codified as in the song form but is nonetheless observable as a repetition of structures tending to a “poésie mémorielle” (Vorger 2017, n.p.), designed to aid the poet’s memorization and enhance its memorability for the audience. Instead, Vorger distinguishes slam and song by how the text is spoken, and frames the former in what Paul Zumthor, among the leading theorists of oral poetry, calls “*récitatif scandé*”, in English a “measured recitation”.

Through this relationship of opposition between the said and the sung, then, I can define the mode of performance. [. . .] Empirically the existence not of two but of three modalities is accepted: spoken voice (in French, *dit*), measured recitation or psalmody (in English, *to chant*), and melodic song (in English, *to sing*). (Zumthor 1990, 142)

However, Vorger points out that this chanting mode is immersed in a continuum, within which it is difficult to situate the slam. Similarly, Rebecka Dürr has highlighted that smooth transitions between the different modes of phonation that are perceived as singing or speaking are frequent in the artistic context of spoken-word poetry, resulting in an oscillation to create various emotional and aesthetic effects (cf. 2024, 36).

Expanding Vorger's point from his perspective as a practitioner, Lello Voce, who has been the coordinator of the Dubito Prize until 2023 and one of the first Italian artists to use the expression spoken music as an artistic label for his productions,<sup>5</sup> reflects on the practice of *messa in voce* or *oratura*, meaning a transcoding of the written poem for the voice. Voce argues that what places poetry with music at the opposite pole of opera and melodrama is precisely the fact that the text should not be entirely sung, "but said, paced, performed, adhering to poetic prosody, thus to its metric-formal laws" (2023, 348). Moreover, the voice cannot simply *pronounce* the written text but must *perform* it as if it were a score – an exercise that is quite different even from the expressive reading and staging of the text that is more typical of actors (cf. Voce 2016, 60).

The Dubito Prize proposes, for artists who wish to participate in their call, the wording "poetry with music", in which the preposition "with" is not accidental. Stefano La Via has developed an interesting taxonomy in this regard. He speaks of "poesia *per* musica" [poetry *for* music], when the poet considers the interweaving of words with music from its inception. This would generally be characterized by isometry of verses and a certain regularity of stanzas as in the aria form of the opera. Poetry *set to* music ("poesia pura *in* musica"), on the other hand, is distinguished by its autonomy from instrumental accompaniment: it "arises more freely as a function of itself, [. . .] that is, it finds a *raison d'être* in its own formal and expressive values" (La Via 2017, 136–137). Poems written on paper for publication and later read with a musical accompaniment are one example. Finally, poetry *with* music ("poesia *con* musica") would involve a total interpenetration of the two languages in a simultaneous conception of the composi-

---

<sup>5</sup> The identity of the first artist(s) to use the expression "spoken music" is unclear. The earliest indexing that I found online concerns the show *Philip Glass Buys a Loaf of Bread* and dates from 1990 (cf. Gussow 1990).

tional approach (La Via 2017, 197). According to La Via (2014), this is the case with Lello Voce's poem *Lai del ragionare lento* [Lai of the slow thinking]: a spoken music example in which the vocal performance does not consist in a "melodic 'intonation', nor in a mere spoken 'recitation'" (La Via 2014, 179), but in a verbal score enhanced by the electronic sounds of Frank Nemola and the flugelhorn of Michael Gross. For Lello Voce, "the decision to integrate music directly influences, upstream, the composition of the text, as much in terms of its structure as its linguistic and poetic choices and its 'sonorities'" (2023, 347). It is not a question of hierarchy or chronological order of what comes first, but rather of agreement, of rhythmic and melodic direction and interweaving between poetry and music, which goes far beyond mere accompaniment (cf. Voce 2023, 349). Within this tempering action the preposition *with*, proposed to analyze the modes of interaction between poetry and music, takes its place. In short, in spoken music the poet is certainly not content to be a lyricist and, as opposed to singers, who are often performers but not authors, the fact that spoken music is usually performed by the poet(s) who composed it may be taken as evidence.

The artists of the Zoopalco collective that I interviewed testify to the different creative modes in their processes, ranging from a long and entirely mixed genesis starting "from a sound, a refrain, a few words or a rhythm" (Zollo 2023, n.p.) to the composition of lyrics and music independently, sometimes starting from the part composed by the poet, and sometimes by the musician: "our work is very solitary [. . .], when the genesis is from the music I write already knowing where the structures of the song are. It's a song that's already done and I speak on it" (Galli 2023, n.p.). Mezzopalco, the spoken music project that I will analyze in more detail within the next paragraphs, creates using the voice as the only input, with no instrumental music, and the idea that "poetry is music in the search for the voice, in poetry for the voice, in writing for the voice, in writing for sound environments" (Giordani 2023, n.p.).

In Zoopalco's spoken music projects, the boundaries between arts are blurred and shaped by highly diverse influences ranging from sound poetry to slam poetry, from rap to electronic, from songwriting to pop songs, from popular music to beatbox. The text is sung, spoken and/or chanted, but most importantly "tempered" *with* music so that neither element dominates the other.

## IMPRE: An Olympus for oral poetry

As I already mentioned in the introduction, Mezzopalco's first project *IMPRE* is a voice concert by poets Tommaso Giordani and Riccardo Iachini in collaboration

with beatboxer MolloBeat, which won the 2018 Dubito Prize. In the current group, the beatboxer is Ninjoh Beats (aka Giovanni Di Matteo), who took over immediately after the victory. This is a particularly interesting example of spoken music, because the voice is the project's only protagonist, present in three different forms: as singing (Giordani), as the already mentioned *récitatif scandé*/chanting (Iachini), and as beatbox (Mollo/Ninjoh). Tommaso Giordani recounts performing with his eyes closed, often singing. The melodic line usually comes to his mind before the lyrics, and he composes by fixing a bpm that provides a rhythmic pulse as a reference (cf. 2023, n.p.). Riccardo Iachini (2023) improvises his poems from memory; the text is thus a sort of *canovaccio*<sup>6</sup> and he does not feel the need to fix the lyrics by writing the lines (cf. 2023, n.p.). Ninjoh's approach to beatboxing includes producing sounds both on inhalation and on exhalation, giving the illusion of a musical continuum and a multiplicity of instruments. The roles of the three voices are defined from the beginning and are maintained for the entire performance, both live and on the recording, the only exception being Giordani oscillating between singing and chanting, often in sync with Iachini.

The title *IMPRE* stands for “essentials,” *imprescindibili* in Italian, and the entire project is intended as a tribute to certain models of Western oral poetry that, according to the group, should not be ignored. The idea of creating a pantheon of essentials came about in 2017 at the *Mitilanza* poetry festival in La Spezia, where the debate concerning the absence of poetic masters to inspire the new generation of young Italian poets had been central. Mezzopalco's response was a transdisciplinary search for the crucial artists who combined their interests, “drawing on the dump of History like needle seekers in immense haystacks and sewing, with those needles, alternative and imaginative stories” (2019b, 93). Their previously mentioned “Olympus of oral poetry” is composed by Muses “prêt-à-porter,” by which they mean potentially available to everyone, rather than popular. Indeed, Mezzopalco's members feel no reverential awe towards the models they invoke: they directly address the Olympus, calling it “pompous” (“borioso”). Asking for a muse should not be a big deal (“che ti costa?”), since these models are part of everyday life in the books they read and lend each other, in the music they listen to in their smartphones. Their intention is not so much a dissemination of these characters' stories as an attempt to measure themselves against their art, to transcode it.

---

<sup>6</sup> In theater, and particularly in the Italian genre of *commedia dell'arte*, this expression means a rough outline of a play or narrative, often used as a preparatory structure leaving some space to the actors for improvisation.



Glorious Olympus  
give me a Muse  
prêt-à-porter

Pompous Olympus  
give me a Muse  
what's the big deal?  
(Mezzopalco 2019b, 95)<sup>7</sup>

The project exists in several forms. The starting point was the live set-up: in fact, the name of the project recalls being in the middle of the stage, communicating through the stage, as well as the composition formed by half of the Zoopalco collective. The pieces were then recorded in order to participate in the Dubito Prize, but in a draft version. Likewise, the written texts were set for the annual prize publication, but continued to change in subsequent performances. After four years of experience and around forty live dates, in locations ranging from village squares to theaters, from the Auditorium Parco della musica in Rome to rap and indie music clubs, in 2022 ZPL produced their first album as a vinyl, which was also distributed on all major online streaming platforms. Mezzopalco released two videos as well, available on YouTube, intertwining their work with that of collaborators from the Zoopalco collective and other visual artists.

The professed goal of both the live show and the record is to take the listener on a non-linear journey through places and characters. As will be detailed below, the live performance has a modular structure, with the exact setlist decided in interactions with the audience. In the recorded album, the order in which the characters appear is fixed, but does not reflect the chronology of the historical periods they lived in. As the narrative voice states in the last skit, their journey does not proceed in a straight line, but is more like the string on a wall with which an investigator picks up traces to gain perspective on a bigger picture.

A journey does not always provide a plot. Sometimes it gets lost, returns, moves of an hour of a year from century to century, does not always remember, a journey. It speaks to the

---

<sup>7</sup> “Olimpo glorioso | dammi una Musa | prêt-à-porter | Olimpo borioso | dammi una Musa | che ti costa?” The quoted texts, not published elsewhere in this version, were kindly provided by the authors.

past, sometimes, to the future. It is not a straight line running on a plane, it is more like a thread of string woven into a wall.<sup>8</sup> (Mezzopalco 2022c, Tr. 6)

While temporal order is not the deciding criterion, the beatbox determines the sonic atmosphere of each piece, guiding the listener through different locations and musical genres, including hip-hop, flamenco, blues, and drum and bass, though the latter predominates due to Ninjoh's roots as a DJ. Apart from adding beats to the spoken-word poems, as it happens in hip-hop culture, the beatbox functions as a poetic device,<sup>9</sup> with a rhythm choice that metaphorically embodies the character represented, suggesting different moods, places and atmospheres, and imitating the instruments used within a certain music genre.

The first piece on their album, *Maratona*, starts with ambient sounds; the genre of drum and bass is then chosen to imitate the sounds of the battle of Marathon between Athens and the Persian Empire in 490 B.C., in the ancient Greece of the tragedian Aeschylus (ca. 525 B.C. – 456 B.C.), to whom the track is dedicated. Aeschylus witnessed and fought in key battles in the history of Athens and is the first of the tragic poets whose complete works are preserved; among the most famous are *The Persians*, *Prometheus bound*, and *The Oresteia*. The spatial-musical nexus may be clearer in the delta blues reference of the second piece on the album, "A memoir", dedicated to bluesman Gil Scott-Heron. Born in Chicago in 1949, he is remembered as an activist, a poet and a pioneer of the spoken word genre. Mezzopalco then guides the audience to Tangier to meet the audiovisual and performance poet Patrizia Vicinelli (1943–1991). From Bologna, the same Italian hometown as Iachini and Giordani, Vicinelli had a tormented life, escaping from prison to the African coasts.

The next city is Paris, where the French painter Jeanne Hébuterne (1898–1920) died. The poem is a letter to her better-known partner, the Italian painter Amedeo Modigliani. Within the album, she is the only character who did not directly work with poetry. In a pantheon of masters of oral art, this serves as a bridge towards a subsequent project for a B-side of the record, narrating the walk-ons of oral history, of those who have not found their voice to tell their own story. The 12/8 tempo of flamenco evoked by the beatbox percussive sounds in the track "Baci di madre" brings listeners to Andalusia (Spain), in honor of the most important female flamenco singer of the XX century: Pastora Pavón Cruz (1890–

---

<sup>8</sup> "Un viaggio non sempre dà corda a una trama. A volte si perde, ritorna, si sposta di un'ora di un anno di secoli in secoli, non sempre ricorda, un viaggio. Parla al passato, a volte, al futuro. Non è una retta che scorre su un piano è più un filo di spago intrecciato in un muro."

<sup>9</sup> The potential of beatbox as a literary device was explored in Dürr and Keylin, focusing on its use in spoken-word poetry (cf. 2024, 240).

1969). The last stop on the trip is contemporary Athens to tell the story of Demetrio Stratos (1945–1979), the Greek-Italian vocalist, experimenter with the limits of the spoken language, and frontman of the politically engaged progressive rock band Area. The track dedicated to him is a re-writing of one of their most famous songs: “Cometa rossa” which opens the album *Caution Radiation Area* (1974), and where Stratos showcases his virtuosic vocal abilities while singing an apparently simple, yet cryptic text in Greek, urging disobedience.

In between tracks, with a role that lies somewhere between the prose parts of a prosimetrum and a slam introduction serving as peritext,<sup>10</sup> six skits – in hip-hop culture, short spoken word sketches within an album – introduce Mezzopalco’s pieces. The voice of Iachini, poet-narrator, accompanies listeners on the journey, specifying the new space-time frame and the character to whom each track is dedicated.

This overview of oral art, including singers, poets, musicians, and tragedians, is not meant to be an exhaustive list of models, but rather a pantheon of masters – not only from what is strictly defined as literature – who have informed the group’s research.

Mezzopalco conceives their art as an ongoing creative process that is constantly exposed to change, and which has not reached the pinnacle of their research or a final, fixed form through the album’s release. The record was rather conceived as a snapshot of a specific moment of the process.

We tried to record the show several times, but it was NEVER convincing. What was happening on stage, in the performance, as written for the stage and for the performance, did not work in audio form. Due to the research within Zoopalco, we applied that method that is now transversal to all the collective’s productions: *medium specificity* [. . .]. Our poetry depends on the medium it inhabits, and if the medium changes it must change altogether. (Giordani 2022, 68)

Just as performance studies scholars argue that recording a live performance to document it “is something other than performance” (Phelan 1993, 146), the members of Mezzopalco are keen to point out that the live, recorded and video versions of their pieces have very different artistic processes, and are thus different aesthetic objects. First, the live performance is sparser, relying solely on the bare vocals, which are superimposed, and post-produced on the record in several suc-

---

**10** In Genette’s conceptualization, paratext is given by verbal or other productions, such as the title, illustrations, and preface, which surround the text and serve to present it. Paratext is divided into peritext, which concerns everything within the volume, and epitext, such as interviews given by the author. The use of paratext in live poetry has been addressed by Novak (2011, 138–144).

cessive layers. Their studio work lasted about a year and a half and involved multi-track recording, meaning that everyone performed at the same time, as in a live show; they then built a mosaic of voices by successive additions, always starting with the beatbox as the first layer and then overdubbing the spoken and sung verses, other beatbox parts, and the backing vocals.

Second, the lyrics undergo sometimes significant changes between the record and the live show, which can even create confusion during the performance: “they are different but not completely. When it’s time for the musical attack or for that word that should change, if you say the right one everything goes fine, but if you say the one that is in the record it’s over, because you need to continue the other version which is not the right one” (Iachini 2023, n.p.).

Finally, the live version is site-specific, based on interaction with the audience, with whom they aim to create a dialogue. The performers change their posture depending on whether the audience is close or far from them, but also on the type of context: “the challenge becomes bringing what we have to whoever we have in front of us, which can be middle-school kids or the jacked-up audience at the Auditorium Parco della Musica in Rome” (Iachini 2023, n.p.). Mezzopalco’s setlist does not follow the same dramaturgy as in the album, but rather has a modular structure. Taking advantage of the spatial-musical research described above, the performers sometimes ask the audience from which city they want the journey to start, and accordingly choose the order of the characters and therefore of the pieces. As a result of the interactivity of the live show, the spectators are not restricted to a passive role, but “become one of the factors of the intermedial network” (Giordani 2023, n.p.). From this brief introduction to the group’s work, it is already clear that spoken music should not be understood as a fixed poetic genre or musical form, but rather as an evolving, holistic language that questions mediums and platforms to explore the potential of the connection between poetry and music. In the next section, I will delve into a specific example.

## Intermediality and Medium Specificity

Given the connections between rap and slam/spoken word, frequently highlighted by international scholarship (Price-Style 2015; Vorger 2017; Lemire 2017, 7–10), I will now focus on the piece “A memoir” (cf. Mezzopalco 2022a), dedicated to Gil Scott Heron, with the objective of highlighting the medial relationship between text, music, and images in the live show, the recorded version, and the photo-clip published on YouTube.

The title takes its cues from Scott-Heron's autobiography about that "last vacation," which was the artist's final European tour before his death in May 2011 in New York. An early version of Mezzopalco's text, composed by Iachini, led to a successful initial public a cappella performance in slam poetry competitions.

Compared to the live performances – both the one in 2018 with Mollo described at the beginning of this contribution, and the more recent one with Nin-joh, recorded in 2021 (cf. Mezzopalco 2022b) – the album version has partially different lyrics: with substantial cuts and shifts in some verses, and hooks that recall the refrain inserted into some stanzas. There is also a slower tempo compared to the live version, which has an old-school hip-hop rhythm, while the album track tends towards a blues ballad, with a regular beat and an intensity shaped by the melodic arrangement. The interplay between the voices is also different. In the live version, Iachini's narrating voice is freer to develop the chant independent of the beatbox, which remains in the background. At certain points – which are not always the same points, and which do not necessarily correspond to the end of the stanzas of the text – the narrative voice pauses, the beatbox stops, and then explicitly indicates the tempo with percussive sounds to resume the next stanza. This expedient creates breaks in the sequencing of the narration: cuts of cinematic darkness that would later also be represented in the photo-clip. On the album, the beatbox and spoken voice are more aligned. In the live performance, Giordani only sings the refrain and chants certain words and verses in sync with Iachini, while in the recorded version he sings a vocal motif that alternates with more frequent hooks from the refrain for the entire duration of the track. During the interview, he explained me the intention behind this choice:

For *A memoir* it was a sort of recreation of the musical roots of the black American context: the idea of the singing and the beat that builds up in that way comes from the delta blues and work songs, arranged in a gospel key, therefore with the structure of a melodic trend borrowed from the delta blues. The guiding idea was that of an overlapping of voices to recreate the chorality of black music as gospel music and the idea of the beat that becomes blues – very posed, melancholic, to keep Gil Scott-Heron together with his musical roots. (Giordani 2023, n.p.)

While what Giordani describes are "intramedial references" (Rajewsky 2005, 54) within the same medium of music, in the text and video of *A Memoir*, it is possible to identify the translation operations that Irina Rajewsky called "media transposition," "media combination," and "intermedial references" at the medial level (2025, 51–52). Media transposition is defined as "the transformation of a given media product (a text, film, etc.) or its substratum into another medium" (Rajewsky 2005, 51). In the case of "*A memoir*," it begins with Heron's autobiography, which is used to create the text of the poem, set to music, and from which a video is then

created. The intermedial references<sup>11</sup> to the cinematic medium are fundamental to the narrative dimension of the poem, which aims to work as a sequence shot. The text starts with a close-up on the character:

He is wearing an American trench coat  
dark grey and a Cuban punch  
in his hand, an unlit cigarette in his mouth  
waiting to spit out  
smoke from the shadows. Above the shelf  
the remains of a French toast and from the dark corners  
dust rises from the Rhodes piano and breaks  
the patterns of feng shui  
(Mezzopalco 2022a)<sup>12</sup>

The frame then widens to show his room and continues the long take outside the apartment in a zoom out towards the city of New York, where history unfolds, shaping the political situation:

As he turns it [the cigarette] on he prays. He knows he can step aside  
now that his art is an anthem and the government if gone to Obama  
from Reagan, much to the dismay of the Black Panther.  
That living room is a waiting room.  
All is silent in the alleys of the Big Apple.  
(Mezzopalco 2022a)<sup>13</sup>

The video, which combines text, music and images, was also planned as a one-shot sequence, but later became a photo-clip: a series of shots edited one after the other that testify to the “making of” a video clip that was never realized. The plot was written, but there were two problems, as Tommaso Giordani and Riccardo Iachini reported in the interview. One was a medium problem: Gil Scott-Heron is the singer of “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”, a call to realize that when

---

11 Rajewsky describes them as “for example references in a literary text to a film through, for instance, the evocation or imitation of certain filmic techniques such as zoom shots, fades, dissolves, and montage editing. [ . . . ] Intermedial references are thus to be understood as meaning-constitutional strategies that contribute to the media product’s overall signification” (2005, 52).

12 “Ha addosso un trench americano | fumo-di-Londra e un punch cubano | nella mano, ha una sigaretta spenta in bocca | aspetta di poter sputare fuori | fumo dall’ombra. Sopra il ripiano | i resti di un french toast e dagli angoli bui | la polvere si alza dal piano Rhodes e rompe | gli schemi del feng shui.”

13 “Mentre l’accende prega. Sa che può farsi da parte | ora che la sua arte è un anthem e si è passati a Obama | da Reagan, con buona pace delle Black Panther. | Quel salotto è una sala d’attesa. | Tutto tace tra i vicoli della grande mela.”

the revolution comes, people will not be able to take a passive attitude, only participate live (cf. Scott-Heron 1971). Therefore “the idea is that if the revolution will not be televised then it doesn’t happen on video either” (Iachini 2023, n.p.). The other problem was political: “there was the problem of shooting the video of a group of three white guys dedicating a song to an African American activist” (Giordani 2023, n.p.). They then chose to involve thirty people, fifteen black and fifteen white, anti-racist activists and collaborators of the Zoopalco collective, who they asked to reflect on self-representation by wearing two outfits: one capable of describing the perception of oneself, the other saying something about how one should dress to represent the expectations of the outside gaze. Roman activist Kwanza Musi Dos Santos portrayed Gil Scott-Heron, while everyone else represented moments from his life and political speeches. A preparatory process of about five hours culminated – when everything was ready to shoot – in the act of turning off the camera and sending everyone home, offering the viewer only the process, which is witnessed in around six thousand shots. The collective work also involved the participants selecting the words to compose a visual poem that overlays the video. Everyone was invited to choose the two most significant words from the lyrics, which were then edited to accompany the voice, drawing a semantic field of Gil Scott-Heron’s story through the piece.

Rather than producing a video clip along the lines of those usually released for songs, Mezzopalco thematizes the choice *not* to make a video, instead showing the process in order to honor Heron’s poetics and political engagement. In this way, the group offers a medium-specific product whose aesthetic choices show an intense reflection on the medial, alongside the political, dimension of their work.

To describe their research, Giordani formulates the idea of a poetry that “in output is medium specific and in research is intermedial” (2023, n.p.), which starts from the word but is fluid and non-hierarchical. From the outset, it is designed to confront multiple forms of media, but is realized under different conditions that clearly differentiate listening to the record from the live performance, and watching the video from the sequence of backstage pictures. Mezzopalco’s spoken music research is like a “suspended platform” (Giordani 2023, n.p.) between different media in which a specific channeling of the creative approach changes in terms of its output.

Similarly, the other projects produced by ZPL showcase a distinct poetic and aesthetic identity for each actualization. In Italian spoken music, characterized by underground independent productions, experimentation is the strong point of the practice, and the homogenization of the styles that is sometimes apparent in slam poetry is not yet noticeable.

## Conclusions

The aim of this contribution was to propose a definition of the spoken music form in the Italian scene, through an analysis of one example. Determining the boundaries of contemporary art, in its porous tension toward the inter-/multi-/trans-media form offered by digital tools, is increasingly difficult nowadays. It is even more complex for poetry, which Lello Voce defines as “constitutionally ‘liquid’”:

[. . .] from the language it articulates the voice drips onto the page, and from the page, after soaking it, it drips back up to the ears (and eyes) of the world. Being liquid has always allowed it to mix and merge with the other arts. [. . .] It indifferently ploughs through various media (aural, visual, multimedia), but its identity is linguistic [. . .]. (Voce 2023, 346)

The Zoopalco collective’s works produced by ZPL are available on popular online streaming platforms, have been released on vinyl, and have become music video or photo-clips and on-demand video poetry series, as well as art installations. When I asked them whether spoken music was a poetic or musical genre, they all convincingly spoke of a movement or scene that instead identifies its practice as a tag to be used to orient listeners and place themselves within some of the models that have been mentioned here. Even though Demetrio Stratos, Pastora Pavón Cruz, and Gil Scott-Heron (to name just a few) may seem very different and distant from one another, their artistic exploration aimed at enhancing poetry through music serves as the common denominator that unites them as exemplary models for Mezzopalco’s spoken music. The interviews revealed that for the artists the process is more important than the result, and the medial dimension is crucial. Questions about how to define their practice, however, came after the experimental phase, which runs through what Schäfer called the different “medial constellations” that draw from the contemporary literary field (2015, 178). The “liquidity” of poetry also poses interesting questions about shared authorship in the collaborations between artists for the creation of an aesthetic object, which is medium-specific in the output, but intermedial in its conception.

As Mezzopalco’s example has shown, the work of directing and tempering is not merely limited to the relationship between text and music as explained by Voce, but expands to a consideration of the physical and digital means used to distribute and publish collective works. The poet thus has the directorial role of coordinating and tempering the arts with each other. In spoken music, the poetic word – in its various declinations that explore the limits between spoken, beat-boxed, chanted, and sung – remains a constant at the center of the mix created by this artistic practice.



## References

- Ailes, Katie. *The Performance and Perception of Authenticity in Contemporary U.K. Spoken Word Poetry*. PhD dissertation. Glasgow: Univ. of Strathclyde, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.48730/g09w-x732>.
- Benthien, Claudia. “La poésie à l’ère numérique.” Trans. Oran McKenzie. *Théories du lyrique: Une anthologie de la critique mondiale de la poésie*. Ed. Antonio Rodriguez. Lausanne: Univ. de Lausanne, 2021. <https://lyricalvalley.org/blog/2021/05/21/la-poesie-a-lere-numerique/>. (January 21, 2025).
- Collins, Michael. “Dramatic Theory and the Italian Baroque Libretto.” *Opera and Vivaldi*. Ed. Michael Collins and Elise K. Kirk. Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1984. 15–40.
- Cook, Nicholas. *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013.
- Disturbat! Altr! *Disturbat! Altr!* Digital album. Bologna: ZPL, 2024. <https://zoopalco.bandcamp.com/album/disturbat-altr>. (May 13, 2025).
- Dürr, Rebecka. “Vocal Interactions: The Use of Voice in Spoken Word Duos.” *Proceedings of the 2023 Aarhus International Conference on Vocal Studies*. Ed. Miša Hejná, Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, Mark Eaton, Mathias Clasen, Zac Boyd, and Oliver Niebuhr. Berlin and Boston: Sciendo (De Gruyter), 2024. 35–40. <https://doi.org/10.2478/9788366675513-005>.
- Dürr, Rebecka, and Vadim Keylin. “‘Be {B}{t}. Be Poet’: Beatboxing as a Poetic Device.” *Literarische Organotechnik: Studien zu einer Diskurs- und Imaginationsgeschichte*. Ed. Lars Koch, Sarah Neelsen, and Julia Prager. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2024. 239–256. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110775310-012>.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Fisco, Eleonora. “Sulla Spoken Music in Italia: I progetti del collettivo Zoopalco.” *L’Ulisse: Poesia e musica oggi* 26 (2023): 296–309.
- Fisco, Eleonora. *La risposta estetica nel poetry slam: Frame analysis e fenomenologia della performance*. Monza: Mille Gru, 2022.
- Galli, Eugenia. Interview with the author (unpublished). Bologna, June 14, 2023.
- Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1997.
- Giordani, Tommaso. “Mezzopalco mezzodisco mezzastoria.” *Rime di pietra sui divieti: Poesia, musica and dissenso: Materiali del Premio Dubito 2021*. Ed. Marco Philopat and Lello Voce. Milan: Agenzia X, 2022. 64–69.
- Giordani, Tommaso. Interview with the author (unpublished). Bologna, June 14, 2023.
- Gussow, Mel. “Philip Glass Buys a Loaf of Bread.” *The New York Times*, February 4, 1990. <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/04/theater/review-theater-philip-glass-buys-a-loaf-of-bread.html> (August 14, 2025).
- Iachini, Riccardo. Interview with the author (unpublished). Bologna, June 14, 2023.
- La Via, Stefano. “Il ‘lai del ragionare lento’ e la sua voce poetico-musicale: Appunti per un’analisi razionalemotiva.” *L’Ulisse: Nuove metriche. Ritmi, versi e vincoli nella poesia contemporanea* 16 (2014): 178–197.
- La Via, Stefano. *Poesia per musica e musica per poesia: Dai trovatori a Paolo Conte*. Rome: Carocci, 2017.
- Lemire, Chantal D. *Speaking Songs: Music-Analytical Approaches to Spoken Word*. PhD dissertation. London, ON: Univ. of Western Ontario, 2021. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/7670> (January 21, 2025).
- Mezzopalco. “Premio Dubito 2018 | Mezzopalco.” YouTube video, @premiadubito6997, January 28, 2019a, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keqNrPGWQSI&t=555s> (January 21, 2025).

- Mezzopalco. "Mezzopalco." *Il genere errante: Materiali del Premio Dubito 2018*. Ed. Marco Philopat and Lello Voce. Milan: Agenzia X, 2019b. 89–100.
- Mezzopalco. "A Memoir [Gil Scott-Heron]." YouTube video, @zoopalco-zpl, May 27, 2022a, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgKbDgxLGoo> (October 13, 2024).
- Mezzopalco. "IMPRE Live at Vooduro Studio." YouTube video, @zoopalco-zpl, July 13, 2022b, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHvRgINViwo> (January 21, 2025).
- Mezzopalco. *IMPRE*. Digital album. Bologna: ZPL, 2022c. <https://zoopalco.bandcamp.com/album/impre> (January 21, 2025).
- Mezzopalco. "Non Sempre Ricordano." YouTube video, @zoopalco-zpl, November 22, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojc59pcGNxM> (October 13, 2024).
- Novak, Julia. *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011.
- Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Price-Styles, Alice. "MC Origins: Rap and Spoken Word Poetry." *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*. Ed. Justin A. Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015. 11–21.
- Rajewsky, Irina O. "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality." *Intermedialités / Intermediality* 6 (2005): 43–64. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1005505ar>.
- Schäfer, Heike. "Poetry in Transmedial Perspective: Rethinking Intermedial Literary Studies in the Digital Age." *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae: Film and Media Studies* 10 (2015): 169–182.
- Scott-Heron, Gil. *The Last Holiday: A Memoir*. New York: Grove Press, 2012.
- Scott-Heron, Gil. "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised". *Pieces of a Man*. Vinyl record. New York: The Flying Dutchman, 1971. Tr. 1.
- Stera, Gabriele. "In tutte le direzioni e anche in tutte le altre." *Rime di pietra sui divieti: Poesia, musica e dissenso. Materiali del Premio Dubito 2021*. Ed. Marco Philopat and Lello Voce. Milan: Agenzia X, 2022. 49–50.
- Voce, Lello. "Per una poesia ben temperata." *Il fiore inverso*. Ed. Lello Voce and Frank Nemola. Rome: Squilibri, 2016. 43–70.
- Voce, Lello. "Un divorzio all'italiana: poesia con musica." *L'Ulisse: Poesia e musica oggi* 26 (2023): 341–352.
- Vorger, Camille. "Essai de slamologie: L'exemple de Grand Corps Malade." *La poésie délivrée*. Ed. Stéphane Hirschi, Corinne Legoy, Serge Linarès, Alexandra Saemmer, and Alain Vaillant. Nanterre: Presses univ. de Paris Nanterre, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pupo.10348>.
- Zollo, Vittorio. Interview with the author (unpublished). Online, December 6, 2023.
- Zoopalco. "L'opera come processo." *Se solo queste guerre non scoppiassero a piangere: Poesia, musica e dissenso. Materiali dal Premio Dubito 2022*. Ed. Marco Philopat and Lello Voce. Milan: Agenzia X, 2023. 35–36.
- Zuliani, Luca. *L'italiano della canzone*. Rome: Carocci, 2018.
- Zuliani, Luca. "Sulle differenze fra poesia orale e canzone." *L'Arte orale: Poesia, Musica, Performance*. Ed. Laura Cardilli, Stefania Lombardi, and Stefano Vallauri. Turin: Accademia Univ. Press, 2020. 107–127.
- Zumthor, Paul. *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*. Trans. Kathryn Murphy-Judy. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1990 [1983].