

1 Introduction

ALLAN F. MOORE

How do we ‘know’ music? Although music has a variety of distinct audiences, one way of approaching a universally applicable response is by looking at the activities we undertake in its presence. Most widespread, of course, is listening. We may listen for pleasure, for identification, as an accompaniment to other activities (dancing, cooking), distractedly (as when watching a film) and in many other ways. In pre-modern societies, listening without any more active form of participation was rare indeed, whether that activity focused on performing itself, on some form of dance, or even on banter with the musicians: some would argue that in modern society too, the musical experience is impoverished without such participation. Many of us are either fortunate or wilful enough to insist on performing, and even composing. All of these activities may be defined as ways of ‘knowing’ music, even if that knowledge is not communicated verbally. We do, however, find verbal communication about music a seductive activity: the scholar Nicholas Cook even argues that words are indispensable in the process of our creating for ourselves meaning out of the music we listen to (Cook 1998a: 270). Verbal communication is certainly necessary for the remaining activity we undertake in respect of music – its study, the process of knowing it ‘better’.

Twenty years ago, it was difficult to find any institution where popular music (as a field distinct from ‘classical’ or ‘non-Western’ musics or jazz) could be found being taught to prospective musicians at undergraduate level. It simply did not appear on the syllabus. Partly as a consequence, the music was ascribed ‘amateur’ status, notwithstanding the evident professionalism exhibited by its practitioners, and the revenue those considered successful were able to generate for various stakeholders (agents and managers, publishers and recording companies, performance venues, record distributors, high street outlets). At the turn of the century, the position has changed to such

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an extent that not only are many undergraduate musicians enabled to study some aspect of popular music (whether that be its performance, its composition, production, sociology, analysis, its marketing or whatever), but there are even degree programmes devoted entirely to it. This has raised within the academic community inevitable questions of how it is to be taught and studied. It has become abundantly clear that to treat popular music as simply another activity (something else that is 'popular', that people indulge in) and to restrict oneself to investigating its institutions and practices is not sufficient for, as music, it appears to hold such a qualitatively distinct place in our lives. It has become equally clear that to treat popular music as simply another genre (as simply another sort of 'music' that people listen to) and to make use of the techniques developed for the study of the bourgeois music canon, is similarly insufficient. The issue is wider than this, of course, for even the techniques through which the 'bourgeois music canon' is addressed are no longer unquestioned. It is at the intersection of these three realizations that this set of essays originates. It will be useful, therefore, to begin by outlining both the archaeology of 'popular musicology' and the problematics which have become identified as the 'new musicology', or 'critical musicology'.

'Popular musicology' is an unfortunate, and potentially misleading, term for the discipline which is growing out of musicology¹ in order to address the need for an investigative methodology.² When musicologists first took the daring step of investigating contemporary popular music, the need for a separate methodology (i.e. the realization that 'popular music' was another sort of music) was not readily perceived. Thus, in his ground-breaking attempt to interpret the music of the Beatles, British musicologist Wilfrid

- 1 Musical scholarship in North America observes a disciplinary divide between musicology (which incorporates historical study, aesthetics, criticism) and music theory (which incorporates analysis). The UK (and Europe generally, it seems) does not, except where the North American influence is overwhelming. The term 'musicology' acts there as an over-arching term for all these activities. Here, I adopt the latter usage, in part because the former divide is senseless in a field (popular music) which as yet involves so few musicologists (in the broader sense), but so many from other disciplines (sociology, cultural studies, media studies, literary theory, etc.). There are other reasons, of course, which will become clear.
- 2 'Popular musicology' should be read as the musicological investigation of popular music, rather than the accessible investigation of music!

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Mellers (1973) nonetheless employed his version of the standard discursive analytical practice of the time.³ Indeed, the Beatles were among the first pop musicians to have called forth positive evaluations from the establishment.⁴ The US anthropologist Charles Keil came to a related repertoire with a different set of questions to pose. While his study of the blues is informed by close, analytical listening, his aim was to discover the role the contemporary blues singer played within urban, lower-class Negro culture (Keil 1991: 1). His compatriot Charles Hamm adopted a more standard historical musicological approach to his unearthing of the history of popular song in the USA (Hamm 1979) and, as befits a historical musicologist, his work remains concerned with the relationship between that repertoire and both avant-garde and African musics. He proclaims elsewhere his indebtedness to an earlier study by Mellers (1965), which at the time ‘concern[ed] itself more with jazz and other vernacular music than any book to that point’ (Hamm 1983: ix). Three approaches, then, the analytical/interpretive, the anthropological and the historical, whose terms are taken from their parent disciplines. It is only in retrospect that these studies have taken on their own historical importance – at the time they were each perceived as marginal studies within music, just as within each of these approaches popular music remained a marginal field of study. It was only with the activities of British sociologists, and particularly the work emanating from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, that the study of popular music began to move closer to centre stage. Here, it was constructed most typically as a music of youth resistance via theories of subculture (see especially Hall and Jefferson 1976), a construction which is falling increasingly into disfavour. Frith’s (1983) related emphasis on issues of opportunity and constraint within which access to popular music operated posed many of the important questions. In the background of all these studies (although a long way in the background in some cases) was Adorno’s denigration of pre-war popular music (e.g. Adorno 1978) in favour of European modernism, in the attempt to construct an adequate

- 3 Middleton (1972) proclaims its indebtedness to Mellers, and actually appeared slightly earlier. It is not that well known and has been out of print for many years, but is a vastly under-rated book, largely free from the methodological problems inherent in Mellers’s approach.
- 4 Rorem (1968) and the entire collection edited by Eisen (1969) are cases in point, even if the latter consists largely of journalism.

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and musically informed sociology of music (see especially the critique of Adorno in Middleton 1990: 34–63). The diversity of approaches observed here might usefully suggest that the study of popular music is an interdisciplinary affair, the contributions of whose various fields were mapped in Richard Middleton's mammoth study (1990). In part, this interdisciplinary agenda was formative in the institution of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (Tagg 1985), even if the polarization often encountered between 'musicological' and 'sociological' approaches has been no less apparent there.

The last two decades in particular have sown poststructuralist doubts deep within the close reading of music of all kinds, doubts which are directed not only at the authority of the composer but, perhaps even more strongly, at the identity, the coherence, the autonomy of the individual piece, work, song (however we choose to label it). The consequences of this move have broadly been of three types. Some have argued that the very practice of close reading, or analysis, has become fatally flawed in its inability to respond to the particularity of our responses to music.⁵ Some, in reinforcing the division between humanities-based and science-based approaches to music, have simply denied the force of these objections.⁶ Both these types of response are fast becoming entrenched. A third possibility is available, to divorce the practice of analysis from the fundamental assumption of the autonomy of the piece under analysis. Adam Krims (1998) has recently attempted to establish such a position within the field of the canon, on theoretical grounds. A similar aim underpins this collection, to which I shall return. However, it is the first of these three approaches which most requires acknowledgement at this time.

To differing degrees, both (US) New Musicology and (UK) Critical Musicology broadly embrace the conditional relativism embodied in Middleton's call to study 'the whole musical field' (1990: 7). They are marked not only by dissatisfaction with the methods (including conventional analysis) employed to undertake such study, but also by dissatisfactions with the exclusive divisions into which musicology falls, and with the exclusive

5 This is the thrust of Tomlinson's key (1993) article.

6 In distinguishing between 'humanities-based' and 'science-based', I make reference to the musicology/music theory divide. Agawu (1996) clearly expresses such a denial.

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repertoire usually studied by musicology (and which develops outward from the encounter with Classicism). One of the strongest points of contact among interested parties is the acceptance of a notion of inclusiveness, the realization that musicologists can no longer afford to ignore a particular corpus simply because it is written, performed, studied, or just listened to by, say, women, by expatriate, foreign or isolated communities, by a particular social class or age group, or simply by 'others'. This necessarily implies a questioning of such notions as genius, canons themselves, universality, aesthetic autonomy and textual immanence, a questioning now routinely traced to Kerman (1980, 1985).⁷

So, at the centre of the debate concerning just how popular music is best studied is the status of the 'musical text' and the activity of 'music analysis'. I have identified this debate above as originating in 'poststructuralism', which may be understood as a group of methodologies which go beyond the seeking of solutions in the ways cultural products and practices are structured. This is an aspect of a wider cultural shift in industrial society, a paradigmatic change conveniently known as 'postmodernism'. Under 'modernism', within music discourse, notions of originality, authorship and autonomy were self-evident. 'Originality' in some respect distinguished the noteworthy from the mundane, and pursuit of the original ensured the continual progress of musical styles and techniques. Notions of 'authorship' meant that to understand a piece of music was to understand the composer's intention, or at least his (normally) workings.⁸ And, since the creative artist functioned as an autonomous being (see Pippin 1991: 61–4), it was not necessary to delve outside his biography, or that of his music, in order to understand it. 'Postmodernism', however, has recognized that progress is quite possibly an illusion (an argument put elegantly long ago by the scholar Christopher Small – see Small 1977: 9) and that the authority long vested in the author is specious. No less so are, we believe, claims to musical autonomy.

In the words of the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, 'information consists of differences that make a difference' (Bateson 1979: 99). Analysis is

7 Some of the results of such questioning can be found in volumes such as Bergeron and Bohlman (1992), Pople (1994), Schwarz, Kassabian and Siegel (1997), Krims (1998), Cook (1998b) and Cook and Everist (1999).

8 In the study of music, the notion of the omnipotent voice of the author in his/her work was never so strongly held as in the study of literature.

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very good at pointing out differences, whether stylistic (i.e. between similar pieces) or within pieces (varied repetitions, for instance). Although this is easier for the canon (where one has a visual text to refer to), it is nonetheless possible when analyzing the aural text (what it is that we hear). Even such a critic of formalist analysis as Charles Keil nonetheless pays great attention to objectifiable details of musical structures (Keil 1994: 59–67). The difficulty lies in deciding which differences do make a difference, which carry any interpretive weight. Thus, as we see it here, analysis is an issue of interpretation. But, interpretation of what? It appears to me that the reason we (communally) go out of our way to experience music is *simply in order to have been part of the experience that was that music*. It is thus, at root, the experience which is subject to interpretation. This formulation is pretty abstract, but I think that most of the reasons which tend to be offered for why people use music at all can be distilled into such a phrase. Now, the role of scholars is principally to formulate pertinent questions. From my own perspective, the most valuable question to follow this observation is something like ‘why was the experience like it was?’ As a musicologist, I would tend to narrow the question down further to ‘why did the music sound like it did?’ Although I am necessarily defensive about this bracketing off of many of what I would call the ‘paramusical’ elements of the experience (in that the hearing of music is the *sine qua non* for a communal musical experience to have taken place), I take refuge in the recognition that it is the responsibility of the entire community of scholars to provide an adequate study of the field, rather than that of individuals. Nobody can claim to see the entire picture. Although the question, ‘why did the music sound like it did?’ may seem simple enough, it opens the door to that whole host of more detailed questions with which scholars are often concerned. These would include ‘how does it sound?’ (and the associated ‘who does the telling?’, i.e. does my observation carry more weight than that of anyone else, and if so, on what grounds?), ‘for whom does it sound like that?’ (i.e. for whom do the differences we observe make a difference? – what levels of competence should be assumed? – are we taking an ‘objective view’, the performers’ view, the active listeners’, or whose?) and even, at last, ‘why does it matter?’ (i.e. how does people’s use of music relate to their uses of other artefacts and experiences?).

It is, however, necessary to begin from some conceptualization of how the music sounds. The most important reason for this, I believe, is one of

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empowerment. Listeners everywhere are encouraged to conceptualize the invention of music as a branch of magic, to believe that musical actions and gestures cannot be subject to any level of explanation, and hence understanding, beyond the trivially biographical. This view, which might almost be described as a sort of ‘popular modernism’ (in the terms discussed above) is ultimately disabling and disenfranchising, in that it conveys to the conventionally ‘unmusical’ that their state is beyond any hope of change. That this belief in music as magic is shared not only by those in influential positions within the media (much popular music journalism, for instance), but also by those in positions of power within the leisure industry (see e.g. Negus 1992: 52–5), only makes the disturbance more acute. The view seems only too natural to those who have never made note-to-note musical decisions, and only too absurd to those who reflect upon spending their lives doing so.

To take full advantage of the interdisciplinarity that the study of popular music offers, means at least to begin from the understandings that relevant disciplines can provide (see Tagg 1991: 144). The interface between musicology on the one hand, and the social sciences and other humanities on the other, is often highly problematic, and will remain so unless we can be quite explicit about our normally unexamined assumptions: it has been a salutary experience to engage with scholars who spend their entire professional lives researching aspects of music, but who cannot accept that such a thing as a ‘perfect cadence’ or a ‘gapped melodic contour’ can have any bearing on the way listeners respond to music, because conceptualizing such things requires training those listeners have not had. Defending the practice of analysis in such circumstances can be an education in itself, especially when trying to sort out at what point objectivity intersects with intersubjectivity in such an enterprise. This seems such a crucial task as to make acceptable the risk of briefly sinking into pedantry. We hear a sound when our eardrum vibrates at, say, 440Hz, having been set in motion by sound-waves vibrating at that same speed. They, in turn, have been set in motion by the vibration of some material, again at that speed, even in the presence of conflicting vibrations from other sound sources (such a sound may, of course, be of very short duration indeed). This is an objective description of what happens. In saying this, I mean that any person with normal or near-normal hearing, from whatever culture they come, will have their eardrums vibrate at the

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same speed. They will not identify the 'sound' that the brain receives in terms of its speed – that would be too cumbersome. There is a code fairly widely accepted in Europe, North America, and latterly in other parts of the world also, which would call the sound 'A above middle C' and, in choosing whether to use that code or some other, we are entering into an act of interpretation, but it is an interpretation of the cultural context of the sound, of how to understand it, rather than of the sound itself. Our choice of code (how we make sense of the sound) cannot affect the speed of the vibrations, nor their interference patterns with vibrations from antecedent, simultaneous, and subsequent sounds. By subjecting this sound to analysis, we are in fact making an interpretation of the relationships apparent between it and antecedent, simultaneous, and consequent sounds, an activity into which it is impossible not to insert the self, because such relationships only become apparent in the presence of a perceiver.⁹ Thus, an analysis is only one among a number of possibilities. This is an important point, since this book lays no claim to the provision of a single mechanism whereby musical meaning is enabled.

An analysis can be subject to at least two types of evaluation. An inherent evaluation would critique it on what might be widely recognized grounds: its economy; its rhetoric or communicative power; its misidentification of the irreducible facets of the object.¹⁰ For example, if we could demonstrate that profligacy was of little value in any aspect of life, we would have a secure basis for evaluation on this ground (thus does aesthetics shade into ethics). Structural coherence used to be regarded as such a ground, of course. These days, however, it may well be that there are no sufficiently widely recognized grounds to permit such an evaluation. A pragmatic evaluation would recognize the question towards which the analysis was directed in search of an answer and use this as a starting-point. The weakness of the scholarship community lies in the fact that any analysis worthy of the name has to be based on, and give rise to, mutually agreed theoretical paradigms. In some areas of music (for instance eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tonal music, perhaps jazz, perhaps the Indian *raga* traditions, perhaps twentieth-century concert music) we have these. Despite a growing number of studies

⁹ To my mind, the most elegant demonstration of this observation remains that of Barfield (1988).

¹⁰ What Tagg (1991) usefully identifies as its *musemes*.

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(Winkler 1978; Tagg 1982; van der Merwe 1989; Middleton 1990; Brackett 1995; Everett 2000; Moore 2001), Western popular music is one of the areas in which, as yet, we do not. What, however, is this objective sound? We cannot entirely take it for granted. It does not exist in any sort of written form but only, ultimately, in our (faulty) memories. All visual representations of it are just that – representations. The emphasis on sounds *per se*, rather than on representations of them, distinguishes the investigations in this book from that of much other analytical enquiry. In formulating this distinction, Theodore Gracyk has recently differentiated between the ‘ontological thickness’ of ‘rock’ (the very physical nature of the sounds we hear, and the richness of detail over and above what can be visually represented in codified form) and the corresponding ‘thinness’ of the scores of the European tradition, where a great deal of performance detail has to be inferred through familiarity with performance styles. The issue is complex: as I have argued above, notwithstanding the difficulty of representation the musical text does have a specificity – we do not go so far as Raymond Monelle’s recent claim that the ‘[musical] text is whatever criticism observes’ (Monelle 2000: 157). However much our idealism may cause us to rue the fact, the commodification of contemporary music culture is taken as read.

The proximate causes of this book are broadly twofold. In 1990, Richard Middleton argued that the wholesale importation of analytical methods borrowed from music analysis and applied to popular music could not be sustained (Middleton 1990: 104ff.). All the essays in this book are therefore, in some sense, essays in music analysis, even where they take a critical stance towards the practice of analysis itself. As I have stated above, analysis is necessarily interpretation, and these essays alone demonstrate the healthy divergence of practices which nonetheless do not prevent us from continuing to laugh with each other. As will by now be clear, however, they exclude the formalist interpretations developing from traditional modernist musicology (represented best, perhaps, by Forte 1995), such that nowhere is the practice of analysis its own justification. In each case, analysis is put at the service of answering some larger question. In 1992, I co-hosted the London conference *Popular Music: The Primary Text*, whose purpose was, in part, to debate the senses in which analysis was appropriate to popular music. Although none of these essays is as old as that conference, I first ate and drank with some of the current contributors at that event. This book is a

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subsequent snapshot of the analytic work being undertaken. It addresses a variety of genres, each of which is 'current' at the time of writing, but since no genre predominates within the collection, we endeavour to evade any sense of presuming to establish a 'canon'. Above all, we believe the book demonstrates the sheer range and vitality of contemporary close reading of popular music.

Since it was first conceived, three other comparable collections have appeared: it may be worth outlining how they differ. John Covach and Graeme Boone's *Understanding Rock* (1997) addresses a smaller repertoire (i.e. 'rock') and is aimed exclusively, to all appearances, at a North American audience. Its subtitle ('Essays in Musical Analysis') situates it clearly within the discourse mapped out above. Walter Everett's *Expression in Pop-Rock Music* (2000) succeeds it by only three years. In some essays (most notably those by Hisama and Fast), the social and the musical are seen to impact on each other, while elsewhere not only the utilization, but the conceptualization, of analytic method is foregrounded in a primarily aesthetic discourse. Richard Middleton's *Reading Pop* (2000) is a collection of key articles with a similar range to this, but encompassing a far more overt interdisciplinary approach, such that the question of analysis is rather downplayed. These collections indicate the growth in collective popular music scholarship, while they also lay out a domain within which this present collection moves.

So, what of the chapters in this book? Each addresses a different genre, and each is analytically founded, while each also addresses a different area of the problematics outlined above. The issue of autonomy is met head-on in Robynn Stilwell's discussion of the music to the cult TV show *The X-Files*. She situates it as a site of many boundary distinctions: between music for television and music for film, between aesthetic and commercial imperatives, and between music and sound design, each pair impacting on the others. She traces the show's precedents and argues that it inhabits its own distinct sound-world, strongly (and problematically) dependent on what everyday language describes as 'ethnic' music. She argues that, in its acceptance of a specifically televisual medium, the show adopts a greater continuity of scoring than has been the norm, in the process denying the music any strong sense of autonomy, but as a result increasing its effectiveness 'as mediator of the visual experience'. The interdisciplinary approach required by this chapter is explicit elsewhere, too. Dai Griffiths takes up an old issue, that