Introduction: popular music and the experience of modernism

This is a book about the "cultural modernism" of the early twentieth century. Part I examines the place of popular music within conceptions of modernism, and Part II examines what I call "the rhythms and semiotics of language and sound" in the music of the Gershwin brothers, Cole Porter, Thomas "Fats" Waller, and Billie Holiday, with occasional references to modernist writers William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Ralph Ellison, William Carlos Williams, Virginia Woolf, and others. The emphasis of *Modernism and Popular Music* is primarily linguistic or textual in that I am pursuing an account of how a "revolution in words," as I note in the Conclusion, transformed or marked the ways in which sensibility, mind, belief, perspective, society, economics, and human experience more generally came to be understood in the early twentieth century. I argue, however, that this revolution, which is usually associated with poets, writers, artists, linguists, and philosophers – as well as twentieth-century composers of "art" music – is just as evident, if not more so, in the work of the great songwriters and jazz performers who came to prominence in the United States between the two World Wars. These artists did not merely reveal the basic contents of this shift in how the world was (or could be) comprehended or "felt." Rather, in their role as "alchemists of the vernacular," as Alfred Appel has described them,[1] they opened up a powerful social space through which fundamental problems of equality, difference, desire, reason, authority, self, and language were not merely expressed, but questioned and negotiated. And they did this, above all, by foregrounding the dynamics of performance and gesture in the experience of human being.

Modernism and Popular Music is a "literary" study insofar as it takes the lyrics and verbal performances of the musicians seriously, but it doesn't focus on literature in any conventional way. Rather, it focuses on non-verbal performances and verbal performances that aspire to the condition of music. In so doing, it offers two global arguments. One is that popular

arts can and should be included in any working concept of twentieth-century cultural modernism. A second global argument is its contention that the ways that musical lyrics/poetry emphasize the material aspect of language can and should help us understand the other verbal arts of poetry and fiction. Both of these arguments assume that focusing on the best music/lyric composition and performance in the 1930s can teach us to hear poetic language of the early twentieth century in new and better ways, and that the "musical modernism" of popular music makes this clear. In one explicit example, I mention that Walter Benn Michael's contention about the material "reality" of William Carlos Williams's language – an argument that can be found in much criticism of modernist poetry – is almost immediate and self-evident when we listen to Cole Porter. Thus, while the book doesn't focus on literature in that it doesn't offer the standard kinds of analyses of particular poetic texts – though it does do so for Gershwin and Porter and for Waller's and Holiday's performative texts – it does emphasize the power of language, including the "language structure" of music, and particularly the power of modernist language in the early twentieth century.

MODERNITY AND MODERNISM

"Modernism" is a term that is still a site for contest, yet most people who examine it agree that it witnesses a remarkable moment in our history that marks the particular cultural crisis of the early twentieth century. That crisis was the need felt by many working in the arts and sciences to rethink and redefine received conceptions about human life, social value, and scientific knowledge. In *Modernism and Popular Music* I turn to the popular music of the 1930s to examine what seems to me to be participating in the same or a similar phenomenal crisis: the felt need to rethink and redefine received conceptions of aesthetic modernism in the particularly American context of the rapid urbanization of the United States. This urbanization was based upon huge influxes of people from eastern and southern Europe and from the American south into American cities (and especially New York City); the great American economic boom that followed World War I; and the remarkable technical innovations that produced a host of new consumer goods (including the innovation of installment buying that put many of these products in the hands of large numbers of people and helped create the boom). To this end the book begins by comparing the phenomenon of what I am calling "Enlightenment modernity" in the "early modern" period of the seventeenth and eighteenth century to the "cultural

modernism" of the twentieth century. These two signal moments in our cultural history share many qualities – individualism, secularism, trust in reason or instrumentalism – even while they differ in many respects, most notably, as I argue here, in the power of consumerism in the later period. (Such consumerism, I also suggest, conditions the validation of performance along with production.) In this discussion I am, I know, generalizing across a host of local questions about the particular terms and issues I examine – particularly notable in remarkably different national and political contexts – but it is my hope that such generalizations give rise to a finer sense of the experience and values of early-twentieth-century Europe and, especially, the United States.

In any case, *Modernism and Popular Music* begins with this comparison at least in part because so many of our self-evident received ideas emerged in the time of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century "modernity," that particular time of transition from the medieval world to the "modern" world. Especially notable in the context of this study is the fact that our received ideas of music, at least in Europe and America, really begin in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when methods of musical notation, the inventions of musical instruments as we know them today, the very idea of a musical key, standardizations of "tempered" musical tuning, the creation of the modern shape of leisure in which listening to music came to be understood as a focused leisure activity,[2] and even the conception of a composer – the "author" in Michel Foucault's famous essay "What Is an Author?" – all emerged.[3] What also emerged then and culminated in nineteenth-century thinking about music and nineteenth-century performances of *concert* music – Charles Hamm describes this historical period as "Concert Life (from *c.* 1740 to World War I)"[4] – is the clear distinction between art music and popular music. This distinction is probably most clear in Theodor Adorno's contention that the popular music of the 1920s and 1930s – he, like most people in the 1930s, called all the popular music of that time "jazz"[5] – was simple "bad music" and "artistic trash."[6]

These two aspects of Enlightenment modernity – namely, the origin of aesthetic expression in the individual "genius" of a particular author and the organizing structure of experience based upon the putative "clear and distinct" differentiation between spheres of understanding – came into question at the turn of the twentieth century. They did so for a host of overdetermined reasons. Thus, mathematical physics, that great invention of Descartes and Newton based upon both clear and distinct ideas (embodied in mathematical notations) and the abstractions of interchangeable parts, had exhausted itself with success. (In the same way late in the

nineteenth century chronological linguistics, based as it was upon a distinct sense that the *origin* of phenomena – such as their earliest, simplest manifestations or simply their "authors" – was the adequate explanation of them, had exhausted itself through success.) In addition, the powerful idea of individualism, manifest most of all in the industrial entrepreneurs of the first Industrial Revolution and the soul-searching of Protestant Christianity, was overwhelmed by the manifest *social* nature of wealth, value, and power. Thus, Marx and Engels ask in *The Communist Manifesto*, "What productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labor?"[7] Moreover, the idea of individualism was overwhelmed as well by the sheer abundance of consumer goods, burgeoning knowledge, and possibilities of experience in the new twentieth century.[8] And finally the arts themselves – and, for my purposes, the art and order of music – came face to face with the tumult of urban life, abundant consumerism, and all kinds of new ways of knowing. This resulted in the particular commercialization of popular music in Tin Pan Alley in New York, with its combination of Jewish American and African American musics, that Part I also examines.

As well as the two explicit global arguments I have mentioned – the importance of understanding the popular arts as part of twentieth-century modernism, and the ways that musical modernism can help us read modern poetry – *Modernism and Popular Music* also presents an implicit argument about twentieth-century cultural modernism in its focus on the popular music of America in the early twentieth century. One significant difference between the first Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century development of capitalism centered in Britain and the second Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was the fact that the vast majority of the technological innovations of the second Industrial Revolution, unlike the first, were made and developed *outside* of Britain. Kenneth Hudson suggests that cultural modernism was especially notable in America; in a parallel fashion I note in Chapter 1 that the United States was the first "modernist" nation instituted on principles of Enlightenment modernity. "The history of industry and commerce," Hudson argues,

> becomes increasingly complicated after c.1870 as licensing agreements, cartels, international groups, import controls, and government direction and intervention have increasingly to be taken into account. All combine to produce a situation which makes the world of Watt, Brunel and their contemporaries seem very small and simple . . . If one is concerned with the history of iron-making between c.1700 and c.1850, all the essential developments can be documented by studying British sites. If, however, the field is cornflakes, tractors or telephones then the

early shrines are to be found in North America. The same is true regarding most electrical appliances, safety razors, escalators, passenger lifts, linotype and monotype printing, roll-film cameras, aeroplanes, cinemas, petroleum extraction and refining, incandescent lamps, typewriters and refrigerators.[9]

And the same is also true regarding the popular arts of music, cinema, and radio.

That is, what is often described as the commodification of aesthetic experience – and what I suggest in Chapter 2 could also be described more widely as the commodification of desire and pleasure – might fruitfully be understood as the transformation of Enlightenment notions of "autonomous" aesthetic experience into the complicated phenomenon of "popular" aesthetics. Such a transformation realized itself most fully in the strange combination of the laissez-faire ideological individualism of American culture and the powerful social-collaborative production of wealth and value in the United States. The popular aesthetics I describe later in this chapter is complicated precisely because it is an interested rather than a disinterested aesthetics insofar as it traffics, explicitly, in pleasure. That is, popular music calls into question the austere aesthetics of Kantian disinterested judgment in a manner similar to the ways that, in Europe, Heisenberg, Einstein, and even the mathematical infinities Russell describes called into question the Kantian "pure" reason of late-eighteenth-century philosophy. In any case, implicit in my argument is the possibility that a rethinking of modernist aesthetic judgment necessitates focus on American "popular" experience.

THE MUSICIANS

Part II of *Modernism and Popular Music* focuses closely on four American musicians, the Gershwin brothers, Cole Porter, Thomas "Fats" Waller, and Billie Holiday. To call the Gershwin brothers "a musician" underlines the problematics of individualism, just as focusing on Holiday's performances of what seems to be other people's compositions also does. In both cases what is in question – as in the less obvious cases of Porter's attempt to tap *common* sources of what seems to be individual feelings and Waller's play with what seems to be other people's language – is the very origin of feeling and expression. In the Gershwins, I examine the art of quotation as I similarly examine another kind of quotation in Waller's participation in the African American tradition of "signifyin'." And both my examination of sources and resources of desire in Porter, based upon Jacques Lacan's

interrogation of desire in language, and the more or less technical focus on the "semantic formalism" manifest in the language and rhythms of Holiday's singing underline the problematics of clear and orderly distinctions between nature and culture, biological need and interpersonal demand, the clarity of facts and the overdeterminations of language. Such orderly distinctions, as Bruno Latour has argued, created the basis for the edifice of Enlightenment modernity and its ongoing tradition through the first half of the twentieth century.[10] All of the examinations of popular music in Part II – quotation in the Gershwins, signifyin' in Waller, and the use of Lacan's modernist revision of the relationship between psychoanalysis and linguistics to examine the power of desire in Porter – are examples of the emphasis I give to language and textuality in *Modernism and Popular Music*.

This is perhaps most explicit in the concept of "semantic formalism," which is explicitly examined in Chapter 6 in relation to Holiday, but which really runs throughout my discussions of the place of popular music and performance in any working understanding of modernism. If the clear and distinct ideas of Enlightenment modernity are essentially formal – and for that reason, seemingly timeless and universal[11] – then one feature of twentieth-century modernism is a new type of comprehension that discovers or realizes particular, timely meanings as, in fact, constitutive of those forms. Mary Poovey describes this in the context of her cultural history of "facts," noting that in the late nineteenth century a "fact" became, across many different fields of understanding, not simply an instance of a pre-existing form, but a "model" in which form and particular instance were simultaneously "enacted" or "realized," as it were.[12] In discussing the musical achievement of Beethoven, Igor Stravinsky makes a similar point in his description of the possibilities of "a reflective system between the language structure of the music and the structure of the phenomenal world," which Daniel Albright describes as realizing "the deep equivalence of the natural and the artificial."[13] In this, Stravinsky is suggesting that the logic of music's language – or really Beethoven's particular musical language – creates the meaning-experience it seems to represent. Thus, the procedure of semantic formalism, *realizing* as it does the equivalence of the natural and the artificial, is powerfully performative insofar as it is an enactment as well as a representation. Later in this chapter I offer a formal description of the aesthetics of popular music in terms of the relationships among formal features in its modernist aesthetic. But it is important to remember that those relationships, above all, are *performed*.

The performative nature of popular music – the ways that it is more explicitly performative in its experience and in the ways that it is studied – is a basic assumption of *Modernism and Popular Music*. That is, throughout this book I particularly focus on performance in terms of the pleasure it creates, its improvisatory "form," the very thematics of performance in its finest achievements. The performative nature of popular music is closely tied to quotation – not only in Gershwin and Waller, but even in the Lacanian sense of the "quotation" of meaning, value, and even desire in our psychological lives – and performances of quotation bring together what seem to be somehow antithetical: semantics (content) and formality (structures). (This is particularly notable in the quotations of cliché.) That is, quotation is both formal and meaningful, a speech act that says something and does something, as Jonathan Culler demonstrates in his fine discussion of use and mention.[14] ("Mention" is the philosophical description of quotation.) The very concept of desire in Lacan and in Porter's musical performances hovers between the standardization of need and the semantics of demand in Lacan's topology of need/desire/demand. And Waller's signifyin', in a different register from the Gershwins' quotation, is both a formal repetition and a semantics.

Formalism of one sort or another, as I have mentioned, is necessarily clear and distinct: it offers the possibility of mathematical physics – and the hope of mathematical biology and mathematical sociology or economics – as well as the elaborations of harmony and development that are the result of the formal organization of sound in notation and strict composition, both of which are crowning achievements of Enlightenment modernity. Semantics, on the other hand – like its closely related science, phenomenology, that emerged in the late nineteenth century – replaces clarity and precise distinction with different kinds of overdeterminations. Twentieth-century "facts," in Poovey's history, are overdetermined in this way, and the linguist and semiotician A. J. Greimas makes such overdetermination clear when he argues that the "edifice" of language "appears like a construction without plan or clear aim" in which, for instance, "syntactic 'functions' transform grammatical cases by making them play roles for which they are not appropriate; entire propositions are reduced and described as if they behaved like simple adverbs."[15] Greimas summarizes this situation by asserting that "discourse, conceived as a hierarchy of units of communication fitting into one another, contains in itself the negation of that hierarchy by the fact that the units of communication with different dimensions can be at the same time recognized as equivalent" (82).[16]

That there might be a semantic formalism – or what Elmar Holenstein has called "phenomenological structuralism"[17] – seems, in the context of Enlightenment modernity (with its seemingly absolute distinction between nature and culture), a contradiction in terms. Yet the high modernist music of Arnold Schoenberg is just such a contradiction, a kind of phenomenological structuralism. And in humbler ways, the transformation of the clichés of the music and words of Tin Pan Alley into the felt meanings of the Gershwins, Porter, Waller, and Holiday also combine the repetitions of form and unique events of meaning in their enacted, performed achievements of semantic formalism. When I turn to what makes particular music "good" in my discussion of popular aesthetics near the end of this Introduction – as I claim that the performances of the popular musicians I treat here are particularly good – I will return to this sense of art forms conditioning and enacting the very meaning of experience.

Latour's global argument in *We Have Never Been Modern* is precisely that such an "absolute" contradiction between formal repetition and unique events – between, that is, the universal laws of nature and the inalienable rights of subjects – was the source of the power of Enlightenment modernity in science and politics precisely because the "moderns" asserted the absolute difference between nature and culture, the global and the local, yet at the same time *acted* as if there were no contradiction at all and thereby *enacted* modernity.[18] Latour argues that Enlightenment modernity governed itself by consistently acknowledging the anxiety of confusing these oppositions, even while it "performed," more or less unconsciously, their confusion. Similarly, Andreas Huyssen identifies as a defining feature of the high modernism of the early twentieth century the "conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: [namely,] an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture."[19] Thus, he describes modernist artists as particularly outraged by popular culture even while, as many recent scholars have noted, the high modernist arts freely appropriated the semantics of popular culture.[20] Popular music also enacts this contradiction inhabiting high modernism in its combinations of sound and sense, of music and the personality of its performers, of personal meanings and impersonal forces, and, of course, its appropriation and transformation of the banalities of Tin Pan Alley. Perhaps a better way of describing this is to note that the popular arts of the new twentieth century at their best, in large part because of the emancipation concomitant with its intense consumer culture, challenged the received universals of Enlightenment modernity, even while they reasserted different *kinds* of universals – of quotidian celebration, of communal solidarity,

of achieved personal agency of those deprived of it – in the enactments of performance.

Most notably, popular music does so by shifting attention from the composer to the audience: it is precisely this that scandalizes Adorno in his high modernist disdainful observation that popular music and "jazz" cater "to the socially determined predisposition of the listener."[21] Thus Richard Middleton argues that

> Adorno assumes without question the superiority of certain kinds of listening, notably what he calls 'structural' or 'integrative' listening. Just as he privileges a particular mode of production (focused on the bourgeois composer), a particular kind of musical form (integrative, self-generating), and particular parameters of musical language (those foregrounded by notation), so he privileges the concomitant mode of listening . . . For Adorno, 'after Beethoven' any type of listening other than contemplative cognitive effort is necessarily regressive. Other listening modes – for instance, those where music is associated with activities of various kinds, the sounds perhaps impinging on muscles, skin, nerves as much as conscious thought processes – have a long and continuous history, however; and, still, as anthropologists have shown, a living ethnography.[22]

David Brackett, in his important study of popular music, more generally emphasizes the audience rather than the composer by citing Roland Barthes's contention that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but its destination,"[23] but he does not add what Barthes goes on to say in this essay, "The Death of the Author," that "this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography or psychology" (148).[24] Such an impersonal audience, I think, is one way to distinguish achieved from banal popular music. The banality of the worst popular music resides, at least in part, in the fact that it never semanticizes its clichés, but leaves them empty ciphers that are charged, so to speak, to trigger automatic yet seemingly "personal" responses. The best popular music calls for responses that are not automatically personal, but that allow one to recover the social – and often utopian – meaning in seeming cipher-clichés. It is precisely this process, I argue later, that allows the recovery of celebration and community in achieved art. In any case, Barthes's *impersonal* sense of audience – like Middleton's *social* sense – is another way that the chapters of Part II are tied together. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the impersonality of composition by focusing on just the kind of cliché and received ideas that Adorno hated: after all, he lauds Schoenberg as "a radical composer inspired by a drive for expression."[25] These chapters focus on the ways that the Gershwins' collaborations complicate the personal expressiveness of their music/lyrics and the ways that Porter's syncopations articulate patterns of desire which

seem beyond personal "demand." And chapters 5 and 6 focus on the impersonality of performance. They focus on Waller's riffing on other people's music and lyrics and the ways that Holiday complicates the relationships between words and music.

Moreover, the chapters of Part II also complicate the clear and distinct differentiation between text and performance. That is, popular music necessarily shifts the locus of significance from score or text to performance. It is no accident, as I argue in Chapter 2, that the people who talked about the music of the 1920s and 1930s – all kinds of people from Irving Berlin to Theodor Adorno – used the term "jazz" to refer both to the self-consciously improvisational music that grew out of the African American community and the Tin Pan Alley "standards" of Berlin, Kern, Gershwin, Rogers, Porter, Arlen, Youmans, and others that grew out of the received practices of popular musical forms at the turn of the century. It is no accident because popular music was (and is) performance oriented: as both Middleton and Brackett argue, popular songs "circulated primarily as recordings" rather than scores[26] and call for different kinds of analysis and understanding from music circulated by means of authored scores.[27] Hamm also notes that popular music necessarily calls for an analysis of the arts which is "based upon economic and social relationships" that call for analytic periodization that does not present a progressivist understanding culminating in the "Concert Life" of art music as the apotheosis of Enlightenment conceptions.[28] All of these scholars are suggesting that the clear and distinct difference between popularly circulating demotic music and the "museum art" of concert music is, in fact, a function of the assumptions and strategies of listening brought to them and not an *absolute* distinction.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE ARGUMENT

In these ways, then, parts I and II of *Modernism and Popular Music* offer both counterpoint and harmony. Moreover, if music, as Middleton argues, impinges on "muscles, skin, nerves as much as conscious thought processes" and can be associated with "living ethnography,"[29] then the particular ethnographic senses of music presented in Part II harmonize with the general sense of cultural modernism examined in Part I. In Part II I examine four "musicians" in relation to sociality, subjectivity, semiotics, and aesthetics reconceived in relation to the conditions of the early twentieth century. In these analyses I am suggesting that the enormous transformations in the lived life of the early twentieth century that can be grasped under the