

Popular Music Studies – bridge or barrier?

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It was my doctoral supervisor and mentor, Jan Ling, who used to draw my attention to similarities between Vienna in the late eighteenth century and Chicago in the nineteen-forties, more specifically to the fact that in both places new and internationally influential styles of music had been created out of a cultural melting pot. I mention his observation because we are in Bolzano, where people speak both Italian and German, half way between Milan and Vienna, half way between the focal points of the great music traditions of Central Europe that flourished in the nineteenth century. I also mention Ling's comparison because Bolzano's geocultural position reminds me that I am, from a Central European viewpoint, an inhabitant of the periphery, hailing, as a UK resident, from one of Adorno's cultural margins (*Randgebiet*).¹

At the same time I also have to see Bolzano, this symposium in particular and Central Europe in general from an Anglocentric rather than Eurocentric viewpoint in the sense that today's hegemonic music idioms no longer primarily derive from the late nineteenth-century Central European tradition with its penchant for the ionian mode, tertial harmony, etc., but on the results of a basically tripartite acculturation between [1] that same tradition, [2] popular music from eighteenth century rural Britain, [3] popular music from parts of eighteenth-century rural West Africa).² According to this view it could be argued that what happened musically in places like New Orleans, New York, Chicago, Memphis or Nashville during this century has in recent decades become at least as influential on a global scale as the musical idiom of Mozart and Johann Strauss had been a century earlier.

1. In a Central European situation like this symposium, the majority of whose participants are from Italy or German-speaking nations, I feel a bit like one of the Antipodeans mentioned by Carlo Delfrati in his paper on Thursday: I will probably seem to many to be walking upside down!
2. On such acculturation and on phenomena like modality, birhythm, etc., see van der Merwe (1989).

The title of this paper ‘Popular Music Studies — bridge or barrier?’ is supposed to signal some sort of warning. To be more precise, I am worried that the institutionalisation of popular music studies over the past three decades may be a Trojan horse. I mean that although progress has been made in the sense that the music of the majority of humans can now be taken seriously in terms of education and research, I think that we popular music scholars risk repeating mistakes of ethnocentricity and elitism which we understandably deplore in the old system of Eurocentric music studies but of which we seem less aware inside our own area. I am in other words afraid that we may be building barriers instead of bridges.

The easiest way to grasp the problem I am talking about is to hear some music. I have put together a sequence of twenty-nine extracts from pieces of popular music, each representing musical practices (genres and/or styles)³ that are rarely the object of scholarly attention in the field of popular music studies. However, before playing those extracts it may be necessary to present a very brief history of popular music studies and their institutionalisation.

As you are probably all aware, the serious study of popular music is nothing new. For example, J S Bach pupil and novelist Johann-Philipp Kirnberger wrote that ‘the good teacher of composition ensures that his students are all competent in various dance styles so that they acquire a solid foundation in the beat’.⁴ It is also worth remembering that Purcell wrote drinking songs as well as operas and anthems for the Chapel Royal, and that Mozart’s opera tunes were whistled by barrow boys while some of his daring development sections were misunderstood by music critics.⁵ Moreover, as if whistling, singing under the influence of alcohol, putting down a solid beat and suchlike were all not ‘popular’ enough, it is often forgotten that improvisation was a skill for which figures like Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and Liszt, were all famed in their own day as much as (and in some cases more than) they were celebrated as composers.⁶

3. See Fabbri (1981) for distinction between ‘style’ and ‘genre’.

The obvious question arising from these observations is: if dancing, singing in the pub, whistling in the street and improvisation all related to the broad portfolio of activities expected of famous composers of the European classical tradition, what is the problem? This question begs in its turn many others lying under the surface of the previous paragraph, such questions as: if Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and Liszt were all well-known as improvisers, how come improvisation was subsequently excluded from almost every conservatory musician's training?⁷ Or, to put it another way, if our official music institutions think that J S Bach was such a good composer (and if we are to believe the testimony of one of his pupils),⁸ how come we choose to ignore his example by failing to teach our composition students how to produce a decent waltz, rock number or techno track before letting them cavort in the playground of the avant-garde? It is impossible to answer these questions satisfactorily in twenty pages, let alone minutes because they

4. The complete original quote runs: 'Gute Tonlehrer haben ihre Schüler allezeit hauptsächlich zu Tanzstücken verschiedener Art angehalten, damit sie sich in dem Mechanischen des Takts festsetzen und ordentlich denken lernen ... Dies was zugleich die beste Übung im Vortrag' (Johann Philipp Kimberger. 'Tanzstück'. *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste*. Leipzig, 1771). Klingfors (1991: 347, 355) reminds us of two other pre-conservatory authorities on the primacy of the beat in European music: [1] Johann Beer (1655-1700, Austrian composer, singer, instrumentalist and satirical novelist) who considered that 'people with no sense of regular pulse have no sense of honour' ['Wer nicht tactfest ist ist auch selten Ehrenfest'] and that 'regular time is the soul of music' ['so kann auch kein practicus, als ein musicus bestehen der die mensur nicht vor die Seele der music lasset'] (both quotes from *Musicalische Discourse*. Nürnberg, 1719: 166, ff.); [2] Mozart's father Leopold who held that 'accompanists who can't keep to a regular beat are vulgar and amateurish' (*Grundlich Violinschule*, 1; Salzburg, 1756: 266).
5. See, for example, Momigny's suggestions (early nineteenth century), as recounted by Stockfelt (1988), for recomposition of the development section in the first movement of Mozart's 40th symphony (K 550).
6. The primacy of improvisation in the art (raga) music tradition of Northern India testifies to the fact that improvisation can in no way be regarded as an intrinsically popular form of music making. European conservatories merely contributed to the death of improvisation techniques that had previously existed inside the European art music tradition.
7. The most notable exception is, of course, the training of church organists.

are all linked to questions of bourgeois ideology, especially in German-speaking Europe during the eighteenth century, as well as to notions of subjectivity and to other cultural developments relating to the political economy of our continent on a much wider scale. To save time, I will therefore zoom in on problems directly relevant to the institutionalisation of music studies.

The problems start to take on an ideological face with German-language aestheticians and philosophers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The canonisation of 'absolute' instrumental music, immanent in the writings of Tieck, Wackenroder and E T A Hoffmann, is clearly presented by Hegel in his *Ästhetik*:

'What the layman (*Laie*) likes in music is the comprehensible expression of emotions and ideas, something substantial, its contents, for which reason he prefers accompanimental music (*Begleitmusik*); the connoisseur (*Kenner*), on the other hand, who has access to the inner musical relation of tones and instruments, likes instrumental music for its artistic use of harmonies and of melodic intricacy as well as for its changing forms; he can be quite fulfilled by the music on its own'.⁹

Such views, innovative in the historical context of their original presentation, were later to form the basis of the value aesthetics (*Wertästhetik*) which underpins a kind of elitist hit parade of styles considered worth studying in conventional institutions of music education and research (conservatories and departments of musicology) in most European states. Another way of understanding the problem is to remember that what we today know as 'classical music' was not called 'classical' much before 1830,¹⁰ and that improvisation, with the exception of church organ tuition, was not expunged from conservatory education until much later. We are in other words dealing with a lengthy historical process of institu-

8. The testimony to this effect, already reasonably conclusive (see footnote 4, p.3) is corroborated by the author of J S Bach's obituary (1754) who, as Klingfors (1991: 346-350) has observed, saw fit to record that the deceased 'was a very accurate conductor and in matters of tempo extremely reliable' (*Bach-Dokumente III*, 1972: 666).

tionalisation in which real musical practices have been frozen in time, cut up into convenient study packages, duplicated out of context, and disseminated in reified form. In short, the institutionalisation of the European 'classical' tradition seems also to have brought about its falsification.

Returning to the matter of popular music, it is important, in the light of the falsification just mentioned, to understand that when, in the early nineteen-seventies, the first tertiary education courses in our field of study start to be established, they inherit a hostile legacy of institutionalised music education and research that is no more than 150 years old.¹¹ For example, in setting up the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) it was clear we would have to underline the need for:

9. Cited by Zoltai (1970:260); original source Hegel (1928): 'Der *Laie* liebt in der Musik vornehmlich den verständlichen Ausdruck von Empfindungen und Vorstellungen, das Stoffartige, der Inhalt, und wendet sich daher vorzugsweise der begleitenden Musik zu; der *Kenner* dagegen, dem die inneren musikalischen Verhältnisse der Töne und Instrumente zugänglich sind, liebt die Instrumentalmusik in ihrem kunstgemäßen Gebrauch der Harmonien und melodischen Verschlingungen und wechseldenen Formen; er wird durch die Musik selbst ganz ausgefüllt.' Please note that Hegel included vocal music under *Begleitmusik* (translated as 'accompanimental music').

The historical idiosyncrasy of German-language aesthetics and philosophy relating to music in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is explained by Ford (1991: 2-4, 31-37) whose arguments can be paraphrased as follows. The intellectual and artistic movement in question, with its *Empfindsamkeit*, its *Sturm und Drang* etc., differed considerably from the Enlightenment in France or England, not least because the socio-economic base of the German bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century under the rule of a multitude of quasi-absolute mini-potestates, was much weaker than that of the same class living in larger nation states, such relative disempowerment resulting in the need to concentrate much more on the expression of ostensibly private or subjective rather than public or objective aspects of individual liberty. It is from such a perspective that the importance of music by German-speaking composers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Germanophone Europe and, indeed, across the world, starts to make sense. It is also from such a perspective (the ideological peculiarities of the *Aufklärung*) that the primacy of instrumental music, as advocated by Wackenroder or Tieck before Hegel and by A.B. Marx, Hanslick and a host of others after him, can be understood as more than the mere metaphysical meanderings of misguided romantics, however much it may often appear that way.

- **interdisciplinarity** — because it is impossible to understand the nature of music in our time without considering it from the viewpoints of music making, musicology, ethnomusicology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, acoustics and bio-acoustics, technology, electronics, economics, politics, etc;
- **interculturalism** — because music is disseminated globally and because it would be as misleading as it would be undemocratic to exclude from serious consideration, any set of musical practices associated with any population, be such a group defined according to social, economic, ethnic, cultural or any other similar set of criteria;
- **interprofessionalism** — because it is impossible to understand the nature of music in our time without considering it in relation to the multitude of functions it can fulfil, or without consulting a wide range of those who, in one way or another, mediate musical experience, e.g. composers, lyricists, musicians, vocalists, technicians, managers, producers, DJs, venue owners, journalists, teachers, collectors, fans, listeners, dancers, those working in audiovisual and/or broadcast media, in sport, in advertising, in cultural policy making or implementation, etc., etc.

Indeed, IASPM's first two conferences, as well as the first few numbers of the Cambridge University Press journal *Popular Music* were quite successful in living up to these three main aims. In IASPM's case tendencies towards the sort of problem sketched at the start of this paper started to appear around the time of the well attended Montréal conference in 1985.¹²

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10. See Ling (1989) and Stockfelt (1988).
 11. It was, and in all too many places still is, an undemocratic and ethnocentric system of music education. For example, nations like Ireland, Ghana, Zaire or Jamaica, all of global importance in the popular music sphere, cannot compete with Germany or Italy in the game of Central European art music.
 12. IASPM's first two conferences were in Amsterdam, 1981 (see Horn & Tagg 1982) and Reggio Emilia 1983 (see Horn 1983). I attempted to address issues facing the future of popular music studies at that time (see Tagg 1982, 1985a, 1985b). The first issue of *Popular Music* (Cambridge University Press) also appeared in 1981.

Of course, there is nothing scientific about table 1 on page 8. By playing the extracts listed there I only want to give an impression of just part of what, in my twenty-seven years of teaching popular music in higher education, seems to have gone missing. As you will notice, I think it is quite a lot because I have only given the final extract more than 2 out of 5! Assuming there to be at least a grain of truth in these observations, the next questions to answer will be: Is anything else excluded? What is included? Why these inclusions and exclusions? What can we do about it?

First of all I should reiterate that the extracts just played typify in my mind what a particular sort of Anglocentric popular music scholar, probably someone from cultural studies, would be unlikely to include in the serious study of popular music.¹³ Such exclusion zones can be categorised as follows:

1. popular music with lyrics sung in languages other than English (extracts 2, 6, 9, 10, 12, 16, 17, 19, 21, 25, 28);
2. popular music from earlier centuries, including extremely popular music in the European 'classical' tradition (extracts 4, 5, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 26);
3. popular music conceived in 'pre-rock' vein (2, 4, 5, 7, 22, 23, 24, 24, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 25, 26, 28);
4. popular music that is 'too popular' either within its own cultural sphere or cross-culturally (extracts 2, 3, 6, 7, 12, 14, 16, 20, 22, 23, 24, 28, not to mention Whitney Houston and Céline Dion);
5. popular music that sounds 'too different', such as avant-garde or strikingly foreign pieces (e.g. extracts 1, 6, 9, 10, 26);
6. popular music more closely associated with moving image than with dance, the marketing of an 'act', the construction of youth group identity, etc. (extracts 4, 5, 8, 13, 23, 24).

Just as likely to be excluded from the serious study of popular music but inadvertently omitted from the musical extracts illustrating

13. For critique of the relationship between Anglocentric cultural studies and popular music, see my review of Shepherd and Wicke (1998) in *Popular Music* (17/3, 1998: 331-348).

such exclusion are examples of:

7. popular music regarded as incompatible with discourses of the ‘subcultural’ or ‘emergent’, e.g. most forms of background music, ‘Muzak’, easy listening.¹⁴

Table 1: Institutional exclusion of popular music styles

	<i>Extract from (Artist/Composer. Title)</i>	ῥ	<i>probably too ...</i>
1	Cassiber. <i>Remember</i> (1990).	1	avant garde, arty
2	Trio Los Panchos. <i>Me voy pa'l pueblo</i> (1980?).	1	rural, old, uncool, exotic
3	Two Unlimited. <i>No Limit</i> (1992).	2	popular, uncool
4	Wagner. <i>The Ride of the Valkyrie</i> (1856).	1	old, classical, uncool
5	R Strauss. Gevafax TV advert (1983) / <i>Zarathustra</i> (1896).	1	old, classical, uncool
6	Vasilis Karras. ΠΟΙΑ ΜΕ ΚΑΤΑΡΑΣ ΤΗΚΕ (1997).	1	exotic, uncool, irrelevant
7	Chris Barber. <i>When the Saints Go Marchin' in</i> (1954).	1	old, uncool, irrelevant
8	Bernard Herrmann. <i>The Shower from Psycho</i> (1960).	1	‘un-poppy’, irrelevant
9	Slobo Horo. <i>Mastika</i> (1992).	2	exotic, folky, irrelevant
10	Diblo Dibala. <i>Matchatcha</i> (1992).	2	exotic, irrelevant
11	Maurice Ravel. <i>Pavane pour une infante défunte</i> (1899).	1	old, classical, irrelevant
12	Trini Lopez. <i>Cielito Lindo</i> (1980?).	2	old, irrelevant, uncool
13	Grieg. <i>In the Hall of the Mountain King. Per Gynt</i> (1891).	1	old, uncool, classical
14	Sousa. <i>Monty Python</i> (1969/‘Liberty Bell’, c.1900).	1	military, old, uncool
15	Rouget de Lisle. <i>Marseillaise</i> (1789?).	0	old, uncool, irrelevant
16	Gipsy Kings. <i>Volare</i> (1989).	1	popular, uncool, ‘Euro’
17	Georges Bizet. <i>Chant du toréador. Carmen</i> (1875).	0	Euro, classical, uncool
18	E Cantor, C Tobias, C Mencher. <i>Merrie Melodies</i> (1931).	1	trite, uncool, childish

14. See Lanza (1994).

	<i>Extract from (Artist/Composer. Title)</i>	5	<i>probably too ...</i>
19	Silvana Fiorese. <i>L'uccellino della radio.</i>	0	exotic, uncool, irrelevant
20	AC/DC. <i>Shoot to Thrill.</i> (1980).	2	old-fashioned, uncool
21	Gisela May. <i>Lied einer deutschen Mutter</i> (Eisler, Brecht) (1943/1968?).	2	exotic, serious
22	Abba. <i>Mamma Mia</i> (1974).	2	kitschy, 'nice', uncool
23	Ennio Morricone. <i>The Good, the Bad and the Ugly</i> (1966).	2	kitschy, irrelevant
24	Mark Snow. <i>The X-Files</i> (TV theme, 1994).	2	well-known, 'nice'
25	Mariachi Sol. <i>El toro rabón.</i> (1993).	1	exotic, rural, irrelevant
26	Joculatores Upsalienses. <i>Falalalán</i> (Spanish c. 1500).	0	old, rural, irrelevant
27	Carl Orff. <i>O Fortuna. Carmina Burana</i> (1952).	1	classical
28	Raoul Casadei Orchestra. <i>Com' è triste la domenica</i> (1982?).	0	trite, exotic,
29	Bullyrag. <i>Learn to Live.</i> (1998)	3	local, heavy, uncool

If there is any truth in these observations made over the past two or three decades, it is clear that some sort of musical canon is under formation as popular music studies are institutionalised in the social science departments at universities in the English speaking world. Notable by its absence is popular music from cultures other than what happens to be currently regarded as at the forefront of the Anglo-American commercial recording industry's international activity, i.e. music connected with phenomena other than those marketed by commerce and its high priests in journalism or academe in terms of a subcultural or 'emergent' discourse of youth culture, including whatever is currently understood as the immediate historical precedents of the style(s) in question. This kind of focus tends to exclude any music or musical function which does not appear on a rather badly hidden agenda of 'alternative' or 'oppositional' authenticities.¹⁵

A different focus and another type of implicit exclusion has accompanied the institutionalisation of practical and creative aspects of popular music education and research. Here the main tendencies

have so far been to concentrate on styles and functions valued by fellow professionals rather than on music and its uses as favoured by the majority of listeners. The existence of various kinds of ‘muso music’ within popular music colleges — for example jazz funk, fusion, bebop — and the pride of place given to such showcases for virtuoso skills in traditional forms of composition or instrumental performance favour the notion of musical skills being imagined as in some way separable from other social skills of communication so important in less ‘muso’ styles and functions (e.g. dance music, love ballads, film themes).¹⁶

The problems of what might be called ‘the popular music conservatory’ and its penchant for ‘muso music’ are those of any institution teaching creative and practical skills in forms of expression which, like popular music, are in a constant state of change. I am referring here to the basically insoluble equation between, on the one hand, the totally acceptable demands of students and education authorities that assessment norms be as fair and as consistent as possible and, on the other, that popular music — its structures, functions and aesthetics — are as changeable as the society and culture in which it exists. Unfortunately, the upshot of this contradiction is more often than not that traditional institutional criteria win the day, with the result that socially finished chapters of music history end up on the syllabus (e.g. bebop), while historically unfinished and relatively unmanageable genres like Country, techno, etc. remain on the outside. In other words, a finished chapter of music history may make for a more manageable study package, but it is doubtful whether bebop harmony and improvisation, styles which today are mainly practised within the academy, can

15. For a critique of ideologies of authenticity, see Michelsen (1993). I have tried to criticise the same canonic tendencies in Tagg 1982, 1985a, 1985b, 1987, 1989, 1994, 1998a, 1998b. I have attempted to address problems with the theoretical underpinning of such tendencies in my review of Shepherd and Wicke (1997, see footnote 13).
16. Besides, soloistic electric guitar acrobatics are easier to quantify and easier to mark than skills in the production of pregnant riffs à la Keith Richards or Angus Young.

any longer be qualified as popular music in the same way as Country music, techno, TV themes or advertising jingles.¹⁷

The only way out of this particular problem is, it seems to me, to learn from history and observe the ways in which most successful composers and musicians, from Bach to the Beatles, actually learnt their creative skills, i.e. by taking part in real musical practices in real contemporary situations. This is why we need to strive for the reestablishment of apprenticeship as the basis for any institutionalisation of practical and creative skills in music. Such a process means that today's social and cultural realities will have to shape our institutions of musical training rather than vain attempts in the opposite direction.

In the case of both cultural theory about and of conservatory studies in popular music, the canonic tendencies may be different but they are both equally canonic. As canons including certain musical practices and theories about music they are also both exclusive. Their existence is due to the historical legacy of the institutions to which we belong and according to whose rules we are expected to work. These institutions are not value free: they demand, as I have described elsewhere, individual competition when it is counter-productive,¹⁸ and, as mentioned above, consistency of aesthetic values when the very nature of popular music is to undergo constant change in such values. The same institutional legacy also plays havoc by imposing disciplinary boundaries upon an area of experience which in everyday life is taken as a single indivisible phenomenon — music. At the same time, those of us who work inside institutions of music education are accountable to representatives of the system propagating such contradictions, this relationship of accountability making us willy-nilly part of the same system that needs such radical change.

A lot has happened since IASPM and *Popular Music* were started. Various types of popular music have entered the academy in vari-

17. The predilection for muso music is another problem, subject of another paper

18. As in the production of rock music, for example (see Tagg 1982).

ous ways. What, however, do not seem to have changed is the basic relations of power in the field of music education and research: certain new types of music and of music aesthetics have merely replaced certain old types of music and music aesthetics. A similar sort of canonical practice remains in tact and the vast majority of music used by the vast majority of people most of the time is still excluded. Popular music, as much for the jazz-funk conservatory muso as for the oppositional subculture sociologist of pop, has, it seems, ceased to be popular. I fear such institutionalisation is constructing barriers, not bridges, between groups of people, socially as well as between nations.

The most obvious ways to open up the area of popular music studies again are to:

1. take it out of the institution and reinstate it in forms of real-life apprenticeship;
2. strive for cooperation that is truly interdisciplinary, intercultural and interprofessional;
3. be constantly aware of our own position as teachers and researchers in the institutional and cultural system we belong to; in short to follow the advice of Carlo Delfrati from last Thursday and to exercise qualities of tolerance, self-awareness and the ability to see ourselves as others see us.

It is in such ways that we will be able to work efficiently for necessary change in the structures of our institutions and in the balance of power between classes in our society. Besides, the examples of Vienna and Chicago suggest that cultural interaction and openness in are much more likely than institutional incorporation to produce a vibrant music culture.

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