

WHY IASPM? WHICH TASKS?

by Philip Tagg

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Background

IASPM was started in 1981. It was not the idea of one particular person but the result of conversations among a number of us who were faced with similar problems in our work. My personal position was that, in being required to teach certain practical, theoretical and historical aspects of popular music at a music teachers' training college, I was faced with numerous problems not only of educational method but also of (a) providing students with a recorded anthology of popular music history — an impossible task to solve legally! — (b) finding data about contemporary habits of musical production and consumption and (c) answering the most legitimate but most complicated questions which students expressed approximately as follows: 'OK, Tagg, you tell us that so much of this music is produced and sold and that we hear it on average for 3.5 hours every day, but why is there so much? How does it affect us? Why does it all sound the way it does? What does it all mean?', etc. (For a more detailed account of these problems, see Tagg 1982a, pp.232—42).

As an erstwhile church organist, rock musician and, on a more limited scale, arranger, producer and composer, I had only one practicable avenue open to me: that of musicology, in particular that branch of the discipline known as 'musical analysis'. However, it soon became painfully obvious that the analytical tools of traditional musicology would have to be extensively enlarged using methods borrowed from linguistics, political economy, semiotics, sociology, psychology, electronics, acoustics, business studies — just to name a few other disciplines — if I were to be able to answer my students' questions without having permanently to resort to speculative conjecture.

Now, it is quite obvious that no individual researcher can ever hope to master everything in the field of popular music from Edison's phonograph to Fairlights, from Bernard Herrmann to Human League, from Abba to Eno, from 'Muzak' to Rock in Opposition, from instrumental skill to intimate knowledge of broadcast media, from cultural politics to integrated circuits, and at the same time be expert in the thirteen disciplines that proved necessary for the study of the *Kojak* theme. (See Tagg 1979, p.57)

Having therefore to face up to my own 'non-omniscience', I decided to get into contact with those who knew more about a particular part of my subject than I did or who studied the same sort of material from a different viewpoint or with another set of methods. Very few such people were to be found inside my own university, within my own nation of residence or within my own discipline of musicology. Instead, they appeared to be spread around the world, inside and outside of music-making, inside and outside the university world, inside and outside the music business, cultural politics, journalism, the media and so forth. In fact, the only existing organisations

relating to the field of popular music seemed to define themselves according to *profession* (e.g. unions of composers or journalists, associations of publishers and producers), *discipline* (e.g. musicology, ethnomusicology, psychology, education), or to cover areas of study which, although relevant, were not equatable with our own (e.g. International Council for Traditional Music, International Association for Mass Media Research).

So, seeking to bring together people seriously interested in a particular area of study rather than in the problems of a particular profession or in the future of a particular discipline, the 'First International Conference on Popular Music Research' was organised in 1981. On that occasion in Amsterdam it was agreed (1) to form IASPM — using the word 'studies' rather than 'research' to emphasise that we were not just another society of academics — and (2) to answer the question 'What is Popular Music?' at the next conference, that is, the one taking place here and now in Reggio Emilia.

Popular music = excluded music?

Unfortunately I have had to be absent from far too many sessions at this conference but am willing to bet that no-one has yet actually given a definition of 'popular music' with which everyone here agrees! Nor do I expect everyone to agree with the delimitation of the term which I have provided on other occasions. (Tagg 1982b, pp.41-43). However, let us here consider 'popular music' to be all that music traditionally excluded from conservatories, schools of music, university departments of musicology, in fact generally excluded from the realms of public education and public financing in the capitalist world: this state of affairs is the reason for the existence of IASPM anyhow and 'popular' is a shorter way of saying 'traditionally excluded... and the like!

Now, if we want to know our priorities in the tasks ahead, it would be wise not only to have a working definition of the term 'popular music' such as that offered above, but also to understand how and why this particular corpus of music came to be excluded from the realms of public spending. Here it will be necessary to generalise copiously.

By the time of the Second World War, bourgeois public institutions in most capitalist countries had already incorporated the music of feudal courts and churches, along with the music of the bourgeois enlightenment and its paragons of individualism — the 'Great' composer and artist — into their midst and certified them as areas of honourable and legitimate study, worthy of public, as well as of private, subvention; then, as folk communities disintegrated and as the rural proletariat became urban, folk music could also safely be certified as a legitimate field of study since the social reality of those making and using the music being studied was either moribund or actually extinct. Thus, 'the music of the people' could be studied as long as the socio-cultural dynamic of that music was no longer a real threat. This process is particularly clear in the case of most sorts of jazz which fell prey to the more intelligently opportunist culture vultures of conservatories and colleges of music as soon as its popular and, in particular, proletarian base was either dying or dead. On the other hand, most of the music available on records, cassettes, radio, TV, video, most of the music in films, factories, offices, cars, cities and homes, most of the music used for dancing, relaxation, recreation, revolution, consolation and inspiration, most of the music heard through loudspeakers or headphones - in fact, most of the music entering

the brain of the average inhabitant of industrialised society during about twenty—five percent of his/her waking life — is socio-culturally alive and has not been incorporated into bourgeois public institutions of education and funding.

Ethical strategy and organisational structure

Of course, if we wish to avoid becoming yet another organisation in the flora of academically, professionally or nationally defined associations, we will have to make sure that our own structure and activities take into account a *common field of studies as perceived by the people*, that is, as a whole, as an intrinsic part of day-to-day living in modern society. It will mean taking into account the highly specific interests of particular groups of specialists (musicians, composers, sociologists, journalists, musicologists, etc.), not in order to develop each speciality per se, be it academic or professional, but to develop an understanding of the total phenomenon. To this end *cooperation* should be the order of the day, *mutual respect* and the *absence of professional or disciplinary egotism* our ethical strategy.

This point should really be obvious! While popular music is produced in contexts of either conscious or unconscious teamwork, such as that between the peer group and the rock group or as can be seen in corporate production and manufacturing by composers, musicians, arrangers, recording engineers, market psychologists, technicians, sociologists, cameramen, roadies, journalists, and so forth, the study of all this music is plagued by guild—orientated professionalism and disciplinary narrow-mindedness. In this way IASPM must battle against the heritage of bourgeois institutional divisions with which we are all endowed and which, although they may have reflected earlier organisational demands made by real situations, do not answer to the need for cultural studies in the age of the integrated circuit.

Internationalisation

As can be seen from the tables showing the association's breakdown of membership according to nation/region, our international character needs development as much as our interdisciplinary and interprofessional aims. At present we are a sort of 'NATO of Popular Music Studies'. There are of course natural historical reasons for this state of affairs, but the risks of ethnocentricity are large if we do not make concerted efforts to involve third world and socialist countries more actively in IASPM. Such an extension of our membership should be one of the association's main priorities.

These international priorities will be difficult to deal with without *money*. At present, IASPM derives its regular income from payment of membership dues. Given the present economic situation and the anarchy of international currency exchange, we cannot expect a mass influx of members from those countries so far under-represented (if represented at all) in IASPM. So support for a real internationalisation of the association will have to come from elsewhere. In this position, we will need to consider UNESCO affiliation and make a decision in this direction in the very near future.

Money

At present IASPM receives no regular subsidies from any sort of public body responsible for funding different types of musical or cultural activities and

studies. Neither is such support likely to be forthcoming in the near future, judging from the austerity measures so widespread, at least in the capitalist part of the world. Moreover, IASPM's field of activity cannot be satisfactorily categorised under convenient headings such as 'art', 'research', music 'folklore', 'social science', 'humanities', 'economy', 'the media', etc., for it can be included under all these headings and not really under any of them at the same time. This 'hard—to-categorise' quality also makes it difficult to tap traditional funding bodies, especially in times of economic depression.

'All the greater reason, then', I hear someone say, 'to tap private commercial sources'. Here I think it is of paramount importance to avoid sponsorship from private enterprise if we wish to preserve any degree of decency or independence. 'Ah, but our symphony orchestra is run on brewery or car money and wouldn't exist without it', continues 'common—sense Charlie'.

We are not a symphony orchestra: we are dealing with music which makes money in itself, music whose study is associated with a considerable amount of *geschäft* already, resulting in information which may sell more records and make more fans, but which does not actually seriously seek to inform about the nature and function of that music. If we wish to join forces with or be on the payroll of commercial companies, especially those involved in the production of musical commodities, we might just as well dissolve the IASPM straight away!

If IASPM should not receive money from 'private enterprise', if we carry out no commissioned research for such organisations in order to finance our existence, if no support is forthcoming from the democratically controlled funds of public institutions, IASPM will be placed in a difficult situation. This may leave us with independence to determine our own policies and plans but may make us thoroughly impotent. This is another reason why the question of UNESCO affiliation is of pressing importance.

Working in existing institutions

It is clear that popular music students cannot expect to make overnight changes in the various institutions to which most of us here are connected. The rock journalist or pop radio producer trying to change forms of presentation or content on his/her paper or at his/her radio station is in just as disadvantageous a position as the music teacher or sociologist attempting to include popular music within the often quasi—feudal institutional structures of higher education (especially universities). Just imagine the difficulties we had when trying to apply the age-old principle of individual achievement grades for collective creativity in rock, for example! (See Tagg 1982a) However, if you do not try all the time, if you do not consistently bang your head against the metaphorical wall of these institutions, the possible holes you might succeed in making will never grow big enough for anyone to creep through, let alone to step or walk through. Moreover, the mass of people who really need access to both the democratic production and understanding of musical culture will forever be excluded from the important part of ideological power which music represents if we (and they) are content to walk outside the existing fortresses of power (be they private or public), wearing our ideological white kid gloves while we 'heroically' denounce those 'oppressive structures' instead of actually trying to do something to change them from within and without.

DOPMUS

Let DOPMUS serve as a small example of the sort of important task we have ahead, and of the historical ballast of institutional structures (mentioned above) which makes very heavy going of both the project itself and IASPM work in general. Early this year I circulated materials about this 'Documentation of Popular Music Studies' project to all members, asking them to fill in forms about their activities in the field of popular music and to supply information on their publications and so forth. All this is intended as a first stage in an attempt to provide an answer to the question 'where can I find out who has done what in popular music studies?' The response so far has been most disappointing. IASPM, it should be clear from what I have already said, is not the well-endowed mother of an illusory 'welfare state', employing well-paid civil servants to provide up-and-coming young students with ultra-modern database services by magic. Personally, I have as yet little or no idea where the money is coming from for the DOPMUS computer-stored information, and neither here nor in any other IASPM context in the foreseeable future will there be any guaranteed commodity-fetishist satisfaction of desires as far as 'results', 'goods' or 'services'¹ are concerned. If 'immediate customer satisfaction' is what you are looking for, then I suggest you take your trade elsewhere and join a well-endowed, well-established and less uncomfortable organisation!

The only way to get results in IASPM at this stage is by dedication and hard work, I am afraid. If we receive thousands of titles of books, articles, TV programmes and so on, which study any aspect of popular music in a serious fashion, then we shall be able to demonstrate to funding bodies the *need* for the project and actually get it going, ultimately providing a useful service. On the other hand, if no one is prepared to save us the time and money of having to code contents into keywords, if no one else does any bibliographical research for us, then you will have to wait for centuries before we have the time or the money to put enough information on to the computer to make it of any use or interest to anybody! DOPMUS consists at the moment of one person working quarter-time for the Musicology Department of Göteborg University; it is *not* a magic milk-cow!

Conclusion

DOPMUS is just one example of what IASPM should and could be doing. There are surely many others, of which David Horn will shortly be mentioning a few. If IASPM should be doing something it is not, please get in touch with other members — you have a list of addresses if you paid your fee! Contact either the branch organisation to which you belong or let the secretary know, because our area of study is too important for anyone to be lethargic.

It is obvious that popular music is an uncomfortable area of study because, as we have seen, it is still largely excluded from the realms of general education and public funding. It is the music of the people in a dynamically changing society. It is no sociohistorical fait accompli, nor can it be the destination of any academic safari, since we are all in the middle of it here and now. It is not at any convenient historical, geographical, ethnic or social distance from our own reality.

All this means finding new methods, new activities, new forms of organisation relevant to such a dynamic phenomenon of the people. It also requires

that our priorities include dispensing with petty-minded group egoism and sectarianism if we want to solve the problem. It is obvious that we cannot do it as individual student supermen/super-women; that old national, disciplinary and professional boundaries are of little use; that no one will do the job if we don't do it ourselves. So let us try to solve the problems and fulfil the aims of the IASPM by working together in the ways I have attempted to describe.

References

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