

High and Low, Cool and Uncool: aesthetic and historical falsifications about music in Europe

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Introduction

It is a real honour to be invited to deliver a keynote speech at this, the first symposium organised by the Bulgarian branch of IASPM. I suppose one reason for my invitation may be that I was one of IASPM's founders, and it is from this perspective (from twenty years of the association's history) that I would like to speak to you today. I am particularly pleased to be here in this capacity today because IASPM has very simple and humble origins. Twenty years ago I had admittedly hoped, but never expected, that the democratic thrust of serious interest in the music of most people, rather than in the music of a privileged minority, would be so powerful as to gather in quite a short time around one thousand scholars and musicians into one organisation in forty-odd nations around the world. In its short history IASPM has also helped secure an institutional base for popular music in many countries and has seriously challenged the aesthetic and intellectual monopoly of the Western European bourgeois art music canon. This development has been so remarkable as to exceed the expectations of any of IASPM's three founding members.

However, IASPM's growth has not been without problems, even dangers, and in this talk (entitled 'High and Low, Cool and Uncool') I intend to give a few examples of what can go wrong when our relatively new area of studies enters the world of established institutions. I then propose to suggest ways in which we can tackle these problems constructively and, finally, to put forward some thoughts as to why the influence of popular music scholars from such nations as Bulgaria and Turkey can exert a really beneficial influence on IASPM as a whole. But I will start with a brief personal history of IASPM, just to give you a background to the kind of motives that lay behind setting up the association around 1979-80.

Brief personal history

I was certainly not the only musical child of middle-class parents in postwar Western Europe whose family had plenty of cultural capital (in the Bourdieuan sense) but no capital in the real sense of the word. Indeed, Richard Middleton (founder of the CUP journal *Popular Music*), David Horn (head of the institute where I work), Simon Frith (well known to all here, no doubt) and many others share a similar background. Speaking personally, my parents, especially my father, an enthusiastic secondary school maths teacher, had a passion for learning. Both my parents saw knowledge and culture as a passport to a better life and they made considerable sacrifices to ensure that my brothers and I received what they assumed to be a good start in life. However, much of the education I received was really destined for the UK elite of that time: in many ways that education had developed as a training ground for a career in the British colonial apparatus and, as such,

rhymed badly with the egalitarian and humanistic variant of Protestant Christianity in which my parents believed. These contradictions became particularly clear to me in the realm of music.

Introduced to classical piano at the age of eight and progressing to organist in the local Methodist church by the time I was fourteen, I was exposed, through school friends, to the likes of Presley and Haley, as well as to recordings of visiting blues artists like Big Bill Broonzy. I also found out that my father was a closet big-band music fan and that many of the songs my mother sang to me as a small child were in fact taken from the music hall (vaudeville) repertoire. By the time I was fifteen I was playing in a trad jazz band, at seventeen I was thumping oom-pah piano in a Scottish country dance band, and at nineteen I joined an R&B/Soul band. Moreover, due to my family's financial difficulties I had to work for much of each university vacation: in the steel works, the post office, on the railway, collecting garbage, etc. I felt much more at home with my workmates, their music and their sense of fun than I did with my economically and culturally 'privileged' fellow students at Cambridge. It was in these ways that various types of popular music became an even more integral part of my everyday life than classical music had been.

But the European classical music lingered on, if only because the university course I took forced me to complete motets in the style of Palestrina, to go theme-spotting in the Viennese classics, to write canons, to construct Schenker diagrams, all with no apparent regard to the fact that music cannot exist unless it communicates something to somebody somewhere at some time. I did not seem to be dealing with music as I knew it. In fact, I felt like abandoning classical music altogether because of how I was taught it and because of its tangible social stigma of elitism and pomposity at that time. And I would have abandoned it altogether had it not been for composers like Byrd, Bach and Bartók, whose *Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythms* (*Microcosmos* Vol. 6), incidentally, I played badly but with delight back in the early sixties. Even the guitarist in our R&B band at that time (1963-64) thought the last of those dances (the one in 3+3+2) 'kicked some arse' and we would sometimes play the first few bars at a gig just to annoy everyone else in the band, labelling the item Country and Eastern.

Disillusioned by my education at the elitist University of Cambridge, the notion of a career in music in the UK was not attractive. I moved to Sweden, where I taught languages before being asked to join the staff of a music teacher training college. Why was invited? Because popular music was to be included on the curriculum and I was, in 1971 in Sweden, about the only person they could find who had both a degree in music and some experience of popular music. This, I thought, was an opportunity to bring together in the real world outside myself different aspects of music that had always been together inside me. What I had not realised was that so many others shared this experience of music institutions separating integrated and interrelated experiences of music into socially hierarchical categories. However, despite great enthusiasm and dedication from both staff and students at the college in Göteborg, we faced many problems. Apart from those just mentioned, we had to build many courses up from scratch: hardly anything of any scholarly substance had been written about any music traditions except those furthest removed in time or space from the majority of the people where we worked. In other words, there was plenty about the music of other classes at other

times in Europe (the classical tradition, the music of the continent's fast disappearing rural proletariat, etc.), plenty of academic safaris into the music of far-away places, but next to nothing about pop music, TV themes, advertising jingles, disco music, film music, i.e. little or nothing about the musical here-and-now for most people in our own culture. I have tried to account for some of these problems in various writings.¹ Suffice it here to say that my own aim at the time was to respond as best I could to my students who, after learning that people in our part of the world spend 3½ hours a day with and substantial amounts of money on music legitimately objected: 'OK, Tagg, but how does all that music affect us'?

Of course, it is impossible to answer that question without being simultaneously an expert in sociology, anthropology, psychology, business studies, political science and musicology, to name just a few disciplines. At the same time, my own discipline, musicology, had largely managed to avoid the issue of examining relationships between music as sound and music as social meaning. Conventional Western European music analysis, with its fixation on notatable parameters of expression, with its almost hermetic brand of formalism, was not going to be of much use. Clearly, some form of semiotic music analysis was needed to help bridge the gap between, on the one hand, music making or 'the music itself' and, on the other, all the sociological, anthropological and ideological discourse *about* music. Admittedly, I could try, as I have, to develop methods of semiotic music analysis adapted to popular music, but those methods would, I knew, be much less valid if they were not informed by some kind of systematic knowledge of music as a social, economic and political phenomenon.

Given this situation and never having considered myself Superman, I knew I needed help. First, in 1976, I came across Gerard Kempers who faced similar problems in his work at a community arts college in the Netherlands. Surrounded by classical piano teachers arguing the finer points of fingering in the Waldstein Sonata at a conference of Scandinavian music educators, Gerard and I agreed that something ought to be done. We toyed with the idea of organising a conference on popular music in education. Realising the importance of the English-speaking world in the area of popular music, we sought help from colleagues in the UK and were lucky to gain the support of Richard Middleton and David Horn. It was David Horn who joined Gerard and me in 1980 and who enabled us to invite such figures as Charles Hamm, Paul Oliver and Simon Frith to the First International Conference on Popular Music Studies which Gerard organised, on a shoestring budget, in Amsterdam in June 1981. Among others speaking at that conference were Günter Mayer (ex-DDR) and Franco Fabbri (Italy). Given the enthusiastic response to our call for papers, we decided to prepare a document proposing the foundation of an International Association for the Study of Popular Music.² The proposals were accepted and the association has existed officially since that time. IASPM's main goals were to act as an international, interdisciplinary and interprofessional association dedicated to the serious study of popular music.

1. See www.tagg.org/texts.html

2. In fact the originally proposed name was 'International Association for Popular Music Research'. It was Prof. Martin Tegen (Stockholm) who suggested 'Popular Music Studies' instead as complying better with the aim of interprofessionality.

High and low

The term 'popular music' is impossible to define accurately. What it meant to us back in 1980 was really all the music, used in contemporary everyday situations, that was excluded from the realms of academe. Most of that music at that time sorted under terms like 'low-brow', 'light music', 'U-Musik' or even 'Trivialmusik' according to the (then) hegemonic view of culture and class. In order for popular music's validity to be established in the institutional world, attention had to be drawn to its unique qualities in contrast to those of 'high-brow' 'masterpieces' of 'E-Musik'. As with the early stages of feminist scholarship, a clear profile of difference in relation to an old and unjust order was important. This strategy of difference was not without success. Popular Music Studies have managed to project a market image of being something new and exciting. It has become a sort of intellectualised *Roll Over Beethoven*. Dichotomies propagated during this process of carving out an institutional niche have been those between serious and fun, between black and white, between body and mind (or between body and emotion), between *plaisir* and *jouissance*, between notation and oral tradition, between composition and improvisation, etc., etc. These dualistic categories have positioned Popular Music Studies clearly in academe and the subject has proliferated, at least in the UK, attracting many students to both theoretical and practical programmes. Careers and the financial well-being of institutions now rest on this type of academic 'credibility'. The only trouble is that many aspects of these dichotomies are, to say the least, questionable.

There is not the time here to deal with all the dualisms just mentioned. Besides, I have in other writings already treated the problems of inverted racism in the 'black versus white' dichotomy and criticised the intellectual bankruptcy of notions of 'the Other' in relation to music (Tagg 1989, 1996). However, in order to clarify the sort of problems caused by the strategic dichotomies listed above, it is perhaps worth discussing, if only cursorily, two interrelated issues: notation versus oral and mind versus body.

1. Notation

A commonly held assumption among popular music fans and scholars is that music notation is always associated with a prescriptive set of aesthetic rules and regulations, while oral traditions are linked with notions of freedom, individual creativity, spontaneity, etc. This assumption is fraught with problems. Firstly, it ethnocentrically disregards the fact that most non-European art music traditions, for example the raga music of Northern India, the Tunisian nouba, Cambodian court music, Japanese Nogaku, have all observed strict rules of performance and adhered to quite prescriptive aesthetic norms without ever resorting to musical notation. The millennia-old Rig Veda chants, to cite just one case in point, has been passed on down the generations by oral rather than scribal means.

The same widespread assumption about notation also breaks down if applied to many forms of popular music, for not only do strict taboos apply to pitch patterns in heterophonic Sprechgesang from rural communities in Polynesia: equally strict rules of musical procedure apply within most pop fads within the English-speaking world. In this context you only need think of the recent Macdonaldisation of the British pop industry (of all those mass produced Spice Girl copies and Boyzone clones) to realise that musical spontaneity and creativity are much more likely to be stunted by entertainment

business shareholders looking for a safe and predictable return from sales to the easily manipulable 8-16 target group than by music notation. Similarly, anyone who has faced the impossible task of teaching improvisation will witness that you are just as likely to hear 'the same old music' from the repetition of improvisatory stereotypes, which *have* to be learnt by rote, as when you hear *Für Elise* for the thousandth time. After all, producing Charlie Parker or Jimi Hendrix clones is not much more liberating than manufacturing yet another frustrated classical piano broiler.

Another problem with the scribal v. oral dualism in music is one of ahistoricity, more precisely the inability to see notation as a specific form of technology enabling the storage and distribution of music in specific historical and social contexts. True, it is generally held that our European system of music notation started with a need to recall the pitches of the Holy Church's melodies in tact from year to year in much the same way as the word of God was thought to be more reliably preserved in written rather than spoken language. But this original, institutional purpose of music notation was often flaunted in the upsurge of subjectivity in the late middle ages and early Renaissance. For example, the entry on notation in the 1956 edition of *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, draws attention to the private musical doodling of an anonymous monk for whom notation was clearly a channel for personal expression, not the means of its repression. Unfortunately, the copyist galleyslave's subjective doodles were crossed out by his abbot. The emancipatory potential of the (then) new medium of notation was in other words seen as a danger in much the same way as the democratic potential of home recording and MIDI sequencing were ignored or trivialised, nearly a thousand years later, by those whose musical and ideological values were very similar to those of the abbot. In other words, it is not the technology itself but the purposes to which it is put that make the difference between prescriptive authoritarianism and innovation.

In addition to the points raised so far, it should be noted that many African-American jazz, funk and R&B musicians, contrary to stereotypical expectations from mostly white popular music experts, are notationally literate. By the same token, it should also be remembered that notation is still used extensively in popular music production, not only in the field of composing for the moving image, but also in recording studios where you can save a lot of time and money if your backing vocalists or your hired studio musician can lay down their tracks *a vista*.

Now, none of these refutations of the stereotypical popular music fan's or scholar's assumptions about notation imply that every scholar or musician in our field needs to be notationally literate. Nor do the points I have raised contradict the fact that Western art music notation was developed to enable the reperformance of the same music in a similar way on repeated occasions and that this system of dots, lines and squiggles was adapted to particular types of music produced at particular times in the history of particular classes in a part of one of the world's five continents. Obviously, our notation system is totally inadequate when it comes to recording aspects of timbre, cross rhythm, additive rhythm, pitches outside the twelve semitones of our equal-tone scale, not to mention all the parameters of expression available through electronic or electro-acoustic means (reverb, echo, delay, panning, distortion, phasing, flanging, chorus, etc., etc.) Just as the Roman alphabet was conceived to scribally represent certain sounds specific to the Latin lan-

guage, not to Bulgarian, let alone English or Vietnamese, our notation system cannot be seen as an accurate scribal representation of musics outside the monometric tonal tradition of Central Europe. On the contrary, all I am suggesting is two simple things. Firstly: the issue of scribal and oral traditions is not of one versus the other, not of mutual exclusivity, but of complementarity, even though the need for notational literacy may, for understandable reasons, be less today in the age of cheap digital recording than in the heyday of sheet music publishing. The second issue is that the scribal-versus-oral dichotomy is based on several historical falsehoods and that the success of our field of studies will be jeopardised if we are content to present the negative imprint of a false historical view of music in our own continent.

2. *Improvisation*

This last point about notation is as good a starting point as any if we want to avoid falling into the same traps of evaluative categorisation as conventional classical music scholars used to present and, in some cases, still present. This point, which links into the vexed question of 'high' v. 'low', is that European

Music notation started off, and has in many ways remained, a blueprint for performance, not a true written document of 'the music itself'. *Notes inégales* and slow overture dottings in music of the French Baroque, not to mention ornamentation techniques (C P E Bach 1974), testify to the fact that notation in the classical era did not represent what was actually performed or heard. Moreover, music scholars in both the classical and popular fields seem unaware that J S Bach, Mozart and Liszt were just as well known as improvisers as composers. They also tend to forget that Purcell wrote not only anthems for the Chapel Royal but also drinking songs for his friends in the pub, or that Mozart's opera tunes were whistled by barrow boys in Prague. Another forgotten fact is that what we call 'classical' music did not acquire this epithet until the 1830s, yet another that no-one played any really old music in European concert halls or opera houses before the mid nineteenth century. For example, while one third of music on the French concert hall repertoire in the 1780 consisted of compositions by dead composers, the proportions had reversed by 1870.³ During this same period, conservatories mushroomed across Europe and by 1900 the improvisation which had been such an integral part of what we now call 'classical' music had been virtually eradicated by the very institutions who claimed to be the standard-bearers of that same tradition.

I raise these points to cast doubt on commonly held assumptions in both the 'classical' and 'popular' camps about the history of music in our continent, but there is more.

3. Ling (1989: 173) citing W. Weber, 'How concerts went classical in the nineteenth century', *Proceedings of the annual meeting of the Western Society for French History 1977*, vol. 5: 161-168. According to Karen Collins, who from 1997 to 1999 ran the music section of Future Shop (Canada's second largest record retailers) in Kitchener (Ontario), it was company policy to aim for 60% sales of back catalogue. Head office stated: 'that's where all the margin is'. This general tendency towards relying increasingly on old music to make a profit seems to echo developments in French concert hall repertoire 150 years earlier. Heritage and conservation tendencies in classical and popular music studies are discussed in a revised and expanded version of this paper, given at the IASPM UK conference in Guildford (July 2000), see <http://www.tagg.org/html/iaspuk2000.html>.

Mind v. body

Perhaps the clearest set of problems with the high-low dualism concerns the dichotomy of mind and body. Most people imagine classical music to be a matter of mind, or at the least the emotions, rather than of body, popular music to be the opposite. For a classical buff like Adorno, music that represents mind over matter is aesthetically preferable to the animal behaviour of the masses dancing, drinking and mating. In the popular music camp, however, the tables are turned: corporeal is seen as cool and the mind as uncool; black is considered cooler than white, new cooler than old, beat and rhythm cooler than harmonic progressions or thematic narrative, etc., etc. Intricate theoretical superstructures, many of them influenced by dubious variants of postmodernism, are concocted by cultural studies colleagues in our field as intellectual justification for such a mechanistically negative stance. Of course, this stance can be easily criticised by referring to the simultaneous cerebrality and corporeality of recordings by Frank Zappa, to the vulnerable emotionality and visceral corporeality of Kurt Cobain's singing, etc., etc. Less familiar, however, is the importance of the beat and of rhythm in the European classical tradition. For example, who do you think said the following?

[1] 'You can't trust anyone who has no regular sense of the beat. Regular time is the soul of music'.

[2] 'If you can't provide a backing with a reliable beat, you're a useless amateur'.

[3] 'The good music teacher makes sure that pupils are well versed in different kinds of dance music so they acquire an automatic sense of the beat'.⁴

And which musician do you think is being described in this fourth and final quote?

'He was a really accurate band leader. When it came to tempo, which he usually laid down at a very brisk pace, he was 100% reliable'.⁵

This testimony of comes from [1] Austrian author and art critic Johann Beer (1719), [2] Mozart's father Leopold (1756), [3] J S Bach's pupil Johann-Philip Kirnberger (1771) and from [4] J S Bach's obituary (1754). Such evidence as to the central importance of keeping to the beat is apparently of little interest to self-styled keepers of the classical seal. In fact, such historical testimony is more likely to be of considerable embarrassment to them. 'Great music', their argument probably goes, 'cannot have been created by people who think that dance and beat are so important because those are the sorts of thing the rowdy masses enjoy in music. Bach and Mozart can't be wrong because they're Bach and Mozart, but we should keep quiet about

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4. I have translated all four citations, taken from Klingfors (1991: 347, 355), freely and colloquially. The original versions are as follows: (1) 'Wer nicht tactfest ist / ist auch selten Ehrenfest' ... 'so kann auch kein practicus, als ein musicus bestehen / der die mensur nicht vor die Seele der music lasset' (Johann Beer: *Musicalische Discourse*, Nürnberg, 1719: 166, ff.). (2) 'De som inte har något begrepp om god smak håller inte tempot när de ackompanjerar (niemals bey der Gleichheit des Tactes bleiben)' (Leopold Mozart: *Grundliche Violinschule, I*, Salzburg, 1756: 266). (3) 'Gute Tonlehrer haben ihre Schüler allezeit hauptsächlich zu Tanzstücken vershiedener Art angehalten, damit sie sich in dem Mechanischen des Takts festsetzen und ordentlich denken lernen ... Dies was zugleich die beste übung im Vortrag' (Johann-Philip Kirnberger: 'Tanzstück' in *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste*, 1771).
 5. 'Im Dirigieren war er sehr accurat; und im Zeitmaaße, welches er gemeinlich sehr lebhaft nahm, überaus sicher' (J S Bach's obituary, 1754. *Bach-Dokumente III*, 1972: 666).

their views on dance and the beat, in case our version of their music, with its aura of transcending both society and physicality, loses credibility. Metronome sense, improvisation, etc. must therefore be seen as belonging to others and not to us'. Of course, this sort of view, and its corollary inside popular music studies, where rhythm is regarded as cool, leads easily to racism, straight or inverted, a matter I have dealt with at some length in other contexts (Tagg 1989).

Cool and uncool: the consequences

In short, the intellectual and musical canons of popular music studies often seem to function as the reverse of the canons associated with conventional approaches to the European art music tradition. If the latter did not exist, popular music studies would be unnecessary and, conversely, if no identifiable aesthetics or practices existed within the popular sphere, the conventional study of 'classical' music would have lost its own ostensible *raison d'être*. In other words, each sphere of musical practice and thought about music relies on the other for substantial parts of its own self-perceived legitimacy. As I have tried to show here, the problem with this 'tit-for-tat' situation is that its negative interdependence of stances derives from a series of historical falsehoods. I will admit that I have been worried for some time about the consequences of such falsification on the future of our field of studies.

For example, I worry about the fact that, in the Anglo-North-American sphere of popular music studies at least, some music is studied a lot, other music less so, or not at all. Is this because of implicit value judgements that some musics, not mention the groups of people using them, are cooler than others? I have little time to go into any detail about this problem, save to say that you are more likely to find jazz rock fusion or funk than C&W or trad jazz skills taught to budding musicians in 'cool' colleges of the performing arts. Similarly, you are much more likely to find academics publishing articles about Bowie, Madonna, rap or club culture, than about Tom Jones, Steps, Muzak or line dancing, despite the greater popular spread of the latter.⁶

Another reason for this type of concern is that, thanks partly to phenomena like IASPM, centres for popular music studies are sprouting up like mushrooms in colleges and universities across the world, perhaps a bit like the proliferation of conservatories and departments of musicology in Europe in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Current trends in the UK, where higher education is run increasingly as a money-making business, suggest that our field of studies is a profitable line for our overpaid managers. They are very keen to see our subject streamlined. Corporate bureaucrats that they are, they want our aims, standards and outcomes to be clear and consistent. On the other hand, although they worship the holy cow of 'cutting-edge' business, they are unlikely to want to see us reflect the ever-changing social, technological, political and musical realities of contemporary life. In their corporate vision of the world we are no more than service providers, our students no more than consumers, and the greater the turnover of the same product, the greater the corporate university structure's income. Canons and other expressions of absolute aesthetics are vital ingredients of success-

6. These observations about canonisation are corroborated by a small experiment carried out two weeks later in the UK (see <http://www.tagg.org/html/iaspuk2000.html>).

ful institutionalisation under such circumstances. If our subject substantiates its legitimacy in terms of the negative imprint of historical falsehoods, then we will run the risk of playing straight into the hands of those who are looking for new immutable values which can replace the once immutable values of the classical canon. This would be an insidious process in which we would contribute to the illusion of permanence which any unjust and conservative power system needs to create.

It is from this perspective that the existence of IASPM Bulgaria is of considerable importance. Given the country's wealth of popular music traditions (the envy of many Western musicians who want to get their heads and fingers around the scales and rhythms of the Balkan region), and given the late arrival of the European classical tradition in Bulgaria, the power relationships of cultural canons seem to be quite different to those in my part of the world. We Anglos desperately need the input of our friends in this region, just as we need help from Jamaicans, Latin Americans and Asians, to de-ethnocentrify the association and to ensure that IASPM in our part of the world does not become the victim of its own success. It is not, and ought never to be, a matter of exoticism, musical tourism or cultural imperialism. No, in order to put our own house in order, we 'Westerners' must learn to defalsify our own music history. Learning to understand and respect music cultures formed under historical conditions quite different from our own provides us with perspectives that can help us in our efforts to write our own history more truthfully. I have already learnt a lot from two days in Bulgaria and, judging from the programme for these two days, I know I will learn much more before I leave.

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