2012 Society for Music Theory
(New Orleans, LA)

Popular Music Interest Group
Panel Discussion

# ABSTRACTS

Melissa Wong:
    In order to understand what it means to analyze popular music, we must first determine the *work* of popular music, which will in turn determine the focus and goals of our analysis. Existing research in popular music analysis has largely relied upon theoretical methods that take for granted the *song* as the primary work of popular music. However, scholars such as Theodore Gracyk, Andrew Kania, and Albin Zak have recently begun looking instead to the *track* as the primary work of popular music, albeit one that encompasses both the song and a particular performance of that song as set on record, whether real or imagined. If we accept this claim, we must shift our analytical mindset to prioritize production values and performance practice at least as much as composition. In particular, production and performance styles can serve as important indicators of genre, which can provide a meaningful framework for analysis. I would therefore suggest that we must allow our ontology of popular music to shape our analysis of popular music.

Brad Osborn:
    For the purposes of sparking what I hope will be a lively debate, I will begin with a (very) short position paper arguing that analyzing popular music entails a choice between two approaches. Through a reading of the painter Francis Bacon, we may invoke a dichotomy between the mouth and the face. The mouth, acting as meat, as flesh without words, offers the possibility of a pure sonorous utterance devoid of signifying potential. The face, on the other hand, may be regarded as a "black hole of signification" (Deleuze)—its specific aesthetic details are often disregarded in service of external signification (e.g., this is Lindsey; that person is angry). Analyzing popular music as a mouth highlights the unique elements in a specific piece. Analyzing popular music as a face theorizes what specific musical figures *signify* in terms of form and genre while, at least implicitly, devaluing the unique aspects of the piece. While most if not all analyses balance these two approaches, analyses of popular music which foreground faciality risk *circulus in probando*, turning specific pieces into "black holes" of signification.

Kyle Adams:
    In my view,  the analysis of popular music—a field still in its infancy, relatively speaking—is about system building, about inducing principles and building a methodology from them. Pedagogically speaking, popular music is too often analyzed by appropriating concepts wholesale, and uncritically, from unrelated repertoires, and its study is often justified through misguided attempts at legitimization. I would argue that the most successful analyses of popular repertoires are those that interrogate the ontological status of the most fundamental concepts— for example, chord, scale, or function—with specific regard to the repertoire under consideration.

Nicole Biamonte:

A common question asked in regard to popular-music analysis is whether or not we should use or adapt tools originally developed for art music. Traditional terminology and methodologies address parameters important to art music and well-represented by its notation, such as formal and pitch-based structures, but they are less well developed for parameters more important to vernacular musics, such as rhythm, timbre, and microtonal pitch inflections. Nonetheless, "classical" theoretical models can be generalized to apply to popular musics that derive from outside of the tonal art-music tradition. While the specific syntax of much vernacular music differs on the surface from that of the common-practice tradition, this is not the case with many deeper-level organizing principles, including pitch centricity and hierarchy; relative consonance and dissonance (melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, metric, and hypermetric); phrase structures, and formal functions. Thus the answer to the question depends on our analytical goals and whether we choose to explore the foreground differences or the background commonalities between these two repertoires.

Tim Hughes

In my talk, I'll briefly address both the nature of popular music analysis itself and an approach for how to undertake such analyses. I have always begun with a familiar distillation of analysis into a three-part process:

1. Breaking something into its constituent parts,
2. Examining those parts, and
3. Examining how they work together to create a whole.

In doing so, I like to use John Godfrey Saxe's version of the ancient Jainist fable of the blind men and the elephant to illustrate the importance of the final part of this process. And because different musics, different artists, or even individual songs vary so much in terms of their natures and purposes, I discuss how it is necessary to some extent to develop a different list of elements to examine for each case.

However, while discussions of *how* to analyze popular music are becoming more common, discussions of *why* to do so are still uncommon—even though asking such a question should be the first step (in this sense, I do not refer to the repertoire itself but rather the activity of analyses). My own answer to this deeper question is that I analyze songs, not to learn what they *mean*, but to shed light on further possible meanings *and* the ways in which those meanings are created. As such the list of musical elements that I investigate as part of analysis includes not just traditional elements such as form, harmony, melody, or rhythm or even less traditional ones such as texture, timbre, dynamics, spatial imagery, repetition, groove & flow, lyrics, persona, and gesture. It also includes, "the disclosure of possible ways of looking at things" as well as "the grounding on which such opening up is performed", as my colleague Allan Moore has recently put it,[1] which leads to other elements of music to be examined, including persona, gesture and embodiment, authenticity, intertextuality, signifyin(g); the perception of music by listeners and the various ways in which they listen to it, make sense of it, and relate to it (singly and in groups); and the relation of music to the various kinds of environments in which it exists.

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[1] Allan F. Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2012), 10.