

# What, if anything, can the study of popular music contribute to musicology

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Joseph Kerman, in his 1985 book *Musicology*, stated that musicology had "come to mean the study of the history of Western music in the high-art tradition...musicology is perceived as dealing essentially with the factual, the documentary, the verifiable, the analysable, the positivistic." Richard Middleton defines musicology as "the scientific study of music." Nicholas Cook, in his article *What is Musicology?*, claims that musicology "is all about the knowledge that underlies the enjoyment of music." Traditionally, being a 'musicologist' has come to mean an academic who studies and writes about music from the Western high-art tradition. Popular music, traditionally, has not been studied by musicologists. Alastair Williams, in his book *Constructing Musicology*, said this ignorance occurred because "an overtly socialized medium appeared trivial alongside music making claims to autonomy." Both contemptuous and condescending musicologists are looking for types of production, musical form, and listening which they associate with a different kind of music - let us call it 'classical music' for now - and they generally find popular music lacking. Indeed, it is claimed by some that popular music is not worth of such close analytical consideration. There is no ingrained musicological tradition for the study of popular music. Theoretically informed musicology understands both art and popular musics as social constructions. Nevertheless, the study of popular music raises specific issues, the most obvious being the absence of a musicological tradition to build on. An absence of a popular musicological tradition led to traditional musicologists using traditional musicological methods in the analysis of popular music. Richard Middleton, in *Studying Popular Music*, thought there were three main aspects to this problem. The bundle of methods, assumptions and ideologies

which came to constitute 'mainstream musicology' in the later nineteenth and the twentieth centuries renders it a less than useful resource in many ways. The first aspect that Middleton thought unsatisfactory was the terminology used by musicologists when studying music. The terminology used when analysing art music was applied to analyses of popular music. These terms had been used in musicology for a long period of time and had been utilised and re-evaluated as the musicological tradition grew, the terms and vocabulary becoming the mainstay in musicological research. Often the terminology used is not relevant to popular music. Middleton felt the terminology used was slanted by the needs and history of a particular type of music, namely the European tradition, or canon, that musicologists studied. He claimed that there was a rich vocabulary for certain areas that were important in musicology's typical corpus, such as harmony, tonality, part-writing and form. However, there were less developed areas of vocabulary which were less developed in traditional musicology but important in popular music, such as rhythm, pitch nuance, graduation outside of the diatonic and chromatic system and timbre. Middleton also felt that terms used in musicology and music analysis were ideologically loaded. The terms 'dissonance' and 'resolution' for example suggested harmonic procedures akin to traditional functional harmony and were associated with certain technical procedures and emotive links. 'Motive' brings to mind the techniques of Classical composers, not the use of a riff in a pop song. Terms such as 'accidental', 'third' and 'fifth' are again associated with functional tonal harmony, implying precedence to certain notes above others; and 'syncopation' implies rebellion from the rhythmic norm which is certainly not

appropriate in some popular music where syncopation is in fact the norm. These connotations are ideological because they always involve selective, and often unconsciously formulated, conceptions of what music is. If this terminology is applied to other kinds of music, clearly the results will be problematical. In traditional Schenkerian analysis, harmony is cited as the most important part on the structure of a piece. In popular music harmony may not be the most important element; rhythm, pitch gradation and timbre are often more important. However, if there is no vocabulary extensive enough to describe these elements within a piece effectively, the analysis is falling short. Musicologists looked at aspects of the music that were not the most important, and often ignored the elements that were prominent simply because there was not a developed vocabulary. 'Pop musicology' needs the opportunity to extend, develop, explore and refine its vocabulary. The second dissatisfying aspect Middleton found when applying traditional musicological techniques to popular music was the over reliance on notation. ...while notation may be a viable starting point for much art music analysis, in that it was the only form of storage for over a millennium, popular music, not least in its Afro-American guises, is neither conceived nor designed to be stored or distributed as notation, a large number of important parameters of musical expression being either difficult or impossible to encode in traditional notation. Musicological methods tended to foreground those musical parameters which could easily notated and neglect parameters which are not so easily notated; parameters such as non-standard pitches, irregular rhythms, rhythmic nuance, nuances of ornamentation, articulation, specificities of timbre and recording techniques.

These parameters are associated with popular music. Musicologists tended to notate popular music for analysis purposes and over simplify it, reducing it to something that it was not which changed the entire interpretation. It is common for notated versions of pop songs, for example those used in beginner keyboard books or those notated for beginner instrumentalists, to sound completely different to the recorded version of the original song. This is normally due to a standardisation in the rhythm and pitch, avoiding rhythms that are hard to notate, and things such as pitch bend and slides. If musicologists use these for their analyses they are not analysing the work, merely a derivation of it. Similarly, producing one of these for the purposes of analysis is not effective when analysing the work. Methods need to be developed to allow closer accuracy of the pieces if they are to be notated. Notation was the sole means of communicating musical works before technology. Hence, traditional historical musicologists have tended to focus on the score as 'the text' when analysing music. The score comes to be seen as the 'music'. However, as we have already seen, this is not entirely appropriate for popular music. Recordings are the modern day 'text' and performances of a piece should be taken into consideration over a simplified notated version of it for the purposes of analysis. This also means that the context in which the work was composed and performed can be taken into account. Philip Tagg, in his article *Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice*, stated that traditional music analysis can be considered formalist. It tends to shy away from extra-musical influences and factors, preferring instead to claim that music is autonomous with no referential features. Traditional analysis also relies on notation as its main means of

communication, and Tagg felt, like Middleton, that this was a disadvantage when it came to the close study of popular music. Tagg also felt that traditional musicology and analysis, with its emphasis on notation, had what he termed a "culture-centric fixation" on elements that were important in Western art music, but not as paramount in popular music. Like Middleton, he felt that aspects such as timbre and ornamentation were unimportant or ignored in the analysis of art music, but extremely important in the analysis of music in the popular vein. Tagg was an exponent of the hermeneutic method of analysis for popular music. He felt that looking into developing the terminology and methodology of analysis was highly important if popular music were to be analysed deeply, as art music had been for so long. He felt that a checklist of the musical parameters in a piece should include, among others, timbre, technical aspects of performance, acoustical aspects and qualities arising from the use of technology, for example the use of reverberation, filtering, panning and mixing. Robert Fink also agreed with Tagg on a hermeneutic approach to popular music analysis. In his essay *Elvis Everywhere: Musicology and Popular Music Studies at the Twilight of the Canon*, he states that Popular music, like noncanonic classical music, rewards hermeneutic analysis. Embedded in culture, its primary significance is as a carrier and constructor of social meanings and identities. It makes no pretence to autonomy or transcendence: in fact, its value is thought to lie in the cultural specificity of its message and effect. Some have tried to extend the terminologies and methodologies used in the analysis of popular music. In his article *Revenge of the Boomers: Notes on the Analysis of Rock*, Peter Kaminsky describes an analysis of *Enter Sandman* by Metallica, where the

analyst had transcribed the lead guitar part, and also the progression of the 'wah-wah' pedal, using an adaptation of Slawson's theory of sound colour and timbres. Ethnomusicologists have attempted to find ways of notating nuances of pitch and other parameters, but the resultant methodology is often complex, and mainstream musicology has shown little interest in taking these further and using them in their own work. Middleton is concerned that a notation-centric approach will not only affect analysis directly, but also have significant indirect effects. Notation-centric training induces particular forms of listening, and these then tend to be applied to all sorts of music, appropriately or not. An important part of conventional musicological training is in the skill of score-reading with 'inner hearing'. It seems that Richard Middleton is calling for students to be taught in the skills of analysing popular music as well as music from the Western classical tradition, and for them to be seen to be of equal importance. In order to do this, the problems he quotes with terminologies and methodologies need to be overcome. However, if this were to be the case, it would surely do popular musicology a great service, both in terms of its standing within the academic community and in terms of research. The third aspect of traditional musicology as applied to popular music that Middleton was unhappy with was an ideology slanted by the origins and development of musicology as a discipline. Studying popular music requires musicology to expand not just its views of acceptable repertoires but its notions of acceptable methodologies. Greater awareness of popular music could contribute to a breakdown in the traditional musical canon, and encourage more open listening. Tagg felt that a cross-discipline approach was the best way to analyse and study popular

music. Popular music is a music heavily involved with, attached to and created for and by its context. Musicologists need to take this into account when studying popular music. It is clear that a holistic approach to the analysis of popular music is the only viable one if one wishes to reach a full understanding of all factors interacting with the conception, transmission and reception of the object of study. Studying popular music will impact on music education, as popular music is introduced increasingly into the National Curriculum, schools and universities. The aim of musicology is to try and understand the music around us. The resultant knowledge will have a bearing on how popular music is taught right through the different levels of education and also how it is received by those gaining the new-found knowledge. It seems both a necessary and inevitable consequence that methods to study popular music in greater depth and quantity will happen. Music is a central part of cultural life today and, through modern technology, it is disseminated faster and further than ever before. Methodologies and terminologies specific to popular music need to be developed in order for the analysis of popular music to be deemed worthwhile and effective. To this end, musicology could be divided into three sub-disciplines – musicology as related to the 'classical' tradition, ethnomusicology, and popular musicology. Bibliography Cook, Nicholas, 1999: 'What is musicology?', BBC Music Magazine, May. Taken from <http://www.soton.ac.uk/~ncook/what.html> Fink, Robert, 1998: 'Elvis Everywhere: Musicology and Popular Music Studies at the Twilight of the Canon', American Music, Summer. Taken from [http://www.findarticles.com/cf\\_dls/m2298/2\\_16/53552766](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m2298/2_16/53552766) Garnett, Liz, 1998: 'Musical Meaning Revisited: Thoughts on an 'Epic' Critical



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