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The Sound of Popular Music: Where are we?

The track that fans download, or that we buy as part of a collection on CD, is the record of a virtual performance. When we study a rock, or dance, or pop recording, we study the trace of the activities of individuals, working together, to produce a sonic artifact. Moreover, listeners normatively respond to it as if it were a record of a performance [see Frith *Perf Rites* p211], albeit in the majority of cases one which never took place, or never could take place, hence 'virtual performance'. However, the trace of the work these individuals have undertaken is present only in sound – to address the relationships on which the recording is founded, we have to address the relationships in sound which constitute the artifact. Agreeing how, and even whether, to do this has been a key issue in the debate over analytical methodology of popular music across the last decade or so.

Established music theory, i.e. that developed for the analysis of notated musical texts, distinguishes primary from secondary domains on the grounds, in Leonard Meyer's justification¹, of their propensity to engage in syntactic relationships. Thus, primary domains encompass melody and harmony, metre and rhythm; secondary domains, which 'shape' the primary, encompass texture, timbre and, omitted in almost all discussions, location. The distinction, in other words, is supposedly one of content versus articulation. Early analytical approaches to popular music observed this distinction, whether in working from transcriptions (as in e.g. Wilfrid Mellers' *Twilight of the Gods*²) or in producing structural analytical diagrams on paper (as in Walter Everett's early articles³). A number of subsequent commentators (including Everett, it must be said) have remarked on the limited adequacy of this approach, arguing that, for recorded popular music, secondary domains can do much more than 'shape' content: indeed, they frequently *constitute* content, even if they do not embody syntax, thus challenging the commonplace that syntax is a necessary condition for meaningful musical expression. And yet, although journalistic and vernacular discourses often pay great heed to this inversion of primary and secondary domains, there is not much academic literature dealing with it.

Theodore Gracyk, in *Rhythm and Noise*, does refer to the relationship between primary and secondary domains (although he doesn't use this terminology). In his distinction between what he calls ontologically-thin musics (where the primary domains are the principal carriers of affect) and ontologically-thick musics (where this role is taken by the secondary

¹ Leonard B. Meyer: *Style and Music*; Pennsylvania UP 1989, pp.14ff.

² Wilfrid Mellers: *Twilight of the Gods*; Faber 1973.

³ E.g. Walter Everett: 'Fantastic remembrance in John Lennon's "Strawberry Fields Forever" and "Julia"; *Musical Quarterly* 72, 1986.

domains), he makes it clear that there is no question of primacy involved⁴. In 1992, I proposed the model of the 'sound-box', to open up academic discussion particularly of the role of location and, with it, that of texture⁵, a model which was taken up in Richard Middleton's proposal for a theory of gesture. Middleton called attention to the failure of a notion of analytic detachment in theorising gesture, since it depends on both "the experience of somatic movement"⁶ and to the existence of musical gestures "semiotically beyond the linguistic domain"⁷ which is the justification for his diagrammatisation of gesture. Middleton's writing particularly concerns the connotations such gestures have, and their formation from both primary and secondary domains, again without the assignation of priority.

Such gestural connotation is a driving force behind Philip Tagg's entire work – an early and representative approach can be found in his 1992 essay, where he identifies four elements of a sign typology⁸: anaphones; genre synecdoches; episodic markers and style indicators. It is clear from even a cursory reading of his list that both sonic and tactile anaphones, genre synecdoches and at least some style indicators operate without reference to primary domains. The focus of both Middleton's and Tagg's work, however, is toward connotation. They ask questions relating to the effects listeners perceive (either in theory or in actuality) as a result of the uses of particular timbres, gestures (and their combination). A particularly notable recent contribution to the field is that of Albin Zak III⁹, whose work begins from the recording studio, asking what aesthetic effects might be achieved by the manipulations which sound recordists apply in the recording process. In so doing, however, his inversion of the domains is so thoroughgoing that he effectively denies that Meyer's primary domains can still carry expressive force. One of the things which underpins my work in this field is the belief that both syntactic and gestural domains, i.e. the conventional musical decisions which the recording records those individuals as having made, and the textures and production decisions which can also be traced in the recording, produce a result which embodies an expressive charge to which listeners can, if they wish, respond. Yet another approach is taken by some of my colleagues at Surrey, who work in auditory scene analysis, endeavouring to develop linguistic or graphical elicitation techniques for what listeners perceive. But, since their work is funded by the EPSRC, questions of aesthetic expression are always outwith their brief.

⁴ Theodore Gracyk: *Rhythm and noise*; I.B.Tauris 1996, particularly in chapter 2.

⁵ In Allan F. Moore: 'The textures of rock'; *Secondo Convegno Europeo di Analisi Musicale*, ed. R. Dalmonte, M. Baroni, Università degli Studi di Trento 1992, and *Rock: the primary text*; (revised edition), Ashgate 2001 (originally 1992).

⁶ Richard Middleton: 'Popular Music Analysis and Musicology: bridging the Gap' in Middleton (ed.): *Reading Pop*; Clarendon 2000, p.108.

⁷ Middleton, p.110.

⁸ Philip Tagg: 'Towards a sign typology of music'; *Secondo Convegno Europeo di Analisi Musicale*, ed. R. Dalmonte, M. Baroni, Università degli Studi di Trento 1992, p.371.

⁹ Albin Zak III: *The poetics of rock*; California UP 2001.

First, let me give a brief outline of the heuristic 'sound-box' model within which the virtual performance takes place. This model posits a three-dimensional space, wherein the potential locations of all instrumental forces can be plotted. Thus, sound sources can be located to the left or right of each other (according to their location in stereo space), in front of or behind each other (the sense of depth is a function both of dynamic level and degree of distortion), and above or below each other (a result of their frequency spectra, which are perceived as pitch height and, sometimes, as brightness of timbre), and they can move their positions within these dimensions, providing the conventional fourth dimension. This three-dimensional space can be experienced both in listening to stereo loudspeakers and, more acutely, in listening through headphones, in which case the 'sound-box' becomes superimposed on the head. Here's an unproblematic example which demonstrates the use of all three dimensions – Deep Purple's 'Soldier of fortune' of 1974¹⁰. Note first, the foregrounded (soft) acoustic guitar placed in front of the organ pad. Secondly, note that the placing of the voice centrally, and to the front, focuses our attention on the lyrics. Thirdly, note the double-tracked guitar solo, placed at either side and, fourthly, the kit which, placed centrally, provides both textural and metrical glue for the whole ensemble.

Play #1

In some styles, the production aesthetic requires the unproblematic use of the sound-box. In others, however, normative placements within three-dimensional space are there to be tampered with. I shall demonstrate this today simply with respect to the drum-kit. Drummers normatively treat their kit as a multi-timbred, single instrument. And, in the production aesthetic of the 1960s and early 1970s, this norm was actualised on record. Vertically, the kit covers quite a large area, from the depth of the kick drum to higher crash cymbal frequencies. In terms of depth, the drummer sits behind the band, both aurally and visually. In early stereo recordings, the snare drum is dead centre, with cymbals often somewhat to each side. By the late 1970s, the invention of the drum machine had brought into the hands of non-drummers the ability to invent their own drum grooves. In this example from 1980, Ultravox's 'Vienna'¹¹, we can hear that the synthesised kick and snare drums have been aurally separated, both in terms of extreme timbral difference, and also their locational separation. In verse two, the kick drum is all but masked by a synthesised bass, and the snare drum, while central, is both higher and further back than normal. This is no longer the sound of a single drummer at work.

Play #2

On Peter Gabriel's 'Rhythm of the heat'¹², the track uses sampled drum sources and disposes them separately, throughout the sound-box. We

¹⁰ Deep Purple: 'Soldier of fortune'; *Stormbringer*, Purple Records 1974.

¹¹ Ultravox: 'Vienna' (1980); *Young Guns go for it*, BBC 1996.

¹² Peter Gabriel: 'Rhythm of the heat'; *Peter Gabriel IV*, Charisma 1978.

begin with a resonant central hand drum, of quite high pitch. This is joined at 41" by a pair of tuned Ghanaian hand drums, fairly foreground, but well separated to left and right. These are then joined at 1'09" by a deeper, single drum, more centrally-placed. At 1'51", these are joined by drummer Jerry Marotta's beaten snare, tomtoms and kick drum, again in two different locations, and further forward than the deep hand drum.

Play #3

Finally, this aesthetic results in the "unreal" spatial layout now often given to a real drummer, as in Joy Division's 'Heart and soul'¹³, from the same period. Listen particularly to the distance between the bass drum and snare, but listen also, in passing, to Ian Curtis' voice. Is he singing a perfect fifth which he sometimes undershoots, a diminished fifth which he sometimes overshoots, or a blue fifth? Which of these we decide on will have a marked effect on our reading of the track. Combine that with his questionable tuning generally, and the drummer's inability to play even snaps, and we see that a reading of a track, of a performance, has nothing to do with its idealised representation. [My view is that writing down fixes which pitch he's singing & we need to retain it 'unfixed']

Play #4

These kit layouts are only incidentally related to any putative live layout, but they are designed, literally, in the studio. Indeed, this notion of spatial layout seems to me much more one of design [layering] than writing, actioned as it is either at a mixing desk or computer screen, but totally resistant to representation on manuscript paper. In so doing, Gabriel in particular implies that the location of the performance is larger than that inhabited by a studio.

Now to a both more primitive and sophisticated example, the Beatles' 'A Day in the Life', of 1967¹⁴. The details of this are oft rehearsed. The stereo mix of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was made by producer George Martin with, apparently, total uninterest from the Beatles themselves. 'A Day in the Life' begins with acoustic guitar on the right, bass in the centre and John Lennon's voice on the left. During the opening verses, the bass is joined by a kit, while a piano is heard at both right and centre. During verse three, Lennon's voice slowly wanders from left to right, freeing the left channel for the entry of the cacophonous orchestra at the end of the verse. The interlude begins with Paul McCartney's voice on the left, again balancing prominent piano on the right, with kit and bass central. Lennon's voice replaces McCartney's for the short dream sequence, moves across to the left and back again, and then re-enters on the right for the fourth verse, finally returning to the left for the final 'I'd love to turn you on'.

Play #5

¹³ Joy Division: 'Heart and soul,' *Closer*, Factory, 1980.

¹⁴ Beatles: 'A day in the life'; *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967); EMI 1987.

Why all this wandering? The song is nominally in G major, but each verse heads towards an unrealized E minor: the chord G begins phrases but is never the result of a cadence. The generally arpeggiated melody contains weak Ds, but strong Es, suggesting at the very least uncertainty between E minor and G major, an uncertainty which constantly swings back to G major, as the voice swings back to its original location but, as I say, never cadences. The track finally cadences, almost artificially, in E major. In 1966, when the track was recorded, the Beatles (and Martin) were at something of a loss over their artistic direction, a position crystallized by this track and their recording activities over the next few months. The analogy between structure and production, and real life, is plain.

All these tracks are also songs. The distinction is crucial. A song can, or could, be re-orchestrated, re-engineered, covered, to produce a different track. There is not, however, always a song at the heart of a track. In 2002, Martin Grech released an album¹⁵ containing this track, 'Dali' (as in 'Salvador'). I would argue that reducing the five tracks we have already heard to melody, lyric and harmony on paper does not render them unrecognisable. In 'Dali', design (enlarged from 'location' to incorporate 'texture') has replaced writing to such an extent that its sound quality takes precedence over the notes used. To reduce 'Dali' to its melody, lyric and harmony on paper would render it unrecognisable.

Play #6

This is such a crucial point that I would like to illustrate it in another way. Radiohead's album *Kid A* opens with the track 'Everything in its right place'¹⁶. This is a radical track, taking many opportunities to refuse to conform to expectations. Timbrally, it eschews Radiohead's trademark guitars for computer-assisted keyboards, marked by a lack of attack quality and a disorienting continuity: a daring move. Harmonically, it uses an extremely rare locrian loop. Metrically it is absurdly irregular for 'popular music' – we are only reassured of its intentionality by the lyric, which assures us everything is in its right place.

Play #7

In 2003, classical pianist Christopher O'Riley, beloved of Classic FM listeners, released piano solo interpretations of 15 Radiohead tracks¹⁷. Here's the beginning of his attempt at 'Everything in its right place'.

Play #8

A virtuosic, and accurate, rendition surely. However, I would argue it is also pretty meaningless without not only the lyrics, but the timbral daring of the original. This is perhaps what happens when you mistake a track for a song. If only O'Riley had seriously re-conceived it.

¹⁵ Martin Grech: 'Dali'; *Open Heart Zoo*; Island 2002.

¹⁶ Radiohead: 'Everything in its right place'; *Kid A*; EMI 2000.

¹⁷ Christopher O'Riley: 'Everything in its right place'; *True love waits*; Sony 2003.

There is, of course, a massive problem associated with the focus on virtual performance space and texture, with the move from song to track, which is that we simply don't have the vocabulary to describe what's happening, even in the case of the 'sound-box', where things are at least demonstrable. Is pinpointing the effects, and labelling their meanings, perhaps less important than the opportunity for greater self-awareness presented to an audience by the rich textures of recent popular music? I have both Radiohead and Grech in mind here, of course. How necessary, in other words, are words? In my introduction to the collection *Analyzing Popular Music*, I paraphrased Nicholas Cook to the effect that "words are indispensable in the process of our creating for ourselves meaning out of the music we listen to"¹⁸. I sometimes wonder, though, whether that doesn't simply mark a lack of imagination. In order to communicate our experiences, to offer them for scrutiny, some sort of externalised representation is clearly necessary. We are used to this, and we are trained, encultured, to create such externalised representations, no matter what our cultural milieu. However, this enculturation has become so effective that I think we are now encouraged to act as if to understand these effects in the first place, we must first represent them to ourselves, we must effectively communicate them to ourselves: we act as if we cannot comprehend their affecting us unless we verbalise them. The absurdity of this situation, put like this, I hope is obvious (which is why I put it like this). Communicated experiences are always mediated. But, I think, our own experiences, our own musical experiences at least, before we try to verbalise them, are precisely what we try to identify as 'unmediated'. As Richard Middleton argues, such affects are "semiotically beyond the linguistic domain". Robert Walser notes, in a rejoinder to Elvis Costello's much-quoted comment "writing about music is like dancing about architecture", that dancing about architecture might make a lot of sense, if we were as used to dancing as we are to talking¹⁹. Perhaps, then, we should consider the advantages of learning to dance not to, but about, tracks.

¹⁸ Allan Moore: 'Introduction' in Allan F. Moore (ed.): *Analyzing Popular Music*; Cambridge UP 2003, p.1.

¹⁹ Robert Walser: 'Popular Music Analysis: ten apothegms and four instances' in Allan F. Moore (ed.): *Analyzing Popular Music*; Cambridge UP 2003, p.22.

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