

POPULAR MUSIC

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Most of us have listened to popular music throughout our lives. It permeates our culture, on the radio, on TV, in the movies, and even in churches, as Contemporary Christian Rock. The musicologist Richard Taruskin describes our engagement with popular music as more than mere exposure: "Nowadays most educated persons maintain a lifelong fealty to the popular groups they embraced as adolescents" (2007: 37). The significant role that popular music plays in our lives has undoubtedly been instrumental in creating interest in popular music among music theorists. Another important factor has been a sharp decline of belief in the superior status of high culture, including classical music. As a consequence of these social and cultural changes, many music theorists have turned their attention to popular music. Where previously there were none, now there are several academic journals devoted to the study of popular music, all of which began publishing in recent decades.

Before this sea change, the philosophy of music had focused almost exclusively on purely instrumental Western classical music, and thus primarily on the notion of a musical work, on the ontology of such works, their abstract musical, aesthetic, and expressive properties, and on the resulting musical experiences of listeners. According to this model of music, the composer plays the role of an artist who creates and gives meaning to the musical work. Performers are important as interpreters of the written score who give sonic life to the abstract work, which properly remains the center of aesthetic attention. Authenticity in classical music has to do with how faithfully performers follow the composer's instructions as indicated in a score.

The attention to popular music that is now emerging offers new perspectives on the philosophy of music and more generally on the philosophy of art. Among the questions concerning music are those regarding what music merits the status of art: should popular music be considered art and its products regarded as artworks? Moreover, there is a question of the value, aesthetic or otherwise, of popular music. Skepticism has often been expressed about whether popular music has any sort of positive value – as music, as art, or even instrumentally – for society. Indeed, there are many negative critiques of popular music, from

both conservative and radical directions, one of the earliest and most influential being Theodor Adorno's (1941). (See Carroll 1998 for criticism of the main philosophical critiques of mass and popular art, including those of Adorno.)

Elevating popular music to the status of art would do more than expand the purview of musicology and philosophy of music. Because popular music involves physically engaged responses (it is common for listeners to physically move, dance, and even sing along to the music), the model of appreciation at the heart of traditional aesthetic theory – that of disinterested, even disembodied, contemplation – faces a serious challenge. (For the challenge of popular art to aesthetic theory see Shusterman 1991 and Novitz 2003. For whether rock music requires different appreciative practices, see Baugh 1993, Davies 1999, and Novitz 2003.)

Consideration of popular music also forces philosophers to reconsider the ontology of music so as to account for the ways in which its forms diverge from the model of classical music sketched above. Are there aesthetically important musical artifacts of a different sort that are prominent in popular music, such as recordings (or “tracks”) and improvisations? If so, do such artifacts have different aesthetic dimensions than those possessed by classical musical works? Finally, is the very picture of a work that is the result of a free and creative act of an individual composer undermined by the more complex world of mass-produced popular music, with its pervasive commercialization, collaborative authorship, and recycling of materials? (Horn 2000 questions the applicability of the work concept to popular music. For the ontology of rock music, see Gracyk 1996: 1–98, Fisher 1998, and Kania 2006.)

Even though the classical model of music with its emphasis on the abstract musical work has limited applicability to popular music, the concept of authenticity remains important. However, authenticity in popular music takes a different form, shifting from whether performers are accurately recreating a pre-existing work to a concern for their capacity to give appropriate *meaning* to the music they perform (Gracyk 1996: 219–25). Simon Frith describes the central place authenticity occupies in rock: “The rock aesthetic depends, crucially, on an argument about authenticity. Good music is the authentic expression of something – a person, an idea, a feeling, a shared experience, a *Zeitgeist*. Bad music is inauthentic – it expresses nothing” (1987: 136). Frith's own view is that quality in rock ought to be explained in some other way than by the “myth of authenticity” (1987: 137).

What is popular music?

Claims about popular music, such as the attacks on it from both ends of the political spectrum, presuppose that we can characterize what it is. However, because of the many associations of the expression “popular music,” there is no *one* answer to the question “What is popular music?” (Middleton 1990: 3–7).

Further complicating the issue is the fact that the categories "popular" and "folk" both evolved as ways of referring to "the people," although from different perspectives.

In investigating the meaning of "popular music," we need to distinguish the concept or concepts expressed by *actual* usage of the term from theoretically stipulated concepts that, albeit clearer, may not explain what popular music is as we ordinarily think of it.

Popular vs. mass music

An example of a theoretical simplification is Noël Carroll's argument for replacing the notion of popular art with his conception of mass art. He argues:

If by popular art one means the art of the common people, then there has always been what is called folk art. Moreover, if popular art just means art that is liked by lots of people, then it seems fair to say that every society has had some popular art.

(1998: 185)

Carroll objects that both of these concepts of popularity apply to every type of society and hence they are *ahistorical*, whereas "the concerns that motivate contemporary theoretical discussions about the popular arts occur in a historical context where we understand that the label 'popular art' refers discursively to the arts of mechanical and electronic reproduction" (183). Accordingly, he defines his proposed replacement concept of mass art as art that is simplified for mass consumption and which is both "produced and distributed by a mass technology" (196).

Carroll's concept of mass art describes rock recordings (technologically created and distributed), but does it characterize popular music more generally? To equate the category of popular music with a category of mass music, as Carroll would define it, would imply that popular music is only possible in a modern technological society. Hence it would rule out popular music before the twentieth century and consequently many familiar applications of the concept of popular music, for example, to describe street songs from seventeenth-century England, or music in early nineteenth-century America, such as minstrel music and parlor songs. Such songs are paradigm examples of popular music rather than folk music. The problem is that applying Carroll's simplification to music would ignore categories of popular music that are neither folk music nor mass-technology music.

Another limitation of any equation of popular music with mass music is that it privileges recordings while leaving the songs that are recorded in limbo. Songs are more abstract entities than their recordings and they are not produced technologically any more than are poems; they can be recorded, arranged

and performed in multiple ways and yet be the same song. A given song – for example, Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man” – is not to be equated with recordings of it, such as by Melanie. Nor are songs or their recorded versions to be identified with their live performances, which are also by Carroll’s definition not mass art. Yet surely songs and their live performances are central to the fabric of popular music.

Popular vs. folk music

An equation of popular music with folk music would also be historically inaccurate. The historical development of the concept of popular music reflects the evolving meaning of the more basic concept of popularity. As Raymond Williams reminds us, “popular” originally referred to something *of* the people, which could mean either *open* to all the people in a society – as in “popular government” – or *able to appeal* to all the people, thus was “common,” “low,” or “base” (Williams 1983: 236–7). This evolved into the sense of “widely favored,” which could be viewed pejoratively as the result of unseemly courting of the public. Williams suggests that we have inherited at least three related senses of “popular”: (i) inferior work, (ii) work that deliberately sets out to win favor, and (iii) work that is well liked by many people.

In another early sense, a “popular tune” was one that was familiar to everyone in society and could be used effectively in a variety of types of music. Moreover, until the mid-eighteenth century, “high,” “middle,” and “low,” as applied to music, referred not to value but to appropriateness for use in different genres of music, such as music for the church (high) or for ballad singing on the street (low).

Public cultural material in the eighteenth century was much more fluid and contiguous than it would later become: most societies in early modern Europe possessed . . . a wide-ranging, universally shared body of knowledge. . . . The elite culture that existed at the time tended to build on and supplement this universal material rather than displace it, making the shared layer a truly communal “popular” culture in a sense of the word that disappeared later.

(Gelbart 2007: 17)

From this focus on function, the Romantic age turned to categorizing music by its *origin*, by who created it (Gelbart 2007: 40–110). This led to the concept of folk music, which developed in tandem and by contrast with that of art music, each arising out of the Romantic age’s valorization of, respectively, the nation (the “folk,” in terminology invented by Herder) and the individual genius that created the music. Having spawned these two categories, “popular music” was left to refer to everything else; it was not pure and natural as was folk music,

which arose out of a traditional community, nor was it the individual expression of a composer aspiring to new heights of organic unity and originality of musical form. Hubert Parry's 1899 address to the Folk Song Society captures the resulting contrast between folk and popular: "in true folk song there is no sham, no got-up glitter, and no vulgarity . . . Moreover, there is an enemy at the doors of folk-music which is driving it out, namely the common popular songs of the day, and this enemy is one of the most repulsive and most insidious" (quoted in Middleton 1990: 131).

The distinction between folk and popular is difficult to draw, and some would argue "ideologically dangerous" (Gelbart 2007: 5). The International Folk Music Council (IFMC) in 1954 characterized folk music in terms of evolution through oral transmission. Folk music was music that evolved through the community's creative impulse and its process of selection: "it is the re-fashioning and recreation of the music by the community that gives it its folk character" (quoted in Gelbart 2007: 2). One difficulty with this conception is to distinguish such refashioning by a traditional community from the refashioning of songs and genres of popular music by mass communities.

Another problem is to justify the notion that authenticity attaches in a special way to folk music whereas it disappears when music is made in more urban and less unified societies. Without the Romantic idealization of the "folk," what grounds the idea that traditional music (as folk music is now called) is more authentic? To be sure, it may reflect community functions, such as initiation rites, and musical traditions such as use of modal melodies and traditional instruments. But without Romantic assumptions concerning the uncorrupted life of peasants, the decadence of modern urban life, and the mythical notion of a traditional organic community, can a distinction in authenticity between traditional and popular music be maintained?

Current conceptions of popular music

With the solidification of these three contrasting categories by the early nineteenth century both classical music and folk or national music were regarded with esteem as pure and authentic, both free from the "taint of commerce" and dependent only on genius or "natural" cultural traits. Popular music, on the other hand, now differentiated from folk as well as art music, was regarded as less valuable because of its dependence on commerce and on craft rather than genius (Gelbart 2007: 257). The overlapping themes that determine the meaning and reference of the expression "popular music" as it is used today echo this complex history.

One sense of "popularity" as applied to music is quantitative popularity. In this sense, something that is popular is widely liked by relevant evaluators: "popular" as a high degree of consumption or approval. This sense presupposes reference to a class of objects and a group of evaluators. Asserting that *La bohème*

is very popular means that among operas and people who listen to such music it is widely liked. Quantitative popularity does not create a *musical* category. It describes a *relation* to an audience rather than properties of the music that might define a general type of music. Quantitative popularity comes in degrees determined by the percentage of people from the relevant class who prefer or like the music. Thus, Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* is more popular than his *La Clemenza di Tito*, but neither is popular music in the categorical sense. Still, there is little doubt that quantitative popularity shadows any discourse about popular music organized by category; accordingly, it sounds odd to describe some quantitatively unpopular alternative band's music as popular music.

To describe some music as popular in the categorizing sense is to place it in a category with descriptive content. That content is largely predicated on the two contrasts familiar from history. One common notion characterizing "popular music" is that it is meant to contrast with classical music: popular music is music that is *not* in the classical music tradition. Adorno alludes to the contrast when he says "Popular music . . . is usually characterized by its difference from serious music" (Adorno 1941: 17). His notion of serious music appears to be determined by masterpieces of Western classical music. Adorno's focus aside, however quantitatively popular a classical musical work might be, it is not popular music. This contrast can be extended cross-culturally: in South India, popular music is distinguished from Carnatic music (a classical music) although, in contrast to Western practices, Indian popular music freely mixes folk and classical elements into popular songs (Reck 2009: 274).

Popular music is also defined by the historical contrast with folk music. This distinction applies where there exists both traditional music and urban popular music, such as in Africa, where afrobeat, soukous, and other genres of African popular music are clearly different from tribal music even though they use many traditional musical materials. Although the category of popular music is a moving target, the concept of traditional or folk music is more determinate. Hence, using the IFMC notion of traditional music, we can reason that the "folk music revival" of the 1950s and 1960s produced not traditional music but a genre of popular music. The songs in that revival were either written by the musicians themselves or were from singers and traditions that were not those of the singer or their audience (e.g. Pete Seeger singing Leadbelly's "Goodnight, Irene"). In short, these were not musical performances shaped by a community out of which they grew.

Should such performances be considered inauthentic appropriations from folk sources? It cannot be appropriation in a case, such as Dylan's, where the musician writes his own songs and sings them as such, even if in the style of a folk tradition. On the other hand, singers who sing traditional songs as such but do not pretend to be of the original community can be viewed as inviting the audience to engage in an act of make-believe, imagining that they are in that community. In such a case there need be no sense of passing off a performance as

something it is not, and thus it need not seem inauthentic. Yet some cases have been controversial. One much-debated example concerns white middle-class musicians performing black blues songs. This was objectionable to some, perhaps for the very reason that the white audience was indifferent to the communal origins of these songs and the white musicians received credit for what they did not create. (See Rudinow 1994 and Young 2008 for analyses of the issues.)

A prominent sub-category of popular music is “pop” music; it is Britney, not Björk. To many people, “pop” means inferior. Evidence of this is that many genres of popular music reject any association with “pop” music. Pop music in this conception is music whose function is to be consumed as an entertainment commodity by the largest possible audience and whose musical characteristics are chosen to achieve that goal. Hence, both the form and the content are necessarily dumbed down to appeal to the widest audience, which is assumed to be musically undiscerning. No wonder most genres of jazz and alternative music reject being labeled “pop.”

To be sure, such genres as disco and smooth jazz are widely considered paradigms of musical superficiality. It seems doubtful, however, that all pop music is without musical merit. Much pop music is seen by both the musicians and the fans as having elements of originality as well as properties of personal expression and insight. Perhaps this is an illusion (Adorno thought so), but given that the commercial music market requires constant change, something original – for example doo-wop – is likely to result even from commercial priorities.

Frith (2004) and Richard Middleton (1990) point out that a communal identity is expressed by various genres of popular music. Fans have a picture of who they are as fans of *this* music – their values, styles, etc. If the audiences for folk music, blues, or jazz believe that the audience for “pop” music is less discriminating or virtuous than they are, this would explain why they reject that label for their music. Frith gives the example of the anger directed at Dylan in 1966 when he started playing electric rock, an episode Frith describes as “Dylan going pop.” The anger was evoked by

the betrayal of an identity, of a belief in what an artist *stood for*, and how that, in turn, reflected (and reflected back on) the identity of the listener. For Bob Dylan’s folk-club followers musical taste was a key to the way they differentiated themselves from the mainstream of commercial pop consumers.

(Frith 2004: 32)

Popular music as art

The fine arts have been understood since the eighteenth century to include music along with painting, dance, poetry, plays, and so forth. However, the type of music that was considered serious or fine art in the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries, comparable to literature or painting, was assumed to be classical music. Is this prevailing assumption that excludes popular music from the status of art but includes almost all of classical music justified? It is surely arguable that bebop was some of the most important and original music created during the 1940s, as was the music of John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and other jazz musicians in the 1960s and also rock after 1965, for instance, in the Beatles' albums. The power and originality of that music and much popular music in many genres since then would seem to constitute a *prima facie* case that such works and performances should be considered art and the musicians artists.

Yet even friends of popular music, particularly friends of rock music, have not embraced this status; some have been indifferent to the issue, and some have rejected the status. Yet, (i) categorizing popular music as art reflects the fact that the central features of the arts in general, such as emotional expression and narrative, are also central features of most popular music, and (ii) such status supports serious attention to the expressive, formal, and representational dimensions of popular musical works, even though those dimensions take a different form in popular music than they do in classical music. Finally, *some* works of popular music are worthy of great admiration on aesthetic grounds.

Why would writers who accept the cultural importance of rock reject the label "art" for such music? Clichés about art and rock play a role. Theodore Gracyk argues that rock critic Jon Landau attacked the idea of rock as art based "on the old stereotype that art is intellectual and contrived, whereas popular culture is visceral, immediate, and 'authentic'" (Gracyk 2007: 13). The cultural theorist Dick Hebdige rejected art status for rock because it would cast the music as "timeless objects judged by the immutable criteria of traditional aesthetics" thus losing the immediacy of the music for its audience (quoted in Gracyk 2007: 14).

Gracyk too rejects the status of art for popular music. He points out that it is commonly assumed "that art status demonstrates great value" (2007: 22); accordingly, he argues that the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* is not art because it is flawed. However, philosophers of art have long distinguished the descriptive use of "artwork" to denominate a category of artifacts from the honorific use of the term "artwork" to praise the best of these. The master argument for the existence of the descriptive category is that there are mediocre, confused, and tepid works of art in all forms; hence, not all art is good art. Contemporary theories of art, such as Gaut's cluster account, are descriptive; they describe what makes something art, not what makes something good art. Gaut's account would clearly include much popular music because such music exhibits most of the properties that are, according to his theory, sufficient to assign an artifact to the category of art, such as the possession of aesthetic properties, emotional expression, the exhibition of an individual point of view, being an exercise of creative imagination, being the product of a high degree of skill, and so on (Gaut 2000).

Gracyk, however, objects to a similar account: “the disjunctive theory of art offers no guidance in distinguishing between better and worse Beach Boys albums. The threshold requirement for obtaining art status [on the disjunctive theory] is now so low that being a work of art confers no special merit” (2007: 24). Proponents of descriptive definitions of art, however, would claim that classifying popular music as art should not imply that all popular musical works are great artworks, any more than classifying movies, paintings, or plays as art implies that they all have great aesthetic value. Some jazz is mediocre and cliché-ridden, but some is brilliant music.

Variation in quality in popular music is actually a regular concern of fans and critics. Not only do critics produce lists of the best records, they also produce lists of the worst. Frith points out that ranking is a feature of fandom: “A self-proclaimed rock or rap or opera fan who never dismissed anything as bad would be considered as not really a *fan* at all” (2004: 19). The ability to separate good from bad, even from a subjective point of view, would seem to be impossible if Adorno had been right. He treats the audience for popular music of his day as made zombie-like by the standardization and formulaic nature of commercial mass music. “They listen atomistically and dissociate what they hear . . . [developing] certain capacities which accord less with the concepts of traditional esthetics than with those of football and motoring. . . . They are childish . . . forcibly retarded” (Adorno 1982: 286). Frith (2004) argues that really bad music is judged so by an audience because it is musically incompetent, involves genre confusions (opera singers performing pop songs), or involves expressively inappropriate emotions. This last criterion highlights that with a few exceptions modern popular music comprises songs that interrelate lyrics and musical structure, and, accordingly, are to be judged holistically, rather than as the sum of independent musical and textual components.

Beyond really bad music, listeners judge popular music by such features as derivativeness rather than originality, dependence on obvious formulas, and so on (Frith 2004). Care must be taken, though, to judge what is formulaic in popular music by its genre. As Frith points out, “the formula criticism tends to be genre-dependent; minor variations in boy band music are taken to be insignificant; minor variations in rural blues guitar tunings . . . are of great importance” (Frith 2004: 20).

The social vs. the aesthetic point of view

Given the influence of mass popular music on the public it was natural for theorists to worry about its underlying ideologies. This concern has motivated such questions as, “Does rock music reinforce capitalist domination or is it a force for social liberation?” (See, for example, Adorno 1982; Scruton 1997: 496–500; and Gracyk 1996: 218–26). However, early critiques that assumed a simple static ideology implicit in popular music in general as mass commercial product have tended to be supplanted by more nuanced views. Recent theories tend to view

the social and cultural significations of a popular musical work as complex and unique to a cultural context rather than as a simple unchanging expression of a class or political ideology (Middleton 1990).

Concerns have also been raised about the values expressed by particular songs or genres of popular music. An example is the charge that heavy metal rock expresses an ideology of male dominance. The theories prevalent in popular-music studies concerning the significant impact of popular music on listeners' imaginations and sense of identity make such concerns salient. (For a critical review of these arguments, see Gracyk 2001: 174–92. For a distinction between messages “in” art and messages “through” art, see Novitz 1995.)

The emphasis of popular music studies has been sociological. Where does that leave the music as an object that individual listeners appreciate and to which they respond with enjoyment? The danger is that studying the social meanings of genres and performers necessarily views popular music from the outside rather than as an object of musical or aesthetic appreciation. To regard this perspective as revealing the underlying reality of the musical experience for a given work of music appears to assume that there is no significant aesthetic basis for the listener's individual response. When listeners feel they are responding favorably or unfavorably to the audible features of a song, are they in reality responding to social factors and significations in the music that operate independently of their conscious aesthetic perceptions?

Frith points out that the sociological approach will miss why listeners enjoy one song and not another, why some songs are hits, why distinctions are made: “The discriminations that matter in these settings occur within the general sociological framework. While this allows us at a certain level to ‘explain’ rock or disco, it is not adequate for an understanding of why one rock record or one disco track is better than another” (1987: 135). The challenge is to understand the aesthetic dimensions of popular music while acknowledging that its social functions and significations are an integral component of the music for the individual listener (Gracyk 2007).

See also Adorno (Chapter 36), Appropriation and hybridity (Chapter 17), Jazz (Chapter 39), Music and gender (Chapter 52), Music and politics (Chapter 50), Rock (Chapter 38), Sociology and cultural studies (Chapter 51), and Song (Chapter 40).

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