

For Dave Harker, the arch debunker of such values, there is a need to open a study of popular music with a justification of popular music scholarship – ‘Who needs a book on “popular song”? Isn’t that one area where we are all of us experts? Won’t a book like this degenerate into a spiritual autobiography; or won’t it try to lay claim to yet another area of social life for trendy academics?’⁶ (The simple answer in socialist terms is, of course, that academics are workers too). Clearly, Adorno’s elision of Marxism and aesthetic autonomy is a headache for the socialist popular musicologist.

But perhaps we no longer require such Marxist guilt in the face of this ‘Dionysian’ form. At the recent inaugural meeting of the Critical Musicology Group in Sheffield University, popular music studies was described as one of a number of ‘more established areas of musical study’, along with ‘music analysis, music aesthetics (etc.)’.⁷ If this is so, why does the current *MT* editor feel it necessary to commissioning an article on popular music in this ostensibly classical journal? Clearly, communication across the divide *is* at issue.

The questions are put on both sides of the debate. The real question, however, is one of how musicology can *pop* the question, if by that we mean not only to *put* the question, but also to *explode* its duality, and to frame it within a context unique to the popular, rather than merely importing inevitably hostile contexts?

I will sacrifice everything – rhyme, reason, sense, sentiment, to catchiness. There is, let me tell you, a great art in making rubbish acceptable.⁸ The sentiments of music hall songwriter Felix McGlennon would seem to be an admission from within capitalism that Adorno was right. But does popular music consist solely of such ‘sacrificial rubbish’ strewn across the inauthentic altar of the capitalist mass-media? McGlennon’s extension of Adorno’s concept of the ‘popular-as-proletarian’ appears to fall into the pattern of ‘proletarian-as-trivial’. But as even Adorno acknowledges, popular music is not generically homogeneous. What he refused to accept was the possibility of an *aesthetic* as well as *generic* heterogeneity, although he does admit that some consider jazz to partake of aesthetic autonomy (‘contrasting Beethoven and jazz – a contrast that has already become undefinable for some musicians’⁹). If we consider the possibility of an ‘art-*vs*-pop’ divide within the popular itself (based on autonomy-*vs*-function, serious-*vs*-trivial, or any other similar formula) then it is easy to find its proponents within the jazz field, such as Avril Dankworth:

pop music has only the slenderest direct connection with jazz. Pop music is popular. It is the ‘music of the people’... Jazz is not for the masses; it is a minority interest – just like ‘classical’ music.¹⁰

For Dankworth, McGlennon’s conception is correct, but jazz, with its aspirations of concert hall obscurity, difficulty, and exclusivity, steps beyond music hall popularity. And although Adorno’s quotation above comes from a 1970 text, and Dankworth’s from 1968, they both avoid the similar implications of the new approach to aesthetic autonomy represented at that time by progressive rock.¹¹ The significance of progressive rock in this context is that, much like jazz before it, it set up an ‘art-*vs*-pop’ axis within the popular itself. In other words, not only to divide jazz from popular,

but to extend the division to within Dankworth’s definition of ‘pop’ itself. As Andrew Chester wrote,

The biggest obstacle in the path of rock criticism is the notion of *pop*... Pop denotes a cultural, not an aesthetic object... For rock, the struggle for artistic autonomy was won by the mid-’sixties¹²

These arguments around the aesthetic status of both ‘jazz’ and ‘rock’ as distinct from ‘pop’ were not so much a case of a Marxist debate around authenticity, whether racial or class-based, but one around the traditionally bourgeois concept of autonomy. The new rock aesthetic can be argued to be derived from ‘middle-class’ ‘art-music’ values – large-scale forms; structural complexity; rhythmic, tonal and textural innovation; virtuosic performance; the ‘heavy’ issues of metaphysics, psychoanalysis, humanity, ideology, etc. (cases in point would be King Crimson, Yes, Pink Floyd and Frank Zappa).

The complexity of this music is not in question to anyone who has ever attempted to transcribe a Frank Zappa guitar solo. Irish *sean-nós* or Japanese shakuhachi are easy by comparison. Indeed, it is possible to view this complexity as a popular analogue to the contemporary line traversed by the Total Serialism–New Complexity axis, with, for instance, Stockhausen, Ferneyhough and Zappa occupying a pseudo-druidic status. However, is *complexity* a valid criterion in deciding whether or not progressive rock, jazz, etc. are ‘serious’ enough to merit academic study? If it can be argued that some popular genres involve such ‘classical’ values, then surely we can fairly unproblematically plug them in to our extant classically applied discourse?¹³ And would this mean we can still reject ‘trivial’ pop music?

Some students and lecturers of popular music do indeed appear to follow just this line of thought, whether consciously or not. My own experience of teaching on a BA degree in popular music is that the most vocal students often prefer to study Zappa than Madonna, and others have noted the same. Alf Bjørnberg indicates that the Danish university’s approach to popular music is inevitably based on the valorisation of aesthetic autonomy due to its obsession with the analysis of notation, and that curriculae should balance between the ‘musician attitude’ and the ‘scholar attitude’.¹⁴ Again, we come up against the division between practice and theory outlined by Kane. If the ‘scholar attitude’ can be found in our university approaches to popular music, however, so can its inverse.

The anti-analytical attitude of popular music *users* (and many students remain little more than this) is by now practically proverbial. Kane alludes to the ‘fuck analysis – let’s dance!’ attitude, and points out that this in itself is a theoretical position.¹⁵ However, taking anti-analysis as a theoretical position, Meltzer argues for a more radical possibility in such conceptual nihilism:

‘So what?’ is... a fine aesthetic judgement for two reasons, because it sums up a valid experience and leaves the work itself untarnished... In fact, why not judge art by its sheer stubbornness, defiance of any and all objectification?¹⁶

Indubitably, Meltzer comes close to post-structuralism in this statement, but it remains the position of a theorist and hardly deals with the untheoretical pseudo-nihilism of a hostile ‘musician attitude’. Evidently, neither Kane nor Meltzer have ever tried these arguments out on a group of popular music students suffering from

general, whether popular or modern, whether theoretical or compositional, and she has argued that Madonna's song 'Live to tell' in particular engages compositionally with the deconstruction of certain rhetorical oppositions encoded within the structure of western harmonic practice.²⁷ Equally, she argues that the minimalist 'art-pop'²⁸ musician Laurie Anderson deconstructs concepts through their ironic postmodern juxtaposition with binaristic harmonies. Not wishing to confuse deconstruction with postmodernism, however (the two terms are not cognate), there is a great deal to be said for the direction in which McClary is moving. In approaching the problem of the musicological divide from a deconstructive position, she has neatly outlined the power of 'trivial' pop to question the tenets of 'serious' theory; she effectively underlines that a specific pop piece may be in fact a reading, or deconstruction of, the allegedly universal values and associations of European tonal rhetoric.

However, we must be careful here not to take these points as general – the claim is not that pop music as a genre deconstructs the whole European tradition. Deconstruction is not in the business of making totalising statements; the role of deconstruction is precisely to interrogate such constructs. Its strength lies in its refusal to fall back into stable generalities; it offers *one* means of disassembling the communicational divides between popular and classical theory and practise.²⁹ Not in order to throw the whole into a single homogenised mass, but to find routes of passage between the various points in the remarkably differentiated mess which we call 'music'.

Further, and the specific character of musical signification which has been at the basis of the arguments around aesthetic autonomy presents different problems to those encountered in the more travelled fields of deconstruction, whether philosophical, linguistic or political. If such a direction is taken up, musicology stands a decent chance not only of updating itself, but of advancing the boundaries of cultural theory in general. We may yet again find ourselves with the Paterian idea that 'all art tends toward the condition of music'.³⁰ If we do, then this time, it will not be within the strictures of 'absolute music', but within the conceptual milieu of post-structuralism. Let the silence roar forth.

Notes

1. Patrick Kane: *Tinsel show: pop, politics, Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 62. 2. *Ibid.*, p. 36. 3. This association of the popular and the Dionysian, which Kane suggests (and which was also enacted by Jim Morrison in the 60's), is notably argued against by Richard Meltzer, who asserts that 'Nietzsche's Dionysiac revelry has been utterly surpassed by the rock 'n' roll frenzy.' (*The aesthetics of rock* [New York, 1970], pp. 24-25). 4. This is not to imply, however, that the attendant prejudices of Enlightenment discourse are not operative within this inclusiveness. In a significant passage dealing with the Ancients and Moderns issue, Smith is inclusive in his movement through 18th-century instrumental 'art' music, Scottish and African 'folk', and ancient Greek vocal music (Adam Smith: 'Of the nature of that imitation which takes place in what are called the imitative arts', [London & Edinburgh, 1795] in *Philosophical subjects* [Indianapolis, 1982], pp. 208-9). Yet the association of folk praxis with the ancient Greek is designed to position the former as the *historical* past of urban modernity (and therefore partaking of the civilization of the Golden Age), but simultaneously as an outmoded remnant of pre-modern origins, as a *structural* precursor to modernity (and thus barbaric). These two aspects implicitly align themselves in Smith's text by the

following formulae: Scots folk = Golden Age; African folk = savage prehistory. Thus, while both folk styles merit aesthetic reflection, and Smith can acknowledge the specific affectivity of each style *in the same language* as he describes Corelli, Pergolesi, Marais, Destouches, Lully or Handel, there is nevertheless a characteristic ethnocentrism encoded within his Enlightenment discourse. This is the classic structure of the ethnocentrism which has pervaded the entire history of the western critical engagement with both non-western musics and (in a sense even more insidiously) those musics of the west practised by what, at the end of the 18th century, Johann Gottfried von Herder termed *der Volk*: the cultures at once the vital roots of the racial/national tree, but also its dark, subterranean past – both spiritual origin *and* primitive material. 5. Theodor W. Adorno: *Aesthetic theory* (London, 1984), p. 170, my italics. 6. Dave Harker: *One for the money: politics and popular song* (London, 1980), p. 9. 7. Allan F. Moore, Dai Griffiths & Eric Clarke, ed.: *Critical Musicology: invitation letter to inaugural meeting* (1993). 8. Felix McGlennon: 'A chat with Felix McGlennon' in *The Era*, 10 March 1894, p. 16. 9. Adorno: *op. cit.*, p. 170. 10. Avril Dankworth: *Jazz: an introduction to its musical basis* (London, 1968), p. vii. 11. Allan F. Moore: *Rock: the primamry text – developing a musicology* (Buckingham, 1993). 12. Andrew Chester: 'For a rock aesthetic' in *New Left Review*, no. 59 (1970), pp. 83 & 87. 13. And with detailed full score transcriptions of progressive rock pieces now available, their analysis according to classical techniques is increasingly possible. For instance, Barnes Music Engraving's transcription of *Queen: greatest hits II* is 347 pages long and reaches up to 16 staves on tracks such as 'Innuendo' (Woodford Green, 1992). 14. Alf Bjørnberg: 'Teach you to rock?: popular music in the university music department' in *Popular Music*, January 1993. 15. Kane: *op. cit.*, p. 62. 16. Meltzer: *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13. 17. John Shepherd: *Music as social text* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 199. 18. Richard Merton: 'Comment' in *New Left Review*, no. 59 (1970). 19. The often divisive debate around the categories of pop, rock, jazz and classical can be summed up by two short passages from Andrew Chester: 'Is rock music a genre which cannot compete with, for example, Western classical music as an aesthetic object, for want of formal complexity, and so needs the consolation prize of social significance that Merton holds out? I believe this is a capitulation to bourgeois ideology' (Chester: 'Second thoughts on a rock aesthetic: the band' in *New Left Review*, no. 62 [1970], p. 78). 'Rock is an art form in its own right with its own rules, traditions and distinctive characteristics. It needs no gift pass from Dizzy Gillespie in order to enter the gates of musical immortality' (Chester: 'For a rock aesthetic', p. 86). 20. Frith also wrote along these lines as late as 1983, in the introduction to Craig McGregor's *Pop goes the culture* (Lane Cove, NSW, 1983): 'The starting-point for all pop criticism must be that pop is a culture of consumption – we're dealing with commodities' (p. 1). 21. Simon Frith: *Music for pleasure: essays in the sociology of pop* (Cambridge, 1988). 22. Moore: *op. cit.* 23. Richard Middleton: *Studying popular music* (Milton Keynes, 1990), p. 193. 24. *Origins of the popular style: the antecedents of 20th-century popular music* (Oxford, 1990). 25. Middleton: *op. cit.*, p. iv. 26. I should point out here, that I am using this term in its strictly technical, philosophical sense, rather than the somewhat banal vernacular usage which seems particularly current in the 'Anglo-American tradition' of theory. I use the term not in the sense of 'analysis', but to refer to the Derridean method of the engagement, reversal and displacement of a text's metaphysical oppositions (Steve Sweeney-Turner: 'Music and deconstruction: some notes on the usage of a term' in *Critical Musicology Newsletter*, no. 1 (1993)). 27. Susan McClary: *Feminine endings: music, gender, and sexuality* (Minnesota, 1991). 28. If I may be allowed to coin another term. 29. I do not offer up deconstruction here as a total panacea for all of musicology's ills once-and-for-all, but as *one* of many possible routes for further development. 30. Elsewhere, I argue that deconstruction itself is intimately related to, if not *caught up in* some rather basic concepts from Enlightenment music theory. I refer the reader to Derrida's deconstruction of Rousseau (Jacques Derrida: *Of grammatology* [Baltimore, 1976]), where the clash between the rival ontologies of melody and harmony becomes one of the sites of production of Derrida's classic deconstructionist concept of *différance* (Steve Sweeney-Turner: *op. cit.*).