

***Song Interpretation in the 21st-Century Pop Music*, edited by Ralf von Appen, André Doehring, Dietrich Helms and Allan F. Moore**

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Abstract

The collected edition *Song Interpretation in the 21st-Century Pop Music* resulted from a summer school that set out to explore the fundamental issue of all music analysis: Subjectivity and the nonexistence of one true interpretation. The 13 chapters, eight by renowned scholars in the field of popular musicology and five group chapters by 26 junior scholars, demonstrate different methodical approaches informed by various disciplines such as ethnomusicology, music theory, music technology, media, literary and communications studies. The senior scholars analysed a topic they are known for, whereas the groups were given songs they were unlikely to be familiar with to avoid previous knowledge interfering with the interpretation. Indeed, the group interpretations led to different outcomes, partly due to the scholars' individual academic socialisations, partly due to the divergent perceptions of the music. Rather than coming to a mutually agreed interpretation, the complexity increased in most cases, making the results richer and more credible, but also less coherent and consistent. *Song Interpretation in the 21st-Century Pop Music* is an important contribution to the various fields concerned with the meaning of popular music. The potential of academic cross-pollination is clearly demonstrated, but so are the challenges. The initiated discussion is promising and should be continued.

Analyses of (commercial) popular songs have long sat uncomfortably in the disciplines of musicology, music theory and popular music studies. It took years for traditional musicology to accept popular music as an area worth studying and, at first, musicologists focused on progressive styles which responded better to their methods of analysis. The interdisciplinary field of popular music studies, rooted in cultural studies, has had issues with analysing popular songs albeit for different reasons. Analysing the music of popular songs could be seen as an attempt of either extracting the composer's meaning or of presenting the scholar's interpretation from the authoritative position of an expert. This goes against the fundamental beliefs of cul-

tural studies that trust in multiple readings and the individuality of people. Music theory has also had its problems with popular music analysis because the music's aesthetic appeal and meanings are largely based on non-structural aspects such as sound, performance and the artist's personal. Music theory, while able to explain a composition, could only predict how listeners might experience the songs based on the assumed standardised Western perception.

It is against this historical and methodological backdrop that *Song Interpretation in the 21st-Century Pop Music* must be understood. The collected edition is a result of a five-day summer school, held during September 2011 at the University of Osnabrück (Germany), that set out to explore the fundamental issue of all music analysis: Subjectivity and the nonexistence of one true interpretation. Four aims guided the research activities. The first aim addressed the inherent subjectivity of music analyses by exploring group-based interpretations. These did not come without their challenges as the editors reflect (4-5): Diverging experiences with group work due to different cultural conventions, different theoretical paradigms, discursive advantage of English native speakers and, as a result, disproportional use of techniques common in the USA such as the Schenkerian tonal analysis. The second aim concerned the editors' impression of music analysis often being reduced to examples as to prove a larger theoretical position. To tackle this, the songs themselves should take centre stage. Taking this into account, each chapter is dedicated to close readings of one song only. The third aim is linked to the historical academic practice of studying older records whose ascribed value increased by having become canonical. Thus, the editors chose modern examples of commercial top 40 pop music, released since the year 2000 from the genres mainstream pop, r&b, popular hard rock as well as indie and EDM styles. These music genres are often ignored by scholars because of their associated low value. The fourth aim is to present different ways of analysing popular music to provide an inspirational toolbox for (junior) scholars.

The summer school comprised eight lectures by renowned scholars in the field of popular musicology and group analyses by the 26 partaking junior scholars at master's to post-doctoral level. The outcome are 13 essays that combine methods of different relevant disciplines such as ethnomusicology, music theory, music technology, media, literary and communications studies, psychology and sociology. The organisational structure of the summer school is reflected in the book. Part one «Listening Alone» includes all lectures of the eight senior scholars,

whereas part two *Listening Together* is divided into five chapters, containing the group analyses of the junior scholars.

Four international and four German scholars contribute individual analyses to the first part, each one covering a topic they are associated with. Walter Everett performs a Schenkerian analysis of Death Cab For Cutie's *I Will Follow You Into The Dark*, Anne Danielsen explains the groove of Destiny Child's *Nasty Girl*, Simon Zagorski-Thomas analyses the production strategies of "Sex on Fire" by the Kings of Leon and Allan F. Moore explores the listening perspectives of Amy Macdonald's *This Is The Life* by comparing a TV advert, the single and music video. Likewise, the German scholars contribute chapters on topics or methods they are renowned for, at least in the German-speaking popular music scene. Dietrich Helms draws on communication theory to explain the popular appeal of Lady Gaga's *Pokerface*, Dietmar Elflein interprets Rammstein's *Pussy* through the cultural lens of the artists' upbringing in the German Democratic Republic, André Doehring explains the popularity of André's *New For U* through nostalgia and Ralf von Appen analyses the compositional and production choices of Ke\$ha's *Tik Tok*. Following the book's aims, all eight essays focus on songs at hand rather than relying too much on abstract thoughts and theories. This makes the essays a good starting point for getting acquainted with the author's analytic approaches. Readers already familiar with the respective oeuvre will recognise links to the authors' other work and understand the broader methodological and theoretical implications. Some authors have internationalised their approach as for instance Dietrich Helms, who is known in the German-speaking scene for his thorough application of system theory. Different from his usual approach he has drawn upon Roman Jakobson's communication theory, which is likely to be more accessible to readers not familiar with Helm's previous writings.

The four aims of the book are addressed very differently in the essays. Given that the overarching aim was to discuss multiple meanings, Walter Everett in his traditional Schenkerian analysis, intending to demonstrate how recent rock music follows conventional tonal behaviour, neither explores new methods nor accounts for the individuality of artists, let alone listeners' perceptions. Other texts follow more innovative approaches. So is the question of a personal liking central to many essays. Whilst André Doehring strives to find out why André's "New For U" is appealing to him, Dietrich Helms and Allan F. Moore take the unusual route seeking explanations as to why they do not like their chosen tracks. In both cases, the re-

flective form of writing is interesting insofar as both scholars cannot help but be attracted by some compositional and production tricks used in popular music, while, at the same time, describe these as reasons for their disliking of the tracks. These statements shed light on both the self-perception of popular music scholars and how their socialisation – rejection of commercial music in musicology – influences their perception. A common research interest in several essays is the question as to why the tracks are appealing to so many people; in other words, what makes them popular. This takes form in explaining the small decisions in the production process that keep the listener interested. The most creative take is an imaginary dialogue between artist and producer in Ralf von Appen's chapter on Ke\$ha's *Tik Tok*. Based on a combination of listening analysis and interviews with producer Dr. Luke, von Appen describes how the production process might have taken place. Even though this approach is both informative and entertaining, the stereotypical form of a male producer explaining the composition and production to a female artist is problematic, especially in the light of the more recent legal battle between Kesha and Lukasz Sebastian's *Dr. Luke Gottwald*. There was no way to foresee these occurrences, but von Appen could at least have reflected upon such gender issues. Nonetheless, all eight texts are useful resources for higher education seminars on popular music and music technology as they show how many details have been put into songs that could easily be branded as simple and unambitious commercial tracks when remained unnoticed.

The second part of the book consists of the group analyses. Intending to avoid previous knowledge and to facilitate discussions, each group was given a track they were unlikely to know; P.J. Harvey's *The Words That Maketh Murder*, Janelle Monáe's *Tightrope*, Fleet Foxes' *Helplessness Blues*, Lucenzo's *Danza Kuduro*, Björk's *Crystalline*. While the taken approach of allocating a track to groups certainly suits the aim to discuss individual meanings, it might prove problematic. Music analysis is normally motivated by personal interest in finding out why and how a song has affected the listener. This is true for all eight individual analyses. The group chapters, however, demonstrate that there was considerable disagreement between the scholars as to what the songs meant to them, and possibly even if they affected them at all. Although this certainly accords with the aims of the book, these issues could not be resolved in some cases. Inconsistent and descriptive chapters are the result with each scholar writing one section on a distinct parameter of analysis such as harmony, melody, sound or lyrics. Consequently, the argumentation is less cohesive and convincing. Reflecting on the experience, the

editors state that whilst the findings of the group analyses are not as detailed and consistent as those of the single authors, they are more credible (6). Evaluating whether this is true might require more extensive discussion. Another observation is that rather conventional methods were chosen. In all five group chapters the authors relied heavily on music theory, which seems odd in the pursuit of addressing multiple meanings of a song. Given this choice of methodology, the analyses help little in bridging the gap between musicology and music theory on the one side and the analysis-wary popular music studies on the other side.

Overall, the collected edition is an important contribution to the various fields concerned with the meaning of popular music. The eight single-authored chapters are suited to introduce students to the different ways of approaching popular music analysis in such a way that the results go beyond mere structure but rather link it to possible meanings. The five group-authored chapters are a starting point to address practical implications for peer interpretations. The potential of academic cross-pollination is clearly demonstrated, but so are the challenges. However, the initiated discussion is promising and should be continued because it obviously would help advance popular music analysis as a method and field of study as well as the wider disciplines of musicology, music theory and popular music studies.