

The Certain Uncertainty in Popular Music Analysis

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In the workshop this morning, we talked about tonal and harmonic ambiguity in popular music. For those of you who couldn't attend, I'll give brief overview of this issue. But I also wanted to highlight ambiguity in other domains, such as melody, tempo, meter, and form. Ultimately, as the title of my talk indicates, you should expect a certain element of uncertainty in your analysis of a song.

[NEXT] Here is an example we talked about in our workshop, the song "Get Lucky" which is comprised of just four chords that loop over and over. But what key is the song in? [NEXT] One view is that the tonic is F#. [NEXT] Another view is that the song is in A major, but that true tonic is quote-unquote "absent." [NEXT] Mark Spicer, who wrote an article on absent tonics in rock, views the tonic of this song as B minor. [NEXT] If you're willing to hear B minor as the tonic, D major should be a viable option as well. So what is the key of this song? I play and excerpt now. [PLAY].

In "Get Lucky," the chords seemed pretty clear but the key is not. [NEXT] We could also have the opposite situation, where the key is clear but the chords are not. What, for example, is the second chord in the verse of the song "Mannequin"? [PLAY] Often, I can't figure out the exact pitches of a sonority because the texture is too thick, and so I have to guess; but luckily in this case, the texture is pretty thin.

[NEXT] Also, I can find a video of Katy Perry performing this song live, which helps me figure out the exact pitches she's playing. But even knowing all the notes, I'm still stuck. The first chord, on the left here, is definitely some sort of tonic major nine chord in G major. The second chord, on the right here—which is the chord in question—has a clear scale-degree 4 (C) in the bass, but the pitches above spell a D major chord. [NEXT] So is this second chord an inverted dominant with the seventh in the bass, [NEXT] or is it a IV chord with no third and some wacky upper extensions? [PLAY] "How will I know the right way to label you." This second chord leads to a 2 minor chord, but that doesn't tell me much because the functional expectations of common-practice syntax don't necessarily apply here.

[NEXT] Moving away from harmony, I find melodic transcription to be one of the thorniest tasks in popular music analysis. Here are just a few bars from the song "I Can't Make You Love Me". This is my best effort at transcribing the melody. [NEXT] For the sake of comparison, here is a published transcription by Hal

Leonard. The two transcriptions are not that dissimilar, but there are a few places they differ. [NEXT] Ultimately, it's hard when transcribing a melody to separate the performance from the composition. My version leans more towards trying to capture the subtle tuning and timing aspects of Bonnie Raitt's performance, whereas the Hal Leonard version arguably leans more towards reflecting the underlying composition of the melody. [PLAY]

[NEXT] Let's move on to tempo. Consider the song "Sicko Mode," which a recent MTSU graduate produced. I'll play the track now, and I ask you to think about where the beat is. How would you conduct this song? [PLAY] I would guess that most if not all of you heard the song the way I've transcribed it here [NEXT], at a tempo of about 78 BPM, primarily because of where the kick and snare were landing. [Sing song]

[NEXT] What's interesting is that when this song was played at the Super Bowl last month, everybody on stage and in the crowd was feeling the beat at a rate twice what I had it transcribed as in the last slide. As you'll see in this video, the tempo of the song appears to be twice as fast, at 156 BPM as this new transcription shows. [PLAY] Apparently, the drum beat may not always correspond to the perceived beat of the song.

[NEXT] This issue gives rise sometimes to paradoxical relationships between songs. Take, for example, the song "Tainted Love" as covered by Soft Cell. The drums in this version imply a fairly clear tempo of 144 BPM, and so the excerpt I'll play lasts about 15 seconds. [PLAY] Let's compare this version to another cover by the band Pomplamoose [NEXT]. The Pomplamoose version may feel slower on some level due to the drum pattern. But the melody and the lyrics are actually going faster in the Pomplamoose version than the Soft Cell version, such that this same excerpt now lasts less than 13 seconds. [PLAY] It seems that tempo is more complex than a single BPM value can convey.

[NEXT] If it is unclear which layer in the rhythmic texture is the beat, then it can be unclear what the meter of the song is. Here, for example, are three published interpretations of "Norwegian Wood." Is one of these hearings better than the other? [NEXT] If meter is unclear, then the organization of higher metric levels is also unclear. Is what we just heard an 8-bar phrase, a 4-bar phrase, or a 2-bar phrase? Ambiguity about meter thus creates ambiguity about form.

To further complicate matters, form labels in popular music are generally under-determined. [NEXT] The song “Today” is one case in which I’m not sure what form labels are most appropriate. The song begins with a soft section followed by a loud section. This is a common strategy for 90s-era grunge songs, with the expectation that the soft part is the verse and the loud part is the chorus. [PLAY] After this soft-loud group, we get another soft-loud group [NEXT], which probably strengthens our feeling that we have a verse followed by a chorus. [NEXT] But then after the second loud part, the opening part returns, but now as a loud part. Admittedly, the harmonies are a little altered in this third iteration of the A section, but it seems to be basically the opening section coming back. [PLAY] So maybe this A section—which includes the title of the song and has been the catchiest part of the song all along—is actually the chorus of the song. [NEXT]. But maybe calling it a chorus-verse form is weird, because the B section doesn’t really sound “verse-y,” so maybe it’s a chorus-bridge form. [NEXT] Or maybe I’m undervaluing the differences between the third A section and earlier A sections, so [NEXT] maybe this third A section is the bridge of the song? [NEXT] Or maybe the third A section is the real chorus, and the B sections are prechorus sections? [NEXT] I could also see the last B section as a bridge. Ultimately, I don’t think any of these analyses are unreasonable, but nor do I find any of them entirely satisfying.

[NEXT] So that’s an extremely brief overview of some of the issues I wrestle with every time I analyze a song. I don’t have time here to propose solutions. That said, I do think that corpus studies help us gauge, at least somewhat, the extent of subjectivity in popular music analysis. So let’s hear a bit about corpus work from Dan Shanahan.