

## Review article

# Popular music analysis too often neglects the analysis of popular music

*The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis: Expanding Approaches.*  
Edited by Ciro Scotto, Kenneth Smith, and John Brackett. New York:  
Routledge, 2019. 441 pp. ISBN 978-1-138-68311-2.

For more than two decades, a trend in popular music scholarship has been the publication every few years of an edited collection of analytical essays (e.g., Covach and Boone 1997; Moore 2003; Everett 2008). These multi-author volumes sometimes have a specific analytical concern, such as intertextuality (Burns and Lacasse 2018), but more typically they simply bring together a variety of essays written by a variety of authors using a variety of methods to analyse music from a variety of styles. Strategically, the editors of these volumes will pitch this lack of any strong unifying theme as an advantage, asserting that the broad range of approaches gives the reader a sense for the diversity of current perspectives (as in, for example, the preface to Spicer and Covach 2010 or the introduction to von Appen et al. 2015). To be fair, the exclusive focus on analysis, particularly close readings of the ‘text’ itself, makes the chapters of these collections hold together more than, say, the articles in any regular issue of *Popular Music*. However, with typically only a dozen or so contributions in each volume, these multi-author works often seem like scattershot glimpses into the vast universe of possible analytical approaches and musical styles.

The latest iteration of this format is the recently released multi-author volume edited by Ciro Scotto, Kenneth Smith and John Brackett, entitled *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis: Expanding Approaches*. As the subtitle implies, this volume seeks to distinguish itself from previous collections of analytical essays on popular music through an emphasis on ‘expanding approaches’. The most obvious manifestation of this expanded approach is simply the book’s size. With 28 contributions plus a preface, it more than doubles the typical length for an offering of this type. In contrast to the lack of hierarchy found in other edited collections, the large number of essays allows for an organisation of its chapters into five parts by topic: (1) Establishing and Expanding Analytical Frameworks; (2) Technology and Timbre; (3) Rhythm, Pitch, and Harmony; (4) Form and Structure; and (5) Critical Frameworks: Analytical, Formal, Structural, and Political. As a result, the book coheres a bit better than similar publications if one decides to read from beginning to end. That said, each essay is a standalone work, and the chapters could be read in any order without significant consequence.

The concept of ‘expanding approaches’ also summarises the advertised purpose of the book, which is to offer scholarship that ‘widens the scope of popular music

analysis' (p. xvi). In particular, while other publications on popular music apply analytical techniques derived primarily from classical music, this book offers essays that create 'new analytical paradigms for examining popular music from the perspective of developments in the ways we understand contemporary art music' (p. xvi). Indeed, many chapters in the collection employ methods more traditionally associated with 20th-century art music. Peter Silberman, for example, examines the form and temporal structure of Captain Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica* through the lens of moment form composition, common to the music of Stravinsky and Stockhausen. Ciro Scotto offers a new theoretical framework for heavy metal music that combines modal scalar relationships with set-class and pitch-class centric relationships, reflecting a blend of tonal and post-tonal practices. Additionally, David Heetderks shows how Sonic Youth's dissonant textures, like those of Shostakovich or Copland, can be explained through a central dyad that creates tension between two opposing pitch centres.

A large number of chapters, though, do not in any clear way adopt or adapt techniques developed from the analysis of contemporary art music. John Covach's careful highlighting of relationships between songs and their cover versions by Yes and Vanilla Fudge reads like a traditional analytical essay, written by a music theorist with a deep knowledge of historical context. Neil Newton's use of chromatic linear progressions to analyse modulatory passages and scalar shifts in popular music leverages tools similar to those developed by Schenker to analyse Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. To account for variations in the microtiming of neo-soul grooves, Anne Danielsen introduces the 'beat bin' concept, which derives from theories of performance practice in classical music combined with recent research in music perception and cognition. Perhaps as a concession to the difficulty of wrangling the more than 30 authors into a singular orientation, the editors ultimately define expanded approaches as 'any compositional, analytical, theoretical, aesthetic, or cultural concept that goes further than current scholarship towards our understanding of the pitch-class structure, form, timbre, rhythm, aesthetics, or cultural significance of various forms of popular music' (p. xvii).

With such a broad definition, it would be difficult to argue that previous edited collections do not also offer expanded approaches. I see the current volume, therefore, as essentially a conventional continuation of the decades-old tradition of binding together under a single cover an assortment of analytical essays on popular music by various authors with heterogeneous interests. This is not to say that the book offers nothing new. Michael Spitzer, for example, very observantly explains how lo-fi and primitive musical materials evoke a sense of 'postmemory' in Neutral Milk Hotel's *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*, a landmark album of indie rock that had not yet received much analytical attention. Bethany Lowe and Freya Jarman provide in their chapter an encyclopaedic inventory of self-referentiality in popular songs, certainly the first such compilation of its kind. Yet these are isolated accomplishments by individual authors, the type of accomplishments that one might encounter in any journal article or any chapter of some other edited collection, rather than any large-scale shift in music analysis that might be achieved through the coordinated work of nearly three dozen contributors. That is to say, the nature of expansion found in this volume is mostly of the kind that readers of *Popular Music* can probably predict, whereby an author takes a particular theory (either from music or some other discipline), applies that theory to the analysis of a specific song or album and then comes to the conclusion that the application of this theory offers

us a better understanding of that song or album. This *modus operandi* is undeniably an expansion of knowledge, but it is more of an expansion of the *status quo* rather than a wholly new approach to analysis.

To understand what I mean by a new approach to analysis and what that new approach might look like, consider a central feature of this volume: the specific repertoire under study. As of the writing of this review (January 2020), 34 artists have worldwide sales figures that exceed 100 million total certified units (according to [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_best-selling\\_music\\_artists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_music_artists)). By sales figures, therefore, these artists are objectively of great importance in the landscape of popular music, and the names on this list – e.g. Michael Jackson, Katy Perry, Eminem – should be familiar to any scholar of popular music. As an impartial way to gauge the overall repertoire discussed in *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music*, we can compare its index entries with this list of the 34 top-selling artists; doing so, we find nine names that overlap – The Beatles, Elvis Presley, Queen, Led Zeppelin, AC/DC, Pink Floyd, Billy Joel, Bruce Springsteen and Metallica. Note that every one of these nine artists are white and male, even though only half of the top 34 best-selling artists are white and male (or are groups comprising solely white, male members). To be clear, the essays in this collection are not exclusively focused on white, male artists. John Brackett, for example, has a compelling chapter about how aspects of musical time and form in Frank Ocean's *Blonde* represent the experience of a marijuana high, and the book's index contains a number of entries by female artists and artists of colour, such as Bo Diddley, Joni Mitchell, Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar. Yet it is highly improbable (given a hypergeometric distribution,  $P[X=9] < 0.001$  with  $N=34$ ,  $K=17$ ,  $n=9$ ) that the observed sample of the 34 best-selling artists found in the index of this volume would skew so strongly towards white and male owing entirely to random factors. It is much more likely, in other words, that there are some underlying factors by which musicologists choose their objects of study that would explain this strongly lopsided distribution of popular artists.

Admittedly, it is not entirely fair to single out this particular book, since a similar criticism could be made about the repertoire trends found in the pages of this very journal. In a search of articles published in *Popular Music* during the period 2005–2014 (the latest decade available on JSTOR), there are 60 results for the Beatles, 26 for Elvis Presley, 34 for Led Zeppelin and 19 for U2, yet there are only three results for Mariah Carey, four for Whitney Houston, five for Celine Dion and four for Jay-Z. The biases with regard to repertoire that we find in this edited collection overall can thus be explained simply as a reflection of similar biases that exist within current musicology more generally. I should clarify that I do not believe there is any significant racial or gender-based prejudice on an individual basis that is responsible for creating such an imbalance of representation. Nor am I advising that we avoid studying the music of white, male artists. Some very popular white, male artists remain highly underrepresented in musicological work, such as Justin Bieber and Garth Brooks, both of whom are among the 15 best-selling artists of all time as measured by total certified units. And the music of Pink Floyd, as examined in Shaugn O'Donnell's essay, is still important and deserves to be the subject of our scholarly interests. Yet to truly expand our approaches to popular music, we need to more often and more directly confront a large swath of significantly popular music that has yet to receive significant analytical attention.

One central problem is that the analytical methods we currently have, particularly those of the American-trained music theorist, are more easily applied to certain musical styles and thus certain musical artists. Simon Zagorski-Thomas highlights this issue in his essay, writing that ‘musical thought is shaped by the representational system . . . and there is a dissonance between many of the practices of popular music and the ways in which notation encourages us to think about music’ (p. 117). The observed repertoire bias, in other words, can be seen as a function of our existing tools. It is much easier, for example, to find cases of magically mysterious modal mixture in the music of the Beatles than in, say, the music of Drake, who now surpasses the Beatles to be the top-ranked artist of all time as measured in total certified units. It is thus understandable that if we start from the analytical tools or concepts, we will be tilted towards one artist and away from another. Instead, we need to begin with the music itself, to begin with the object that demands to be studied, and to try to expand our approaches based on what is happening in the music. It is in this regard that I find the motivation for this edited collection to be inherently misguided. Trying to create new analytical paradigms for popular music through the refashioning of frameworks developed to understand contemporary art music is an approach based on tools first, music second. I am not saying that these tools – such as the transformational networks used by Kevin Holm-Hudson to show how Emerson, Lake, and Palmer’s version of ‘Toccata’ relates to the final movement of Ginastera’s *Concerto No. 1 for Piano and Orchestra* – cannot or should not be applied to popular music. However, we need to start with the music and then use, adapt or develop the tools required for the task at hand.

What is the task at hand, though? What are we trying to accomplish when we analyse music, particularly in the form of a published article? Stan Hawkins and Jon Mikkel Broch Álvik conclude their analysis of A-ha’s ‘Take on Me’ by saying that they ‘have endeavoured to show how a close reading . . . can throw a light on a wealth of features that have ensured the track’s longevity’ (p. 90). In short, these authors are trying to explain why the music was and continues to be so popular. This is a natural and understandable inclination, but it is a problematic foundation on which to base the analysis of a single song. Christopher Doll, in his cautionary essay that is a highlight of the collection, lays out some of the practical issues with aesthetic analysis and addresses this particular danger, writing that we ‘must guard against the temptation to treat every conceivable connection between words and tones as objective evidence of some grand intelligent design’ (p. 11). The analysis of a single song is essentially an experiment without a control, like taking a drug and not knowing whether the perceived results are due to the drug itself or merely a placebo effect. Allan Moore tackles this issue in his contribution, a sort of counterpoint to the collection overall, writing that the time for publishing analysis (or at least, structural analyses) has past – ‘not for doing analysis for its own sake, note, but for publishing it’ (p. 45). Too often, he writes, we publish structural analyses without a clear research question, failing to ask ‘why do I want to understand the structure of this piece?’ Ultimately, Moore argues that the goal of analysis should be to elucidate the way music ‘engages our perception’ (p. 55).

I read Moore’s advice as advocating for a listener-based, interpretation-focused approach to analysis, and many chapters in this volume fit that mould. Lori Burns, for example, applies David Herman’s narrative framework to Steven Wilson’s song ‘The Raven That Refused to Sing’ so as to put into dialogue the various layers of expression (e.g. lyrics, images, music) and thereby bring the analyst ‘into a very

close engagement with the artistic content, and ultimately into a more sensitive consideration' of the story being told' (p. 109). I wonder, though, to what extent this type of analysis connects and contributes to the future of music pedagogy, given the push in recent years for popular music to play a larger role in the music theory classroom. The editors write, for example, that this essay collection 'will be an invaluable resource for educators seeking to incorporate popular music into their core curricula' (p. xviii), which may be true for those who view the interpretation of a work to be the end-goal of music theory and analysis coursework. I would guess this view is held by most music theorists, in fact, primarily owing to their teaching situations. A great deal of the intellectual capital within the field of music theory, as measured by the number of research-oriented tenure lines at top schools, is currently concentrated (at least in America) at institutions where the student body comprises largely performance majors (e.g. Indiana, Eastman, Florida State). When teaching performance majors, the crafting of an interpretation is the practical application of music theory, so it makes sense that there has been a preference, historically speaking, for interpretative analyses. Yet as undergraduate programmes shift more towards popular music, we should expect a concomitant shift away from traditional performance degrees and towards degrees such as songwriting, sound recording, music production and commercial guitar. These areas, generally speaking, are much more focused on creation and composition than pure performance. For these students, therefore, the practical application of music theory is not primarily interpretation.

To best serve these students, we need to think about how analysis can better elucidate not just our perception or interpretation of music but also how to create and compose it. I do not intend to deprecate interpretative analysis, in the same way that I do not intend to deprecate music by white men. However, we should be devoting a much larger portion of our analytical efforts towards identifying the grammar and syntax of popular music and its various styles, to finding and organising the typical patterns of rhythm and pitch and timbre and form, because it is this information that students will need if they hope to create popular music of their own. This type of analysis is impossible to do by looking at a single song or a single album. It can only be done by looking at a large number of songs, such as the entire output of an artist, the top-charting songs of a decade or the most critically acclaimed albums of a particular style. What I am describing might sound like a corpus study, but it does not have to necessarily be statistically driven or strictly empirical. It does, however, have to wrestle with the question of what is common and what is not common in popular music and its various styles. As a paragon of this approach and another highlight of the collection, Nicole Biamonte's chapter on rhythmic functions in pop-rock music is a *tour de force* of musical examples that illustrate the characteristic organisational aspects of a broad style, and I expect her essay will become standard reading for graduate music theory seminars.

It was not that long ago, of course, that the academic study of popular music became a substantial field of research, that papers on popular music topics began to appear with any significant frequency on the programmes of the general musicology conferences (e.g. AMS, SMT). In that light, the publication of this book is a welcome sign that the analysis of popular music continues to blossom. And I cannot be too critical of the editors of this collection or its individual authors for the skew in the volume's repertoire overall, because these scholars obviously value and respect the study of popular music deeply, which in my experience is still not the case among many music faculty members. However, if we hope to change the culture of music

departments, to create a scholarly environment that promotes the inclusion of a much wider group of people than are currently represented, then we need to more directly confront the reason for studying popular music in the first place. Popular music is important because it is popular, because by nature it mirrors the demographics of society at large, the same demographics that we ultimately hope to mirror in music departments if we care about diversity. So let us all, myself included, make better efforts to study the music that is popular if we are to call ourselves scholars of popular music.

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