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Middle Eight

# Methods of popular music analysis

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While few would deny the importance of postgraduate conferences for active exchange of views, such events focus on results and possibilities for future work, often ignoring the *process* of analysis and, indeed, the role of trial and error. The second Methods of Popular Music Analysis Summer School (14–18 September 2015) was a study in lifting the veil surrounding analytical approaches and thus offered participants a crucial insight into the process of analysing popular music.

The School welcomed 24 postgraduate participants from different cultural and academic backgrounds at the University of Osnabrück, Germany. Organised by Ralf Von Appen (University of Giessen), André Doehring (University of Giessen) and Dietrich Helms (University of Osnabrück), the international nature of the conference was ever-present with participants from the UK, USA, Germany, Ireland, Spain, Norway and New Zealand. The eclectic selection of guest lecturers reflected a similar mixture of backgrounds. Instructors included Walter Everett (University of Michigan), who spoke on harmonic relations within rock music; Anne Danielsen (University of Oslo), who discussed structure, microrhythm and form; Mark Butler (Northwestern University, Chicago), who explored methods for analysing electronic dance music; Samantha Bennett (Australian National University), who presented her 'tech-processual' approach to popular music analysis; Dai Griffiths (Oxford Brookes University), who drew comparisons between poetry and song lyrics; and Allan F. Moore (University of Surrey), who described interrogative hermeneutical analysis of popular song. As the title suggests, each of the Summer School presentations highlighted *methods* for analysing popular music.

The 2015 Summer School built on the success of a previous programme, held in 2011. Both shared a core aim of promoting multidisciplinary study in popular music analysis. The results of the 2011 Summer School were published in the Ashgate book



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*Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music*, which collected chapters by each of the lecturers of the Summer School alongside readings of five tracks written by groups of the School's participants. The 2015 programme emphasised collaborative analysis, reflecting the organisers' belief in not only its pedagogical value, but also in its use as an alternative research approach. Musicologists have been reluctant in the past to embrace co-authorship of research publications, despite the potential for more holistic outcomes. This philosophy extended to the lecturers themselves, who, like the participants, took the opportunity for smaller group analyses of tracks, although these, sadly, remained behind closed doors.

Perhaps the most distinctive element of the Summer School was the opportunity for group analysis. Groups of four or five participants from different cultural and academic backgrounds analysed one song together in private sessions each afternoon, and discussed their ongoing work with the guest academics, who shared their own analytical approaches to each group's track. In order to expose participants to a song they had not studied (or perhaps even heard) prior to the Summer School, the organisers elected not to divulge the identities of these songs until the first group meetings, so that groups could start their analyses with 'fresh' ears. Prior to attending the Summer School, the participants were asked to express an interest in one of five music categories: 'R&B', 'hand-made expressive music', 'female soul', 'percussive and tricky' or 'computerised dance'. The five group-work songs that were allocated based on preferences of the above descriptions were: 'Ain't That Easy' by D'Angelo and the Vanguard, 'Water Fountain' by tUnE-yArDs, 'Gimme All Your Love' by Alabama Shakes, 'Partition' by Beyoncé and 'Holding On' by Disclosure featuring Gregory Porter.

Analysis in groups proved unfamiliar for many of the participants. Each was provided with a notebook to document the delights and dangers of group analyses (what went well, what went wrong, session outcomes, developing group dynamics, and so on), which were collected by the organisers to investigate similar themes. On the final day, all groups presented their work in a plenary session, which provided valuable insight into each group's analytical methods and internal dynamics. The five-day programme evidenced two particular themes which we would like to highlight. The first of these themes was the attitude to analysis as a process approachable from a variety of means. Groups had the opportunity to work directly with each lecturer to discuss specific elements of analysis, according to the lecturer's expertise. While this was beneficial for the groups, as they could discuss their ideas with experts in their respective fields of analysis, it did on occasion break the 'flow' of the group, particularly in the latter part of the Summer School as the papers and presentations were reaching their final stages. The processual nature of analysis was also apparent in the group work generally, which offered participants a rare opportunity for collegial study.

The second theme which emerged from the School was the subjective nature of analysis. Over the week, this provided the basis for varied discussion on whether or how this should or could be accounted for, and particularly how this might be approached in relation to group analysis. In each group, it was necessary to negotiate the inter-subjectivity of its members and their particular analytical approaches. For several, this resulted in multiple interpretations of aspects such as form, rhythm, harmonic structure and lyrics. Owing to the diverse perspectives among participants, achieving consensus in relation to procedure and conclusions was often cited as a challenge. Two strategies emerged: some groups elected democratic approaches

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and chose to either vote for a particular type of analysis or interpretation when ideological and hermeneutic frictions arose; meanwhile, other groups embraced their differences and presented their work in a dialectical manner to illustrate the different ways in which certain 'controversial' elements of their songs could be perceived.

The Summer School introduced a variety of approaches to the analysis of recorded popular songs and provided a novel opportunity for intersubjective analysis from different cultural and research backgrounds. Furthermore, it encouraged participants to consider the pedagogical value of group analysis and how it could be used within a classroom environment. Indeed, for many of the participants, the exercise highlighted the various possibilities for different hearings of the same text, drawing attention to the role of interpreters' biographies and backgrounds. This required attendees to challenge and articulate their initial responses to tracks, accommodate different perspectives and approaches, and to defend their interpretations in relation to those of their colleagues. Organisers anticipate that a publication of essays by the School's contributors and participants will follow the Ashgate collection from the 2011 School.

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