

## RALF VON APPEN, ANDRÉ DOEHRING, DIETRICH HELMS AND ALLAN F. MOORE (2015). SONG INTERPRETATION IN 21ST-CENTURY POP MUSIC

### Review by Christopher Doll

In this book, editors Ralf von Appen, André Doehring, Dietrich Helms, and Allan F. Moore offer readers a collection of scholarly essays on popular music analysis in the tradition of John Covach and Graeme Boone's *Understanding Rock* (1997), Richard Middleton's *Reading Pop* (2000), Allan Moore's own *Analyzing Popular Music* (2003), Walter Everett's *Expression in Pop-Rock Music* (2008), and Mark Spicer and John Covach's *Sounding Out Pop* (2010).<sup>1</sup> Seeking to distinguish their new book from its predecessors, the contributing editors of *Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music* commence with a collectively authored introduction laying out four aims that, at least in their particular combination, ensure a novel scholarly contribution. The first of these, and probably most important, is to undermine the objective pose so often implied—or even overtly adopted—in analytical music scholarship, and to replace it with a sentiment of accepting—and indeed celebrating—music analysis's inherent subjectivity. The second aim is to center attention on songs themselves, rather than presenting songs merely as examples within larger discussions of theory or methodology. The third aim is to analyze only contemporary songs: nothing before the new

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1 John Covach / Graeme M. Boone (Ed.) (1997). *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis*. Oxford University Press; Walter Everett (Ed.) (2008). *Expression in Pop-Rock Music*. 2nd ed., Routledge; Richard Middleton (Ed.) (2000). *Reading Pop. Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music*. Oxford University Press; Allan F. Moore (Ed.) (2003). *Analyzing Popular Music*. Cambridge University Press; Mark Spicer / John Covach (Eds.) (2010). *Sounding Out Pop: Analytical Essays in Popular Music*. University of Michigan Press.

millennium. The fourth and final aim is to demonstrate the utility of musical analysis as a means to various other scholarly ends, including hermeneutic readings and socio-cultural arguments concerning insider experience and personal identity (race, gender, nationality, etc.).

The extent to which these four stated aims are met *collectively* by the essays makes the book a clear success, which is to say this book adds something fresh to the slow-but-steady stream of analytical collections by popular music scholars. Matters are a bit more complicated when dealing with the essays *individually*, however, because the book's general aims don't seem to apply equally in each case. It is hard, for example, to find anything other than analysis or theory at the end of Anne Danielsen's stimulating chapter on the groove of Destiny Child's »Nasty Girl.« Danielsen's waveforms don't really lead to any hermeneutic or socio-political point (the fourth aim), or even lead to any obvious insight about experiencing the groove through dancing (which would be the most basic form of analysis-as-means I could imagine for a study of groove). Walter Everett's detailed tonal analysis of Death Cab for Cutie's »I Will Follow You Into The Dark« is unmistakably hermeneutic in its trajectory (this, despite the essay's rather austere title announcing the song as a mere »Exemplar of Conventional Tonal Behaviour«). Yet I find nothing explicit in Everett's rhetoric suggesting his musico-poetic argument is to be celebrated as an instance of subjective interpretation (the first aim). (And given the central role of subjectivity in the collection, as articulated clearly in the editors' introduction, the placement of Everett's analysis as the very first essay makes this incongruity even more noticeable.) All this said, it would be unreasonable to expect any multi-author collection to confirm uniformly to numerous collectively guiding goals, in light of the inherent difficulties in assembling this type of publication.

On the other hand, it's entirely reasonable for readers to debate the goals themselves—to deliberate over the degree to which we find them well formulated and ultimately worth pursuing. The remainder of my review will offer such interrogation of the book's four general aims, in reverse order. The fourth goal, analysis-as-means, is described by the editors as revealing analytical study to be »not necessarily an aim in itself, but a toolbox that can be used to address many different issues of broader relevance« (2). I myself have no ideological objection to using analysis in this way, but the formalist in me also stands firm in the conviction that analysis can act as its own reward, and indeed I would go so far as to say there is a severe limitation on the number of different ways analysis can be pressed into the meaningful service of some further cause. It is analysis's highly subjective

nature (remember the first aim) that makes it a rather unstable foundation for making assertions much beyond the activity of music-making itself, and in fact, the essays here that do connect their songs to broader socio-cultural concerns really do so in service of illuminating the former (the musical) rather than the latter (the extra-musical). Dietmar Elflein's provocative chapter on Rammstein's »Pussy,« for instance, links musical and lyrical details to larger aspects of German culture, but the ultimate point is actually to »enable an understanding of the music in its cultural context« (98) – *not* to enable an understanding of the culture. In other words, the goal is not to get past musical analysis, but to get to a better, more diversified version of it. An admirable pursuit, in my opinion.

The third aim is to feature recent music, understudied so far not only because of its sheer newness but also because it is less responsive – at least compared with earlier popular music – to traditional methods of musical analysis. The editors identify their repertory as »pop« in the book's title, but this is intended to cover »mainstream pop,« »critically acclaimed ›indie‹ styles,« »R&B,« »and current electronic [popular] music« (2). I find this aim laudable, and so I was somewhat confused to read the opening of co-editor Allan Moore's individual essay on Amy Macdonald's »This Is The Life,« where Moore admits he is »not really very much interested in ›keeping up‹ with the ›latest thing‹ in music« (157). The entire first paragraph of Moore's essay would appear to be at least a partial refutation of the third aim he himself helped express in the book's introduction; this paragraph's inclusion seems to me an unnecessary distraction, if only a minor blemish in the larger scheme of things.

The second aim, analysis-over-theory, strikes me as a meaningful counterbalance specifically to the field of professional music theory/analysis, as opposed to, say, popular music studies. The latter, as far as I can see, is replete with articles focusing on one or a few songs, while the former is definitely more focused on articulating more sweeping claims and using musical excerpts as mere examples. Of course, there must be some sort of balance between the two; the editors themselves suggest that »methods of analyzing sound and record production, or rhythm and groove are still underdeveloped« (2), implying that all the analysis here of new repertory is at least likely to *eventually* lead to new general claims, new theory. As a matter of fact, essay-author Simon Zagorski-Thomas goes all the way, explicitly framing his article as an »examin[ation of] some specific ways in which features other than melody and harmony can be incorporated into the analysis of recorded popular music,« »[u]sing the example of the Kings of Leon track ›Sex on Fire‹« (115). In other words, the specific song

discussed here is somewhat arbitrary; it is the methodology that matters. (Again, not every individual essay conforms equally to each general goal.)

The book's number one aim, to emphasize analysis's subjectivity, is one with which I am completely on board; it is a sentiment all too frequently missing from analytical scholarship, at least at a deep enough level where it can rightfully call into question the purpose of the analytical activity itself. This being the primary way *Song Interpretation* sets itself apart from previous analytical collections—the editors stating that »[t]his important aspect has not been adequately considered in the existing literature« (1) – I am again perplexed by a brief, and this time immediate, dissent from co-editor Moore. The editors write (partially in the third person): »In his recent *Song Means*, though, Allan F. Moore makes this case: ›it is now widely (and rightly) accepted that we cannot presume an objective position from which to write hermeneutically‹« (1). So, subjectivity »has not been adequately considered« but »is now widely...accepted.« The message here is muddled.

The collection's commitment to keeping subjectivity front and center is most evident in its second portion: while Part I, »Listening Alone,« features traditional single-author essays, Part II, »Listening Together,« is composed entirely of multi-author essays. These collaborative efforts, each with at least five authors, wear on their sleeves their origins as pedagogical exercises at a musical summer school, offering mostly student-level observations (with occasional exceptions). Yet they represent a valiant effort to circumvent the maddeningly restrictive norms of academic analytical authorship. The attempt itself is so suggestive that I feel the book is just getting started as it ends; an intense flood of questions rose to the surface as I read it. I will conclude this review with two of these questions, both regarding subjectivity. The first concerns listeners versus listening: while it is true that different listeners can (will) hear the same song differently (as the authors note), to what extent is the operative distinction not between different listeners but, more fundamentally, between different hearings, or different listening strategies? I myself know that I don't always experience the same song in the same way every time; this question could very well have been crafted into a defining topic for all the *individual* authors featured in Part I, thus bringing both halves of the book into closer alignment. My second question is about the nature of analytical writing in general: to what extent must analysis, if it is to be successful, constitute an act of persuasion, or even an act of intellectual intimidation? Since analysis is inherently subjective, it's not clear what the use of sharing such information is, if not to help shape other people's own personal interpretations, which then calls into question the purpose and nature of something like Part II's group analysis

wherein participants are asked to meld their own subjectivities with each other's. (The editors end their introduction with similar questions.) Far beyond the actual content of *Song Interpretation*, its central themes direct us into these and other very interesting areas of scholarly inquiry. Let us hope the next analytical collection can further the process.

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