ANALYSING POPULAR MUSIC TOGETHER: ON THE METHODOLOGY AND METHOD OF MUSICAL GROUP ANALYSIS[1]

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When I'm traveling on the train or plane, or on the streetcar on my way to work, nearly everybody around me is wearing headphones, including myself at times. Some people may be listening to podcasts or audio books, but most are probably listening to music, as their silent lip-syncing, their bouncing knees, or fingers tapping to the rhythm signal to me. As isolated as this reception is, sealed off by headphones, it nevertheless always takes place in a social context: It is, of course, the social situation of human and non-human actors, which influences how we are affected by music (the annoying train conductor, for example, who interrupts me shortly before the end of the track's build-up; the clouds floating below me as I look out of the speeding, yet seemingly motionless airplane, thus allowing me to situate myself in a different time-space while I listen to ambient music, etc.).Then, it is music itself, which invites us into sociality, as Adorno (2003: 18, transl. by author) points out: »every sound alone says we«. Both the production of sound as music and the understanding of this sound as music arise in a social space

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in which we participate through language, which also affects our thinking. As much as we may sometimes want to exclude the society around us through noise-cancelling headphones, we never quite succeed: Music is a thoroughly social fact. »We're in this together«, to sum it up with Justin Bieber (2021).

For a long time, the analysis of popular music hardly addressed this. As a rule, an isolated analyst examined music's structure without addressing the fundamentally social nature of the situation or the descriptions used by White, male, middle-aged music scholars who, devoid of reflexive awareness, often wrote about the analyzed music as a fan, sometimes as a musician, in a language that, in the case of musicology, was devised for Western art music. It was only after the turn of the millennium that music's affect on the analyst increasingly became an issue, as exemplified in Allan Moore's *Song Means* (2012). Even if the social aspects of this reception were initially overlooked, an important consequence of this turn was that we recognized how different people can understand and use music similarly (Moore uses the concepts of embodied knowledge and ecological listening for explanation) or differently (Tia DeNora's (2003) research on affordances is particularly noteworthy here).

Georgina Born's (2011: 379ff.) use of the assemblage concept and her recent interest in the process of audiencing (Born 2021) have drawn attention to how much the situations in which people are touched by sound influence a group's reception of music. In her book *The Race of Sound*, Nina Sun Eidsheim (2019) calls for expanding the study of voice, which, in addition to auditory characteristics, also consists of »action, material and social dynamics« (ibid.: 4). Therefore, she proposes a »listening-to-listening-framework« (ibid.: 22), in which we »move from an analysis of sound to an analysis of how that sound is listened to« (ibid.: 25). If historically, materially and socially constituted situations have such a strong influence on our understanding of music, then our analysis of popular music must focus more on the »understanding of the understanding of music«, as Helga de la Motte-Haber (1982: 12; transl. by author) once did for systematic musicology in Germany.

In the following, musical group analysis (MGA) is presented as a method that takes the subjective experience of being affected by music as its starting point. What is new here is that this process, which demands a »radical self-reflexivity« (Doehring 2012: 37), is carried out in the presence of others, who act both as verifiers of the understanding of one's own listening and as sparring partners, namely by proposing other understandings that might foster a debate about interpretation. In Eidsheim's terms, one could say that an MGA is about listening to listeners debating their listening. Importantly,

there is no sole or 'right' solution, because MGAs produce many, sometimes competing or contradictory understandings of music. In this way, they can tell us a lot about popular music and its affordances for many people and in different situations.

The fact that people listen to music in different ways has also arrived in music theory, even if the correctness of their hearings and the value of exchanging ideas is questioned:

> *Only an individual person knows what she hears and how she hears it, and even this self-knowledge can be faulty. We can talk to one another about our experiences, and we can make guesses about other people's experiences based on so-called hard evidence (whether gathered via ethnography or scientific experimentation), but all this is a very different thing from having access to the experiences themselves (Doll 2017: 10).*

MGA, however, refrains from accusing others of faulty listening, as it aims to capture many different musical understandings. In this way, voices become audible that were rarely heard in analyses so far. Verbalizing the analysts' impressions (also for themselves) turns them into a social fact. This results in intersubjective discussions within the group which then can be investigated using qualitative methods as explained below.

Group settings have been used in social sciences for some time now. Robert Merton and Patricia Kendall (1946) were among the first to develop the focused interview of groups for radio consumer research in the 1940s. Rather quickly, the idea of using groups in research was adopted, for example by the Frankfurt School around Horkheimer and Adorno (Pollock 1955) who had learned about it during their exile in the US. At the latest since the publication of the standard reference *The Focused Interview* (Merton/Fiske/Kendall 1956), however, focus groups have become a highly standardized method in market research. As a variation with a stronger emphasis on the needs of qualitative research, *group discussions* have been used in the context of, for example, cultural or gender studies. In Germany, the work of Burkhard Schäfer and Ralf Bohnsack in the 1990s strongly advocated group discussions as a means of researching collective patterns of orientation by analyzing communication and interaction processes. In group discussions, it is important for the group to develop an independent discourse following an initial prompt from the researcher, who then tries to increasingly withdraw from the discussion. Another variant is the *interpretation group* (Interpretationsgruppe) that Jo Reichertz (2013) proposes for qualitative social research. Instead of the random sample usually favoured for group discussions, Reichertz recommends groups of four to ten scholars who

repeatedly interpret given data within a certain amount of time. Their interpretation process is recorded or documented for later analysis of »local rules« of understandings within the group, various styles of thought, and the development of »shared points of view on how to perceive and interpret« (ibid.: 42; transl. by author).

MGA builds on this tradition, using the encounter with sound within a group setting as a prompt for a spontaneous exchange between subjective understandings of music. This distinguishes MGA from other music analytical collaborations such as, for instance, a sequential dialogue in which scholars comment on individual analyses consecutively – a situation not too different from analyzing music alone at home. Instead, MGA is related to the everyday conversation about music (which is why it can be a lot of fun), but it goes beyond this by means of its analytical impetus and methodical procedure as described below.

DEVELOPING GROUP ANALYSIS

First ideas for group analysis took shape back at the Institute for Musicology and Music Pedagogy in Gießen. My former office mate Ralf von Appen and I were looking for a new teaching method for our joint seminar »Music Analysis II: Analysis of Popular and Non-Notated Music«. Our initial goal was to get our students to talk about subjective differences in their musical perception in an analytically grounded way. We assigned them to groups to work on analytical tasks restricted to one parameter. First results and feedback were so promising that we proposed using this approach at the »International Postgraduate Summer School Methods of Popular Music Analysis« in 2011, organized by Dietrich Helms and us in Osnabrück.[2] Here, however, with postgraduate students from many different countries, we encountered aspects that we had not experienced before in our seminar: At the summer school, different academic backgrounds, theoretical and disciplinary positions as well as culturally shaped and thus heterogeneous forms of interaction collided. This was framed by the participants' ambition to impress the invited lecturers.[3] All this made the analytical group work, at the time only loosely developed by us, a challenge – which, thankfully, the groups took on quite well.

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2 The results were published in Appen/Doehring/Helms/Moore (2015).
3 The international lecturers were Anne Danielsen, Walter Everett, Allan F. Moore, and Simon Zagorski-Thomas.

In 2015, when we organized another International Summer School, we presented a much clearer methodology to the participants. We also wanted to empirically understand what processes take place when popular music is analyzed in groups. For this, we used three methods: participatory observation during group work, autoethnography during our own group analysis among the lecturers, and anonymized feedback journals that participants kept during the course of the summer school.

Participant observation proved to be a challenge because a one-week summer school is a very short timeframe for the participants to establish themselves as working groups. Here, the presence of a participant observer certainly impacts that situation. Reflecting my positionality as the organizer *and* researcher of group analysis, I got the impression that during my presence the groups were keen on avoiding what they thought were ›wrong‹ steps or to criticize the method. While they may have done the latter after I had left the group (and did so in their journals, see below), my presence stood in their way of voicing an earlier and open critique which might have been useful for establishing group solidarity and, hence, a better atmosphere. Both, then, might have allowed me to learn more about the method of group analysis. What I did learn, however, was that the method of participant observation was not working well.

»ATEMLOS« IN THE MGA—AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

With the lecturers invited in 2015, Samantha Bennett, Mark J. Butler and Dai Griffiths alongside Danielsen, Everett and Moore, we three organizers took part in two MGA sessions of very recent pop songs: a longer session on »Atemlos«, a chart-breaking song in German by Helene Fischer (2013) and one on »Blank Space« by Taylor Swift (2014). The sessions were recorded and transcribed, and I wrote memos of my experience in this group that guide my interpretation of the transcripts. Especially the first song by Fischer yielded valuable insights into group analysis: »Atemlos«, an evergreen of German Schlager today, was then unknown to most group members. Moreover, it is sung in German, a foreign language for most participants, which thus offers an experience much like that of listeners around the world listening to popular music with English lyrics.

At first, the situation felt slightly disconcerting and a bit daunting to me: there were many well-known analysts of popular music in the room, each a specialist in her or his field. Given the age span of approximately 30 years, the different statuses (professors, mid-level academics[4]) and varying ana-

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4   Some group members had been students of some of the professors.

lytical approaches, not to mention the gender imbalance (two female, seven male scholars; all of them White and from Western countries), the question to me was if this group would take the plunge of group analysis at all and work *together* on one song? It did, and after an hour, as we grew gradually more comfortable, it became increasingly fun, even hilarious; for example, when the group was discussing the possible content of the German lyrics based on concepts of persona and personic environment (1:07:30 ff.), one member imagined a liaison between a nun and priest, which was actually not too far from the actual lyrics about two characters ›out of breath‹ (»Atemlos« in English) painting the town red. We furthermore explored the music's affordance regarding bodily engagement, ecological listening and production techniques, discussions which seemed very productive to me. Yet, a sense of hierarchies lingered: Nobody in the group dared to speak about their subjective opinion of the music—until one of the elder professors said:

> *I think it would be quite interesting, um, it's something I was encour-*
> *aged by students to do but never do myself: To actually look seriously*
> *at something you seriously do not like. And I mean I have an intense*
> *reaction against this. I don't like it at all (43:10).*

With that, the ice was broken, and considerable negative statements were made: this song was formulaic (»dance music by numbers«), the track corrupted »real dance music«, the voice and the performance were boring, the music was not contemporary, »it's fun but it's nothing you take seriously« (57:50). None of the international participants could imagine a chart success for Fischer outside Germany, even with English lyrics. The reason was an overall sound that seemed »mainstream« to the participants: very controlled, without sonic ambiguities, an ordinary groove, a production that suggests situational affordances (the song was imagined by the group as being played for big crowds dancing to it, e.g. in beer tents or large clubs), while technically the sound was considered a strain on the ears. As the group analysis went on, however, the group became aware of the chosen path of a »snobby scholarly position« (1:45:04), and individuals distanced themselves from their judgments. In my interpretation of the transcription and memos, the special composition of this group allows for certain assumptions about the members' approaches to engaging with music; no one (including me, a mid-level academic then) talked about their pleasure in listening to Helene Fischer's song. Listening to music in this situation, we music scholars paid attention to more or less the same things, and we seemed to have developed – or in view of the differences in professional status: some of us per-

formed – a similar taste in music (which is a consequence of a similar social status and career, according to Bourdieu). The meanings we produced in this MGA are mediated by this special situation, in which we had to prove our professionalism and status. A more heterogeneous composition of the group certainly would have yielded different results. Nevertheless, I realize that this group has produced more creative and diverse results than any single analysis by one of us alone could have managed.

LISTENING TO OTHERS IN MGA

Finally, the content analysis of the written memos and reflections in the journals kept by the summer school participants also provided valuable insights into group work. With all due briefness, my evaluation of this data shows clearly what happened in these situations. Managing power relations within the groups seemed to be the major challenge for those participants who kept the journal (the return quote was 60%): Some participants were dissatisfied with group work because they didn't have enough room to speak out and didn't feel heard; sharing (at times very idiosyncratic) ideas or feelings that came up while listening to music did not seem possible to everyone. As a result, some participants withdrew from group work and opted for a mode that led to a temporary split of the group. Dividing a larger task into smaller units is a common way of organizing group work. While it usually makes work more productive, it yet undermines one important feature of MGA: the joint discussion of musical features and their impact on the individual within the social setting of a group.

Most groups found a work mode on equal terms and were excited by the possibility of structuring their analytical work themselves. Yet, in their journals, several participants wished for an official group leader (which we considered unnecessary at that point of the method's development). Informally, participants with higher cultural capital tended to dominate the discussion with »opinionated« (group 2, journal 4) comments, as several participants noted. In this situation, the capital consisted of musicological and/or music theory training and advanced academic titles; the latter imply a higher age which often correlated with male gender and a natural command of English. In my interpretation of the anonymous response journals, and based on the participatory observations, this predominance led to dissatisfaction among some young female scholars from disciplines beyond musicology.

Most of the time, all groups were keen on avoiding conflicts and participants tried to arrive at common positions as a group: »Whilst tensions were

high we were able to figure out a way of working so that everyone had an equal say on everything and the ideas were cohesive« (group 3, journal 2). Yet in one case, the group nearly imploded due to an unresolved conflict that mainly stemmed from different disciplinary backgrounds and the respective concepts and methods deemed adequate for their study of popular music. While many participants thought of group analysis as a productive method that offered many insights into other areas of popular music research (for example, performance studies) and most – us lecturers included – enjoyed it, we can see that it did not work well for everybody.

AN INTERIM CONCLUSION

In my interpretation, these results show how situations deeply impact our understanding of music. MGA, like any musical practice, is a special case of »doing things with music« (DeNora 2003: 41) in the social and historical situation of academia, with its characteristic shortage of academic positions and the increase of tuition fees (in the 2010s, for example, prominent in the UK). In this summer school, our postgraduate students felt they were in a competitive situation: They spent a whole week in close contact with international experts in the field, so if they performed well according to academia's unwritten rules, publications or jobs might follow. Of course, cooperation was useful to build a network, but for a stellar career, individualism might have played a larger role to a few participants. Within this context then, group analysis as a cooperative method did not convince everybody to fully engage. Also, as we know from social psychology (Hoffmann/Pokladek 2011; Nijstad/van Knippenberg 2007), groups need time and space to form—a one-week summer school with people from different countries and disciplines meeting for the first time was just not the ideal place for this method.

Looking back at this summer school today, I realize with some self-criticism that while it produced beautiful results (as can be seen in the articles of this special section) MGA lacked a clear-cut methodology, which entails instructions that had been tested before. Although we had presented ideas about group analysis in the introductory lecture of the second summer school, including some advice on dos and don'ts, the method was still in development. It took exactly these data from the summer school and my subsequent analysis to unearth the intricate processes taking place within groups analysing popular music together, including, for example, the performance of class and status (and thus: taste) within a group and potential gaps in participation. The resulting methodical approach presented below

integrates these factors into its design; it nevertheless emphasizes the need for constant reflection of their impact on the process of the MGA.

DOING GROUP ANALYSIS

GENERAL REQUIREMENTS

The first important adjustment of the method comes directly from the experience of the summer school: Since then, group analyses have been led by a facilitator. She should act as the group's MC—not a master, but a gentle moderator of ceremonies. One lesson from the summer school was that hierarchies establish themselves within groups even if they were not intended, so introducing a moderator seeks to control these processes by orienting the group towards the ideal of a flat hierarchy. The facilitator is responsible for the process and success of the method: As very basic requirements, she needs to provide a room with a playback device for a high-quality song recording, and, ideally, instruments and computers to support the analysis. As explained below, she then selects the participants, introduces the rules of group analysis, starts the process, keeps the discussion going, moderates the group's chosen path throughout the analysis, and keeps an eye on time.

SELECTING THE PARTICIPANTS

The recommended size for group analysis is four to five people. Groups of three sometimes tend towards a dialogic format, excluding the third person; if such a constellation is unavoidable, the moderator should pay even closer attention to addressing all group members equally. In groups larger than recommended, participants might feel uncomfortable talking about sometimes very personal things related to music. Moreover, in larger settings, the discussion often tends to disintegrate into several sub-discussions thus exacerbating cooperative work.

From my experience, it is beneficial if some participants have met before, at least occasionally; for newcomers, suitable team-building measures should be taken in advance. As we saw in the summer school, it takes a lot of time and effort for groups consisting of complete strangers to effectively engage in an open discourse about music and its sonic structures. Like in every qualitative research, however, familiarity is an issue and should be closely monitored; for example, it can be addressed directly as a subject during the discussion. While the sampling should preferably aim for heterogeneity regarding age, gender, class, ethnicity, or Race, the demands and

pragmatic solutions of research will often lead to a less heterogeneous, but much faster group formation. This certainly impacts the results of the group analysis; it is therefore essential to transparently inform readers about the selection process and evaluate the results with much self-reflection.

Perhaps surprisingly, group members do not necessarily have to be musicologists or musicians (though at least one member should be able to translate the discussion into common music vocabulary). The selection criteria are, first, that participants can communicate their impressions of specific musical details (for example, »when the drum kit continues after the breakdown, I feel like dancing«) and, second, that they are willing to talk about a song for an extended period; usually, a MGA session takes about two hours. This way, the method is open to disciplines beyond musicology (cf. Doehring 2024), as well as to fans or everyday listeners of popular music.

PROCEDURE

It is highly recommended to record the group analysis session. If you do so, it is mandatory to inform participants about the recording and anonymization, and then ask for their consent (it is wise to record their consent immediately). Submitted to a content analysis, the recorded data is useful at a later stage of the research to show how meaning was created by whom in the group process.

The facilitator then explains the context of the research and introduces the concept and aims of MGA. Here, it is important to establish an atmosphere of mutual appreciation as the basis for an open discourse. Every member must be given the opportunity to communicate her individual interpretation of the music to the group, every statement should be appreciated, every idea about possible relations between sound and meaning should be pursued. Group analysis is, basically, an exercise in exchanging views about music based on the exposure to sound of which its structure is to be explored.[5] Therefore, the facilitator needs to emphasize that perspectives from different (disciplinary) backgrounds and varieties of individual experiences are not only welcome but necessary. This involves an appreciative attitude towards the others, a commitment to attentive listening, and to developing ideas together. If members possess musical or technical knowledge (which potentially radiates authority), they shouldn't brag about it but aim to be well-understood. When individual members fall silent, the group and the facilitator try to bring them back into the discussion.

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5   Music is understood here as a concept, not a thing as such, which results from sound exposure in specific discursive situations; cf. Wicke (2004).

The facilitator should emphasize that all group members, as long-standing listeners of popular music, are experts in their own right. Therefore, anything that comes to their minds in respect to the song being analyzed is worth contributing to the discussion. In group analysis, there's no such thing as a ›wrong‹ impression since the basic assumption is that music has more than one meaning. Instead, group members gather a spectrum of possible, sometimes ambiguous or contradicting affordances of the song. Rather than deciding on the ›right‹ solution, they will have to put up with these different listening interpretations. Strong musical likes or dislikes might also be a part of the game as they are important indicators of the song's affordances and hence should feed into the group discussion. However, it's important to remember that every statement should be connected to the sonic structure; for example, »I don't like this song because the guitars are too loud« is a more valuable judgment than »I don't like the song because it sucks« since only the first statement can become the subject of a debate based on arguments.

Before playing the song for the first time, the facilitator should instruct participants to take notes of whatever comes to mind during this first round of listening; if a group member prefers to dance instead of taking notes, for example, this is also a great idea for the initial experience of the song's affordance. As the saying goes, there is no second chance for a first impression; therefore everything—from musical observations to adjectives to landscapes, movies, or emotions—is worth taking down. Initial guiding questions might be »What's going on here?«, »How do I feel?«, »What does the song do (to me)?« For this first encounter, it is recommended to play the song in full and at a high volume on a hi-fi system.

In MGA, we start by listening to musical sound. Therefore, the facilitator should not introduce the song title, the name of the musicians/band, or recording year, since all this information might bias the discussion. Likewise, the facilitator should ask group members who might know the song or the musicians not to reveal this information until it is clear that everybody is on the same page. During the analysis, the group should focus on the musical sound as long as possible. Only later in the process, by joint consent, should the facilitator introduce other material (music videos, lyrics, pictures, websites). The reasons are obvious: First, once the eye is involved, the ear is ruled by visual impressions. Second, a music video or website is usually created after the recording, it is, hence, a second-order interpretation. Later, adding such materials is an important step because they enrich, consolidate, or challenge our interpretations. But in the beginning of the group analysis, we start from what we hear and trust our ears, bodies and minds in our aim to

understand how differently or similarly we create meaning from the expo-sure to sound within this social setting. For example, if the ›correct‹ lyrics[6] are introduced too early, significant information about a song's affordances (misheard lyrics, for instance, may suggest different interpretations of the persona—but within the same personic environment!) would get lost in the analysis. Once the group shares and discusses its understandings, the inter-pretation becomes denser.

When the song is over, participants should immediately start sharing and discussing their thoughts and impressions. If the discussion is hesitant at first, questions like »What do you find remarkable about it?«, »What ad-jectives would you use to describe its sound?«, »Did you like or dislike it? Why?« might be of help. The moderator ensures that group members listen to each other attentively, comment in a constructive way and add ideas to the discussion.

Since the group needs a framework for orientation, it is recommended to work on the song form in an early stage of the discussion. It is a good idea to start by jointly creating a song chart (an example can be found in Ap-pen/Doehring 2017: 9). A debate about song parts and basic musical fea-tures (like tempo and harmony) is a welcome side effect: »Where exactly does the pre-chorus start in your mind and what makes you think so?«, »You seem to move in double-time here, how come?«, »Is this a drop or a post-chorus to you? And why?«—questions like these show us that individuals lis-ten differently and the discussion helps to understand their arguments.

From this point on, the group determines its own mode of operation. It decides when and how often to listen to the song (or parts of it), by means of which analytical tools (discussion, use of instruments, computer, music paper, dance, etc.) and in what constellation they want to carry on. Some-times, groups work more efficiently if they assign parts of the analytical work (e.g. the melodic contour of the vocals) to breakout groups and split for a specified amount of time. Usually, however, it is more revealing to work on this task together, especially in regard to melody: It is both astonishing and informative in how many different ways people listen to voices and draft personae from there. I suggest prioritizing the analysis within the group con-text.

If the process of group analysis is in danger of stagnation, here are some suggestions for how the facilitator can keep the discussion going:

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6   Not all official lyrics represent what has actually been sung. Bob Dylan is a prominent example here as can be seen comparing the lyrics from his songs with the published versions on his website; in this collection's article on Alabama Shakes' »Gimme All Your Love«, the authors face (and solve) the same problem.

a) *Hypothetical substitution* or *commutation* (Tagg 2015): The facilitator could propose another way of addressing the song's specific sound design and arrangement as well as their reception by hypothetically substituting an instrument, a sound, word, or part of the song. This imaginative game is entertaining, contributes to greater group cohesion (which generates more commutations), and tells us a lot about the particular sound and its affordances.

b) *Inter-objective comparison* (Tagg): »Put simply«, Tagg (2015: 10) explains this technique; it means »describing music by means of other music.« Although he prefers the comparative song to come from a »relevant« style and to have a »similar function« (ibid.), it can be quite informative to compare across styles and genres in the logic of grounded theory's idea of maximum contrast. For example, the facilitator could introduce songs of the same title from other genres into the discussion which might outline genre rules and boundaries more clearly than a comparison within the genre of the analyzed song.

c) *If I were in your place*: To arrive at more ideas about the song's affordances, the facilitator asks group members to imagine themselves in a different place of reception. How would they experience the song in, for example, a packed club with a decent sound system at 4 a.m.? Another suggestion is to imagine being another person listening to the song. They could start with a person they know quite well (their sibling, for example), then move on to imagine themselves as someone they don't know as well. Analysis, after all, is a creative activity. Once these imagined receptions are shared, other group members might enjoy imagining more details for the scene, for example integrating lights, drinks and bodily aspects of reception. These imagined personae tell the group more about the song's possible and unlikely affordances (some of these made-up receptions will immediately feel terribly wrong).

d) *Changing the sound worlds*: The facilitator could suggest using different means of audio playback (e.g. laptop speakers, studio monitors, headphones) and different listening locations (the kitchen, the café across the street, a car stereo, etc.). Furthermore, it is recommended to move around in the space while listening because the sound varies in relation to a room's spatial conditions.

Analysis never ends, they say. Indeed, any further round of investigation could reveal another interesting detail. Again, the group has the final say. If the members agree that the song's most interesting aspects have been addressed and that they won't find another route of investigation, i.e. a state of theoretical saturation is reached, it is time for the facilitator to thank everybody for their kind contributions and close the session.

Subsequently, the recording of the group analysis is transcribed and subjected to a qualitative content analysis. Thus, this method is very suitable for questions about socially situated attributions of meaning to sound, »of how links between music and agency, music and forms of community, music and ideas, come to be forged« (De Nora 2003: 39).

GROUP ANALYSIS IN ACTION

This was exactly the reason why we integrated this method into our research project *Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe* (2019-2022, VW Foundation 95 774; cf. Dunkel/Schiller 2024). In our research in five European countries,[7] we examined the processes of mainstreaming populist politics through popular music. The methods we used were ethnography, group interviews and media analysis next to MGA, merging these different data with musical analysis. In the Austrian case we found music in our populist field that could not easily be grasped as *political* music, i.e. music that was composed with a political motivation. We encountered a particular mixture of popular hits, mostly folk-like Schlager played by bands or a DJ. None of these songs featured obviously political or populist lyrics. Something else had to be relevant here, because the music at several events we attended, among them rallies by the far-right Austrian Freedom Party FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs), was far from accidental and often identical.

We used group analysis to explore the affordances of this music beyond our understanding and beyond the ones we observed in the field, where people seemed to enjoy the music as entertainment. Colleagues from Graz and Vienna—musicians and scholars of Austrian, British and German origin representing various disciplines— participated in the Austrian MGAs. In line with group analysis' aim, the different socializations turned out to be beneficial.

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7   Research was conducted by teams in Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy and Sweden.

In our MGAs, the »sound worlding«[8] of the songs positioned their listeners from different nationalities in similar musical worlds. Analyzing songs like Andreas Gabalier's (2015) »Hulapalu« (Doehring/Ginkel 2024a), for instance, we agreed that the sound reminded us of places of great exuberance with a tendency for rule-breaking, such as après-ski events, beer tents, large-scale clubs in Alpine rural areas, or even children's birthday parties. Especially the latter association can be important: Being played at FPÖ election campaign events, this song suggests fun and harmlessness.

At the same time, our MGAs produced a bundle of initially contradictory or erratic sound-related statements that then made us aware of new avenues of interpretation. For example, in the MGA of Melissa Naschenweng's (2019) »I steh auf Bergbauernbuam« (I dig mountain farmer boys), we wondered if anyone would actually say something like, »You know what, I really like sons of farmers from the mountains!« To whom? And, most importantly, why? The group then deliberated the matter: Some members were convinced that they would never say this, others heard it as a confession. But a confession is usually shared in private, whereas here it is sung in public and with great fervor in the song's chorus. This paradox led to further investigation. With its musical character and the many repetitions of the chorus, this declaration of heterosexuality, unlike a homosexual coming out, celebrates and thus reinforces the norm of heteronormativity. It is made by a female persona in a personic environment that alludes to the Alpine landscape as the national symbol of Austria (Austria's national anthem, for example, begins with the words »Land der Berge« [land of the mountains]): in the song, there is a Styrian harmonica, a falsely regionalized and nationalized instrument of the transnational Alpine region that many consider to sonically represent Austria; in the background vocals, one group member identifies hints of yodels nobody else had noticed. The female persona, then, is an amalgam of different ›Melissa‹ personae that group members derive from the sound production and vocal performance; for example, one ›Melissa‹ appears to be a relatively emancipated persona who actively chooses her appropriate male partner, another passively waits at home for him to pick her up with his tractor and a bouquet of edelweiss. But each depicts specific male bodies as desirable, namely those from the mountains with their calves

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8 The term is our transfer of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1985) term »worlding«, which she uses for the colonial force of remodeling the colony and the colonized, to represent a track's powerful affordance of creating specific imaginations of sound worlds through what has been called "sonic signature" (Zagorski-Thomas 2014), the track's audio design by mixers and producers.

steeled by peasant labour, while men from urban areas are marked as contemptible.

While we did not arrive at a conclusion during the MGA (remember: rather than coming up with one interpretation, group analysis aims at producing many different understandings of the music), later analysis of the transcript, in triangulation with our data from the field, led us to an understanding of »I steh auf Bergbauernbuam« as an advertisement for an Austrian *heartland*, a hallmark of populism according to Paul Taggart (2000). In this heartland evoked by the song, men and women live up to their traditional gender roles, while other genders and customs from the morally degenerate city are rejected. The confession of heterosexuality serves as a cultural self-assertion in a world perceived as dominated by urban left-liberal media, politics, and ideologies (even though at the beginning of our research, a coalition of conservative and far-right parties ÖVP and FPÖ was in power) and their ideologies. Andreas Gabalier, who incidentally uses the same management company as Naschenweng, stated that it was difficult in »these times« if a man »still« digs women (Vienna.at 2015).

Depending on the performance situation, however, songs like these may be just a fun song, or—and here, the FPÖ comes back into the picture—they can be used to establish a certain worldview of nativism and nationalism, both ingredients of an Austrian brand of populism. Judith Butler (2016: 29), in her notes on a performative theory of assembly, explains that fleeting moments of the assembly of people constitute unforeseen forms of political performativity. The populist ›people‹ is thus not only produced through words but centrally through material conditions of their enactment, for which Butler explicitly highlights visual and auditory aspects. At their rallies, the FPÖ carefully controls these conditions by setting up beer-tent-like events with very particular types of music that pleasantly entertain but have the potential to evoke the gendered and nationalized populist Austrian heartland. Here, in the mode of the beer tent (Doehring/Ginkel 2023, 2024b), inhibitions are allowed to drop, and »we, the people« become an audience via music in a process of audiencing (Born 2021). In these situations with human and non-human actors, popular music fosters an *assembled politicity* (Doehring/Ginkel 2022), and far-right statements by FPÖ politicians encounter great enthusiasm.

CONCLUSION

MGA in its current advanced form, along with other methods, enables useful and diverse results and contributes to research on popular music (and possibly other musics). The method invites us to encounter music as an affective and social experience, in which we reflect our own relationship with the research object. Moreover, group analysis is a methodical consequence of the fact that music offers more ways of understanding it than the lone analyst has long been (and will be) able to grasp. MGA reminds us of and integrates multiplicities of subjective meanings that arise when people listen to music together. It is an advantage of the method that these meanings do not have to be compatible, but on the contrary are often ambigious, sometimes even contradictory. Just like any method, group analysis is not an end in itself but needs to be integrated into a larger research perspective. Combined with data from fieldwork, MGA can help explain how only some out of many possible interpretations of the music prevail for specific situations where, paraphrasing Tia De Nora, people do things with music in practice.

A positive side effect of group analysis is that it offers an opportunity for bridging disciplinary paradigms. Because MGA does not require a lot of music-technical knowledge, many people are welcome to cooperate in a new way, contributing their respective knowledges and competences. All they need to do is explain how the sonic structure affects their individual listening in a way that others in the group, including at least one person with music(ological) training, can relate to. In this way, it may help to overcome disciplinary certainties (see, for example, the ideas for integrating MGA into jazz studies in Doehring 2024) with people listening to music together, imagining other identities, places, practices, and, maybe most importantly, having a lot of fun. Especially as a method of interdisciplinary exchange, group analysis in my experience functions as a much-needed catalyst of thought.

Admittedly, group analyses, including the subsequent qualitative evaluation, require a great deal of time and effort, including conscientious self-reflection. The group's composition and moderation impact the results and must therefore be explicitly addressed. If this is ensured, the method can also be used for data other than music, which underlines the relationship of the method to Reichertz's interpretation group (cf. Krisper 2024 for her evaluation of field data in a group setting). In view of MGA's benefits of integrating more people into popular music analysis and, thus, getting us a step

closer to what happens when we are affected by music in the presence of others, I think it is worth the effort.

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