

## UNDERSTANDING UNDERSTANDING POPULAR MUSIC. A MONOLOGUE

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I'm going to start by sitting down here, and pulling three rolled paper homunculi out of my bag of tricks, sticking them in the mud by the river and seeing how long it takes for them to dissolve. Because of course ›we all‹ know the point of the blues, that to comprehend it is to comprehend the pains of its perpetrators, and ideally to feel them, perhaps learning thereby a little compassion and impetus to action. And ›we all‹ know what it is to understand EDM, which is to dance it, to achieve that liberty of the body from conscious control that is of value even to a determined sitter like me. And finally ›we know‹ that the point of commercial pop music is just to consume it, because it will be gone in a minute and there will be the next one to consume. Job done.

How do you know, though, I mean really know, what it is to understand what it is to understand? This sounds like a question which requires a hierarchising answer—we begin by analysing the word ›understand‹, observe the concepts into which it breaks down, and continue the process until we come to a level where we can act—recall Gregory Bateson's definition of explanation as description plus tautology,<sup>1</sup> by which he means pinpointing something, and then placing it within the system which organises it. And yet I don't initially find this possibility convincing and am minded of Eleanor

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Bateson: *Mind and nature: a necessary unity*; London: Wildwood House 1979, pp. 81–4.

Rosch's insistence<sup>2</sup> that in any categorising process we begin (not a question of where we should begin, we simply do, by virtue of being human) at the human level, at the level at which we interact with the world, not from some abstract conceptualisation which fails to impact on our experiential existence; the class of all things we call ›river‹, perhaps, for we cannot swim in a class.

Now a professional thinker might have it otherwise, but I think we can only understand understanding by endeavouring to do so. Praxis. For some long months now, I have (again) been rather obsessed with Roxy Music's »A song for Europe,«<sup>3</sup> and I would want to argue, right from the outset, that I understand it, that I have an understanding of it, any difference between the two claims remaining transparent here. What would I mean by making such a claim? I would not normally bother to answer such a question, but accepting the invitation to write this paper thankfully requires me to do so. For ease of presentation, I shall focus on the stretch that starts about 47" into the track and lasts for about 26". The first thing to consider is that some understanding of that section might equate to the ability to reproduce it. I can listen to that stretch of music, and then go to the piano and play a recognisable representation of it. What do I capture in so doing? I capture the passage's harmonic sequence, its rising bass line, and an approximation of the vocal line, together with the temporal relationships involved. The first half of the passage is based around the sound of a piano—I can reproduce the notes exactly if I choose (although my piano cannot capture the exact sound). The second half is dominated by the replacement of the piano with an electric guitar. Again, I can capture the notes, and add the melody line to them, although again I cannot capture the sound. And, should I wish, I can even sing the lyrics. Now I do not say all this out of arrogance—I am fortunate in having learnt enough about music, and about piano playing, at a sufficiently young age to make such an exercise as easy to me as reading out loud. I am guessing that, for somebody who does not share this skill, the ability to create by ear a recognisable rendition of a passage of a song might appear remarkable—likewise, to someone who does not share such a skill, hearing such a rendition might be sufficient to count as understanding of the music. I want to hang on to this possibility while proceeding to challenge it. I shall propose a couple of alternative scenarios, for the process I have described could, conceivably, be achieved without any knowledge of how music is ›put together‹, which might equally be a requirement for any

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2 Summarised, for instance, in George Lakoff (1987). *Women, fire and dangerous things*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 39–55.

3 On their album *Stranded* (1973, Island Records).

claim to understanding.<sup>4</sup> For the first, I could get out my electric guitar, plug into ProTools and open up my samples files, and laboriously put together a rendition of that segment which also tried to capture the timbres.<sup>5</sup> Now the stilted nature of my language in this previous sentence will immediately tell you that I couldn't do this. In other words, I do not understand—in other words, I cannot enumerate—the precise detailed steps which would be required to do so. I am hoping you will accept that this failure is beside the point for my main argument, since I do understand that that could, in principle, be done (even if recent advances in AI technology have yet to reach that level). Would this proposed set of actions perhaps qualify as understanding? After all, I could possibly achieve the result with just a very good ear (mimicry is apparent from the animal kingdom, where the question of understanding is perhaps not worthy of posing). For the second, to replay the passage at the piano in a different key (to transpose the entire segment) would, perhaps, seem to require some such understanding, in addition to having some understanding of how the concept of transposition functions, and a higher degree of understanding of how piano-playing works in practice (coordination of fingers and mind, at minimum). Would that latter rendition then count as understanding, as opposed to the first rendition, or would the latter rendition count somehow as manifesting a higher level of understanding? It all depends on how we want to use words, but what would seem to be clear is that these two renditions would not show the same level of understanding as each other. And again, I want to hang on to this possibility at the same time as declaring that, for me, all three of these responses are trivial as manifestations of understanding. It seems to me that the word, and the state it purportedly describes, demands more. So, whose understanding of what constitutes understanding should I be writing about? Two options seem to suggest themselves, the 'hierarchical' account which attempts to determine all the possible ways to understand, top down, and to recount and relate them, or the 'human level' account which begins from where I have reached. No surprises here—that's the option I follow.

Let me recapitulate for a moment. Reproducing music in an alternative form (a piano rendition of a carefully designed track) might count as understanding—reproducing it with an appropriate, added conceptual operation (transposition) might count as better understanding. What if I were to play the same passage in waltz time? That would be difficult to justify as appro-

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4 The assumption that understanding requires analysis into parts, and possibly subsequent synthesis into the original whole, at a new level.

5 Note that this would not be to reproduce the means by which the original was recorded, i.e. on multi-track tape.

priate (to this particular example), but it might demonstrate, again, a higher level of understanding because what would be demonstrated extends to more than just what is heard, and adds a further level of musical expertise. But is the playing of that segment in waltz time a demonstration of understanding music, or of understanding the music? Perhaps the two are sometimes difficult to disinter.

And yet, there seems (already) to be a problem here. In the example I have given, I am talking about the manifestation of understanding by means of demonstration in the same medium. However, I suspect that in normal discourse we assume that understanding is something which is, itself, manifested through words. After all, if you have just explained to me a difficult passage of music, an explanation which will necessarily incorporate your understanding of that passage (the opening to Boulez' *Le marteau sans maître*, let's say, and let's not worry about the depth of such an explanation), in order to manifest my understanding of your explanation, I will want to rephrase it, to retain its substance but a substance qualified by my processing of it, and to deliver that back to you in words. Of course, you can see the problems this raises. First, there is the subtle shift from understanding the music to understanding an explanation of it. I think it important to distinguish the two, to declare that they are not identical, even though each might be worth achieving in particular circumstances. Second, there is the, surely reasonable, assumption that the process we go through is one of conceiving an understanding, and then, subsequently, of finding a form of words to articulate it (even though it is the putting it into words which may help to crystallize the understanding). Third, there is the introduction of a new emphasis, a requirement of demonstration. This seems to me quite crucial. It appears that the stamp of understanding is taken to be achieved in my explaining my understanding to a listener, in such a way that they understand me, and they then validate that understanding by relaying it back to me. However, I have also found that any understanding achieved by this process, because reflected by another and imprisoned in a form of words, can become solidified, become static, become impersonal, crystallized indeed, detached from the actual experience of understanding. Of course, it depends on precisely what is being transmitted this way, but it is a perspective not to be lost.

Why, though, would it be necessary for me to prove my understanding of music to someone else, or why might it be necessary for them to prove their understanding to me? There's the instrumental reason, of course, in that our entire educational system is based on such a model. If, as a ›teacher‹, someone who has ›qualifications‹, someone who ›knows‹ and has the sta-

tus, in my email signature, to prove it, I am to validate the status of another individual, a ›student‹, that validation has to be made through an examination of that individual's understanding, and their understanding can only be examined through their parading of it. Without their proving, or endeavouring to prove, their understanding, the system fails. And there's the contractual reason; in a situation where I am paying to hear another play, it is an assumed aspect of instrumental pedagogy that you will perform better if you ›understand‹ what you are performing.<sup>6</sup> This raises the question of whether Bryan Ferry and the rest of Roxy Music (and its production team) understood ›A song for Europe‹ when putting it together, and how to judge whether such understanding is manifested. Of course, there is no other (studio) version with which to compare it, which immediately problematises the issue. I think we can get no further than noting that: a) there are no technical deficiencies which could have been overcome in 1973 in regard to the recording (at least, none I can discern) so that process, at least, was understood; and b) there is a strong degree of stylistic orthodoxy in the ways the instruments are used, in the harmonic and melodic patterns and in the way the lyrics are couched, adequately instantiating the contractual relationship with the listener pertinent to the genre it activates. But outside the system (and even, conceivably, within it), what right do I have to demand of someone that their understanding be made plain to me? In terms of the (simple) understanding of music, surely very little right, if any. So, we assume that understanding needs to be validated by another, but not for reasons necessary to the sheer experience of music.

Roxy's track is set in a virtual Parisian café. I understand this because the lyrics appear to tell me so, and I choose to put that interpretation on them, to understand them as having that import. With that declaration I can go on to broach what, for many people it appears, would constitute an understanding of a song, namely an understanding of the lyrics, what they refer to, and making sense of the narrative (insofar as there might be one). I'm never convinced that this is a particularly important feature of such understanding, which is why I have not already addressed it, but it does play a part. If a song has a narrative, it is the lyrics which will lay out that narrative. If a song does not, then the role of the lyrics is normally taken to be to lay out an intellectual, or emotional (or both) position in relation to a topic, usually one concerning interpersonal relations in some way or other.<sup>7</sup> Simply, if an understanding of the song equated to an understanding of the lyrics, why go to all the trouble of accompanying them with anything? Clearly, the

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6 David Elliott: *Music matters*; New York: Oxford University Press 1995, pp. 68ff, for instance.

7 And of course these two alternatives are frequently intertwined.

music does something which the lyrics do not. In my estimation,<sup>8</sup> while the music of ›popular music‹ cannot tell us what the narrative is, it can encourage us to take up a particular perspective in response to that narrative, manipulate us into what to feel about it. Indeed, the reason I began this disquisition at the piano is that the ›what to feel‹ is often more significant than the course of the narrative itself. Sometimes, it is not the entire lyrics which remain in the head, but simply one portion of them. This experience is usually ignored in writings on lyrics, which prefer to take them out of this performative context, but it is an experience which can take on a sense far greater than normally acknowledged. The most memorable phrase Ferry conjures, in my listening, is the almost throwaway »and the bridge, it ... sighs«. What's involved in understanding this? Presumably my imagining such a bridge to cross my river at this point, because it does not feed back into the music, is not a candidate for identifying such understanding. Even in the wonderful world of Roxy, bridges don't actually sigh, of course, unless we accept the verb as a metaphor for something like creaking in the wind. The conjunction of »bridge« and »sighs«, though, might well lead a listener to make a connection with the »Bridge of Sighs« in Venice, or the similarly named bridges in Oxford, in Frankfurt am Main, in Chester, or any number of other places. If one is disposed to think that song titles are meaningful, carrying some sort of clue as to what to make of the song, then I guess the Venice bridge is most likely to come to mind as, presumably, being the closest to being universally recognised as prototypically ›European‹. There are a number of reasons to justify pulling these few words out of context, a number of qualities which mark them out for attention. Firstly, there's the articulation. Ferry breaks the line before the word ›sighs‹, giving sufficient time for a first-time listener to predict what is about to come, and perhaps to think »surely, he's not going to sing ›sighs‹?« Not only does he do so—a cheap pun which seems to have no other purpose for being there—but he does so with a smile—you can hear the way his mouth shapes the vowel in ›sighs‹—not a simple vowel but as a diphthong, almost as you would shape a sneer, conveying knowingness, recognition that a listener will be both surprised and probably disappointed at such a lame word. But there's more. The idea of the bridge emitting a sigh, once lodged in your mind, adds a new layer of sense. I was fortunate, a few summers past, to be in Venice and recall looking along the canal at the Bridge of Sighs with Roxy's song firmly in my mind. I felt encouraged to perceive the bridge not simply as an inanimate backdrop to the dramas which were once played across it (or, more probably, at

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8 And I've spent an entire book trying to lay out how this is the case—*Song Means* (2012) Farnham: Ashgate.

either end of it), but to experience it as responding to, indeed as an active player in, those dramas, a response which Ferry's strange phrase and articulation projects. I have no doubt that my experience and, more, my understanding of the track was richer as a result, and my attempt to put it into words, to transmit to you, is a manifestation of that understanding, normally needless, but pressed here into the service of illustrating my experience for you. And this is simply one image referred to in passing, one moment.

Such a level of response is achieved again and again as one listens to a track which is fully engaging, an observation which requires me to make a distinction, hitherto implicit, between two forms of audition, two levels of involvement: ›listening to a track‹ and ›hearing a track‹. This distinction is highly pertinent to the issue of understanding, calling attention as it does to the activity of discrimination. By using the word ›listen‹ I am describing a process in which the listener discriminates between, and among, the various sound sources and their articulations, the various conceptual elements and their sonic histories, and hears them as they are and as they contribute to the enrichedly listened-to whole. One engaged in hearing does not make such discrimination, and simply experiences an undifferentiated whole. The understanding achieved through hearing bears very little relation, I submit, to any understanding achieved through listening. Listening exhausts the listener, and is exhaustive of only the most uninteresting music.

Before I entirely leave the question of lyrics, it is worth addressing another common understanding of what it is to understand a song, namely that of understanding what the originators meant. For many listeners,<sup>9</sup> it appears that this is a prime motivation for listening, that the song is merely a medium to bring them into closer contact with the celebrity status of the artist, a practice which overlooks the identity of the persona, which I touch on below. To understand what the originators meant presumes, thereby, that the originators did indeed mean something, did indeed have something to convey by means of the lyrics they used. Implicit in such an understanding, of course, is the assumption that meaning precedes its expression, an assumption of sometimes problematic nature to which I have already alluded. Indeed, in the practice of songwriting, this assumption cannot stand as self-evident—many songwriters are explicit in suggesting that their only task is to find a set of words that works, that has the right tone, rhyme scheme, syllabic proportions, level of specificity, where ›right‹ is judged by some unspecified sense of what makes a good lyric, rather than any objective crite-

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9 There is evidence aplenty on sites like [songmeanings.com](http://songmeanings.com).

ria and, thus, cannot be interpreted as some expression of the deep self.<sup>10</sup> In any case, a songwriter is not present in a song to make their case (as I discuss below). So, understanding a lyric such as this is not achieved by positing an originary meaning, but by observing and appreciating the way that conventions are addressed—a technical understanding, if you will. After all, we are dealing with songs, and if it is hard enough to equate understanding with what the songwriter meant, it would be far harder to argue that we understand the music with reference to what the composer ›meant‹, since any words through which they describe what they know of their intentions are extrinsic to the song.<sup>11</sup> No, there is a distinction between understanding the music and understanding the musician and, while the latter might be worth pursuing, it is the former I am addressing here.

This leads me to another distinction I must make explicit, that between understanding a stretch of music and understanding the meaning of that stretch of music. If songwriters do not necessarily have a meaning in mind when they write, even if for no other reason, it would be difficult to maintain that the meaning of a stretch of music somehow inheres in that music. Now, of course, there are those who would declare that to ask about the meaning of music is a simple category error (Peter Kivy, for instance)—music simply is,

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10 Here's Jethro Tull's Ian Anderson, for instance: »what they [listeners] get from the lyrics is theirs, what the lyrics are for me is mine. Sometimes these two things are very close together and sometimes they're not. But it doesn't matter ... although I am the creator of my lyrics, I am not the creator of the way in which other people draw satisfaction from them or not«. Ian Anderson (1993). »Talking Tull.« In: *Jethro Tull: the complete lyrics*. Ed. by Karl Schramm and Gerald Burns. New York: Palmyra, p. 11.

And here's Richard Thompson: »I think most of us songwriters write for fun. I think that's the main thing ... And then perhaps ... there might be something more in the song«. Quoted in Paul Zollo (1997). *Songwriters on songwriting*. New York: Da Capo, p. 525.

Even Bob Dylan sees things similarly, insisting he does not worry about what a song means, although his comments do carry the sense of an embedded meaning. See Bob Dylan—Nobel Lecture at [https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2016/dylan-lecture.html](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2016/dylan-lecture.html), accessed 21 July 2017.

And finally the left-wing songwriter Leon Rosselson, whose »Harry's gone fishing« is clearly about hero worship, or is an enactment of such. Who Harry is, or should be identified with, is left unclear, much to the song's benefit. Rosselson's own words on the song disclaim any need to pin this down: »Who's Harry? people ask. Where's Harry? And why are they all waiting for him? But it's no use asking me questions like that. I don't have any answers. I'm just the songwriter«. Sleeve-notes to *Harry's Gone Fishing* (1999); Fuse Records, p. 3.

11 Thus the irony of Robert Wyatt's lyrics for Matching Mole's »Signed curtain«; *Matching Mole* (1972) CBS. Part of the lyrics run: »This is the first verse/And this is the chorus/Or perhaps it's a bridge/Or just another part of the song that I'm singing/And this is the second verse/It could be the last verse....« And at the moment they are sung, they are ›correct‹. The lyrics can be found at, for example, <https://genius.com/Matching-mole-signed-curtain-lyrics>, accessed 11 July 2017.

rather than means. However attractive this position might be in the abstract, it fails to address the experience of listeners who find the experience of listening to music is one that brings meaning, one that is meaningful, not on account of the experience, but on account of what the music brings to it. Maybe music does not always mean, explicitly, but music is meaningful. A brief digression to explore this distinction is perhaps in order.

Attempts to explore meaning in what we perceive are normatively couched in terms of talking about »the meaning of...«<sup>12</sup>. The assumption here is that meaning is an attribute of something, or of the perception of something, which can be identified and placed within a (social) discourse, interpreted, argued, evaluated, critiqued. But I have in mind something also less precise, less subject to successful translation into language. Many people find particular activities, or states, meaningful, without thereby being able to pinpoint what the meaning of these activities or states might be. They identify some aspect of lived experience which as an individual they could not face doing without, some aspect which ›gives meaning‹ to their life. For some, it might be certain sorts of physical labour<sup>13</sup> or other physical activity<sup>14</sup> (and I am not opposing ›physical‹ to ›mental‹ here—as Crawford demonstrates, such an opposition is both inaccurate and damaging). For some it might be deep contemplative engagement with an aspect of living nature<sup>15</sup>, or the deep engagement some identify as ›spirituality‹<sup>16</sup> or, indeed, deep engagement with music<sup>17</sup>. I find the experience of this sort of meaningfulness captured in the following statement, by an unschooled follower of music, on the piece *In the White Silence* (for string-based ensemble) by John Luther Adams: »All I can say is that this piece (and its realization here) is like an hour and a quarter of sheer, boundless radiance. If the light off snow could be heard it would sound like this. It is less like being inside a bell than like being the bell itself.«<sup>18</sup> So, perhaps we rewrite the conceptual distinction between understanding music and understanding its meaning, as a distinction between understanding music and understanding its meaningfulness. The point is perhaps tangential to my main argument at this point but will not remain so.

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12 David E. Cooper (2003). *Meaning*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 16ff.

13 Matthew Crawford (2009). *The Case for Working with your Hands*. London: Penguin.

14 Robert MacFarlane (2012). *The Old Ways*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

15 Keith Critchlow (2012). *The Hidden Geometry of Flowers*. Edinburgh: Floris.

16 J.M. Cohen and J-F. Phipps (1979). *The Common Experience*. London: Rider.

17 Darryl Reaney (1995). *The Death of Forever*. London: Souvenir, p. 256.

18 Comment by »Glenn Becker« at [https://www.amazon.co.uk/White-Silence-Adams/dp/B00008Z452/ref=sr\\_1\\_8?s=music&ie=UTF8&qid=1461774508&sr=1-8&keywords=john+luther+adams](https://www.amazon.co.uk/White-Silence-Adams/dp/B00008Z452/ref=sr_1_8?s=music&ie=UTF8&qid=1461774508&sr=1-8&keywords=john+luther+adams), accessed 27 April 2016.

Time to pick up a discarded thread. I wrote, above, that the ability to reproduce a passage of music was trivial, in my case, and should barely count as understanding. I wanted more of the term. Let's return to that passage from ›A song for Europe‹. In recreating it at the piano, I was capturing its harmonic sequence, its rising bass line, a recognisable version of its melody, and just a small portion of its timbres (those of the piano). As far as copyright law goes, of course I was capturing the essence of the music, that which identifies it as just particularly what it is, which simply goes to show how utterly ignorant the legal profession and policy makers are of music itself, for while I might have been capturing its ›essence‹, I was not capturing what mattered about it, what gave it distinction. The music, after all, never lies in the notes. I'm hearing, in this segment of the track, somewhat ponderous movement, something slightly laboured, given not only by the speed of movement of the arpeggiated lines, but also the comparative lack of treble frequencies. This is only emphasised by Bryan Ferry's voice, comparatively deep, rich in sound and with a certain affectation. I'm also hearing (undifferentiated) absences, particularly of sound sources in the upper range of the available registral space. In listening, my body necessarily (for I know this so well) closes in on itself, the weight (›ponderous‹) of the track and its dark texture pressing almost literally down on the shoulders. Despite Ferry's singing of sitting at a Parisian café, there is no bright atmosphere.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps it is a cloudy dusk, perhaps the skies are ›threatening‹, as we say. It certainly isn't ›all sweetness and light‹. There is a shift taking place here. From the assumption that understanding is about the putting of something into a form of words and transmitting them to another listener, there's a shift to a different part of the body (the shoulders, the back, rather than the throat and tongue), and the suggestion that observing the way an aspect of the music makes me feel, is akin to understanding it: overcoming the specious distinction between the physical and the mental, the body also understands. My body is living the music. So, perhaps (to my surprise and horror) it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the right way to understand EDM is simply to dance it, to enable the music to sketch a detour around the conscious mind and act directly on the body, allowing us to swim in the music. To the extent that our bodily movements are observable by others, then that understanding is also available for judgement (which is partly why many of us may choose not to dance), and it is of course open to self-reflection. In this sense, understanding the music is knowing what to do in its presence, knowing how to respond in a (socially) appropriate way, and doing so. But

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19 Of course, I say this as a result of my (limited) experiences of sitting at Parisian cafés.

I've lost traction in the main current. In focusing on these less substantial facets of what I am listening to, and particularly in mentioning Bryan Ferry's voice, am I beginning to approach understanding Bryan Ferry, in the same way that when I listen to Blind Willie Johnson sing »Dark was the night, cold was the ground,«<sup>20</sup> I am led to understand a small part of Johnson and his experience as a blind bluesman? It's a plausible suggestion, but I think it confuses analytically separable roles. Because of the artificiality that is music (when do we sing to each other in normal interaction, or converse by playing saxophone lines to each other?), the fiction that is the musical narrative, the »real person« (Bryan Ferry, Willie Johnson) can never get into the music, but sets up a persona through which that music is delivered, a persona who necessarily retains only traces of its originator. And that persona is frequently refracted inside the track as one of its protagonists—Ferry takes on this role as the narrator of the events and descriptions in »A song for Europe«, although whether Johnson does so in his moaning is a moot point—in his wordlessness he perhaps he occupies a liminal space between the river and the bank on which I'm sitting. In the normative case, what I respond to is a persona, possibly by means of a protagonist, a persona who has no necessary relationship (let alone identity) with the performer who made the sounds out of which I construct that persona. Perhaps an accurate construction (although who should be the judge?) is a signal of understanding, but I don't see how that can be an understanding of the performer themselves. Fundamentally, understanding the performer is not the same as understanding the music performed (and vice versa).

There is another type of understanding which is in danger of being overlooked in my focus on such a small segment of music, and that is the relationship between this bit of music and the rest of the track. I mentioned that one of the features of this segment is the diatonically rising bass line, from tonic up to the fifth degree. The second half of the track, introduced by the solo piano passage, is dominated by an alteration of the line, doubling the length of its sequence, and with the bass moving meanderingly down from tonic to fifth degree, doubling the melody with lower thirds. In listening to the whole track, I cannot fail to be aware of this change of direction—both lines have the same starting and finishing points, but the journey between them is different. There is something to be understood here. The two lines have to be noticed outside the immediate experience of listening to the track, brought into the same mental space and then compared, identifying similarities (end points) and differences (length and direction of motion). For

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20 Originally 1927. *Dark was the night, cold was the ground*(1996). Single. Indigo.

many listeners, as opposed to hearers, appreciation of the relationships between different parts of a musical process is a key to understanding and, while it may not be necessary to an appreciation of the track concerned, in some it cases enhances it. Understanding, in this sense, is processive, changes in relation to the course of the track, rather than being gradually erected to reach fulfilment at the end of the track, on the basis of observing how its textural elements pile up.

Okay. So far, I have raised a number of possible candidates for understanding, all of which relate to the object of a listening experience. While this is where my interest (and, as far as it goes, expertise) lies, it cannot be allowed to stand unquestioned for all forms of understanding. Popular music, insofar as the category has any explanatory value, is perhaps distinguished from other categories of music by its more exposed existence as a socially-engaged phenomenon. The term is used to encompass more than simply the sounds of the music, but specifically-manufactured visual and physical accompaniments to it—music videos, artwork (sleeve and advertising designs), publicity (artist interviews, public appearances), artist and fan clothing, and more besides. Insofar as none of these has any material existence outwith the aural experience, whose presence thus organises them, we could declare that understanding any element of this ephemeron merely contributes to a listener's understanding of the music concerned rather than creating it. And yet, of course, each of these can be understood in their own right. I guess it is possible for a potential listener, a viewer, to gain an understanding of the persona presented by an artist through their appearing as an interviewee, without the viewer knowing (and hence understanding) any of the artist's music. While I fail to understand why anyone should be interested in gaining such an understanding (my inadequacy), it is perhaps best understood as an aspect of the understanding of any public persona, irrespective of the field in which they operate. I would want to make a similar argument in relation to any non-sonic aspect of the understanding of popular music, which of course only betrays my own personal history and disciplinary affiliations. But this is where the non-ephemeral nature of popular music comes to the fore, specifically in the most commercially explicit examples, by which I mean those recorded and distributed in accord with the then greatest technological advances. While it might be socially appropriate simply to have consumed Aqua's remarkably fluid ›Barbie girl‹<sup>21</sup> back in 1997 (simply to have heard it, if repeatedly), from first encounter I have been unable to avoid listening to it, regurgitating it, feeling the appropriateness

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21 *Aquarium* (1997). Universal.

of the two lead voices, in their distinction, measured against the glittery timbres which outdo even Abba at their most lovable, and the curious, because part-discursive, harmonic hook which underlies the properly jaunty, because detached and disjunct, sung melody. Here then, I am unable merely to hear ›Barbie girl‹, I have to listen to her. In this most apparently discardable of objects, the experience of encountering it gives the lie to its ephemerality, gives impetus to the drive to understanding and, if even in passing, suggests a meaningfulness in the encounter.

If I claim to have understood the Blind Willie Johnson track I mentioned earlier, does that have any consequence for me? What do I do as a result? Two things, in my case. The first is to have it sit on my regular playlist, so that I listen to it quite frequently. To what purpose? It reminds me of its beauty (first), and it reminds me, in my aurally-induced bubble, of the situation musicians like Johnson found themselves in. The second is that I taught it. I would use it, when appropriate, as a way into discussing racial politics, a topic my music specialist students were often not interested in, but could become so, and this awakening seems to me to have been of value. This is another way of understanding the basic issue at hand, in that an understanding of anything necessarily has consequences. Understanding can never be abstract, always has to be actualised in the presences of a particular understander, in much the same way that there is no such thing as objective knowledge. Once something becomes known, becomes understood, it becomes subjectified, seen through a particular, individuated process of perception which, however similar it may be to another's, can never quite be equated to it<sup>22</sup>. And this is why, when I go to the piano to revel in my own understanding of ›A song for Europe‹, what I play is unlikely to be identical to what another musician may play. While such an exercise may be trivial as a manifestation of my understanding, I am not interested in proving myself to anybody.

It is at this point that I may have to apologize to my reader, for I have said little to you about how you might go about such understanding, and yet you have persevered this far. I guess this is the point. Because I am suspicious of the demands to parade our understanding for each other, I want to require no access to your understanding. I have made of mine as much as I can, in order for you to test your own experience of understanding against it, because it is only you who can discover what it is you can learn from somebody else's attempt at understanding what it is to understand music. And you may discover your understanding has nothing in common

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22 Although various reported cases of the experiences of identical twins leave me a little uneasy at my use of ›never‹.

with mine. I want to counterpose that possibility to a critique of just what I am describing. In a recent review of an earlier essay of mine, Trevor de Clercq correctly writes that the approach, in which I eschew the (for me, illusory) objective, is »inherently resistant to criticism since only the authors themselves can be the experts on their own listening experience«<sup>23</sup>. Of course, in writing such an essay I am inviting criticism, which is entirely appropriate. And yet, it is only in the, perhaps artificial, environment that is public (and academic) life, that criticism of an idea, of a train of thought, of an understanding, is seen as the appropriate response.<sup>24</sup> This is an environment in which competition of individual against individual is valued. On the contrary, in this essay, I am inviting reflection, utilisation, rather than the evaluation of the uncommitted. As I have written of music analysis, it offers an invitation to a way to listen to something, rather than an explication of how one should listen to something, as opposed to in some other way.

Already I have gone too far, and I suspect a more comfortable place to end would be here. I have discovered that my rolled paper homunculi definitely have waterproof legs, even if two particular examples I chose (Blind Willie Johnson and Aqua) are merely more complex in what they offer the listener than my naive initial sketch suggested, and in this they may be emblematic of what they represent. But, although I have addressed a number of ways in which I think one can understand popular music, I have not touched upon what is, for me, the most significant. The range of topics I have addressed so far have all operated according to a single (albeit multi-faceted and robust) model of understanding, which we may characterise thus: something is perceived, that perception is cognised as having sense, and that sense is then translated into some other medium in order that understanding may be demonstrated, that other medium being either musical sound, or more usually verbal discourse. In some of the topics I have tried to find value, about others I am sceptical, but they all qualify as offering some measure of »understanding«. Yet I am not convinced this is the only available model. Prepare for a short detour (in which, again, I fail to observe the etiquette of pretending to objectivity) in order to address a second model.

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23 Review of von Appen et al. (2015) *Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music* in *Music Theory Online* (<http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.16.22.1/mto.16.22.1.declercq.html>), accessed 27 April 2016.

24 Edward de Bono regards argument as a highly inefficient means of reaching a goal. For an introduction, see de Bono: »The inadequacy of argument« at <https://www.tensor.co.uk/articles/inadequacy/inadequacy.html>, accessed 3 May 2016, or *Six Thinking Hats* (1985). London: Penguin, pp. 13ff. I read David Bohm as tending, less explicitly, toward the same end. See *On Dialogue* (1996). Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 30ff.

I have a very poor practical understanding of that quality people call empathy. I have what is politely called a ›cognitive impairment‹, which largely accounts for that lack, but is also the reason I have paid a great deal of conscious attention to what other people (we call you ›neurotypicals‹) say of empathy, as they translate their own experiences into words, in order to enable me to gain an understanding, an abstract, impersonal, unapplied understanding of what empathy might be. So, as I understand the idea, it is the ability to stand metaphorically alongside another, the skill of being able to predict, interpret, experience what that other is feeling without them having to specify it, and to align oneself with them.<sup>25</sup> I think this means being able to feel their feelings vicariously, although I am not quite convinced by that. And some people use the word ›understand‹ to categorise this sort of empathy. Learned discussions of empathy suggest it is important that the understanding achieved is ›accurate‹.<sup>26</sup> Of course, the degree of accuracy attained can be ascertained by checking with the individual with whom we empathize, but we cannot check with a stretch of music as to whether our understanding of it is accurate. Perhaps this might mean that ›understanding‹ is not, after all, something we should claim to be able to do of music, but I offer an alternative view. Looking into the etymology of the English word ›understand‹, I discover that the Old English ›under‹ is cognate with the Latin ›inter‹ and the Sanskrit ›antar‹, with the sense of being among, between, in the midst of, close to,<sup>27</sup> a sense it shares with other Old English compounds beginning »under-«, rather than being related to contemporary usage of »under«.<sup>28</sup>

There is a skill which is, ideally, generated as part of the process of the study of music (although by no means all musicians achieve it), a skill which can be described as ›knowing where to put your ears‹. The awkward locution is surely intentional, because it calls attention to the intensively active quality of the use of ears (rarely a part of most peoples' everyday experience, for whom hearing is the norm, and is a passive experience) and also the slightly strange nature of the activity. What it means is the ability to focus, in complete detail, on every aspect of the musical fabric (although not

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25 Dictionary or other established definitions of ›empathy‹ are entirely beside the point here, of course.

26 »Being able to empathize means being able to understand accurately the other person's position, to identify with ›where they are at‹.« Simon Baron-Cohen (2012). *Zero degrees of empathy*. London: Penguin, p. 13. »[Empathy is] an accurate, empathic understanding of the client's world as seen from the inside...« C. R. Rogers (1961). *On becoming a person*. Boston PA: Houghton Mifflin, p. 248.

27 Whether my source—etymonline.com—is accurate is, I simply declare, beside the point—it is the understanding which the possibility opens up here which is effective.

28 As in ›underneath‹. To ›understand‹ is in no way to ›stand under‹.

always in its entirety), i.e. being able to audition, clearly, every pitch, every timbre, their precise dynamic level, relative length and degree of distortion, and every gesture they form, and to follow at will any of these strands as they unfold (to a maximum of three or four, dependant on the internal complexity of the strands), without being surprised, discomfited, confused, by them. In brief, it is the most intensive version of what I have previously characterised as the ability ›to listen‹. But there is a further aspect of knowing where to put your ears, which is to be able to do so shortly (fractionally) before what it is you are listening for happens. Of course, this requires a high degree of stylistic competence to achieve, is best practiced with repeated listenings, and it can hardly be demonstrated. It is possible to think that a good performer can demonstrate knowing where to put their ears in their manner of performance, but I cannot see how a listener can demonstrate it. And yet, listening in this way is an incredibly absorbing experience, in which you feel one with the music. This seems to me strongly akin to what I understand of empathy, and we might think of knowing where to put your ears as an empathic understanding of music, which circles back to where I have come from—»In this sense, understanding the music is knowing what to do in its presence, knowing how to respond in a socially appropriate way, and doing so«—but at another turn of the spiral. The result of this empathic understanding, in practice, is that every aspect of the music can be encompassed. You come to know it in all its fine detail, because the realm encompassed by your aural perception is expansive enough to accept everything that could happen, and focused enough to register everything that does, and ›coming to know‹ becomes ›understanding‹. It fits. It can all be absorbed, it can all be made sense of as the experience of listening. You are entirely alongside, in the midst of, the music.<sup>29</sup> I'm pretty convinced that Eliot had it right in his quartets—»you are the music while the music lasts«.<sup>30</sup>

So, I think I have suggested that there are two broad means of understanding music—the translation model, which has a variety of manifestations, and the empathy model, which it seems to me (as yet) has only one. There is of course no reason why one should not employ both understandings of understanding popular music, but I know which I think has the more value.

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29 I end up in the same place, starting from a very different point of origin, in another recent essay: »An outlandish as-if: the rock and pop passacaglia« (2014). In: *Rivista di Analisi e Teoria Musicale* 20 (1-2), pp. 259-90.

30 T.S. Eliot (1959). ›The Dry Salvages‹. In: *Four Quartets*. London: Faber, ll. 211-12.