

Philip Tagg: Review of Interpreting Popular Music by David Brackett.

Cambridge University Press, 1995. ISBN 0-521-47337. xiv + 260 pages.

I interpret the main aim of this book (pp.xi-xii) as an attempt to bridge the gap between our understanding of music as sound and our understanding of music as social 'text' in a 'context'. Brackett himself writes in the preface (p xii):

'I remain convinced that the *sounds* of music' ... 'are important. However, their "importance" fluctuates continually depending on the human context in which they are embedded' ... 'While I do not propose an overarching method for the interpretation of popular music, the concern here with the way in which specific texts arise from (and contribute to) specific contexts to create different modalities of interpretation could, in principle, be applied to a broad range of musics, popular or otherwise'.

Target readership for this important area of enquiry consists of 'both students of music and those interested in music as part of a web of broader cultural activity' (p.xii), this suggesting, not untruthfully, that students of music are currently seldom expected to be interested in music as part of anything else and, erroneously, that music students will never be obliged to do so. Thankfully, Brackett's book goes a little way towards contradicting such a pessimistic outlook on music studies.

The book is divided into five main chapters, the first dealing with basic concepts, theory and method, the other four zooming in on four particular 'pieces' of popular music: (i) a comparison of Billy Holiday's and Bing Crosby's recordings of *I'll Be Seeing You* (S Fain/I Kahal, 1938); (ii) Hank Williams' *Hey Good Lookin'* (1951); (iii) James Brown's *Superbad* (1975); (iv) Elvis Costello's *Pills and Soap* (1983). Such concretion is both a strength and a weakness: strength because empiricism and concretion are repellent to armchair theorists, weakness because 'book' and 'musical concretion' are two virtually irreconcilable entities. This is why readers need to know the recordings just mentioned quite intimately in order to derive any real benefit from substantial proportions of this book, although the notationally literate might be able to reconstruct a rough sonic image of some of the sounds referred to from the music examples provided for the James Brown and Elvis Costello songs. I am acutely aware of the copyright problems involved, but, failing the provision of audio extracts on a suitable carrier, I feel that all four songs subjected to detailed discussion should have been provided with complete transcriptions in order to minimise, at least for the notationally literate, the frustration of not knowing how the sounds being referred to actually 'sound' or 'feel'. To put it another way: if I own 10,000 or so music titles in a wide variety of styles, and if only one of the four titles chosen by Brackett (James Brown's *Superbad*) is amongst those 10,000, then how can other readers with no access to well-stocked sound archives, no notational skills and no intimate sonic memory of the analysis pieces be expected to make critical sense of the musicological parts of the book?

Nevertheless, the main strength of Brackett's text is that it gives very different concrete examples of how various levels of socially constructed meaning can be understood to combine, in given historical contexts, to define very different but reasonably precise sets of ideals, attitudes, activities, and ide-

ologies. This quality of broad interdisciplinarity with a tangibly musical bias then allows, as the book's title suggests, for considerable ideological *interpretation* of the song, artist or style under discussion. The operative word here is, however, 'interpretation', for there is ample scope for disagreement with some of the theoretical assumptions apparently informing Brackett's interpretation.

Although Brackett makes a salutary attack on the myth of the great auteur (p.16) and attempts a very short critique of traditional musicology (p.19-29), he runs into some difficulty, I feel, with (i) theories of music semiotics and (ii) notions of 'difference'. For example, Brackett takes a lead from Middleton's ideas of 'primary' and 'secondary signification' (p.9), only to question, quite convincingly, their methodological value (p.11), and then revert to their usage in later chapters. He also (p.12) cites Stefani's (1987) useful five levels of musical competence, a paradigm to which he never really returns, while seeming — at least in 1994 or 1995 — to have been unaware of some earlier, serious attempts to develop theories of popular music semiotics and analysis, or unwilling to use them (e.g. Moore 1993; Tagg 1982, 1987, 1992; Walser 1993). Correcting these (and other) methodological blind spots might have helped Brackett make the interrelation of musical and paramusical a little more transparent. As things stand, it often feels more like a leap of hermeneutic faith than a seamless join between the two areas, for example (i) from irregular section lengths in *Superbad* to notions of 'naturalness' (pp.153-154), or (ii) from 'enhanced dissonances' via 'undercoding' to the mannerisms of latter-day lounge singers (p.71). A clear set of musical sign types and clearer definition of both musical and semiotic terms would have sharpened the argumentation considerably.

One problem with Brackett's presentation concerns something which the author himself warns against: essentialisation of ethnic characteristics in music. The start of a section called 'African-American music as a musicological subject' (pp.115-119) consists mainly of a presentation of such characteristics, many of which are shared by many other cultures. For example, Brackett seems to accept the received popular music studies 'wisdom' that metronome sense is an intrinsically African trait, even though the music most frequently imagined as some sort of *opposite* to 'African' — the Central European 'classical' tradition during the rise of colonialism — was very keen on metronome sense, as the following statements from Germanic Europe clearly illustrate:

1. 'People with no sense of regular pulse have no honour'. 'Regular time is the soul of music' (Beer 1719: 166, ff.).
2. 'Accompanists who can't keep to a regular beat are vulgar and amateurish' (Leopold Mozart 1756: 266, ff.).
3. 'Good music teachers always keep their pupils to various types of dance music so they become rooted in the automatic aspect of the beat' (J S Bach pupil Kirnberger in 1771).
4. 'He was a very accurate conductor and in matters of tempo, which he usually took very briskly, extremely reliable' (J S Bach's obituary 1754. *Bach-Dokumente III*, 1972: 666).

Another difficulty with Brackett's treatment of this sensitive area of semi-falsehood, semi-truth and stereotyping is that most of the enumerations, positive or negative, of African or African-American (as well as European) cultural characteristics are provided by people who (like both Brackett and

me) are white, male, middle-class and European or North-American (Hegel, Henry Russell, Fenimore Cooper, etc.) Such characterisation almost invariably underlines *difference at the expense of similarity* and such definition of difference depends in its turn on the cultural self-understanding of the person defining that difference. Therefore, statements of the type 'they're different to us' will be false if our own notions of 'who we are' are false. As a white European wage-earner I am, for example, convinced that the received wisdom about 'who we are' is highly questionable; in any case, that 'wisdom' makes little sense in historical musicological terms (see Tagg 1989, van der Merwe 1989) and I feel that Brackett should have addressed the class character of white identity and of bourgeois subjectivity in order to diminish the essentialist risk of projection that I think comes to the surface in the Billie Holiday and James Brown sections of the book. Similarly, it seems to me that these traces of ethnic essentialism are compounded by the author's implicit acceptance of the common US-centric assumption that by 'Africa' is meant only those regions of West Africa from which humans were deported as slaves to end up in what is now the USA. It is as though music from Central or East Africa, not to mention music from the Khoi-San and Arabic areas of the same continent was in some sense not equally African. In short, Brackett knows there is a problem but seems sometimes to be trapped within it. The terms of reference defining this problem need to be criticised and widened to make real historical sense.

Despite substantial problems of presentation, method and problematisation, I would recommend *Interpreting Popular Music* to anyone searching for ways of understanding how music as 'text' relates to and functions in its 'context'. There may be considerable scope for disagreement with Brackett's hypotheses, approach and conclusions, but the book contains a wealth of valuable historical and musical detail. The extent to which 'the modalities of interpretation' presented could 'be applied to a broad range of musics, popular or otherwise' was never intended as 'overarching' and it is when Brackett stops paying lip service to theoretical and political correctness, more specifically when he juxtaposes verbal and musical levels of discourse in an entertaining manner, that his work is at its best and most thought-provoking. Thankfully, there are more than enough of those passages to make the book worth reading.

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