

***Tagg's Diatribe
or
Tagg's Nag
or
Phil's Whinge***

IPM Newsletter August 1994 Tagg's page (the back one)

Musicology and popular music (episode 1): backwards or forwards?

New professor at Göteborg

Since 1968, The University of Göteborg (Sweden) has been running popular music studies at both graduate and undergraduate levels. I count myself among the six or seven lucky doctors of popular music to have come out of Göteborg University's Institute of Musicology when Jan Ling was professor there. Last year, the university appointed Olle Edström as new professor of musicology — in my opinion a fair and wise decision. However, the public document produced by the selection committee contained some strange ideas. These ideas merit some comment because they directly relate to the future of music studies in general and to the relationship between musicology and popular music studies in particular.

The joy of discovery or real scholarship?

Most of the candidates for the Göteborg professorship in musicology were, thanks to the Göteborg tradition just mentioned, specialists in the field of popular music. They were also all musicologists, as, indeed, were all three members of the selection committee. In the introduction to the committee's reasoning and decisions, the research paths chosen by 'several applicants for the post' (i.e. the majority, i.e. those with popular music as their speciality) are characterised as 'full of optimism and the joy of discovery... Their questions and answers', the document continues, 'almost always cover areas way beyond the traditional boundaries of musicology'. The conclusion of page one is that 'the problem with musicology today is not so much having to argue for a variety of opinion and ideology as the need to make them' [opinions and ideologies] 'scientifically convincing and fruitful'.

These statements embrace the assumption that some people — professors of traditional musicology — have the authority to determine what is 'scientifically convincing and fruitful' (i.e. adult and objective) and what is merely 'full of optimism and the joy of discovery' (i.e. childish and subjective). This false dichotomy also disregards the following three, easily verifiable facts: (1) that in most university institutions devoted to the study of music nothing is taught or researched but the European bourgeois art tradition; (2) that in many university music departments including popular music on the curriculum, the popular is treated as a new, untried, experimental or alternative sort of necessary evil for student recruitment to be treated as a tiresome ap-

pendix, never on a par with the European bourgeois art tradition; (3) that, given points (1) and (2), popular music researchers not only have to continually justify their field of study but also work harder than their 'classical' counterparts since (a) multi-disciplinary approaches are a must, not an add-on, (b) no tailor-made musicological methods exist and need to be developed, (c) popular music researchers must always argue their case with greater rigour because their subject lacks the traditional musicological legitimacy of 'art'. What is more, the committee's statements negate the obvious truth that whatever is scientifically convincing and fruitful will never be produced without the 'joy of discovery'.

Popular music is not historical?

The selection committee also seems worried that the majority of applicants for the Göteborg professorship were clearly more concerned with the music of the majority of people today than with that of a minority of yesteryear. You don't need to be paranoid to detect a tone of scepticism vis-a-vis popular music research in phrases like 'others will have to look after historical research', meaning 'what on earth happens to good old musicology if these are the sort of candidates we have applying for musicology professorships these days?'. The committee chairman also deplores the 'lack of historical and musical sources' he discerns on the part of several candidates (the popular music ones) applying for the professorship. This implies that the committee chairman considers one (popular music orientated) candidate's highly detailed discussions of reviews in *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* and analyses of Waldo de los Rios' version of Mozart's 40th Symphony as less historical and less musical than work with late Beethoven quartets. It must also mean that another (popular music orientated) candidate's full historical account of the Eurovision Song Contest is somehow less historical than accounting for the development of organ playing in eighteenth century Germany and that the detailed analysis of forty-odd Euro-vision songs somehow constitutes less valid musical source work than editing an Monteverdi manuscript. It is an obviously ahistorical sort of 'history' that assesses degrees of historical validity on a bipolar descending scale from long ago (very 'historical') to just recently (not very 'historical' at all). Similarly, it is just plain daft to infer that a lower degree of musical-analytical competence is demanded for popular than for art music traditions.

Summing up his introduction, the selection committee chairperson asks if musicology should keep to the canons and paradigms of traditional musicology or strive for a broad, multidisciplinary and critical set of approaches, methods and materials.

Backwards or forwards?

This question is a cinch to answer from the perspective of post-Thatcherite Britain where the new universities are fast filling in lacunae left by the unchallenged intellectual elitism of the old ones. One of the first holes to be filled is music, various forms of popular music now being taught, both as practical skills and as theoretical method to undergraduates at a number of institutions with university status in Britain. The number of students applying for traditional degree courses in music at British universities is likely to decrease in inverse proportion to the popularity of those offering at least 50% of their course modules in forms of music outside the European 'classical' canon.

Of course, this anarchy of 'market forces' is a double-edged sword for popular music studies. On the one hand it means there is popular demand for what we teach and that this pressure can be applied to increase funding for the teaching and research we do. On the other hand, that is a slow process which may well have the opposite effect, i.e. that those inheriting the mantle of 'true music' and 'high art' in our university institutions of music will see themselves obliged to ward off such an imagined siege by us 'barbarians' of popular music studies: after all, their jobs maybe at stake as much as ours are. Their strength should not be underestimated — they still constitute the vast majority of full-time employees in the vast majority of British university institutions of music — and they have powerful allies — the Heritage Ministry, the 'arts' lobbies and all those other defenders of 'tradition' and 'basic values' that are contradictorily and magically allowed to transgress the holy laws of the mystical market which we other mere mortals must worship or die!

Obviously, there is no logic in this, nor should we expect any. It would therefore seem advisable for musicology, Swedish or otherwise, to keep its options open and to make full use of the sort of methods, materials and approaches developed in Göteborg during the seventies and eighties and to regard these as a productive potential rather than as a threat. Such approaches are sufficiently well-established to expand, develop and improve and to cater for the needs of intelligent, musically interested or active people of the future. Moreover, Sweden is, thanks to the Göteborg school, in the enviable position of being able to appoint a number of competent teachers to deal with the musicology needs of the next generation while Britain lags severely behind, many traditional music departments coming under increasing threat for not attracting enough students while others, staffed by teachers with insufficient research competence, make nonsense out of popular music studies in much the same way as traditional musicology made much nonsense of the 'classics'. In fact, encouraging the breadth of approaches, materials and methods that characterises much work of the Göteborg school may be the best way of saving Sweden from the fate that may await many sister institutions in Britain. Experience in Göteborg and elsewhere has shown that only with a spirit of open-mindedness and innovation is it possible to save what is worth saving and to create a musicology that is of use in the next century rather than in the previous one.

Maybe sideways...

The problem is that although popular music studies, despite its many imperfections, may be able to offer musicology the sort of ideological and epistemological medicine it needs to survive, it is not certain that traditional musicology will swallow the whole dose, especially in view of the vast superstructure of ideas the latter still frequently sees itself obliged to carry around by way of (relatively recent) historical ballast in the form of 'masterworks' and 'great music'. Nor should we forget the intricate infrastructure that university music studies have acquired over the last 150 years, what with institutions, associations, publications, examination boards, job markets for instructors, teachers, researchers, etc. Add to that the role of artistic icing on the university or municipal cake that many music institutions with university status assume, the artistic cred that universities or cities seem to think they derive from such icing, the 'back-to-basics' (reactionary) trends in British music education, the increased differences of class with the conse-

quent need for developing clear boundaries between cultures of the elite and the *lumpenproletariat* and you have a depressing picture of unholy alliances. Seen in this light, the musicology of popular music may be better off moving sideways and becoming part of the social sciences — sociology, cultural and communication studies, etc. — instead of being a tiresome appendix to 'real' (old) music studies in an arts faculty.

On top of this, there's the problem of 'fame schools' and the guild mentality of musos as performing seals. But that will have to be included in the next whinging episode...