

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### ANALYZING MUSIC

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#### **The Challenge of Listening**

Our daily environment is filled with sounds. Just go outside and you might hear some naturally occurring sounds like birds trilling, dogs barking, or leaves rustling in reaction to the wind. If you walk across campus you're certain to hear any number of man-made sounds ranging from a beeping public service vehicle moving backwards to the banter of two friends as they hop and scratch and roll by on their boards. In addition to these random noises, we can expect to experience a steady stream of music in the public and private spaces we inhabit; so much so that it is possible to lose sight of the value of the creative product. From muzak in the supermarket, to easy listening in the family restaurant, or to those personalized ring tones setting off cell phones in the theater, music, in these contexts, has been reduced to the production of **mood**, to create atmosphere, or merely to signal a more immediate activity.

How many of you cannot study without playing music in the background? The songs are intended to be ignored in this circumstance rather than listened to or valued as part of a cultural dialogue. Your first challenge, then, is to approach the music we listen to in Humcore with a level of curiosity and care to generate interpretive questions that seek meaning in the form, function, and context of the musical composition. Another goal of this chapter is to develop the basic vocabulary needed to discuss how the various components of a musical text (i.e. written text, instrumentation, vocal performance) are put together, how they sound, how they are performed, and how they interact with one another, not only as a means of creating a particular mood or eliciting a response, but also as a means of performing individual or national identity.

#### **The Power of Music to Mark Identity**

In addition to developing skills in careful and critical listening, it is equally important to recognize the ways in which music contributes to individual or national identity as it communicates across social, cultural, or political boundaries. Last winter I asked my students to bring a song to class that they felt best represented the text we were reading that week. In their presentations they were required to explain how the **lyrics**, the spoken or sung language, the **genre** (style, kind), or the **mood** of the music embodied a central theme or characterized the attitude of one of the main characters in the literary text. Students brought in everything from Frank Sinatra to Jay-Z, but imagine my surprise when, following an enthusiastic and knowledgeable presentation of a **punk** song, several of the student's peers remarked: "You don't look like someone who listens to punk music!" One student was shocked because of his quiet and polite disposition, while another remarked that his conservative, neatly-groomed hair and regularly-fitted jeans did not mark him as part of the punk scene. Many explained that they so closely identify

themselves with the values and culture conveyed by their favorite genre that it is difficult to separate their own identity from that cultivated by their music.

This exchange led to a fruitful discussion about the power of music. On the one hand, music is a potent instrument that establishes a particular mood for or elicits a response by a listening individual or group. On the other hand, the music someone chooses to listen to marks him or her as exhibiting or, at the very least, identifying with a specific **ideology**, defined as a particular set of practices, beliefs, and values. In this regard, music participates in a **cultural dialogue** that communicates a strong connection and sense of belonging within a listening community.

Next quarter we will be discussing, among other things, East German Punk, a movement whose public declaration, or manifesto, emerged in reaction to government oppression. Schleimkeim (Slimey Germs), one of the best known East German punk bands founded in 1980, discusses on its band's Web page how, although "none of them really knew at the time just what punk was all about, they well understood that it was angry and rebellious and just the way to react to the boredom of stiff East German society and music scene."\* This is a declaration that, more than anything, asserts its right to create and express its own music, to perform identity, and to have its own theater. Songs with titles like "Waste Products of Society," illustrates how their music embodied a rebellious and angry attitude and lifestyle that threatened the governmental oppression it opposed and encouraged the youth it targeted to embrace its message and enter into its cultural dialogue.

As we move through the rest of the chapter, we will consider how such factors as linguistic choices, (i.e. titles, dialect), or visual image, or the kinds and combinations of instruments used in a song, or even the manner and setting in which music is created or performed offer important insights into the social, cultural, or political make-up of the individuals and nations who produce, perform, consume, or sponsor a particular kind of music.

**Integrated Analysis Activity #1:** Think about your favorite **genre** (kind, style) of music and consider some of the conventions of that genre:

- Jot down a list of key words that you think characterize the prevalent themes of this genre.
- Now describe what social attitudes or values are conveyed by the artists in this genre and the songs they create.
- Describe the intended audience of this genre.
- How do you think these elements are expressed? Is it through the sounds you hear, through the lyrics, through the image cultivated by the artists, or through a combination?

These are examples of the kinds of questions we should consider when we evaluate and analyze a song, especially in the context of our academic studies.

## The Importance of Genre and Talking About Sound

Let us say, just for example's sake, that you chose the genre of Hip-Hop in the above activity. What kinds of words and phrases did you use to describe the sounds or lyrics that characterize that style of music? I have, for example, heard people describe a Hip-Hop song they really like as being “slammin” because of its “thumping bass” or “tight rhymes.” This language is part of the cultural vernacular, or dialect, that the Hip Hop community draws from when creating, performing, consuming, and discussing their music. When we analyze music we can make interpretive observations by thinking about how the kind of language used in the songs we listen to characterizes the culture that cultivates and participates in it.

And, as with any text, it is important to be familiar with the conventions of the musical genre for guidance in the rhetorical analysis of a composition as well as to find meaning in the interaction between the sounds we hear and the performance of the piece. The genre of **opera**, for example, is characterized as a **drama** set to music. It is performed on a stage with costumes, stage action, and scenery as well as changes of scenery between a number of **acts**. There are both spoken and sung interactions between the characters on stage, and the drama is accompanied by an orchestra.

Within the sub-genre of **Classical Opera** you might expect to hear the work of Mozart and see extravagant stage settings and costumes while listening to complex vocal **arias**, solos, which are performed in Italian and delivered with heavy **vibrato**, fluctuations between vocal frequencies. These were operas initially written and produced during a time that sought to meet the expectations of a privileged, courtly audience. However, by the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century those expectations shifted attention to bourgeoisie and middle class patrons. Learning about the historical context and setting of a musical production or genre, whether opera or punk, is another means of uncovering important details about a listening community.

Context also offers us insights into how a nation's political agenda impacts both the production and reception of musical compositions. **Porgy and Bess**, a production we will be studying this quarter depicts the struggles of African Americans living in a fictitious community called Catfish Row in Charleston, South Carolina in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It was first performed as a theater piece on Broadway in 1927 and later as an opera beginning in the mid-1930's, long before the Civil Rights Movement began. This was a bold accomplishment that challenged the conventions of traditional opera. It showcased the talents of an all-black cast and featured music that fused elements of the genres of **blues** and **jazz** within the classical form and performance traditions of opera. In the New York Times in 1935 George Gershwin explains:

Because Porgy and Bess deals with Negro Life in America it brings to the operatic form elements that have never before appeared in the opera and I have adapted my method to utilize the drama, the humor, the superstition, the religious fervor, the dancing and the irrepressible high spirits of

the race. If doing this, I have created a new form, which combines opera with theater, this new form has come quite naturally out of the material.

**Porgy and Bess** reflected the life of a segment of the population and was intended for a much broader audience, but because of its content and movement away from the traditional operatic model, as well as the political and cultural temperament of the time, it was controversial and not officially recognized for its contributions to opera by the opera world until the mid-1970's.

Now that we know a little bit about the power of music to mark identity and have been reminded of the importance of genre when analyzing music, let us think about how to talk about the sounds we hear. As we listen to the sounds produced by the instruments or vocals, think about the **mood** created by these sounds and how this mood appeals to a particular feeling, impacts your emotional state, or summons your imagination. Mood is created partly through the **rhythm** of a song. Rhythm is related to the **tempo**, the speed of the music measured in the form of a **time** signature.

Rhythm is also created by the **beat** and other elements that relate to the musical time. Perhaps an instrument or vocal sounds **high or low**. These descriptors characterize a different **tone**, or **pitch**, having a constant **frequency**. When two or more tones of a different pitch are sung together we describe the result as a **harmony**. This marks a **vertical relationship** of sound. A **melody** occurs when a series of tones of similar or different pitch occur one after another in a **horizontal relationship**. The association between vertical and horizontal aspects of a composition (i.e. **polyphonic**, two or more melodies, or **monophonic**, a single melodic line without accompaniment, like Gregorian Chant) reflects a song's **texture**. Sounds we identify as **loud** or **soft** belong in the category of **dynamics**. **Duration** is a term for describing sounds as being **long** or **short**. We can use more subjective terms like **dark, bright, brilliant, powerful, aggressive, crunchy, melancholy, smooth, mellow, strident, airy, thick** to characterize the tone's quality or **timbre**. These are but a few of the ways we can describe the relationship between sounds in a musical piece.

**Integrated Analysis Activity #2:** Return to your favorite **genre** (kind, style) of music and think about your favorite song in that genre:

- What words best characterize the sounds you hear in the instrumentation?
- How would you describe the vocal performance?
- How do the sounds of the vocals interact with those made by the instruments?
- Are there any recurring sounds or phrases in the music?
- Based on the sounds you hear (not what the words mean), what do you think the central message is (i.e. what attitude or emotion is expressed, what images are evoked) and what specific features of the music support your ideas?

These are additional examples of the kinds of questions we should consider when we evaluate and analyze a song, especially in the context of our academic studies.

## Performing Identity through the Written Text

Most of us probably have an understanding that lyrics generally represent the text, spoken or sung, of a song. In a popular song, the lyric is organized into a series of **verses, stanzas, or lines** that lead to the **chorus**, the catchy **hook** or **refrain** intended to be repeated. This structure might be connected or interrupted by a **bridge**. The lyric can be characterized as a short poem with a rhythmic or otherwise song-like quality. Used as the adverb, **lyrical**, it describes any performance, whether in music or dance, etc., as one conveying a deep sense of personal emotion or conviction. Did you know that the word lyric was literally used to describe the performance of words accompanied by the lyre? The performative connotation of the word “lyric” sheds light on how the written text both characterizes the cultural group that creates its music, as well as how it impacts an individual, group, or nation to participate in a **cultural dialogue**.

The **libretto**, Italian for “little book,” for example, consists of all of the spoken and sung parts in an extended musical production like an **opera**. At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, this “little book” was published for the audience so that they could read the story prior to the beginning of or during the opera and assume a more active role in the performance of the story. If you go to an opera nowadays, you might notice that the libretto has, in most cases, been replaced by subtitles and programs that contain a synopsis of the central story-line. This chapter is itself a “little book” for us to use when reading musical texts. As members of the Humanities community, knowing the story before the performance is yet another kind of public declaration, or manifesto, which encourages us as an audience to be careful and curious listeners, to think about how music, musicians, and listeners perform identity and participate in the cultural dialogue of the music theater.

**Integrated Analysis Activity #3:** Return to your favorite song again and answer the following questions:

- What do you know about the historical context, time and place, when your favorite song was created and performed?
- Who is the intended audience for this music?
- How is your favorite song received or viewed by the population? (Is it controversial? Is it Top 40 and does it enjoy a wide appeal?)
- Has this group or artist had an impact on a particular culture or on other artists?
- What rhetorical claims can you make about the written text?
- How does the message of the written language interact with the mood of the music? How would you describe the vocal performance?
- In what ways has this activity changed your understanding or appreciation for this song?

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evaluate and analyze a song, especially in the context of our academic studies.

\*[homepages.nyu.edu/~cch223/eastgermany/schleimkeim\\_main.html](http://homepages.nyu.edu/~cch223/eastgermany/schleimkeim_main.html)