

POPULAR MUSIC ANALYSIS AND SEMIOTICS: APPLICATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

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INTRODUCTION. WHY MUSIC ANALYSIS IS SO INFAMOUS IN POPULAR MUSIC STUDIES

In 1981, among the founders of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM), there were many musicologists – like Charles Hamm, Philip Tagg, Richard Middleton, David Horn, Franco Fabbri – but despite their role as founders and their importance in IASPM's life, the majority of popular music scholars today are not musicologists. IASPM is, by definition, a multidisciplinary association, and the development of ethnomusicology – and, later, of popular music studies – led to a broader concept of what music is, and how it should be considered and analyzed. The scholar should focus both on the *text* and the *context*, of course. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note how *music* – the text – is not even mentioned in many books and articles on popular music, today.

Even if relevant books such as *Song Means* by Allan Moore¹, *Music's Meanings* by Philip Tagg² and *The Art of Record Production*, edited by Simon Frith and Simon Zagorski-Thomas³ were released quite recently, music analysis does not appear to be among the interests of numerous members

¹ A.F. Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song*, Farnham – Burlington 2012.

² P. Tagg, *Music's Meanings*, New York – Huddersfield 2013.

³ S. Frith, S. Zagorski-Thomas, *The Art of Record Production: An Introductory Reader for a New Academic Field*, Farnham – Burlington 2012

of the IASPM international mailing list⁴. And not just analysis: *music/sound* fails to be among the interest of the majority of popular music scholars. It is because of our misconceptions on music and the idea that only musicians and musicologists can discuss it properly – as very well addressed by Philip Tagg in *Music's Meanings*, Chapter 3, called „The epistemic oil-tanker”⁵. Because of the fact that the most of popular music scholars are non-musos, they just do not deal with music: they deal mainly with para- and extra-musical elements, which are extremely relevant, but *only if related to the music*.

Plus, the fact that music analysis is avoided by many scholars is also due to concepts unfortunately derived from ‘traditional’ musicology, and mainly from what Philip Tagg (again) calls ‘musical absolutism’. The concept of ‘absolute music’, born in the second half of the XIX Century, is – to cut a very long story very short – at the basis (1) of the common belief that ‘absolute music’ is music ‘at its best’, and that all musics that relate to anything outside musical grammar itself is, somehow, inferior; (2) of the idea that the score – being the only possible representation of music – is the only thing the analyst has to consider in order to understand a piece. It would be ungenerous to state that ‘traditional’ musicologists do not consider also philosophy, history and the likes to understand music (so, not just music as-it-is) – but when classical musicologist concentrate on ‘music itself’, they rely exclusively on the paper score – what Marcello Source Keller sharply calls ‘papery music’⁶. Those kinds of analysis are incomprehensible to anyone who is not a musician or a musicologist, of course. So, musical absolutism is one of the main reasons why music analysis is not very popular.

The other reason is the exact opposite, as Tagg points very well:

damaging to the development of analytical perspective [...] has been the *inverted musical absolutism* that was so fashionable, at least in the anglophone world around 1990 and which, like the old-style art-music absolutism [...], exhibits avid aversion to making links between music as sound on the one hand and its meanings, uses and functions on the other. Inverted musical

⁴ The author has been a membership secretary of IASPM – and, as such, was in charge of the international mailing list – from June 2015 to June 2019.

⁵ P. Tagg, op. cit., pp. 83–132.

⁶ M. Source Keller, *What Makes Music European: Looking Beyond Sound*, Plymouth 2012, p. XXIII.

absolutism has its own articles of faith as part of an irrational belief system and still rules the roost in a significant number of institutions supposedly devoted to studies of culture, including music. I'm referring here to what, in the context of popular music studies, I call *ptomorockology*⁷.

The idea, on the exact opposite extreme, that talking about the *context* is more effective than talking about the *text* is still influencing popular music studies today. We could read many books on many artists or bands with no reference at all to their music. It seems like many scholars perceive music analysis as an outmoded approach to the subject – as if analysis has to be necessarily related to a repertoire written on paper, and as if left no space for para- and extra-musical aspects.

For these reasons Philip Tagg published his last two books – *Everyday Tonality* and *Music Meanings* – and founded the Network of the Inclusion of Music in Music Studies (NIMiMS). *Music Meanings* is particularly interesting because in a 700-pages long book on music analysis we have just *one* notated example. Tagg's aim is to prove that it is possible to talk about music and analyse it even without being classically trained musicians. In fact, an analysis of how music works in order to communicate something can be done without technical musical terms.

One of the points Tagg focuses on is the fact that the discourse around music lacks aesthetic terms, while there is an abundance of poietic ones: it is possible to technically describe a chord, but the way it sounds and what it can mean to listeners is not included in that technical description. This is the example of the 'detective chord,' the minor chord with a major seventh and a major ninth (for example, Am^{maj9}) that we can listen to at the end of the James Bond theme and in a huge amount of noir and spy movies since the 1950's; or the 'Doomsday mega-drone,' that we heard in many movies and TV series, aurally depicting an ominous situation.

Here are introduced three possible directions in popular music analysis that will hopefully stimulate readers for further research.

⁷ P. Tagg, op. cit., p. 105.

DIATAXIS

Even in case when an analyst does not want to consider sound itself, it is possible to study *the music*. For instance, Franco Fabbri developed a very efficient way of representing the structure of a song visually – the structure that Philip Tagg called later ‘diataxis’⁸. As you can see on fig. 1, we can distinguish chorus, bridges (or verses and refrains, in other song forms) as perceived just by listening to the song, and pointing them on the screen of the player (with minutes and seconds), not looking at a written score.

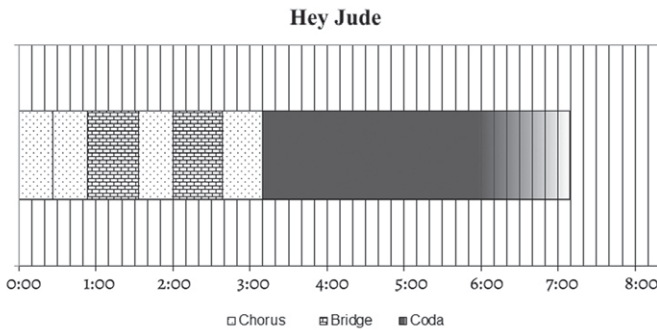


Fig. 1. Diataxis of Hey Jude (Beatles, 1968a)

The textures change according to the function. Franco Fabbri used it mostly studying the structure of Beatles songs; he noted that most of the Beatles tunes – especially at the beginning of their career – were structured as chorus-bridge songs, or AABA, as in Tin Pan Alley classics (and that is the case, mentioned above, of *Hey Jude* too). Taking advantage of its immediate effect on listeners (because a chorus can start right with the interesting part, while a refrain keeps the listener waiting for it), sometimes the Beatles started their songs with refrains, instead that verses. It happened with *She Loves You*, and *Can't Buy Me Love*. It later happened with *Strawberry Fields Forever*, as well documented in Fabbri⁹: in Lennon's demos, *Strawberry Fields* was originally in verse-refrain form but was later

⁸ Ibidem, pp. 383–416.

⁹ F. Fabbri, *Verse, Chorus (Refrain), Bridge: Analysing Formal Structures of the Beatles' Songs*, [in:] *Popular Music Worlds, Popular Music Histories*,

inverted as refrain-verse. Now, regarding the Beatles, while new demos are released in these later years, song structures seem to be one of the main struggles of the band during their compositional work: if we compare, for instance, the demo of *Cry Baby Cry* (released on Beatles 2018; fig. 2), a song from the *White Album* (again by Lennon), with the final version (fig. 3), we see that the structure changed again during the recording process: a verse-refrain song that turned into refrain-verse.

Cry Baby Cry (demo)

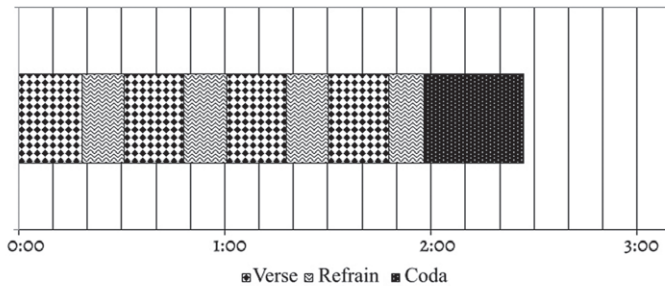


Fig. 2. Diataxis of *Cry Baby Cry* in the demo (Beatles 2018)

Cry Baby Cry

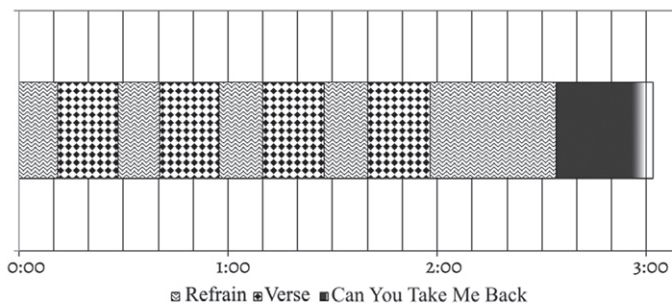


Fig. 3. Diataxis of *Cry Baby Cry* (Beatles 1968b)

And it happened with the outtake *What's the New Mary Jane* (Lennon again), whose 'final' version was in verse-refrain, but the demo was in

refrain-verse. Not to mention Lennon's *Goodnight*, in which the „Dreams, sweet dreams...” part – here named ‘bridge’ – changed its position several times during rehearsals: it was at the beginning of the song in an unnumbered early rehearsal (released on Beatles 1996; fig. 4), then in third position in take 10 (fig. 5), again at the beginning in take 22 (fig. 6) and in third position in the final, ‘official’ version (fig. 7).

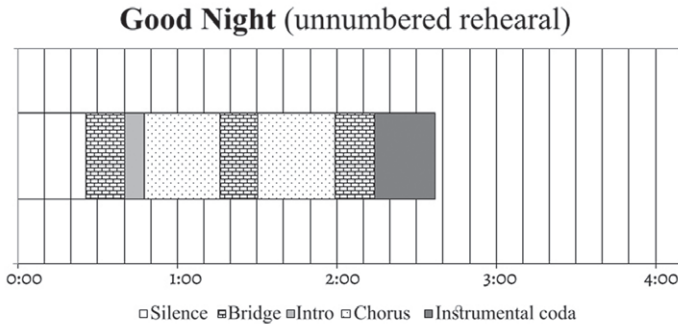


Fig. 4. Diataxis of an early rehearsal of *Good Night* (Beatles 1996)

McCartney, on the other hand, seemed to be the one who did not change his songs in the studio, with the notable exception of *Helter Skelter* (fig. 8). Take 2 of the song (Beatles 2018) was an almost 13-minutes long slow jam with plenty of instrumental sections: it seems quite normal that the band did not record this version to release it, but it is interesting that what became the sung intro in the final version („When I get to the bottom...”; Beatles 1968b) – pointed by the arrow in the image – wasn’t placed at the beginning of the song. So, ‘condensing’ the song for the record did not mean to simply remove the instrumental parts, but also *re-structuring the whole diataxis* of the piece.

The rhetoric aspect of diataxis has proved relevant not only for the Beatles, of course. Let us consider, for example, *I Want It All* by Queen (1989), released as a track of the album *The Miracle* and as a single (now in Queen, 1991). The single is 4 minutes long, while the track on the album is 4 minutes and 41 seconds. This is not particularly relevant, as singles are often edited to be more radio-friendly (usually by removing an instrumental solo). What strikes in the case of *I Want It All* is the fact that on *The Miracle* the song begins with an instrumental intro, followed by a solo, the first verse and

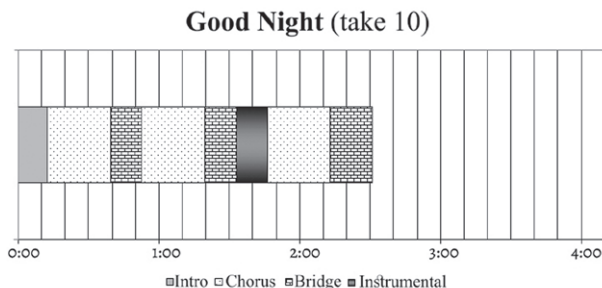


Fig. 5. Diataxis of Good Night, take 10 (Beatles 2018)

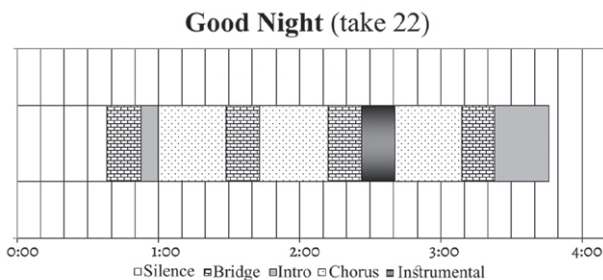


Fig. 6. Diataxis of Good Night, take 22 (Beatles 2018)

then the refrain with the hook (consequently appearing after *one minute*). In the single, the very first thing we hear is an *a cappella* version of the refrain, followed by the solo (i.e. starting with the refrain, as in *She Loves You*, *Can't Buy Me Love*, or *Strawberry Fields Forever*).

VOICE, AURAL STAGING, AND SOUND-BOX

While the issue of diataxis is mainly a rhetoric one, the field of music analysis related to semiotics is a broad one that has not been explored enough. The work that Philippe Lacasse has done on the perception of the voice in recorded music (with effects and filters) is a seminal one¹⁰, but it did not open to other studies in the same field. In these years, voices filtered through

¹⁰ S. Lacasse, *Listen to My Voice: The Evocative Power of Vocal Staging in Recorded Rock Music and Other Forms of Vocal Expression*, PhD diss., Institute

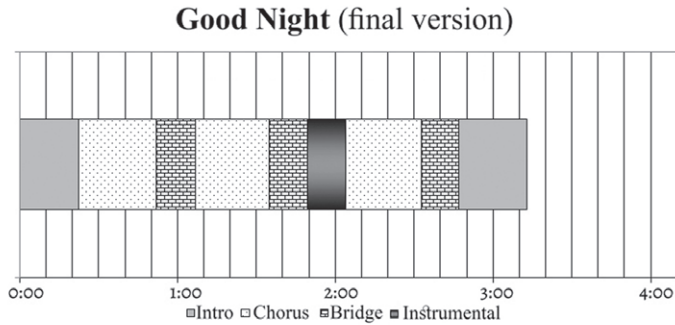


Fig. 7. Diataxis of Good Night as officially released (Beatles 1968b)

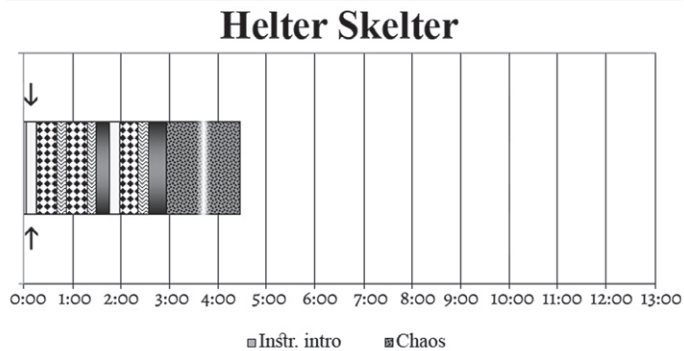
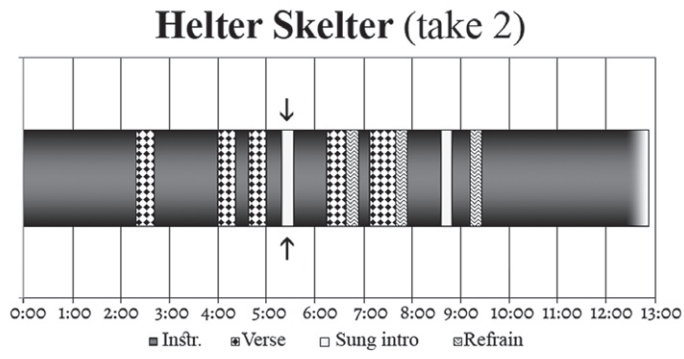


Fig. 8. Diataxis of Helter Skelter compared (Beatles 2018 and Beatles 1968b)

Autotune or a similar software dominate the industry: a study on what those voices mean *as timbers* to different audiences (the emic and the etic perspectives), with a particular focus on who *understands the lyrics* and *who doesn't*, would be essential to understand this phenomenon. It could help understand the gap between those who like it (or just dig it) and those who do not.

Another aspect that could be studied without a musicological technical background is that of space in recorded music – the *aural staging*, that is *the mise-en-scène* of sound sources (voices, instruments, sound effects, etc.), in one or more acoustic spaces; particularly important in audio recordings – *phonographic staging*¹¹ – but also in film and games sound, as well as in live performance situations¹².

Allan Moore studied in detail the evolution of the sound-box, that is „a four-dimensional virtual space within which sounds can be located through”¹³. Developing his discourse on the sound-box, Moore used a particularly useful visual representation of sound sources in the mix, as shown in fig. 9.

What we see in is a cluster mix, with all instruments placed in one channel (the cluster), backing vocals on the opposite channel and lead vocals in the center.

But Moore focused exclusively on repertoires he knew well, of course – anglophone popular music, whether it is rock or rhythm and blues or soul¹⁴. Studies on the sound-box in other genres, or on rock, rhythm and blues and soul in other countries are yet to be done. Moore defines the ‘normative mix’ (that is, what became the norm since the early 1970s) the diagonal mix, the one with vocals, bass and snare drum in the middle, after a ‘struggle’ between diagonal mix, triangular mix (snare drum, bass and vocal placed as in a triangle), cluster mix (aforementioned) and dynamic mix (with moving

of Popular Music, Liverpool 2000; idem, *Persona, Emotions and Technology: The Phonographic Staging of the Popular Music Voice*, Québec 2005.

¹¹ Idem, *Persona...*, op. cit.

¹² P. Tagg, op. cit., p. 583.

¹³ R. Dockwray, A.F. Moore, *Configuring the sound-box 1965–1972*, „Popular Music”, Vol. 29, No. 2, p. 181.

¹⁴ See: ibidem; A.F. Moore, op. cit.

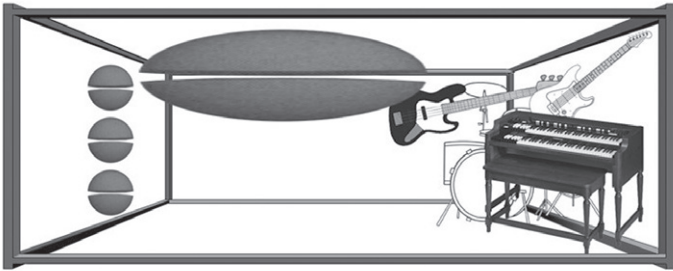


Fig. 9. Sound-box of Pugno Chiusi (I Ribelli 1967)

sources). But were the steps to get to it the same all around the world? In Latin countries, like Italy of course, the voice was treated very differently, for instance¹⁵. In my classroom, at the University of Torino, we have one speaker, and we listen to our examples in mono (just the left channel): when I explained to my students what ‘mono’ and ‘stereo’ meant, I played *Pugno Chiusi*, represented in fig. 9. Everyone laughed, because being the cluster of instruments on the right channel, they were all cut out of the mix, and they could just hear a very predominant voice and the backing vocal (very up-front)¹⁶. It would not have happened with any Beatles tune from that very year, because they never used it. So, different vocal and instrumental traditions from around the world led to different strategies of stereo mix, but comparisons among them, as already stated, are yet to be done.

MUSICAL SYNECDOCHE

The perception of space in a record is also a semiotic issue. Analysis and semiotics can help us understand cultural similarities and differences on a deep level. A style flag is:

¹⁵ The mix with the voice up-front is sometimes called ‘Latin mix’.

¹⁶ It has to be noted that the study of the sound-box can be applied to any stereophonic recorded music. As far as I know, there are not studies on this field regarding the aural staging of euroclassical music or jazz. But were piano concertos mixed in the early 1960s as in the late 2000s? And what about jazz quartets?

As its label suggests, this [...] sign type uses particular sounds to identify a particular musical style and often, by connotative extension, the cultural genre to which that musical style belongs¹⁷.

while a musical synecdoche is:

a set of musical structures imported into a musical 'home' style that refer to another [...] musical style by citing one or more elements supposed to be typical of that 'other' style when heard in the context of the 'home' style. By including part of the 'other' style, the imported sounds allude not only to that other style in its entirety but also to the complete genre of which that other musical style is but a part¹⁸.

Now, let us focus to what a synecdoche means *by connotation*. To Western audiences, for example, classical Indian music from the North of the country does not simply sound 'Indian' (that would be the denotative level): since the Beatles and hippie bands, we are used to associate by connotation that music to 'hippie spirituality,' especially if it is placed into a rock 'context', as a genre synecdoche – as ironically represented by George Harrison at the end of his video for the 1987 single *When We Was Fab* (fig. 10).

Harrison used Indian 'soundscapes' exactly to represent the spiritual world against its material counterpart at least in two other songs, *Living in the Material World* (1973) and *Brainwashed* (2002), in which the bridges of the songs radically changed the aural environment – from rock to 'Indian classical'. And with sound, the lyrics changed: the choruses of *Living in the Material World* deal with what the title is about, but the bridges begin with the lyrics „From the spiritual skies...”, while in *Brainwashed*, in a list of how the modern and material world brainwashes us, the bridges deal with soul and God. And the volume notably decreases, But Western listeners do not know what it means to an Indian audience: would it sound just 'classical'? Or what else? And there are many examples even in Europe.

That is because a musical message – in that case, the synecdoche and its denotative and connotative levels – can work only in presence of a store of signs that has to be shared by both the transmitter and the receiver; when it is not, we are in presence of a codal incompetence, that can lead listeners

¹⁷ P. Tagg, op. cit., p. 522.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 524.



Fig. 10. George Harrison before disappearing at the end of the video of *When We Was Fab* (1987), while a generic 'Indian' atmosphere is set by a tambura and a sitar

to a whole new way of interpreting a message. And the examples could be many, many more.

A serious approach to music analysis should aim to do that: to understand music as a medium, and as a message. Hopefully, more scholars will learn from past and present mistakes (of analysts and haters of analysis) and understand that extramusical and paramusical elements are relevant and must be studied in detail, but they wouldn't be there if it wasn't for the music in the first place, so even musical aspects of music are important.

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Queen, 1991: *Greatest Hits vol. II* – with *I Want It All*.

Popular Music Analysis and Semiotics: Applications and Perspectives

The aim of this paper is to introduce just a few of the characteristics of popular music analysis that can assist further development of the discipline even for non-musicologists. After an introduction on why music analysis and popular music analysis – considering music as ‘humanly organized sound’ – are not popular in popular music studies and why contemporary popular music scholars tend to concentrate more on paramusical and extramusical issues, this presentation will concentrate on: song structures – or, as Philip Tagg calls it, the *diataxis* – comparing the structures most used by the Beatles; the sound of voices; the sound-box and the *aural staging*; the musical synecdoche. The final aim of this paper is to state the importance of music in music studies: paramusical and extramusical aspects are essential to understand how music works and communicates, but music is important as well.

Keywords: music analysis, popular music, music semiotics, song analysis, sound-box