Reviews


The ostensible topic of this collection takes as its starting-point the idea of response to Lydia Goehr’s 1992 essay, The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works. In reality, the book is about various forms of intertextuality, in the sense that a circumscribed work can only be known by demarcating it from others which it is not. The book originates in a symposium called to aid the growing dialogue between popular music and formal (art, serious, classical, ‘unpopular’) music, and, of eleven essayists, four overtly (and one more in passing) address our field of popular music.

Richard Middleton’s chapter (‘Work-in-(g) practice: configuration of the popular music intertext’, pp. 59–87) takes many turns, beginning from Bill Laswell’s takes on Miles Davis and Bob Marley, though signifyin(g) and dialogism to a recovery of authorial agency (and not the first thing I have read recently to take this line), by means of which singers and producers have inherited the aura bathing the composer of the formal work. By focusing on the popular music intertext, he argues that ‘work’ is a broadly unhelpful concept, skating over the necessary nuances which lie between music as process and music as product, some of which are recaptured by recalling exactly what a ‘record’ actually does. And yet, the ‘intertext’ is itself problematic, so frequently erasing the identifiable agency from ‘the ethics of musical practice that we badly need’ (p. 87).

Middleton finds it unnecessary to make clear categorical distinctions between classes of intertext – the confusions surrounding Laswell’s work remind us that theory’s clarity is practice’s unreality (pp. 62–71). Serge Lacasse’s discussion of ‘Intertextuality and hypertextuality in recorded popular music’ (pp. 35–58) itself creates as intertext topics from Gérard Genette in order specifically to address recordings motivated by sampling practices. The distinction in his title refers (very loosely) to the difference between quotation (explicit reference) and imitation (implicit reference). He develops a whole series of sub-categories: allusion; parody; travesty; pastiche; copy; cover; translation; and many classes of remix. He summarises these practices in a matrix measuring paradigmatic and syntagmatic against ‘autosonic’ and ‘allosonic’ categories. His chief conclusion is to call for a dual conception of the recording, existing both as ideal (consisting of melodies, rhythms . . .) and actual (a performance consisting of sounds). His is a potentially useful vocabulary but, as with all such attempts to specify terminology in the early life of a discourse, it remains to be seen how pertinent it is. In this respect, there is probably most mileage in his summary matrix.

The collection opens with David Horn’s ‘Some thoughts on the Work in popular music’ (pp. 14–34). Horn argues not for an academic approach to the question,
but from the point of view that in everyday discourse, it is simply a non-question. He discusses nine spheres of reference for the term ‘work’: the ‘piece’; its unique ‘identity’; the ‘achievement’ of it; identification via its ‘author’; its ‘originality’; its aesthetic ‘status’; its ‘aura’; its existence as intellectual ‘property’; and as a ‘blueprint’ for performance. He then focuses on what he regards as the two key phenomena in relevant scholarship, those of signifying and the recording. The first challenges the work concept for reasons we have already seen and, while the second shares many of his nine spheres of reference, it differs crucially because ‘popular music practice involving these issues is generated not by a work-concept but by a different set of precepts arising from the interactive nexus of performer–performance–performed. This nexus is capable of generating debate about the concept of the work – not the other way around’ (p. 34).

Philip Tagg approaches, ultimately, the same question, but from a definitional and etymological angle in ‘The Work: an evaluative charge’ (pp. 153–67). Although he ranges through a variety of cultures in exploration, he is at his best when using Charlie Ford to explain the rise of instrumental music, so inextricably bound up with the work-concept, as a response to social need in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Germany. This led to a concentration on notation and, as far as close reading was concerned, on what was susceptible to notation, at the expense of the performance. For Tagg, the result has been the petrification of concert music, and of its performance, such that the inapplicability of the work-concept to popular music is to be welcomed. The problematic outcome of this is our current terminological inexactitude, in that not only are prescriptive definitions too prone to institutionalisation, but no real consensual practices have yet emerged. And yet, surely this very inexactitude helps us maintain the balance between our existences as both fans and scholars. Any consensual practice must originate from its users. I, for one, am willing to accept the resultant unwieldy prose (song or instrumental number or piece of music . . .) as necessary.

Catherine Moore’s essay, ‘Works and recordings: the impact of commercialism and digitalisation’ (pp. 88–109) raises the general question of regarding the recorded performance as a unique work, no matter what the genre. Her focus is on technological developments, from the active listening these enable right through to the practice of home remixing, while the fetishisation of historical recreation this enables goes unremarked. I can make no sense at all of her conclusion, that ‘standards of artistic worth are meaningful only if non-negotiable’ (p. 109) (the essay is far less concerned with issues of conceptualisation than those already referred to) and get equally lost in the detail of the book’s most polemical essays, Reinhard Strohm’s attack on Goehr’s original thesis, and her own rejoinder. That debate seems to me to boil down to Strohm’s delineation of an established work-concept existing prior to 1800 and Goehr’s contention that it was only at that juncture that such a concept began to make a difference. The book also contains essays concerning nineteenth-century piano virtuosity (Jim Samson), the concepts and practices of Busoni (John Williamson), borrowings of Schubert (James Wishart) and composer-centredness (Michael Talbot). It does not contain sufficient reference to other disciplines – more’s the pity – especially that of contemporary performance studies (I have dance and physical theatre in mind) where, despite the clear presence of both avant-garde and popular cultures, the work-concept is alive, well, and undertaking a good deal of work.
Although the contributors do make reference one to another, the symposium’s aim of reaching ‘a clearer understanding of both the similarities and the contrasts that exist between the various musical traditions’ (p. 1) has not been satisfactorily achieved by its record, this book.

Allan Moore

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The performance of rituals, dances and music in non-Western societies frequently involves the non-textual articulation of issues salient in cultural studies – race, gender, class, ethnicity. Anthropology and ethnomusicology have both successfully carried out research on social groups engaged in rituals emanating from oral traditions, without texts as such. However, an interdisciplinary approach, inter-mingling both anthropological methodologies and the ethnomusicological gaze, seems to generate the most fruitful analyses. A significant development in this arena is the movement beyond the view that conceived such performative expressions as the enactment or reflection of fixed systems of meaning. A great deal of current research is re-evaluating cultural performances as the sites for negotiating and re-negotiating cultural identities and social life.

Mendoza’s book undertakes the challenge of analysing Peruvian Andean dance performances without presupposing a core principle underlying them. The author’s project involves the analysis of public ritual performance and identity construction from an interdisciplinary perspective. Her findings stem from the combination of her anthropological goals, ethnomusicological cultural pragmatism, and the political and sociological input of Foucault and Bourdieu. The subtitle of the book might suggest that its content entails the study of different ethnic groups from the vast geographical area of the Peruvian Andes. However, the author specifies the scope of her research at the beginning of the book, as concentrating on the study of two comparsas, the Majenños and the Qollas of the Cuzco region. Comparsas are ritual dance associations, which play a significant role in shaping cultural identity during public celebrations, and the author discusses the regional, national and trans-national implications of their performance in the fiesta of San Jerónimo, the patron saint of the town of the same name, located on the outskirts of Cuzco.

Mendoza focuses on the reconstruction of Peruvian colonial ethnic/racial categories of social distinction in post-colonial contexts. Since the 1920s, an intriguing process has incorporated the music, dance and ritual practices of Cuzco into the cultural domain known as ‘folklore’. The author examines the characteristics of this process, and the trans-national factors determining the switch of Andean symbolic practices into ‘folkloric’ performances. In her opinion, ritual dance performance is the powerful means by which sectors of Cuzco society reshape their ethnic/racial and class identities to achieve and mark their new status, one they emphatically recognise under the title of ‘folklore’.

Such an apparently decisive choice of collective identity obscures the undercurrents of ideological struggle in the region. As part of the redefinition of ethnic/
racial and class relations in the Cuzco area, the people of San Jerónimo began to discard elements of rural identity, and to incorporate themselves into the urban world. According to the author, this meant ‘de-Indianising’ themselves, and becoming more mestizo and more ‘folkloric’, thus acquiring more power in local society. Mendoza conceptualises hegenomic impulses as determining drives of identity construction.

Following definitions of contemporary scholars of performance who have been influenced by the works of Michael Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, I take power to be a quality inherent in all social relationships, ‘including those enabling and created through performance’ . . . (p. 12)

The issues Mendoza analyses are not dance, dancing and ritual per se, but those performances insofar as they play a key role in redefining the ambiguities and potentialities of the townspeople’s identity. She believes that whereas generational distinctions and identities of the comparsa members are constantly redefined through ritual performance, an ancestral Andean dualism still nurtures that ideological process. Central dichotomies such as rural/urban, white/Indian, modern/genuine, highland/coastal, centre/periphery, decent/mischievous, and so on, are enacted in dance performances. Such a complex process of ideological negotiation creates relevant local categories manifested during the fiesta, where the two comparsas, the Mayos and the Qollas, engage in competitive dance and display (an Andean principle, highly valued since Inca times, and performed in the ritual confrontations between Hanan (Upper) Cuzco and Hurin (Lower) Cuzco, as they represented different kinship groups). The opposition set up between Mayos and Qollas is evidenced in the ‘elegance, decency, and modernity’, represented by the Mayos, and the ‘indigenousness, autochthony, and genuineness’ portrayed by the Qollas. These enactments are a privileged domain where regional, national and world concerns come into negotiation, revealing the ambiguities and unrealised potentialities of the participants’ everyday lives.

Ethnomusicologists may wish to complement Mendoza’s study with analysis of musical transcription, and semioticians could examine the iconicity and symbolism of the fiesta. In fact, Mendoza’s book opens up various avenues for future research. But the overall content of the book successfully fulfils the author’s aims.

With an accompanying compact disc, and a seventy-seven minute VHS-format video, Shaping Society Through Dance is a valuable contribution for students and researchers dealing with the construction of identity through non-textual utterances. Anthropologists, ethnomusicologists and cultural studies scholars alike will welcome Mendoza’s book.

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The flurry of obituaries, appreciations and other pieces of commentary and analysis in the French and British press which followed the death of the veteran French singer Charles Trenet in early 2001 proved to any doubters how much interest has developed in popular music and its iconic figures over the past few years. Trenet was long one of
the most loved and most controversial of France’s singer-songwriters, and his death, although arguably marking the breaking of a link going back to the pre-Second World War traditions of chanson, occurred while chanson and other newer genres of contemporary French popular music such as rap and hip-hop remain vibrant expressions of French culture. Chanson: the French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day provides an opportune, informative and enlightening analysis of what chanson is and how its most significant musical protagonists interpreted it and advanced its development throughout the twentieth century.

Peter Hawkins has long been a leading British expert on French popular music. As he points out himself in his introductory justifications of why a proper understanding of chanson is of such importance, while studying in France in the 1960s, he was struck by the expressivity and variety of this particularly French musical genre and was moved to investigate its various forms. Since then he has innovated by teaching about chanson to the fortunate undergraduate students at the University of Bristol and has published a number of analyses of French singer-songwriting, notably ‘How do you write about chanson?’ (in French Cultural Studies, IV, 1993, pp. 69–79).

As a practical source of reference and information, the book furnishes highly useful bibliographies, discographies and details of video recordings for each of the singer-songwriters whose work is presented and analysed, covering the early precursors of chanson in the earlier years of the twentieth century, such as Bruant, Georgius, Mireille, Yvette Guilbert and Piaf, as well as the artists whose studies form the main bulk of the work: Charles Trenet; Charles Aznavour; Léo Ferré; Georges Brassens; Jacques Brel; Barbara; Serge Gainsbourg; Bernard Lavilliers; Renaud; Alain Souchon and Laurent Voulzy; Michel Jonasz; and MC Solaar.

In terms of the academic study of popular music, the most interesting chapters are perhaps those in which Hawkins sets out some ground-rules for approaches to chanson: ‘What is chanson?’; ‘How do you write about chanson?’; ‘What is not chanson: some fine distinctions’; The gender of the genre’; ‘The psycho-anthropology of everyday chanson’ and ‘the Frenchness of chanson’. While apparently a simple concept, chanson is actually a complex genre: ‘Chanson is not just a popular variety of poetry, not just a commercial product of the mass media interest, not just a reflection of popular taste nor even a variety of folk song’. Hawkins argues that chanson should be analysed as ‘a variety of theatre, with the emphasis very much on variety’, ‘a medium of live performance, where the interaction with the audience can be determining’, and as an ‘aspect of the mass media in which the technical progress of electronic means has been decisive’.

The main bulk of the work is made up by short chapters which assess each of the singer-songwriters listed above, explaining the style and musical history of the artists and locating their contribution to chanson either in terms of music, lyrics, performance, personality or life-style. As the author expresses it, this approach aims to show how each artist makes a ‘distinctive contribution to the development of the chanson genre’ and also how each singer-songwriter (to differing extents, of course) ‘situates his productions in relation to the cultural norms of the period in question’, and in the case of the more ‘radical’ artists such as Léo Ferré ‘showing how he challenges them and at the same time opens up new spaces for chanson as a serious form of expression’. The profiles which result from these studies make interesting and intriguing reading and there is much discussion of the meaning and significance of selected lyrics (of which generally appropriate translations are provided).
For anyone with little, or only a nodding acquaintance with *chanson*, these chapters are an admirable source of essential information on what these singer-songwriters represent to the French in terms of cultural and social perceptions of them as musicians and public figures. And for more informed readers, there is also much of additional interest, as Hawkins ties together the threads of music, lyrics, recording and performance which make the overall significance of the artists.

All in all, this is an invaluable addition to the shelves of anyone interested in French culture, music and society, and provides a key starting point for further investigations of the ways in which *chanson* will develop under the constraints of increasing cultural pressure from the US and continued globalisation. However, as the author concludes in the chapter, ‘How do you write about *chanson*?’, for him, ‘At the risk of stating the obvious, the study of *chanson* belongs with the Humanities’. Such an approach, successful as it is here in presenting sensitive and informative analyses of the careers, cultural significance and lyrics of France’s most famous singer-songwriters of the last century does, obviously, leave room for a more political and economic study of the place of *chanson* in the music industry and its role as an instrument of France’s cultural and linguistic defensiveness.

Hugh Dauncey


What have nineteenth-century ideologue Matthew Arnold and contemporary singer-songwriter Enya got in common? The answer is . . . difficult to express, ineffable, enigmatic, impervious to rational engagement – in a word: Celticism. Not that Arnold was a Celt; he was an Englishman concerned to co-opt Britain’s Celtic margins into a peaceful political arrangement with the archipelago’s dominant power. He did this by flattering the Scots, Welsh and Irish, telling them that they were lovely people possessed of qualities without which the British imperial project could not advance. The Celtic qualities identified by Arnold – wistfulness, melancholy, sentimentality, passion – would help to humanise what he perceived to be the Anglo-Saxon’s characteristic gifts for worldliness and pragmatism. Basically, in Arnold’s vision, the Celts were ideally suited to entertain the English after a hard day at the empire.

A century or so later, not much has changed. Despite energetic resistance during the Irish revolutionary period, the discourse of Celticism survived and re-emerged in some rather odd places throughout the twentieth century. One of the most unexpected of such places must be the current vogue for ‘Celtic Music’, the ostensible subject of June Skinner Sawyers’ study. The author evinces a wide knowledge of ‘Celtic’ matters, the result of a lifetime’s immersion in the field. However, *The Complete Guide to Celtic Music* in no sense offers a critique of what many see as a predominantly media phenomenon; rather, the text does what it says on the packet, ‘guiding’ the reader through a number of historical and geographical aspects of contemporary ‘Celtic’ music. It also provides some useful resources (including recordings, web sites, schools, labels and a bibliography) for those interested in learning more about the subject. If you really want a theory that encompasses everything from the uilleann pipes to U2, from Galicia to the Grand Old Opry, this may be the book for you.
It's not the book for me, however. Problems emerge from the opening chapter in which Skinner Sawyers addresses the question ‘What is Celtic Music?’ This latter phenomenon she attempts to define initially in quasi-scholarly terms, quoting linguistic, geographical and historical sources to establish a link between those disparate parts of Western Europe washed by the Atlantic. However, the ‘essence’ of the music remains ultimately recondite; thus, the opening pages introduce a rhetoric that pervades the entire volume:

When all the techniques are checked off, the element that the music of the Celtic lands most commonly shares is something a lot more intangible and certainly less quantifiable – a feeling or quality that evokes emotions of sadness or joy, sorrow or delight. All share, for want of a better word, a Celtic spirit, a unique bond with one another that transcends time, distance, and political units. (p. 5, emphasis added)

Some academics go through a whole career without ever finding a passage so ripe for deconstruction. For Skinner Sawyers, this ‘something’ (wonderful mystificatory term) animates the culture not only of the disparate ‘Celtic’ nations of Europe, but also of the Celtic diaspora, whether it surfaces in Nova Scotia, Chicago or Sydney. The notion that there is a trans-historical ‘feeling’, ‘quality’, ‘spark’ or ‘spirit’ infusing an arbitrarily defined body of music would not pass muster in a first-year media seminar. Here it underpins an entire world-view.

Of course, Skinner Sawyers is not entirely to blame for this recourse to ‘something’. Many of the artists whom she evokes have at one time or another bought into the ‘Celtic soul’ thing, as is evidenced in a recent *Time* article on the Celtic craze, in which Enya refers to her music’s ‘melancholy’, Mary Black discusses the ‘passion’ of Irish culture, and Christy Moore accounts for the success of Irish artists by pointing to the ‘very interesting and colorful way’ in which they use the English language.

‘Essence’ segues irresistibly into the volume’s other discursive touchstone: authenticity. This is a concept with an extremely troubled career in archipelagic history, responsible – when harnessed to one or another ideological agenda – for all manner of outrageous prescriptions and dangerous proscriptions. Like so much cultural commentary, *The Complete Guide to Celtic Music* is in fact organised around a central opposition between the authentic and the inauthentic. The author, with her undoubted knowledge of the archive, is self-elected to differentiate between these categories. Time and again, artists, performances and individual musical texts are celebrated or condemned in the name of an ‘authenticity’ which, like the ‘spirit’ which animates it, is ultimately unlocatable. Recourse to such argumentation bespeaks an arrogance borne of the elitism which has come to inform the traditional music revival, a revival built on popular success but which, with its tendencies towards protocol and hierarchy, came in time to aspire to art status.

Of course, the so-called ‘Celtic music’ scene is not the first to adopt such a tendentious aesthetic. ‘Keep it real’ was the vainglorious war-cry of jazz, rock, punk and hip hop in their day. All those genres had to learn the lesson that popular music invariably emerges from a complete matrix of business interests, creative energy and audience engagement; over-investment in the latter two categories in the name of some putative ‘real’, ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ moment located outside the former invariably leads to hopeless attempts to sort out the worthy from the unworthy. These efforts always end in tears, and for two reasons: firstly because in the realm of popular culture the *idea* of the authentic can only emerge, circulate
and be consumed in strategic alliance with that which is invariably condemned as inauthentic – which is to say, in alliance with capitalist economic practices; and secondly, because the authentic per se has no existence in reality – it is the site of something that cannot be located, the name for something that never happened.

With its touching faith in the persistence of an all-informing ‘spirit’ and its presumption of an ability to identify that spirit whenever and wherever it manifests itself, *The Complete Guide to Celtic Music* attempts to establish a range of diverse musical tendencies as a discrete cultural tradition. If there is a ‘spirit’ in this book, however, it belongs to Matthew Arnold, and it is about time that particular ghost was laid to rest.

Gerry Smyth

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