

Book Review: Ken Stephenson, *What to Listen for in Rock: A Stylistic Analysis* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002).

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In the psychology of language one can assume that, barring a warning to the contrary, data reflect subjects who are native or fully fluent speakers of the language in question. A study of German parsing, for instance, ought to be conducted with fluent German speakers, or a study of Vietnamese semantics should be based on the reactions of those who fully comprehend Vietnamese. In the psychology of music, by contrast, the whole concept of fluency is much less clear and often addressed only indirectly. We tend to use weak measures of expertise like “more than five years of music lessons” as a proxy for fluency. Ordinary people do not “speak” music, and thus we may wrongly attribute to them a fluency in the comprehension of a given music style that they do not, in fact, possess. If we conduct a study that plays Mozart to listeners whose native musical language is Hip-Hop, are we then measuring in their responses the same sort of incomprehension as a study of language that would play German to the Vietnamese, or Vietnamese to the Germans?

The conceit that music is a “universal language”—a by-product of Western hubris and the false but seductive assumption that other people hear music in the same way as you or I—fails even simple tests. The mapping of “happy” and “sad”

onto the major and minor modes, for example, does not apply in many ethnic musical traditions, it did not apply consistently in Europe before the eighteenth century, and it may not apply today in some genres of popular music. Many researchers in the psychology of music have been troubled by the facile equation of the degree of musical comprehension with the number of years of music lessons. By that measure, an elderly fan of symphonic music who had never taken lessons but listened to 8 hours of classical radio daily for 50 years would be a classical-music “novice” whereas a 12-year-old student with 5 years of piano lessons and a passion for the music of Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera would be a classical-music “expert.” Given that a high proportion of studies in music cognition are conducted by using college students as experimental subjects, should we not play for them the kind of music in which they are fluent listeners? That music would probably not be Mozart and might very well be Rock. Thus it was with considerable interest and anticipation that I opened a book titled *What to Listen for in Rock*.

The small genre of books titled *What to Listen for in...* began with Aaron Copland’s *What to Listen for in Music* (1939), and has had a resurgence in the 1990s with *What to Listen for in Mozart* (Harris, 1992), *What to Listen for in Jazz* (Kernfeld, 1995), *What to Listen for in Beethoven* (Harris, 1996), and *What to Listen for in the World* (Adolph, 1996). I fondly remember a paperback edition of the Copland that I kept in the glove compartment of a grain truck. As a teenage farm worker one hot August in the 1960s, I drove that truck to unload harvesting machines across the oat and barley fields of Minnesota. After I delivered each truckload, and as I waited for the next machine to fill its hopper, I would open the compartment, blow the chaff off the book, and read a few more pages. The truck radio played Rock, Country, Motown, and Sinatra while Copland expounded on Beethoven, Wagner, Schumann, and Stravinsky. I finished the harvest and the Copland at about the same time. The seven chapters of *What to Listen for in Rock*—“Phrase Rhythm,” “Key and Mode,”

“Cadences,” “Chord Type and Harmonic Palette,” “Harmonic Succession,” “Form,” and “Analyzing a Hit”—name, with the exception of “Analyzing a Hit,” the same topics addressed by nineteenth-century pedagogues at conservative conservatories and echoed by Copland in the 1930s. I will return later to the question of whether an interpretive framework devised for the art of Beethoven is a good fit for the art of Little Richard, Led Zeppelin, or The Clash.

The chapter on phrase rhythm first describes the types of phrases encountered in folk songs and simple classical melodies. The author notes how, in those more traditional styles, a cadence commonly occurs in the fourth measure of a four-measure phrase. The phrases of the early twentieth-century song “Daisy” are typical. For example, its first phrase—(1) “Daisy,” (2) “Daisy,” (3) “give me your answer,” (4) “do”—cadences on the word “do” in the fourth measure. For a Rock norm, by contrast, the author describes a “2 + 2 model” of measures where the vocalist’s cadence falls on the third downbeat and where instruments fill the second pair of measures. The Blues are cited as an important source for this construction, and the Blues in turn inherited the call-and-response pattern from various folk and African traditions. In the “extensions-overlap model,” the two-measure norm is stretched out until a cadence occurs on a fifth downbeat, which coincides or overlaps with the beginning of a new phrase. In the “first-downbeat model,” “a short vocal phrase ends on the first downbeat of a hypermeasure,” meaning in this case the first measure of a four-measure phrase. An “elision model” allows for a cadence on a fourth downbeat to begin at the same time a new two-measure phrase. Similarly, the “1 + 1 model” has two one-measure components, and two such 1 + 1 units in series would result in a cadence on the fourth downbeat (as well as on the second downbeat). The author points out how, in Rock, many cadences are harmonically open and lead on to a stable tonic chord at the beginning of the next phrase, thus helping to propel the music forward.

“Key and Mode” contains a brief review of work by Krumhansl (1990) and by Longuet-Higgins and Steedman (1971) on the determination of key. The author describes this literature as coming from “computer scientists and psychologists with a secondary interest in music” (p. 30). Having only a “secondary” interest in music, perhaps these scholars will not then be disappointed to learn their methods “do not model correctly the process they are meant to explain. Human beings do not, before surmising the key of a music passage, wait for the completion of a pitch source or wait for enough notes on which to base a comparison between durations and tonal strengths of pitches” (p. 31). The author refers to David Butler’s (1989) critique of Krumhansl to argue, quoting Butler, that “*any tone will suffice as a perceptual anchor—a tonal center—until a better candidate defeats it*” (p. 31; Stephenson’s italics). Oddly enough, the italicized phrase would serve as a working definition of many implementations of key-finding algorithms based directly on Krumhansl and Schmuckler’s work, including the ones we use here at Northwestern University. The author might be surprised to learn that such algorithms, when given as input a piece of music that begins with a C-major chord, will immediately assign the piece to C major “until a better candidate defeats it.” He reaches firmer ground when he concludes that much remains unknown about the perception of tonality, and that the perception of tonality in Rock is, if anything, a more difficult problem than in Mozart. He offers the following rules of thumb for determining the key of a Rock song: “(1) Identify the root and quality of the first chord and assume that the chord is the tonic harmony. (2) Confirm or question this assumption by noting one or more of the following features: (a) The first harmony initiates phrases persistently, (b) Structural pitches are P4 [a perfect fourth] or P5 [a perfect fifth] apart in the melody, or (c) The last melodic pitch in major sections is the same as the first” (p. 37). Students of the history of music theory will recognize in these rules of thumb strong echoes of Pietro Aaron (1525), who wrote about the problem of determining the

mode of polyphonic compositions in a treatise that, by the way, may be the first to use the word “cognition” in relation to music (*Treatise on the Nature and Cognition of all the Modes of Polyphonic Music*). Then, as now, rules of thumb had to serve in lieu of a comprehensive theory.

“The conclusions to be drawn about cadences are decidedly mixed..., they are by no means a given in Rock” (p. 67). With those words the author sums up his discussions of how coordinated changes in melody, rhythm, and harmony may or may not signal moments of closure or articulation in Rock songs. In the hierarchy of cadences heard in classical music, for instance, the final cadence is likely the strongest and most convincing. Recordings of Rock songs, by contrast, often have no final cadence because the music fades away instead of conclusively ending. In Rock repertoires that rely on a cyclical, ongoing “groove,” strong cadences may provide unwanted interruptions.

Chapters 4 and 5, “Chord Type and Harmonic Palette” and “Harmonic Succession,” form a unit. Their central thesis is that Rock has a harmonic syntax that is both different from classical music and independently coherent and consistent. Rock shares with classical music the use of triads as the default sonority. In figured bass, the musicians’ shorthand of the eighteenth century, a simple triad was always assumed unless a numerical symbol was added to indicate a deviation from that norm. Likewise in the shorthand for chords used by many Jazz, Rock, and Pop musicians, a bare letter such as “C” indicates a triad on that root, and any special indications (“7,” “sus4,” “add6”) show deviations. It is the succession of chords, the subject of Chapter 5, that Rock is most distinct from classical music. “Whatever successions are not normal in the Common-Practice are now normal and vice versa” (p. 103). In particular, whereas root movements in classical music typically go up a second, down a third, or up a fourth, in Rock the opposite is true (progressions down a second, up a third, or down a fourth). The author recognizes the limitations of this

condensed account: “Rock’s harmonic practice is not easily or usefully summarized in a chart of typical successions. This is true for two principal reasons. First, the common practice is not entirely rejected...[and] second, any chart displaying all the successions frequently used would be complicated beyond usefulness” (p. 108). The author discusses a large number of Rock songs in which various elements of Blues, Folk, Funk, Pop, Metal, Punk, and Broadway traditions meld in different ways. I suspect that approaching Rock harmony in the way a linguist might approach a creole language could be fruitful. Anyone not previously acquainted with the richness of Rock harmony, and its freer syntax, will find this chapter valuable.

The treatment of form in Chapter 6 begins with a general discussion of how changes in musical features can signal a change from one formal unit to another. “In rock, the relevant cues most often appear in the areas of text, instrumentation, rhythm, and harmony. In many cases, the patterns in these areas work together to create a clear form; in many others, changes in one or more areas work against a backdrop of stability in the other areas to create a subtler form. And in yet other cases, lack of alignment in the patterns of change of various areas makes for ambiguity” (p. 122). An attempt later in this chapter to sketch the historical evolution of musical form in popular traditions since the 1850s is not, I would argue, very successful in spite of a number of useful and telling observations about individual songs. The author may pay insufficient attention to the important roles that unwritten, vernacular traditions like Blues, Folk, and Country had on the development of musical forms in Rock, to the significant influence of technology on the modes of transmission (Album Oriented Rock, for instance, was an outgrowth of both long-playing records and the advent of FM radio in the United States), and to changes in consumers’ patterns of music consumption. The chapter “Analyzing a Hit” presents analyses of (1) “Help Me, Rhonda” by the Beach Boys (1965), (2) “Barely Breathing” by Duncan Sheik (1996), (3) “Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?” by Chicago (1969), (4)

“Brain Damage” and “Eclipse” from Pink Floyd (1973), (5) “What a Fool Believes” by the Doobie Brothers (1978), and (6) “The Endless Enigma” by Emerson, Lake, and Palmer (1971). The concepts and principles introduced in the preceding chapters here find application. The author makes clear his knowledge of many popular styles. Indeed, he poses the question “Is the history of rock a crazy quilt of disparate swatches? Does a Rock Music exist in a structural, musical sense, or is it only a list of styles connected by virtue of features of their social context—popularity, commercialism, electronic dissemination, and the like?” (p. 148). The author strongly argues his case that Rock does have unifying trends and features.

For someone already indoctrinated in the *termini technici* of music theory, the book provides a method of translating those concepts into their Rock analogues. Yet describing so many of Rock’s features in terms of how they differ from their classical analogues reminds this reviewer of describing goats as “not sheep.” A goat, of course, is uniquely a goat and not a “short-haired, cantankerous sheep.” I wonder if the machinery of academic music theory serves to isolate a scholar from his or her own musical intuitions. The author is, by all accounts, an experienced and able Rock musician. Yet so little of the visceral effect of Rock music survives the descriptions of “hypermeasures” or “[024579] hexachords” that one questions what insights justified the dissociation. In particular, can one really describe “what to listen for in Rock” without discussing timbre? Is not the massive, distorted sound of the electric guitar almost the sine qua non of Heavy Metal, or the bright, jangling sound of an acoustic 12-string guitar the sonic signature of 60s Folk Rock? If contemporary youth wear their music as a badge of peer-group membership, is that identification really signified by hexachords and hypermeasures? Does the fact that measures, intervals, chords, and other music-theoretical features are captured by standard music notation, while timbre or rhythmic “groove” are not, constrain what can be analyzed in Rock? I am not arguing against abstraction or analysis. Rock provides

abundant opportunities for apt abstractions and trenchant analyses. But I do believe we ought to align our abstractions, to the extent possible, with culturally significant perceptions.

One measure of what constitutes a culturally significant perception could be the importance that a perception plays in how fluent listeners of popular music make meaningful distinctions and categorizations. The timbre, vocal production, and performance nuances of a “Quiet Storm” Soul singer, for example, differ markedly from those of a Hard Rock singer. In terms of one semantic axis, the Soul singer is commonly perceived as “smooth” while the Rock singer is perceived as “rough.” In the context of the stark dichotomies that have sometimes characterized American social history and popular culture, it is probably not an accident that the Soul singer is almost always black and the Rock singer is almost always white. Would they both, if famous, be called Rock stars? I think not. There has been a strong tendency for some white writers about Rock to subsume under the heading of Rock almost every utterance of African-American popular musicians. The editors of the excellent *All-Music Guides* fall into that category ([www.allmusic.com](http://www.allmusic.com)). But is this historically or stylistically justified? And if not, should these important distinctions not be central to a more realistic theoretical treatment of the music? If the author of this book had not chosen to view Rock as a synonym for almost all postwar popular music, it might have been easier to treat the individual features of these distinct musics. Blues, for example, could have been analyzed as an autonomous style that was fundamental to the development of various Rock styles. One could focus, for example, on the question of why Mick Jagger is a Rock star even when he emulated the art of Muddy Waters, who was not a Rock star. Funk is another African-American tradition whose progenitors like James Brown thought of themselves as Soul stars, not Rock stars, and whose later masters like George Clinton would, I believe, have been offended to have been called Rock stars. Yet their innovations in the area of groove-based

musics have been among the most influential in the last third of the twentieth century, affecting every kind of popular music, including Rock. To overlook “groove” while foregrounding “hypermeasure” is, in my opinion, a misapplication of the conceptual framework of nineteenth- and twentieth-century classical music. Beethoven never laid down a Funk groove, and Clinton never penned a sonata. But neither artist need be faulted for doing what they did best, and their respective excellence should be judged on its own terms. The author makes the same case in the introduction to this book, and at many points in the body of the work he notes the difficulty of applying his chosen framework to Rock. But the actual exposition *does* apply that framework. When the Rock critic Greil Marcus (1975) wrote of The Band’s *Basement Tapes* album that “what matters is Rick Danko’s loping bass on ‘Yazoo Street Scandal’; Garth Hudson’s omnipresent merry-go-round organ playing (and never more evocative than it is on ‘Apple Suckling Tree’); the slow, uncoiling menace of ‘This Wheel’s On Fire’; Bob Dylan’s singing, as sly as Jerry Lee Lewis, and as knowing as the old man of the mountains,” he was telling us what a fluent listener heard in the art of those master Rock musicians. There is a large gap between that level of description and what can be accomplished through the current tools of music analysis. So we are left with a provisional attempt at defining “what to listen for in Rock,” one that can fruitfully be sharpened by many of the readers of this journal. Their more than “secondary” interest in music, coupled with their strong interests in perception and cognition, make them particularly well situated to investigate the listener’s perspective on these important types of music.

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