

Tracking Relational Spaces on Record: A Multipart Perspective on the Analysis of Recorded Popular Music

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Abstract

One of the divides between traditional and popular music is the different status of the performance in the two. In the former, it is generally understood as a live event, an extemporaneous composition realized in the here and now, whereas in popular music the recorded performance is an object based on performative materials (the recording), which in turn can influence subsequent live performances. Despite this difference, the concept of multipart music may nevertheless be fruitful in both domains of music studies in approaching both actual and mediatized performances. After a theoretical discussion of issues related to mediation and production processes, including the temporal aspects of collaboration through recording and the spatial dimension constructed by the stereophonic mix, the paper will apply the concept of multipart music to an analysis of the main theme from *Shaft* by Isaac Hayes. Here the perspective provided by this conceptual tool will provide the key to unpacking its meanings and cultural significance, starting from a consideration of its structural details and subsequently revealing the connections between text and context.

The discussion of whether multipart music could offer a reliable theoretical framework for the study and the analysis of recorded popular music becomes constructive when it leads to a different and unified conceptualization of some aspects of a track's structural and aural organization. With respect to traditional music, for which the concept of 'multipart music' was first elaborated, the application of the concept to a different context of music production and reception requires a series of methodological and disciplinary caveats to be introduced, which will be discussed in the second section of the article. In this first part, however, I want briefly to underline why the challenge of using it as part of the theoretical toolbox for popular music analysis could add a new perspective to the consideration of the nexus between structures and the generation of meaning in the reception of recorded tracks. In Macchiarella (2012: 22), multipart music is defined as:

Any musical behavior producing at least two intentional sound sequences, regulated by specific rules for their overlapping, each of which is performed by one single person or several people in unison, who maintain a distinctiveness of their own, within contexts of

strict interaction and interpersonal relationships.

What makes the concept appealing from the point of view of a scholar interested in contemporary mass-mediated cultural production is its positive ambiguity. By including in one and the same definition the structural, performative and relational elements of a musical object, the adjective 'multipart' introduces a view on music-making as a shared practice in which various people are involved in different roles, and where the divides between who sings or plays and who is listening, or between who sets the conditions for the act of music making and who makes the music are blurred, in favor of a holistic approach to a cultural practice in all its complexity. By foregrounding the activities that originate musical utterances and the social interactions involved in making them happen, the concept provides an analytical matrix to understand music as a set of relationships: between the musical elements within a specific song, between the performers, between the musicians and their audience. Focusing on the "expressive behavior based on the intentionally distinct and coordinated participation in the performing act",¹ the field circumscribed

¹ This quote is taken from the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) web page with the presentation of the Study Group on Multipart Music: <http://www.ictmusic.org/group/multipart-music> (9 March 2016).