

#### 4. *Ethno, socio, semio*

This chapter tries to answer one question: if conventional views of musical learning in the West are still going strong despite their irrational premises, what changes in thinking about music occurred during the twentieth century that cleared the path for developing alternatives? These changes or challenges – the ‘lifeboats’ in the final paragraph of Chapter 3 – form part of the epistemological foundations on which the analysis section of this book rests. Challenges of particular relevance in this context have been what, for reasons of brevity this chapter, are labelled ETHNO (as in *ethnomusicology*), SOCIO (as in the *sociology* of music) and SEMIO (as in the *semiotics* or *semiology* of music). These three qualifiers imply that studying music should, unlike conventional music studies in the West which have no such qualifying prefixes, entail considering music as an integral part of human activity rather than as just ‘music as sound’ (ABSOLUTE MUSIC). Put simply, ETHNO relates music, as we defined it (p.15, ff.), to peoples and their culture, SOCIO to the society producing and using the music in question, SEMIO to the meanings and functions, expressed in both musical and other terms, of the humanly organised sounds being studied.

##### *Ethno*

The earliest major challenge to institutionalised wisdom about music in the nineteenth-century West came from what is generally called either *ethnomusicology* or the *anthropology of music*.

There are several plausible explanations for the rise, in Europe and North America around 1900, of these ETHNO approaches. One reason may be that alienated European and North American intellectuals sought alternative cultural values to those of the brutal monetary economy they lived in. Another reason may have been concern for the fate of pre-industrial cultures threatened by urbanisation, a third the search for national musical identity. Whatever factors may have sparked interest in ‘folk’ and ‘other’ musics, one thing is certain at the turn of the previous century, one thing is clear: ethnomusicology would not have flourished without the invention of recorded sound.<sup>1</sup>

Now, although notation, not sound recording, was, during the first half of the twentieth century, the main musical storage medium in the West, acoustic recording, commercially available since around 1890, allowed collectors of non-notated music to store what they sought to document *as it sounded* rather than as scholars heard it or were able to transcribe it. Thanks to the new recording technology, standards of reliability in musical documentation improved: collectors could no longer return from field trips with mere transcriptions of the music they wanted to study. Through repeated listening to a recording of an identical sequence of musical events, they could more easily grasp unfamiliar ways of structuring pitch, timbre and rhythm, taking note of *all* relevant parameters of expression, not just those suited to storage in the European system of notation.

This early development in ethnomusicology is of importance to anyone studying music stored and/or distributed in aural rather than graphic form because focus on musical 'texts' shifts from notation to sound recording. With the early ethnomusicologists, audio recording became the primary medium for musical storage and acted as the basis for transcription. Put another way, the roles of notation and recording were reversed. In European art music, composers and arrangers produced notation acting as the primary medium on which live performance and any subsequent recording were based, whereas the notation of music in other traditions relied on sound recording of a primary live performance for its existence as a text used for purposes of study rather than for (re)performance. Later, after the advent of moving coil microphones and electrical amplification in the 1920s, field recordings by collectors like Peer, Hammond and Lomax were to have an even greater impact:

1. Construction of a national musical identity in the late 19th and early 20th century seems to have been particularly important in European countries outside the dominant Central European musical sphere, e.g. Hungary, the Balkans, Russia, Spain, Scandinavia, Ireland, Scotland and England. Edison invents the cylinder phonograph in 1877; Emil Berliner patents the first flat disc gramophone in 1888; recordings of Native American music start in 1889; Stumpf's trip to Siam dates from 1900, Bartók and Kodály's first collections from 1904, Hornbostel's first expedition from 1905, Sachs & Hornbostel's organology from 1914.

previously non-notated music traditions like hillbilly and the blues could now be stored, reproduced and distributed in quantities that would soon outstrip those of sheet music publishing. By the time of the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* (1967), of course, media primacy is in the recording, live performance becoming at best an attempt to re-enact the recording on stage, often an outright impossibility, while notation has little or no relevance.<sup>2</sup> Given this historical background, there are at least three reasons for stressing the importance of ethnomusicology's challenge to Western institutions of conventional musical learning.

*First:* by using audio recording in their studies, early twentieth-century scholars, researchers, collectors and musicians made 'other' available for interested Westerners to hear, study and appreciate. Through subsequent work by scholars and collectors, more music from more cultures became available on phonogram, this development increasing the Western listener's chances of finding *aesthetic values in a greater variety of musics* and substantially reducing the viability of maintaining a single dominant aesthetic canon for music.

*Second:* due to obvious differences in structure between Central Europe's musical lingua franca and the 'other' musics studied by ethnomusicologists, middle-class Westerners could never take the meanings and functions of 'their' music for granted in the same way as 'we' *thought* we could with our own. 'We' needed explanations as to why 'their' music sounded so different from 'ours'. *Their' music remained incomprehensible to us unless it was related to paramusical phenomena*, that is, unless it was linked to social or cultural activity and organisation other than what we would call 'musical' – to religion, work, the economy, patterns of behaviour and subjectivity etc. If applying notions of the 'absolute' to familiar music in familiar surroundings is, as we already argued (p.51, ff.), a contradiction in terms, applying such notions to unfamiliar music in unfamiliar contexts would be even sillier. So, forced to put the sounds of unfamiliar music into the specific

2. The media primacy of recording in pop music can be traced back at least as far as Phil Spector in the early 1960s (Richard Williams, 1975). See Green (2001) for notation's absence in popular music learning strategies.

social context of 'foreign' culture in order to make any sense of them at all, we had to compare the sounds of our own music with those of people living in other cultures, and the context of their music with our own cultural tradition. Perhaps we would need to ask how 'our' music worked in 'their' context if 'their' music was incomprehensible to us without understanding it in 'their' context; and if we had to ask those sorts of question, maybe we would need to start thinking more seriously about how 'our' music worked in 'our' own context. Whatever the case, understanding anything of the unfamiliar music that ethnomusicologists recorded meant thinking comparatively. It meant reflecting on the givens of our own music, culture and society in order to understand 'theirs'; it entailed thinking in terms of *cultural relativity*. Under such circumstances, musical absolutism was out of the question.

*Third:* as already suggested, attempts at transcribing other musics actualised the limitations of our own system of notation and thereby the limitations of music encodable within that system. This process provided insights into the *relative importance of different parameters of musical expression in different music cultures* and paved the way for a musicology of non-notated musics. Diversity of aesthetic norms for music became reality and musical ethnocentricity, including Eurocentric notions of musical 'superiority', 'absolute music' and 'eternal' or 'universal' values could be challenged. This sense of the *relativity of aesthetic norms* for music was of central importance in the latter formulation of aesthetic values for all forms of music outside the European classical canon.

In short, ethnomusicology refuted the viability of maintaining just one aesthetic canon. It also drew attention to the importance of non-notatable parameters of expression and, of particular relevance to this book, *it obliged any serious scholar of music to deal with questions of function and meaning in a socio-cultural framework.*

### **Socio**

The earliest text devoted explicitly to the sociology of music appeared in 1921.<sup>3</sup> That date coincides roughly with the invention of the moving coil microphone and with the first broadcasting boom. A few years later, patents were taken out on electro-magnetic recording and on op-

tical sound.<sup>4</sup> These new sound-carrying technologies were essential to the development of radio, records and talking film. Mass diffusion of music via these new media highlighted differences in musical habits between social classes within the same nation state because people were now much more frequently exposed to what 'everyone else' – those 'others' again! – listened to. It is also essential to note that the same inter-war years saw momentous social and political upheavals, including the emergence of the Soviet Union, the increasing strength of working-class organisations, general strikes and such disastrous effects of capitalism as the Wall Street Crash, economic depression, rampant inflation and the rise of fascism.

Realisation of this socio-economic-cultural conjuncture and concern about the future of individuals within this new and unstable type of mass society seem to be the main reasons behind the development, not least in the socio-political turmoil of Germany between the two world wars, of a sociology of music dealing with the everyday musical practices of the popular majority (those 'others' again!). Hence, for example, the establishment in 1930 of the Berlin journal *Musik und Gesellschaft*, subtitled 'Working Papers for the Social Care and Politics of Music'. Before disappearing after the Nazi grabbed power in 1933, *Musik und Gesellschaft* had contained articles about, for example, music and youth, amateur musicians, urban music consumers and about music in the workplace.<sup>5</sup> There were, in short, good ethical and political reasons for intellectuals to take a serious look at interactions between culture, class, society and values. Out of these political, social and aesthetic concerns about pre-war popular culture emerge two general trends which exert considerable indirect influence on the understanding of music in the West. One of these SOCIO trends was more empirical, the other more theoretical.

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3. Max Weber's *Die rationellen und soziologischen Grundlagen der Musik*. For a fuller account of this 'socio' section, please see Tagg & Clarida (2003:39-48).

4. For example, (1924) BBC radio license sales rise to two million and Western Electric patent electro-magnetic recording; (1925) first commercial electro-mechanical recordings and standardisation of r.p.m. to 78; (1926) formation of NBC by RCA and first 'talking' film; (1927) 100 million record sales in the USA; (1928) Fox acquire rights on optical sound; (1931) 70% of BBC airtime is music.

The empirical trend in the sociology of music concentrated largely on documenting the musical tastes and habits of different population groups. It can in very general terms be understood as serving both exploitative and democratic purposes. It is exploitative, for example, when the demographic data it produces is used by privately owned commercial media to sell socio-musically defined target groups to advertisers, while its democratic potential lies in the fact that similar demographic data can be used to democratise public policy in the arts and education. Put simply, the democratic potential of empirical sociology not only contributed to a general broadening of the notion of culture, a conceptual cornerstone in what became Cultural Studies; it also fuelled the opinion that publicly funded music institutions were undemocratic. Such critique helped pave the way for the serious study of musics of the popular majority, musics whose producers, mediators and users are so tangibly involved in the complex construction and negotiation of sounds, meanings, values and attitudes in our own society. Under such circumstances it would be absurd to study music as 'just music', illogical to determine any aspect of musical structuration without considering its function or meanings.

Several proponents of the 'more theoretical' SOCIO trend held very different views about the music of the popular majority. The most well-known representative of this trend was Adorno, a figure so frequently referred to by other, mainly anglophone, writers on popular culture that anyone seriously studying music in the mass media is almost ritualistically obliged to mention him. One reason for Adorno's academic notoriety is that, despite the *Musik und Gesellschaft* connection just men-

5. The complete 1930-31 run of *Musik und Gesellschaft* is reprinted in one volume (Kolland, 1978). The authors of two articles ('The Effects of Rhythm in the Fulfilment of Industrialised Factory Work', 'Musical Rhythms in Factory Work' and 'Musical Rhythm as a Means of Increasing the Productivity of Typists') ask if music can humanise an impersonal, mechanical working environment or if it just a tool for increasing production and for numbing the political will of the working class? For information about the connection between *Musik und Gesellschaft* and popular music studies, see Tagg (1998a). 'Mass observation' studies of popular culture were also conducted in the UK during the 1930s by scholars like Q.D. Leavis (thanks to Bruce Johnson for this information about Queenie Leavis, wife of Professor F. R. Leavis of Leavisite fame).

tioned, he is treated as if he were the first music scholar to deal with popular music. The chapter 'On Popular Music' from his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (1962) is Adorno's claim to academic fame in this respect.

Adorno's 'On Popular Music' can best be described as uninformed and elitist. The author seems to have very vague notions about the music, musicians and audience on whom he passes summary judgement.<sup>6</sup> He also presents a hierarchy of listening modes, according to which concentrated listening as you follow events in the score is right and having music on in the background as you do the dishes is wrong.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Adorno's equation of a strong, regular beat and an easily singable tune with the manipulation of the supposedly mindless masses expresses disdain for music's somatic properties, as well as for the working classes which, according to the socialism he professed, would rid society of the capitalism he himself criticised. How can a supposedly intelligent human be so contradictory? According to Paul Beaud (1980), Adorno's deaf ear for popular music can be explained as follows:

'His texts' [on popular music] 'date from his American period when he was on the lookout for fascism everywhere. Anything resembling rhythm he equated with military music. This was the visceral reaction of the exiled, aristocratic Jew during the Hitler period.'

This plausible explanation raises two other problems. One is that popular music in the Third Reich was *not* dominated by military marches but by sentimental ballads (Wicke 1985), a fact substantiating the view that Adorno was out of touch with the musical habits of the populace. The other problem is that Adorno's aversion to music's somatic power is contradictory to the point of anti-intellectualism because it precludes the development of rational models capable of explaining music's relation to the body and emotions. Since, as we shall see next, Adorno exerted considerable indirect influence on 'alternative' studies of music in the second half of the twentieth century, and since no mean amounts of

6. For more on Adorno's problems with 'jazz' and popular music, see Gracyk (1996:149-174); see also Tagg & Clarida (2003:41).

7. This view strongly resembles Wackenroder's metaphysic of 'immersion' (p.54)

music in our contemporary media have such clear emotional or somatic functions, awareness of Adorno's shortcomings is essential. Ignorance of popular music, disdain for the musical habits of the popular classes, visceral aversion to music's corporeal aspects and celebration of its cerebral aspects are hardly the ideal premises on which to base an understanding of Abba, Bob Marley, Céline Dion, death metal, the Dixie Chicks, games music audio, horror film underscores, line dancing, Radiohead, salsa festivals, techno rave, TV themes and so on and so forth.

So, why bother about Adorno at all? 'Because he has been so influential' is the easy answer we have given. That answer begs other questions. If Adorno was himself light years away from forming a viable approach to understanding music in the mass media, why is he so often referred to by scholars with that particular field of interest? That question raises serious epistemological issues which anyone trying to develop a musicology of mass-mediated music would be wise to consider. One explanation is that Adorno's influence on two areas of thought about music has been *indirect* and *paradoxical*.

First, Adorno, a musicologist with some high-art composition credentials, introduced music academics to a vocabulary of social philosophy which, despite its obvious shortcomings,<sup>8</sup> made it just that little bit harder for those academics to bury their heads in wonted formalist sand. Second, and more importantly, Adorno was Herbert Marcuse's mentor and it was Marcuse who popularised the social-critical philosophy of the Frankfurt School among radical U.S. students in the sixties, not least among those who, wittingly or not, contributed to the formulation of the rock canon.<sup>9</sup> It is in this second way that Adorno indirectly

8. For example, what on earth do the following Adornian pejoratives actually mean: *Reiz* (stimulation), *[Wirklichkeits-]Flucht* (escape [from reality]), *Ablenkung* (distraction), *Bekräftigung* (affirmation) and *Nivellierung* (standardisation / homogenisation), not to mention *avant-garde*, *jazz* and *kitsch*? None of these terms are clearly defined or exemplified.
9. Black Panther leader Angela Davis, Yippie party chairman Abbie Hoffman and founding *Rolling Stone* editor Jon Landau were all students of Marcuse at Brandeis University. Carl Belz, one of the first historians of rock, taught at Brandeis at the same time as Marcuse. The rock canon is discussed in Tagg & Clarida (2003:59-88). See also Michelsen et al. (2000: 63, ff.).



contributed to the establishment of influential types of postwar English-language discourse on music. In journalistic or academic guise, this discourse, which was also influenced by traditions of literary criticism and political theory, seems typically to concern itself with a certain set of social and cultural issues — youth, subculture, fashion, the business and the media, etc. — and with alternative aesthetic canons of authenticity in popular music. This aspect of Adorno's indirect influence is paradoxical because the rock canon of authenticity, for example the 'spirited underdog' and the 'body music that ... provokes',<sup>10</sup> contrasts starkly with Adorno's cerebral anti-somatic stance.

Two other explanations will serve to complete the bizarre picture that is Adorno's position in the pantheon of authorities to which scholars of contemporary culture so often seem obliged to refer. One reason is simple: that Adorno is much more widely translated into English than other comparable authorities. This prosaic reply begs the question 'why Adorno and not others?'

The general gist of the second explanation is that many aspects of Adorno's writing align nicely with pre-existing value systems and conventional categories of thought in the humanities. More precisely, Adorno is empiriphobic and undialectic on two fronts, for not only are the voices of music's creators and users conspicuous by their absence in his writings; his work also involves little or no discussion of music as sound. Adorno is in on this second count at an advantage in institutions where the conceptual boundaries between musical and other forms of knowledge are kept tight because no discussion of musical structure means that scholars without musical training can be spared the embarrassment of not knowing what a minor-major-nine chord and other items of muso poïetic jargon actually mean (see p.49). For scholars in other arts or in social science, theorising around music (metacontextual discourse) is simply more accessible than discourse involving reference to the actual sounds of music in the terms of those who produce them (metatextual discourse with its poïetic descriptors). At the same time, Adorno's lack of ethnographic and socio-empirical concretion, com-

10. These expressions derive from Robert Christgau and Jon Landau respectively.

bined with his evident unfamiliarity with the realities of popular culture, are symptomatic of the sort of art criticism or literary theory in which little or no substantiation of value judgements seems to be required. As long as the language is academically abstruse enough and as long as shared aesthetic values are largely confirmed, disciplinary boundaries can be maintained and there need be no disconcerting paradigm shifts. Add to all this the left-wing credibility inherent in Adorno's status as a critical intellectual Jew having fled from the Nazis to the English-speaking West and his popularity as reference point for anglophone academics who see themselves politically left of centre should come as no surprise.<sup>11</sup>

In short, Adorno's value-laden theorising has thrown two major obstacles in the path of those who want to understand how music can carry meaning in contemporary industrial society.

[1] By omitting musical 'texts' from his discussions of music, Adorno reinforces disciplinary boundaries between studies of musical structuration and other important aspects of understanding music.<sup>12</sup>

[2] By excluding empirical concretion, by privileging unsubstantiated value judgements and by his apparent unawareness of his own ignorance about the music of the popular majority, Adorno has reinforced tendencies in arts academe to equate the elegant expression of aesthetic opinion with scholarship.

To summarise: Adorno's main value lies in what his status as much quoted authority tells us about the tradition of knowledge that has kept him in that position. It is *in spite of* him that the SOCIO challenge to the old absolutist aesthetics of music has succeeded. That challenge came mainly from empirical studies of musical life in the industrial West, studies enabling scholars to argue for the democratisation of institu-

11. Ernst Emsheimer, ethnomusicologist, born into another well-to-do Jewish family the same year and in the same part of Frankfurt as Adorno, fled east, not west, from Nazi Germany. Though his influence on popular music studies is as important as and more constructive than Adorno's, his contribution through Jan Ling's work in Göteborg remains largely unknown (see Tagg: 1998a).

12. See "Skills, competences, knowledges" (p. 64, ff.).

tions of musical learning, as well as for the validity of studying musics of the popular majority. SOCIO was also, it should be added, a convenient general-purpose label which for a very long time could be stuck on to studies that discussed music as an integral part of sociocultural activity or which examined musics outside both the European classical canon and the conventional hunting grounds of ethnomusicology.<sup>13</sup>

One final symptom of problems with both SOCIO trends in music studies links back to the absence of musical 'texts' in most work about music in the mass media. Such studies are still overwhelmingly conducted by scholars with a background mainly in the social sciences or cultural studies. It would be unreasonable to demand of those colleagues the expertise associated with the description of musical structures, more reasonable to expect musicologists to have devoted more effort to studying the vast repertoire of musics circulating on an everyday basis via the mass media. With the exception of ethnomusicologists, who until quite recently in general avoided that vast repertoire, very few music scholars examined relationships between that music and the social, economic and cultural configurations in which it plays a central part. As a result of this epistemological gap and thanks to the relative accessibility of the unsubstantiated theorising produced by Adorno, the denial of context associated with Romantic theories of absolute music could be replaced, just as idealistically, with explicit denial of the existence of musical texts. From the musician's perspective, such text denial is of course not so much insulting as absurd.<sup>14</sup> How this problem affects the main point of this book may be easier to understand with the help of Table 1 (p.90).

Table 4-1 shows that SOCIO approaches deal mainly with social aspects of Western music outside the classical tradition and virtually never

13. In November 2007 I discovered I had been labelled *sociologue* by two French musicologists. 'Sociologist', eh? That should cause mirth among my social science friends!
14. For a full discussion of the musical text denial problem, see 'Pomo-musicology, consumerism and the "liberation of the id"' and 'Music: a troublesome appendage to cultural studies' in Tagg & Clarida (2003:66-88).

with music in non-Western societies. ETHNO studies, on the other hand, have traditionally dealt with the musics of non-Western cultures and, as the thick double-ended arrow indicates, with the *interaction* between music as sound and the sociocultural field of which it is part. The table also suggests that conventional European music studies are mainly concerned with the production and description of Western art music texts, less with its social aspects or with interaction between the 'musical' and 'social'. An ethnomusicology of 'other musics in Western society' (the middle two columns on the ETHNO line in Table 4-1) would therefore be extremely useful if we want to understand the meanings and functions of music in the contemporary mass media. Since such studies are still rare,<sup>15</sup> we may have to look elsewhere.

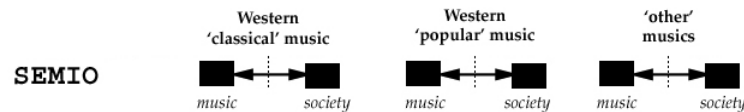
*Table 4-1: Typical topics for ETHNO and SOCIO studies*

Objects of study →	Our own culture				'foreign', 'ethnic', 'exotic', 'other' cultures	
	art music		other music		music	society
General ↓ approach ↓	music	society	music	society		
conventional Euro- pean musicology	■	■ <sup>×</sup>				
ethno	■ ← → ■		■ ← → ■		■ ← → ■	
socio/cult.stud.		■		■		
<p>■ = very likely to be studied    ■ = less likely, though possible, object of study</p> <p>← → = link likely to be studied</p>						

15. One notable exception is Italian ethnomusicologist Serena Facci and her studies of mobile phone ringtones and of aerobics music.

## Semio

The semiotics of music, in the broadest sense of the term, deals with relations between the sounds we call musical and what those sounds signify to those producing and hearing the sounds in specific sociocultural contexts. Defined in this way, SEMIO approaches to music ought logically to throw some light on the interaction between *any* music as text, anywhere or at any time, and the socio-cultural field in which the text exists. In fact, SEMIO studies should ideally produce the following profile in Table 4-1.



*Should* and *ought* are operative words here because the majority of music studies carrying the SEMIO label deal only with certain types of music and/or only with certain aspects of meaning. This very broad generalisation needs some explanation since there is no single semiotic theory of music but rather, as Nattiez (1975:19) has suggested, a range of 'possible semiotic projects'.

SEMIO approaches to studying music first appear around 1960 and initially draw quite heavily on linguistic theory of the time. These early studies were later criticised by semio-musicologists<sup>16</sup> who drew attention to problems caused by transferring concepts associated with the chiefly denotative aspects of verbal language to the explanation of musical signification. Such laudable caution about grafting linguistic concepts of meaning on to music seems nevertheless to have resulted in a reversion to a largely congeneric view of music.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the majority of articles in volumes of semio-musical scholarship published in the 1980s and 1990s show an overwhelming concern with theories of music's internal structuration (syntax). This literature shows much less interest in music's interrelation with other modes of expression and pays

16. For example Imberty (1976b), Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1977), Keiler (1978).

17. Monelle (1992:28-29) provides a useful summary of the problem of metatheorising in music semiotics of the 1970s.

scant attention to music's paratextual connections (semantics). Evidence linking musical structure to musician intentions or listener responses and discussion of these aspects of semiosis to the technology, economy, society and ideology in which that semiosis takes place (pragmatics) is conspicuous by its absence. This observation is based on the perusal of 88 articles published in three learned semio-musical volumes. 59 of those 88 articles (67%) discuss either overriding theoretical systems rather than direct evidence for the validity of those systems, or else they deal with syntax rather than with semantics or pragmatics. In the remaining 33% (29 articles) a few semantic issues are addressed but only three articles (3.4%) discuss pragmatics, each of those three focusing on musicians, none on music's final arbiters of signification – its users.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, syntax fixation and a lack of attention to semantics and pragmatics will not be very useful if we want to understand 'how music communicates what to whom' on an everyday basis in the modern world. Indeed, Eco (1990:256 ff.), emphasising the necessity of integrating syntax, semantics and pragmatics in any study of meaning, provides a very critical opinion of the 'semiotic' tendencies just mentioned.

'To say that pragmatics is one dimension of semiotic study does not mean depriving it [the semiotic study] of an object. Rather, it means that the pragmatic approach concerns the totality of the semiosis... Syntax and semantics, when found in splendid isolation become... "perverse" disciplines.' (Eco 1990:259)

One possible reason for the lack of semantics and pragmatics in so many music-semiotic texts may be the fact that the type of linguistics from which theoretical models were initially derived accorded semiotic primacy to the written word, to denotation and to the arbitrary or conventional sign. Such notions of denotative primacy were understanda-

18. The three volumes are: [1] a special music issue of *Semiotica* (vol.66-1/3, 1987); [2] *Musical Semiotics in Growth* (Tarasti, 1996) and [3] the proceedings of the 5th International Congress on Musical Signification (Stefani *et al.* 1998). We assume here that: (a) *syntax* denotes aspects of signification bearing on the temporal relationship of signifying elements (signs) within a given mode of communication; (b) that *semantics* deals with the relation between such signs and what they stand for, and that (c) *pragmatics* focuses on cultural and social activity relating to the production and interpretation of meaning.

bly considered incompatible with the general nature of musical discourse. However, denotative primacy has been radically challenged by many linguists. Some of them argue that prosody and the social rules of speech (including also timbre, diction, volume, facial expression and gesture) are as intrinsic to language as words, and that they should not be regarded as superfluous paralinguistic add-ons.<sup>19</sup> Other linguists refute denotation's primacy over connotation, and all underline the importance of studying language as social practice (pragmatics).<sup>20</sup> Music semiotics has, it seems, either been slow to assimilate such developments in linguistics or chosen to disregard them. How can such reluctance be explained if incompatibility with linguistic theory is so much less of an issue in 2007 than it was in the 1960s and 1970s?

The syntax fixation of many musicologists rallying under the SEMIO banner is regrettably difficult to understand in any other terms than those discussed in Chapter 3 — the hegemony of musical absolutism in Western seats of musical learning. While ethnomusicologists had to relate musical structure to social practice if they wanted to make any sense of 'foreign' sounds, and while the sociology of music dealt mostly with society and hardly ever with the (socially immanent) phenomenon of music as sound, most music semioticians were attached to institutions of musical learning in which the absolutist view still ruled the roost. Their tendency to draw almost exclusively on European art music for their supply of study objects provides circumstantial evidence for this explanation,<sup>21</sup> not because music in that repertoire relates to nothing outside itself (on the contrary, see p.50-50), but because the notion of 'absolute' music has been applied with particular vigour to music in that tradition. Without exaggerating too grossly, it could be said that the tradition of music semiotics we are referring to is not only 'per-

19. e.g. Atkinson (1984) on the body language of orating politicians, Hirsch (1989) on turn-taking in conversations, Bolinger (1989) on intonation and grammar.

20. See Lakoff & Johnson (1979) on metaphor, Lakoff (1990) on the cultural and experiential basis of linguistic categories, etc. See also Harris (1981), Halliday (1985), Cruise (1988) and Kress (1993).

21. That evidence is easily obtained by perusing major works of music semiotics (e.g. Monelle (1992), Nattiez (1975), Tarasti (1978)), not to mention the 88 learned articles (p.91-92).

verse' in the sense put forward by Eco, but also based on a flawed (absolutist) notion of a limited musical repertoire developed during a limited period of one continent's history by a minority of the population in a limited number of communication situations.

The main problems with the majority of semio-musical writing in the late twentieth century West can be summarised in five simple points.

1. It is hampered by its institutional affiliation with the 'absolute' aesthetics of music.
2. Its objects of study are usually drawn from the limited repertoire of the European art music canon.
3. It exhibits an overwhelming predilection for either syntax or general theorising, much less interest for semantics and virtually none for pragmatics.
4. It concentrates almost exclusively on works whose compositional techniques must be considered as marginal, i.e. as the exception to rather than as the rule of current musical practices, codes and uses.
5. It resorts to notation as the main form of storage on which to base analysis.

The general neglect, by musicologists and semioticians, of Western musics outside the classical canon — 'popular music' — as a field of serious study is of course a matter of cultural politics, but it is also a matter of importance to the development of both musicology and semiotics. The reason is that music circulating in contemporary media cannot be analysed using only the traditional tools of musicology developed in relation to European art music<sup>22</sup> because the former, unlike the latter, is:

1. conceived for mass distribution to large and sometimes heterogeneous groups of listeners;
2. stored and distributed in mainly non-written form;
3. subject, under capitalism, to the laws of 'free' enterprise according to which it should help sell as much as possible of the commodity (e.g. film, TV programme, game, sound recording) to as many as possible.

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22. Music for the audiovisual media, whatever its style, is considered here as part of the 'popular' in an axiomatic triangle consisting of 'art', 'folk' and 'popular' music. For definition of these terms, see Tagg (1979:20-32 or 2000a:29-45).



According to the third point, the majority of music heard via the mass media should elicit some 'attraction at first listening' if the music is to stand a chance of making a sell or, in the case of music and the moving image, of catching audience attention and involvement more efficiently than competing product. It also means that music produced under such conditions will tend to require the use of readily recognisable codes as a basis for the production of (new or old) combinations of musical message. Failure to study this vast corpus of familiar and globally available music means failing to study what the music around us *usually* mediates *as a rule*. We argue that it makes more sense to start by trying to understand what is mediated in our culture's mainstream media before positing general theories of signification based on discussion of subcultural, counter-cultural or other 'alternative' musical codes like avant-garde techno, speed metal, bebop, Boulez, Beethoven's late period or any other repertoire contradicting or complementing rather than belonging to the dominant mainstream of musical practices in our society. Using exceptions to establish rules may be considered standard practice for scholars projecting an image of high-art or high-cred cool but it is not a viable intellectual strategy for constructing a semiotics of music in the everyday life of citizens in the Western world.<sup>23</sup>

The neglect of popular music as an area for semiotic analysis causes other basic problems of method. We have already touched on tendencies of graphocentricism which treat the score as reification of the 'work' or 'text' when in fact the notes represent little more than an incomplete shorthand of musical intentions.<sup>24</sup> Such confusion is less likely in the study of popular music because notation has for some time been superseded as the primary mode of storage and dissemination to the extent that popular music 'texts' are usually either commodified in the form of sound recording carried on film, tape or disc, or stored dig-

23. You might as well claim that general semiotic principles of the English language can be established by analysing ebonics (was 'jive talk'), Cockney or the work of e e cummings or John Donne.

24. Notation as reification of the 'channel' between 'emitter' and 'receiver' (Eco 1976: 33) seems unsatisfactory even for music predating the era of sound recording. For more on the problems of musical notation, see pp. 65-76.

itally for access over the internet. Due to the importance of non-notatable parameters in popular music and to the nature of its storage and distribution as recorded sound, notation cannot function as a reliable representation of the musical texts circulating in the mass media.

Moreover, it is probable that the professional habitat of music semioticians in institutions of conventional music studies which still focus on the European art-music canon tends to encourage a return to the old absolutist aesthetics as the line of least intellectual resistance. Conventional musicology's pre-occupation with long-term thematic and harmonic narrative seems often to preclude discussion of the meaningful elements of sound from which the various themes and sections are constructed and without which no narrative form can logically exist. The spectre of ABSOLUTE MUSIC can even cast its shadow over empirically substantiated studies in which listener responses are restricted to adjectives of general affect and from which connotations of concrete phenomena are excluded, even though combinations of such connotations often constitute musicogenic semantic fields.<sup>25</sup>

This account of the SEMIO phase is rather discouraging: we seem to have ended up where we started (p.79), still dogged by notions of musical absolutism. We have to some extent been describing a music semiotics which is semiotic by name rather than by nature. Put bluntly, if the semiotics of music, as it seems largely to have been applied, were a commercial venture, it might well qualify for indictment under the Trades Description Act.<sup>26</sup>

There are, however, exceptions to the general trends of grand theory and syntax fixation just discussed. A few of these exceptions are explicitly SEMIO, while most of them are semiotic by nature if not by name.

25. See 'Gestural interconversion and connotative precision' (Tagg, 2005). The same problem was addressed 43 years earlier by Francès (1958:278 ff)! Of course, we do not hold that the music 'is' or even 'means' the same thing as the individual connotations reported by respondents.
26. For example, Cook's *A Guide to Music Analysis* (1987) devotes only 28 of its 376 pages (7.5%) to semiotic music analysis. Since less than half of those 28 pages consist of music examples, only 3.7% of the book discusses how musical structures relate to anything apart from themselves.

They have all informed, to varying degrees and in different ways, the type of approach presented in Part 2 of this book and have all challenged, sometimes in the face of considerable opposition, the institutionalised conventions of ABSOLUTE MUSIC. One work deserves special mention in this context: it is Francès' doctoral dissertation *La perception de la musique* (1958), a thoroughly researched and pioneering semio-musical work that has influenced the ideas presented in this book but which is seldom mentioned by those who defer to Adorno or who rally under the semio-musical banner. For reasons of space we can do no more than merely list, in the next footnote, some of the other 'SEMIO exceptions' relevant to the main part of this study.<sup>27</sup> Readers wanting to know more are instead referred to Marconi's *Musica, espressione, emozione* (2001) for a useful and extensive coverage of semiotic approaches to music.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Bridge***

This chapter has dealt with twentieth-century challenges to the grapho-centrism and to the absolutist aesthetics of music in official institutions of education and research in the West. Although some of the tendencies described seem to have done little more than reformulate conventional conceptual differences between musical and other forms of knowledge (the SOCIO avoidance of music as sound, the SEMIO syntax fixation, etc.), the three challenges – ETHNO in particular – have made it much easier to address questions of musical meaning in the everyday life of citizens in the Western world. At the same time, although an absolutist aesthetics of music may still be on the agenda of many learned institutions, it can also be viewed as a mere historical parenthesis: it has after all only

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27. Those studies include, in alphabetical order: Assafiev (1976), Bernstein (1976), Björnberg (1984), Blacking (1976), Boilès (1976), Brackett (1995), Cooke (1959), Davies (1994), Delalande (1993), Feld (1982), Francès (1958/1972), Imberty (1986), Huckvale (1990), Jiránek (1998), Karbušický (1986), Van Leeuwen (1999), Ling (1978), Kivy (1989), Marconi (2001), Martínez (1997), Maróthy (1974, 1987), Mellers (1962, 1973), Middleton (1983, 1990), Nattiez (2000), Rösing (1977, 1978, 1983), Stefani (1976, 1982), Stilwell (1997), Tarasti (1978) and Walser (1993)
28. Marconi's book, which accounts for relevant literature in English, Italian, French and German is highly recommended for anyone who reads Italian.

been 'official policy' in Western institutions for a century and a half. More importantly, everyday musical reality outside the academy has been consistently 'unabsolute'. Musicians have continued to incite dancers to take to the floor and to jump energetically or smooch amorously, while lonely listeners have regularly been moved to tears by sad songs and derived joy or confidence from others. More recently, moviegoers and TV viewers have been scared out of their seats, or they have distinguished between the good and bad guys, or reacted to urgency cues preceding news broadcasts, or registered a new scene as peaceful or threatening, or understood that they are in Spain rather than in Japan or Jamaica, etc., etc., all thanks to a second or two of music carrying the relevant message on each occasion

Even inside the academy, the notion of music as a symbolic system never really died. There were always champions of musical meaning, people like Herman Kretzschmar, who declared 'autonomous instrumental music' to be a 'general danger to the public,'<sup>29</sup> or like Deryck Cooke (1959), or, as already mentioned (p.97), Robert Francès. But there were also organists. Organists?

Yes, church organists have always had to do things like extemporise between the end of their initial voluntary and the arrival of the bride at a wedding service or the coffin at a funeral. On such occasions, organists have to create moods conducive to producing appropriate postures and attitudes for the congregation to adopt. My own organ teacher even encouraged me to word-paint hymns, as the following zoom-in on one microcosm of actual music-making demonstrates.

Number 165 in the old *Methodist Hymn Book* is 'Forty Days and Forty Nights', a popular hymn for Lent, referring to Jesus fasting in the wilderness and sung to the tune *Heinlein* by M Herbst (1654-1681). The words of verse two are:

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29. Kretzschmar, concert music critic in Leipzig in the 1910s, sees Hanslick's notions as 'untenable' (see p.49). He also states: 'instrumental music uninter- ruptedly demands the ability to see ideas behind the signs and forms' [of the music] (quoted by Kneif, 1975:65).

Sunbeams scorching all the day,  
 Chilly dewdrops nightly spread,  
 Prowling beasts about Thy way,  
 Stones Thy pillow, earth Thy bed.

Thanks to my organ teacher,<sup>30</sup> I learnt to apply variations of timbre to each of the four lines just cited. For line one I would, on the Great manual, push down all mixture tabs, fifteenths, etc., flick up all 16-foot and loud 8-foot tabs, and remove my feet from the pedals. These poietically described actions translate into aesthetic terms as follows: I removed the dark, booming low notes and produced a sparkling, sharp, bright, high-pitched, edgy timbre for 'sunbeams scorching all the day'.

For line two's 'chilly dewdrops' I moved from Great to Choir organ, making sure that 4- and 2-foot claribel flutes were in evidence. I would still desist from using the pedal board. This operation produced a smaller, much less sharp, more rounded, cooler, slightly airy but precise and delicate kind of timbre, still without the darkness of bass notes.

For the 'prowling beasts' of line three I lifted my hands up to the full Swell organ with all its reed stops connected, ensuring at the same time that my feet were playing all possible passing notes in the bass line assigned to the 16-foot posaune. Full reeds on the Swell is as close as a church organ gets to guitar distortion: it gives a rich, gravelly, 'dangerous' kind of sound. Together with the low-pitched, rough sounding Posaune —not unlike the fat bass timbre of an Oberheim synth— and the insertion of extra notes to produce a walking bass line, the 'prowling beasts' were appropriately 'musicked', I thought.

In line four I returned to the Great, this time with only 8-foot Diapasons selected, while disabling the 16-foot Posaune pedal tab and suppressing the tendency to go on playing passing notes with my feet. The idea here was to create a medium-volume sound, quite large but devoid of brilliance, delicacy or rough edges —a loudish sort of flat, medium, 'grey', 'matter-of-fact' sound for 'stones thy pillow, earth thy bed'.

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30. Ken Naylor, Leys School, Cambridge (UK), where I was school organist (1961-62). The organ was a three-manual pneumatic Willis sporting tabs, not stops.

This personal anecdote documents a musical reality that flies in the face of ideas propounded by Hegel, Hanslick, Adorno and other musical absolutists. However, understanding, as a musician, that the sounds I produced actually communicated something to someone other than myself, didn't stop at insights about the relationship of timbre to various aspects of touch, movement and space (for example, associated with, but not equal to, phenomena like 'sunbeams scorching', 'chilly dewdrops', 'prowling beasts', 'stones' and 'earth', for example). I also learnt which harmonies made the old ladies in the local Methodist church more sentimental, which bass licks worked better with members of my university's Scottish Country Dance Society, which placement of which mike connected to which amp with which settings made me sound more like Jerry Lee Lewis, which patterns on a Hammond organ made people think our band resembled Deep Purple, which type of arpeggiation made the accordion sound more French, etc., ad infinitum. It is this kind of experience, which I share with countless other musicians, arrangers and composers, that motivated my attempts to critique the dry theme-spotting exercises of syntax-fixated music analysis — the story so far in this book — and to develop ways of examining music as if it had uses beyond its mere self as just sound, i.e. *as if it actually meant something*. The rest of this book takes that sort of empirically proven poietic conviction for granted, as a *sine qua non*.