Divides between sacred, secular, art and popular music

by Tim Harding

Research topic: Divides between (a) sacred and secular and (b) art and popular music in the cultural contexts of the Middle Ages, the Nineteenth Century, and the Twentieth Century.

The divides between sacred and secular music have been relatively clear since the Middle Ages, with the possible exception of African-American gospel music in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. On the other hand, the divides between art and popular music have not been as clear; and have become increasingly difficult to sharply define in terms of musical content and form in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Some examples of 'crossovers' between art music and popular music (in both directions) are given in this essay, together with an alternative method of distinguishing between art music and popular music (and also folk music), based on function rather than form.

Western music of the Later Middle Ages can be clearly divided into sacred and secular by its form and lyrics (if any). Most notated music was intended for the Christian Church; indeed, the very first notated music was plainchant, to be sung as part of Christian worship.[1]

According to Fellerer and Brunner ‘in all Gregorian chants uniform melodic material is found, built upon basic formulas and variations, combined into a close unity of composition both in form and structure’. [2] The Christian Mass was a daily service with a set form of two fixed categories of prayers set to music: the \textit{Proper} (texts that vary according to the day) and the \textit{Ordinary} (texts that remain the same for every Mass). [3] Other sacred music can be clearly distinguished by its lyrics, if not its form. For example, Hildegard of Bingen's \textit{Ordo Vitutum} is a separate morality play with music (that is, not associated with a Mass). The final chorus \textit{In principio omnes} ends with a call to kneel in prayer.[4][4]

Medieval secular music can also be distinguished by its lyrics, if it is a vocal work. Poetic love songs were mainly performed by wandering minstrels, known as \textit{troubadours} in southern France, \textit{trouveres} in northern France; and \textit{Minnesingers} in Germany. [6]

According to Stephen Rose, by the fourteenth century, songs had become increasingly polyphonic and closely associated with poetry. [7]

In the sense of its wide audience appeal, rather than its form, medieval instrumental music could also be described as popular music, as will be discussed later in this essay. Not much of this music was notated; however, one surviving music manuscript is known as \textit{Le manuscrit du roi}, which includes eight dance tunes called 'estampies'. For example, \textit{La quarte estampie royal} is in a fast triple meter that sounds quite different to medieval sacred music. [10][11]

“Initially, their genres were named after poetic forms – the ballade, rondeau, virelai – but by the middle of the fifteenth century, song types such as the \textit{chanson} or \textit{frottola} used a variety of poetic forms.”[8]
The medieval division between sacred and secular music on the basis of their forms and lyrics can be carried through to the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries. According to Fellerer and Brunner, ‘many of the liturgical types developed in the course of history still survive, whereas most secular musical forms developed contemporaneously are no longer a part of musical life’. [12]

A possible exception to this generalization is African-American spirituals or ‘gospel music’, which first appeared during the early Nineteenth Century. [13] Although initially part of sacred worship, Gospel singing later became a key influence on jazz and ‘soul music’, as well as a form of popular music in itself. [14] For instance, the familiar ‘call and response’ pattern of gospel music can be heard in Fletcher Henderson’s recording of King Porter Stomp, as shown in the following notation. [15] [16]

The divides between popular music and art music are less clear. According to Trevor Herbert, ‘popular music’ can have a number of meanings. It can simply mean music that has mass appeal; or it can also mean a type of music that is different from ‘art music’ or that which is colloquially known as ‘classical music’. [17] Herbert identifies a definitional problem in that within classical music, there is a relatively narrow period (1750-1820CE) that is known as ‘the classical period’. He says that many academic writers avoid such problems by using the term ‘Western art music’ instead of classical music. [18]

Nineteenth-Century popular music is thought to have originated in the 1880s, with the mass publication of sheet music of popular songs for voice and piano by music publishers located on ‘Tin Pan Alley’, a single block on 28th Street of Manhattan, between Broadway and 5th Avenue. [19] Tin Pan Alley symbolizes not only a type of music published between 1885 and around 1950, but also a style of production and promotion of popular music. [20] Many of the popular songs published in Tin Pan Alley have since become mainstream jazz standards.

Andrew Ford traces the course of both art music and popular music over the last hundred years or so, linking the changes in these musics to historical events and other societal factors. [21] He focuses on the harmonic development of each music and the influence that each had on the other. Nevertheless, he declines to draw a clear distinction between art music and popular music on the basis of musical structure and content, noting that in the twentieth century, these characteristics were very fluid or constantly changing. [22] For example, I would suggest that the art music of Stravinsky in the early Twentieth Century was initially far more harmonically complex than popular music. Yet in the latter half of the twentieth century, modern large ensemble jazz became almost as complex harmonically; for example, the beginning of Duke Ellington’s Far East Suite. [23]

Gary Giddens’ book Visions of Jazz is a compendium of essays about 60 jazz musicians and singers ranging in genres from ragtime (W.C. Handy) to modern jazz (Joshua Redman). [24] It traces of the transition of jazz from its origins as the traditional folk music of New Orleans, to popular swing music of worldwide appeal in the late 1930s, to the art music that modern jazz has become today. So in that sense, over its 110 year history, jazz has belonged to all three broad musical categories – folk music, popular music and art music.

Giddens also alludes to some ‘crossovers’ between art music and jazz; for example, the author points to swing rhythms in the second half of the Arietta of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 32. [25]

“In a remarkable two minute episode, he switches to a twelve-beat rhythm, implying an unmistakable backbeat in alternating thirty-second and sixty-fourth notes, an augury made all the explicit by a melodic and harmonic content that suggests (for example, the major to diminished harmonic change at III 14) the first phrase of ‘Muskrat Ramble’”. [26]

Another ‘crossover’ example is Maurice Ravel’s ‘Five O’Clock Foxtrot’ from his one act opera L’enfant et les sortileges. [27] This piece sounds like an impression of 1920s popular dance music; and is somewhat reminiscent of the ‘symphonic jazz’ or pseudo-jazz of Paul Whiteman and George Gershwin that Ravel is said to have admired. [28] The ‘symphonic jazz’ genre is typified by George Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue, which is now generally accepted as an art music composition; and is performed by symphony orchestras around the world, despite the earlier disdain of music critics such as Constant Lambert. [29] [30] Yet on the other hand, Gershwin himself described jazz as ‘American folk music’. [31]

Later on in the 1950s, short-lived attempts were made at a more permanent fusion between jazz and art music, such as Gunther Schuller’s ‘Third Stream’ genre. [32]

Using these crossover examples, I have attempted to illustrate that there is no sharp dividing line between popular music and art music on the basis of form and musical content. Another method of distinguishing between these categories of music is required.

Defining popular music as music that is neither art music nor folk music is circular and unhelpful. Defining it as music that appeals to particular
sections of society, such as younger generations, is also problematic.\[33\]

Tagg compares ‘popular’, ‘art’ and ‘folk’ music against a set of criteria related to the production, distribution and storage of the music; and the type of society in which the music occurs – rather than analysing its musical structure and content. Using this method, he is able to distinguish each of the three types of music from the other two, shown by his following Figure 1.\[34\]

Fig. 1 Folk, art and popular music: an axiomatic triangle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTERISTIC</th>
<th>Folk Music</th>
<th>Art Music</th>
<th>Popular Music</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Produced and transmitted by</td>
<td>primarily professionals</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass distribution</td>
<td>usual</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main mode of storage and</td>
<td>oral</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distribution</td>
<td>notation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of society in which the</td>
<td>nomadic</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>category of music mostly occurs</td>
<td>or agrarian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written theory and aesthetics</td>
<td>uncommon</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composer / Author</td>
<td>anonymous</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-anonymous</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tagg’s argument is that-

“popular music cannot be analysed using only the traditional tools of musicology because popular music, unlike art music, is (1) conceived for mass distribution to large and often socio-culturally heterogeneous groups of listeners, (2) stored and distributed in non-written form, (3) only possible in an industrial monetary economy where it becomes a commodity and (4) in capitalist society, subject to the laws of free enterprise, according to which it should ideally sell as much as possible of as little as possible to as many as possible”.\[35\]

This paper was written in 1982 – before the present ‘Information Age’ and the global dissemination of popular music via the Internet, much of which is pirated; so his references to ‘industrial society’ and ‘industrial monetary economy’ are now outdated, in my view. Indeed, Elizabeth Leach has recently suggested updated criteria for popular music, which include dissemination principally via the mass media; and production and uses of the music within other forms of popular culture.\[36\]

In conclusion, I think that some divides between the various broad categories of music can be identified. Firstly, medieval sacred music can be distinguished from secular music on the basis of its forms and lyrics, a method of distinction that has carried through to the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, with the possible exception of African-American gospel music. Secondly, popular music can be distinguished from art music, not so much by its forms and musical content; but by a set of criteria related to the production, distribution, use and storage of the music.

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Scores


Recordings


Journal articles


Books


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[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.


[18] Herbert, Trevor. Music in words : a guide to researching and writing about music, 137.


[20] Ibid.


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[27] Ravel, Maurice. Five O’Clock Foxtrot, Geoffrey Simon, Stephanie Chase, Han De Vries & Philharmonia Orchestra.


[35] Ibid.


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Tag Archives: sacred music. You Can't Sing It for Them (2010). Posted on April 12, 2011 by admin. The musicians who had the skill set to teach that kind of music died.” Through the use of a chalk board and archival drawings and photos, Berryman takes the viewer through the evolution of African-American church music, from African chants to the structured anthems Berryman particularly likes and wants to revive and beyond to the