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RICHARD MIDDLETON. *Studying Popular Music*. Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1990. 328pp. ISBN 0-335-15276-7

*Studying Popular Music* is a comprehensive synthesis of the key theoretical and analytical frameworks in popular music studies. With this carefully structured volume, British musicologist Richard Middleton provides a much needed critical overview of a relatively young but rapidly expanding area of research. The book reads as a dense but sharp discussion which, far from dodging issues, addresses even the most ticklish ones. In this, the author's writing stance is especially noteworthy: while Middleton clearly argues his point of view on an issue, he is not attempting to impose a particular orthodoxy on the reader but is rather encouraging readers to assess critically their own views in light of his own.

In addition to an extensive bibliography which both experienced and new researchers will find useful, this rather lengthy volume provides one of the best, most detailed, and well-informed surveys of the principal concepts and methods used by sociologists, ethnomusicologists, and folklore and communication specialists for the analysis of popular music. The reader should not be misled by this description, however, for *Studying Popular Music* does not provide an encyclopedic description of the field, nor does it make an objective assessment of the issues it considers. It does offer a kind of "guided tour" of popular music studies, but an unambiguously partial one whose underlying rationale is the author's argument in favour of a cultural study of music "which focuses on music but refuses to isolate it" (p. 4). Middleton adopts this position as a means to "remap the terrain"—that is, to set the grounds of a new musicology that would fully take into account musics that have been too often overlooked and, more importantly, to reorganize accordingly "the whole of Western musical history" (p. 122).

The first part of the book deals with theoretical issues. This extremely rigorous analysis begins with the repudiation of absolutist definitions of popular music. As opposed to those who aim to establish this music's true nature once and for all, the author leans towards relativity for his own definition. Middleton argues that in order to grasp popular music's complexity as a full-fledged social phenomenon, while at the same time acknowledging its relative autonomy as a specific cultural form, this music cannot be addressed by itself, but only in relation to the other forms of music that prevail in a given socio-historical context. More precisely, Middleton claims that popular music can be properly viewed only as one of the active tendencies within the "whole musical field," an organized space that is always in movement and that is composed of dominant and subordinate musical formations. This original solution to one of the most debated issues in popular music studies proves to be the cornerstone of Middleton's theoretical agenda, which is centred on his "theory of articulation." Designed to account for the relationship between the musical field and social power structures, it focuses on the processes which concurrently organize music formations as cultural force fields of relations shaped by contradictions and which link them to social formations. As the terminology already suggests, the influence of British cultural studies upon Middleton's work is obvious throughout this first and decisive chapter. The author's position is indeed largely anchored in what has come to be known as the "turn to Gramsci" which was the trademark of the work of prominent scholars such as Tony Bennett and Stuart Hall about ten years ago. The repudiation of class essentialist conceptions that has accompanied this theoretical shift forms a backdrop to Middleton's critique of the views that equate popular music with

“mass culture” or “dominant ideology,” as well as those who see it as the “authentic” cultural voice of subordinate classes. Moreover, the necessity of overcoming the rigidified opposition between text and context that pervades both structuralist and culturalist frameworks informs the author’s attempt to address musical and so-called non-musical components of popular music as two analytically, not “phenomenologically” distinct related sets of attributes whose articulation serves as the guiding principle of both production and reception practices.

The second chapter contains a critique of the “mass culture” framework, and especially of Adorno’s work whose strength lies in its constant emphasis on totality and whose flaws, argues Middleton, “are in the physiognomy of a giant” (p. 35) The most interesting parts of what otherwise remains a well-known argument are Middleton’s critique of Adorno’s views on standardization and repetition and as a corollary, his rehabilitation of listeners as co-producers of popular music and, hence, of listening as a truly musical activity. Following an interesting discussion of music technologies and soundscapes (and their distinct but related impacts on the “music itself”), and modes of production as well as situations of listening, the theoretical analysis reaches its climax as Middleton asserts in concluding his argument that music and its meaning are “generated within a field, not a discrete work; and the non-autonomous aspects of this field leads one to think in terms of a complex system of socio-musical *ecology*.” (p. 95; author’s italics) As this last statement illustrates, Middleton’s brilliant synthesis does more than present already existing concepts; it also introduces new, stimulating, and challenging ideas. His theoretical framework is certainly not flawless, but it does signal paths for addressing popular music as an integral part of complex sets of socio-historical relations, while cleverly avoiding the traps of any reductionist “sociologism.”

This “cultural study of music” is designed to provide an alternative to approaches based on determinism and homology. Middleton aims rightly to challenge these views, but, in this respect, he has not fully succeeded. Despite a convincing critique of the reductionist character of Marxist-influenced determinism and an incisive denunciation of the circularity of “homologist” reasoning, his position remains closely related to these influential models. As Middleton’s critical exploration of the analytical counterparts of his articulation theory — the object of the second part of the book — indicates, the most important limits of his work are not so much of a theoretical as of a methodological nature.

The four methodological chapters that comprise the second part of the book are interesting, but they are more technical and dense than the theoretical ones, and, therefore, far less accessible to non-specialists. Middleton’s formulation of an analytical framework begins with a persuasive critique of traditional musicological approaches to popular music. After a discussion of ethnomusicological, anthropological, and folklorist methods, Middleton undertakes a review of various semiological perspectives with the aim of finding tools for understanding the musical “message.” The final section deals with those analytical strategies designed to account for the ideological components of popular music and to explain them, including those relative to values and pleasures. The scope of the approaches under study is impressive, but the overall coherence of the process is difficult to grasp as the discussion heads in many directions and loses its focus. For instance, it is up to the reader to bridge the gap between the author’s redefinition of the notion of authenticity in terms of appropriation, his revised version of Schenker’s analytical model, and his examination of the implications of aesthetics in its relation to eroticism! Because the links between each of these analytical approaches are not made explicit, the

discussion — which would otherwise exemplify Middleton's concern with a "holistic" view of popular music — has an unfortunately eclectic tone. The operational definition of the theoretically fruitful notion of "musical field" is perhaps the most problematic element of this rather puzzling methodological framework. Not only does it re-introduce the opposition between sounds and contexts it first meant to overcome, but by pushing into the background so-called "extra-musical" components and establishing musical codes and structures as the founding elements of the musical field, it also tends to reproduce the idea of a "musical essence" which is purely contradictory to the author's views and belies the main, if not the sole, purpose of his book.

Despite its limits and lacunas, *Studying Popular Music* is truly an outstanding publication which should soon find its place among the classics of the academic literature on popular music. Given the pertinence of the questions it raises, as well as the profoundness and soundness of the critical analysis it contains, this volume is bound to be the source of many perhaps stormy but surely important debates, both within and outside of the field of popular music studies. I warmly recommend Richard Middleton's excellent volume which I consider an indispensable reference book worth reading more than once.

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