



# Popular Music Practice: Music as Research Introduction to the Special Issue

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## Abstract

This is the editorial introduction for a special issue of IASPM Journal entitled Popular Music Practice: Music as Research. It discusses the origins of this special issue, and the past rarity of popular music practice publications in academic contexts. It examines characteristics of popular music practice research, and that collaboration and relationship are often of more relevance than novelty, or purity of aesthetic. It explores the common themes of the research presented in this publication, addressing the development of the field in the UK and Australia, as well as discussing why audience reception, technology and collaboration are particularly relevant in this field. It finishes by calling for more publications of popular music practice research in the future.

**KEYWORDS:** Popular Music; Practice Based; Practice Led; Research; Production; Composition.

This special issue focuses on popular music focused practice based and led research. It contains a number of submissions in which the research content consists of submitted audio files and the music they contain. In each case the practice content is accompanied by a written submission that contextualizes the research. This publication was inspired by one of the keynote speakers at the IASPM Conference 2011 in Grahamstown, South Africa, Phillip Tagg, who discussed amongst other matters why cultures rather than music have been at the centre of popular music studies since its inception. That presentation was published in *IASPM Journal* (Tagg 2011) and another issue of *IASPM Journal*, entitled Popular Music Studies in the Twenty-First Century (*IASPM Journal* 3(2) 2013) was dedicated to responses to Tagg's ideas. Much of the initial growth of Popular Music Studies was within cultural studies and media studies, where scholars welcomed this study of popular culture. As a result, popular music

studies initially featured a focus on sociological theory, and the study of audiences and reception, the cultures within which popular music exists. At that point, music departments of most traditional universities and music conservatories excluded popular music, and usually focused on art music forms.

While popular music study is permitted in some music departments of universities today, a number of barriers still exist to musical approaches to popular music research. Many university music departments are still populated by a majority of staff whose principal research field is in classical music, for example in the UK or USA; in some countries popular music is mostly excluded from university music study, for example in Italy; music journals may in some cases accept popular music submissions, but are dominated by classical music content; and popular music journals sometimes reject submissions that are focused purely on musical content and do not contain contextual content. Tagg's conclusion was that there is a lack of music within popular music studies (Tagg 2011). He also proposed that alternative formats for popular music research would benefit the field, suggesting that he prefers video presentations to written text. Popular music practice faces difficulties in acceptance, both within popular music studies as well as in the wider context of music research.

The alternative approach to submission called for by Tagg is reflected in this special issue, which allowed only audio submissions. In the field of classical composition, audio and musical submissions are an accepted form of research content; the idea that a score or recording can be research is an accepted form of practice based research. More widely, practice based and practice led approaches are a significant element of a number of fields, including creative writing, education, visual arts (such as painting, sculpture and video art), and performing arts such as drama and dance. Practice based research approaches in the arts have been discussed by for example Smith and Dean (2009). Journals such as *Leonardo* and *Leonardo Music Journal* not just welcome but actively encourage practice based submissions, as do conferences such as the *International Computer Music Conference*, but neither have featured a significant number of popular music publications, and this is a common pattern in a number of similar examples. In the sciences, practice is often at the centre of research, for example in medical or engineering research. In comparison, the IASPM international conference has featured only a very small minority of practice based musical submissions as research presentations, and there are very few examples of such journal papers in previous issues of for example *IASPM Journal*, *Popular Music* or *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. This issue aims to begin to change this history.

Attali (1985, 2001) writes of different periods of music, describing how the writing of scored music on paper was followed by an era focused on music being transmitted as recordings. Frith (1996: 15) similarly describes the development of how music is recorded as a key element in the definition of musical periods, the development of recording technology ushering in a popular mode. Scored musical notation is useful for transmitting content data, in particular as it can be observed outside of a time-based medium, but it is a partial recording of information, it is not possible to record full details of the music, with subtle inflections of interpretation for example often missing. Similarly, written words are useful for the recording of information, but are a partial form of recording of speech, missing for example vocal pitch inflections, and nuances of emotion and gesture that carry significant meaning.

Computers and mobile phones now recognize speech, and for the last century a range of information has been recorded as audio, including speech and music. Data and text can now be readily recorded, interpreted, and analysed in audio

format, the storage of human culture is moving from writing to audio. It is thus a logic development of popular music studies to publish material in audio rather than written form, and it should not be surprising to use music making as a methodology for research into music. There are of course many practice based popular music publications in commercial settings, however this does not counterbalance a lack of such publications in research contexts, any more than popular music biographies are a substitute for written popular music studies research. It is the contention of this publication that audio files containing music are a natural format for popular music studies research, and that in the future the field would benefit from more publications of this kind.

One approach to practice based popular music would have been to present musical content or form that is novel, with the research content consisting of such newness, however this is not the principal focus in this journal special issue. Musical development is enshrined in ideals of musical modernism, in the idea that music needs to be different from what has come before to have value. Popular music is embedded within popular cultural postmodernity; the contribution of popular music is often cultural, and this is reflected in both popular music studies and in the so-called 'new musicology'. Susan McLary (1989), Joseph Kerman (1985), and Rose Rosengard Subotnik (1991, 1996) have all published musicology of this kind, in which the context that surrounds music is regarded as an integral and inseparable part of its nature, as something that frames the music itself, and is a priority for study. Such a contextualized approach is far from universally adopted in music studies, and discussion of absolute music (Chua 1999: 229; Babbitt 1958: 127), that is separate from meaning or context, is common, for example in the work of Scruton (2009: 31).

Newness is a key element of many practice based research publications in the field of contemporary classical music. This is illustrated in Adorno's *Philosophy of New Music* (2006), in which Adorno prefers the conceptual purity of Schoenberg, a valorization of high modernity, while opposing music he regards as reflecting stasis, in which "the music no longer presents itself as being in a process of development" (2006: 50). Stravinsky is criticized for representing an apparatus of society that consumes the individual, an escapist populism that tries to maintain an illusion of communal identity, and in a well-known subsequent publication Adorno develops these ideas into a related criticism 'on' popular music.

A focus on the individual rather than community is discussed by Heelas and Woodhead as having led in contemporary society to the "homeless self" (2001: 53). This breaking of links to past forms and traditions has also led to a homelessness for many avant-garde forms of art, including music, which have failed to engender resonance with communities of listeners, despite 100 years since Schoenberg's first experiments with atonality. Rather than a focus on the individual voice of the composer, on aesthetic differentiation from what has gone before and conceptual purity, popular music creators tend to focus at least to some extent on the way their work impacts on communities of listeners, and on links to musical cultures of the past, rather than separation from them. Popular music aims to contribute to the lives of its listening public, rather than to express the genius of the individual composer. These lines are not clearly drawn, and there are many artists who explore the boundaries between these approaches, or provide contrary examples, but this distinction can be seen in the papers in this special issue, as well as in other publications that exist of this kind. It is not the intention here to critique other forms of music, but instead to frame popular music practice research differently, within its own field (or perhaps habitus), rather than that of other musical forms.

A number of practice based popular music PhDs have explored the creation of knowledge through creating popular music, work often characterized by contextualized practice, and a relationship with music technology and record production. My own PhD (Till 2000) presented a portfolio of compositions of ambient electronica alongside contextual exploration of postmodernity, and all the projects were collaborative; the PhD of Sean Albiez (2013) focused on electronica and hauntology, examining the presence of the past, explored through composition and production; and Nicolas Bougaieff's PhD (2013) included a case study analysis of the work of Richie Hawton, as well as a portfolio of minimal techno compositions. All included research into relationships with other musical or contextual content. These three examples were technologically mediated. Despite the fact that numerous undergraduate popular music degrees feature popular music performance and songwriting, there are very few examples of practice based research publications in these more acoustic fields. This may be because such popular music degrees are often focused in new institutions that have limited research funding and culture (Cloonan and Hulstedt 2013).

The papers published in this special issue provide new examples to expand the previously limited body of research of this type. They are by five researchers from the UK and Australia and this is no geographical accident. In the UK, polytechnics (now often called 'new' universities) were developed in the 1960s with a specific intention of developing a more practice focused approach than that of older universities. Their regulations allowed for the written thesis of a PhD to be supplemented by material in other than written form (Candy 2006). Practice based research PhDs date from at least as early as 1983 in these institutions in the UK, and related developments in Australia led to practice based research developing at a very similar time. Principal research funding bodies in both countries, the Australian Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council both define research in terms of processes rather than outputs, welcoming a range of output forms, and regularly funding practice based research. These research contexts in the UK and Australia go some way to explain why all the submissions in this issue are from those two countries.

All the authors in this collection are also based at new universities of one kind or another, which have a particular focus on practice based activity. Paul Wolinski contributes a paper on algorithmic composition, and is based at the University of Huddersfield in the UK. A former polytechnic that became a University in 1992, Huddersfield's Department of Music and Drama is particularly known for music composition. As well as conducting research into algorithmic composition, Wolinski is a member of post-rock band 65DaysofStatic, who in 2016 scored the computer game *No Man's Sky*. Peter Long is a musician, songwriter and researcher based at Western Sydney University, which was founded in its current form in 1989, integrating elements of trade education. His publication explores the manipulation of time and space, presented through composition of ambient electronica. Toby Martin's research is on songwriting, explored through studio composition, drawing upon the cultural diversity of a suburb of Sydney in Australia. Like Wolinski and editor Till, Martin is also based at the University of Huddersfield. Before entering academia, Martin had a successful career in Australia as guitarist and singer in the band Youth Group, who topped the Australian charts and won an ARIA award. Martin Koszolko is an experienced music producer, and a researcher at Melbourne Polytechnic, which has a focus on vocational education. His paper explores the use of software to enhance musical collaboration, presenting the results of a collaborative project. Brendan Anthony is also an experienced music producer, with credits including

INXS, Midnight Oil and Wheatus. He is a staff member at Queensland Conservatorium, which in 1991 became part of Griffith University, Griffith itself only having been founded in 1975. This conservatorium is unusual in that it offers degrees focused specifically on popular music and music production, alongside more traditional classical music study. Anthony's work examines the role of the third-party mix engineer, describing a project in which he was involved.

All the projects presented here involve mediation of the musical processes by music production technology, to a greater or lesser extent. This integrates either recording studio technology, or computer music equipment such as digital audio workstations. The field of the study of the art of record production has featured many practice based projects, encouraged by the Association for the Study of the Art of Record Production, and the *Journal on the Art of Record Production*, with ground breaking practice based research projects carried out by researchers such as Simon Zagorski-Thomas, providing an actively supportive research environment. Wolinski and Long present individual research focused on their own aesthetic concerns, but are particularly addressing the reception of their work by audiences. In comparison, the research of Martin, Koszolko and Anthony is specifically focused on collaborations of different forms, and on engaging with production processes and interactions between creators.

*IASPM Journal* presents this special issue developing the research field of popular music practice in the hope that this will help to break down barriers to popular music research that is generated through the creation of popular music, and that in the future this will be a less unusual publication format. In many countries practice based research is rare, it is hoped that this publication can provide some model examples of such research, and that many more such publications will follow.

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