Allan Moore - Song Means: analysing and interpreting recorded popular song

Review

“Who are you? How do you define yourself, your identity?” With these words Allan Moore opens his exhaustive new work proposing a more comprehensive approach to the musicological analysis of popular song. The last three decades have seen a huge expansion of the anthology of the sociological and cultural meanings of pop, but Moore’s book is not another exploration of this field, although some of these ideas are incorporated in this work. Rather, he addresses the limitations of conventional musicology when dealing particularly with songs: “I address popular song rather than popular music. The defining feature of popular song lies in the interaction of everyday words and music… it is how they interact that produces significance in the experience of song”. As the publisher's description says, “analytical theory is revisited, covering conventional domains such as harmony, melody and rhythm, but [Moore] does not privilege these at the expense of domains such as texture, the soundbox, vocal tone, and lyrics”. And Moore is careful to specify in the subtitle that this book is about recorded song, acknowledging that, for most people, by far the most common experience of songs nowadays is through recorded media. For this reason he limits his focus to recordings of songs from the 1920’s to the present day, which is nevertheless a vast range, covering a multitude of genres. As Eric Clarke, Heather Professor of Music at the University of Oxford, in his own review of this book, notes, this in itself is “an astonishing achievement”. Clarke, a leading academic in the field, goes on to say that Moore tackles “fundamental questions of musical meaning and the nature of musical materials” and that this work is “a landmark in the musicology of pop”. High praise indeed, and I can only concur!

This book is, in Moore’s words, “not about what songs ‘actually’ seem to mean, it’s about how they mean - (which is my excuse for the strange title)”. “Song Means” is, indeed, an intriguing title. Moore explains that there are “two understandings of the book’s title: the first is to try to lay bare the means by which popular songs are constructed; the second, that popular songs create meanings in listeners (or perhaps the listeners create the meanings through listening to the songs…)”. To understand the means, or construction, Moore presents the analytical categories of Shape, Form and Delivery; for the meanings there are Style, Friction, Persona, Reference and Belonging. Each of these categories forms a chapter, arriving penultimately at Syntheses, where, he explains, “it would be natural to have turned the previous page expecting to find those ‘complete analyses’ that usually act as the culmination to a book such as this”. For Moore, however, “my focus throughout has been on how, as a listener, you can discover meaning in the act of listening to the popular song you listen to… but if the focus is on the means by which meaning is found, to present my own understandings of a range of songs would be to re-erect the results of such questioning as more important than the process of questioning, or at least as more important, more valid somehow, than yours. That will not do.” Throughout the book Moore consistently reminds the reader that the analyses presented are just his own subjective interpretations, that what he is presenting here is a system for analysis, for objective discourse of both the musical and the affective components in a particular song - a structured method for considering, as a listener, “what does the track you are listening to teach you about your own actions or responses…?”

The final chapter, appropriately, is called Questions, for, as he states, in the first chapter, Methodology, his approach is “interrogative”, which he explains using the analogy of a first encounter with someone new (or a song): “…in order to get to know individuals, we will often ask questions both about them, and of them. The questions we ask will, of course, depend on answers to previous ones, but the interrogative approach normally results in us knowing them better than simply observing them. What is important is to have a bank of questions to employ, probably starting with the most general, and discarding those that seem irrelevant in a particular case”. Thus the final chapter consists, almost entirely, of a series of
questions, each of which is referred to the specific chapters where the categories of enquiry are addressed. This structure makes the book a particularly useful tool for any student tasked with song analysis, and therefore likely to become recommended reading for any serious course on popular music.

As an example, the first question applied to Chapter 2, Shape, asks: “Are all the functional layers employed? How are they constituted?” Looking back we see that quality of Shape addresses instrumentation and sound sources because these constitute the “sound-world set up by a track that frequently forms the point of entry for a listener, that first triggers a sense of recognition… what instruments sound like, how they work together, where they appear to be situated within the recording”. Moore proposes three broad categories: functional layers, the soundbox and timbre, and “all these observations should lead to a series of questions: to what extent are they encountered in the track listened to; is the track consistent in its answer, or does it change; are there moments of surprise?” Functional layers are categories of texture, which Moore feels are not adequately described by the traditional terms, such as ‘sparse’, ‘dense’, ‘homophony’ and ‘polyphony’. He offers four textural layers derived from the functions they perform: the explicit beat layer - an explicit pattern of beats, usually the drums, and the major constituent of the ‘groove’; the functional bass layer – self-evident and another component of the groove; the melodic layer - the tune, “other than voices, a whole range of instruments can be found inhabiting this layer”, and the harmonic filler layer, whose function is “to fill the ‘registral’ space between these bass and treble layers”. Parallels can be drawn from traditional forms such as the trio sonata, but, Moore argues, these terms more adequately describe most popular song textures, and he applies them effectively to a range of songs from Bowie’s ‘Queen Bitch’ to the Honeycombs ‘Have I the Right?’ and Chuck Berry’s ‘Johnny B. Goode’. So the question directs the analyst to consider a given track from this perspective.

A further question: “How is the soundbox disposed throughout the track?” directs the analytical focus to consider the track from a perspective of balance and placement. The idea of the “soundbox” will be recognised to those familiar with Moore’s previous work as an effective method for describing the spatial relationship of sound components when hearing recorded music. Moore notes “there is much more to be said of the texture of a track than its functional division into four layers… the soundbox provides a way of conceptualizing the textural space that a recording inhabits, by enabling us to literally hear recordings taking space”. Moore’s concept of the soundbox has also been applied by Richard Middleton in his proposal for a theory of gesture.

The chapters on Form, addressing areas of content: specific beat patterns, metre, modes, melodic and linear structure, and Delivery, the performing voice, melody and lyrics, could be considered as just an alternative way of addressing conventional or formalist musicological subjects, but Moore has his own perspective here too. Considering metre, for example, he cites The Fall’s ‘I Am Damo Suzuki’, where “an initial speed is set by bass and guitar but when the kit enters (first at 43”) with a busy pattern, but at a slower pace, the pattern is entirely ‘inappropriate’ – nowhere do bass and kit beats coincide”. The difficulty is clear and Moore notes, “it would be possible to list more varieties of the standard pattern, and even to group them in a typology. However, this seems less useful than to note that the pattern is highly malleable, and to look at the consequences of any changes…” Moore prefers “another way, which uses the music itself to organize the temporal stream through which we experience it. It is that sense of organization of the time-stream that gives rise to the notion of a track as embodying some sort of narrative.” Numerous examples are presented, with precise notation, to demonstrate the need for an analysis that accounts for the difference experienced by the listener to similar, or often identical, patterns. Who would have thought that Led Zeppelin’s ‘When the Levee Breaks’ and Snap’s ‘The Power’ were almost identical – on paper at least? Melodic patterns, modal structure and syncopation are all identified and examined at deep structural levels, finding surprising similarities. The Beatles ‘Eight Days A Week’ uses exactly the same harmonic pattern as Procol Harum’s ‘Homburg’, but “here the
bass is mobile and the melody has no hint of chromatic descent.” Much of this analytical approach is not new – Moore acknowledges the work of Richard Middleton, Serge Lacasse and Phillip Tagg amongst many other researchers in the musicology of popular music and song – but draws the most useful together in a coherent system. On Delivery, Moore again demonstrates the inadequacies of formal analysis to communicate understanding of musical meanings: “the way that a persona becomes clear to a listener is partly, self-evidently, through the lyrics of the track but, perhaps more importantly, by means of the melody through which those lyrics are delivered, and by means of the voice through which the lyrics and melody are articulated.” Persona is treated in more detail in its own chapter, but here Moore’s discussion is concerned with the interaction of melody with harmony – often as a consequence of the performing singer’s idiosyncratic treatment of melody – and particularly interesting when he considers factors such as register: is the singer forcing to reach higher registers, and how does this colour the emotional meaning?

Moore states his expectation that users will find themselves jumping from chapter to chapter as they address the different perspectives of analysis and interpretation, and has structured the book with this in mind. The chapters pivot around the central Chapter 5, Style, which is a relatively brief “style history of popular song”. As Chapters 2 to 4 address the means-methodologies of detailed analysis of the materials of music: timbre and texture, structure, rhythm and harmony, melody and lyrics - so the subsequent chapters 6 to 9 address meanings, or interpretation. Hence, Chapter 6, Friction, considers “what happens when what happens is not what you expected to happen”. Chapter 7, Persona, provides “a deep discussion of the notion of the persona that a song presents”. Chapter 8, Reference, investigates “how popular song refers to matters outside itself”. Though he reviews the semiotic approach seen in much of the scholarly investigations of musical meaning, he finds this “unsatisfactory… music refers in three fundamentally different ways: within itself; to itself; outside itself. Semiotics… normally claims purview over all three of these ways but, in practice, it is only in the last that it is useful.” Moore develops an “ecological” approach, building on the work of Mark Johnson and Steve Larson on embodied cognition. (Ecology, to grossly over-simplify, refers to the sound environment experienced by the listener.) Chapter 9, Belonging, raises the “twin issues of authenticity and intertextuality”. Here, as in each of these chapters, Moore presents an exhaustive review and critique of the considerable body of scholarly discourse around these concepts, arriving at his own synthesis, in this instance, that “any analysis that claims that a particular song, or a particular performance, is authentic must be regarded with suspicion. In its stead, we should observe how (if at all) a track expresses authenticity, and for what particular audience… ‘authenticity’ is a matter of interpretation that is made and fought for from within a particular cultural and, thus, historicized position. Like all meanings, it is ascribed, not inscribed.”

An admirable quality of this book is Moore’s ability to present in depth the range of scholarly thinking available without resorting to didactic insistence on his own position. “My focus throughout has been on the ways open to individual listeners to make sense of the objects of their listening… meaning has to be owned by an individual listener.” But this is not a book designed for popular consumption, and the question he asks of the So what? factor will remain unanswered for many of my colleagues in the worlds of music production and performance. Personally, as a producer, I find Moore’s concept of the soundbox, and analyses of the textures and timbres of recordings, helpful and instructive, at least. But, although production is intrinsic and implicit in much of the commentary – Moore frequently references Albin Zak III’s key work from the studio perspective, Poetics of Rock, as well as Simon Zagorski-Thomas on studio gesture, and there are several of the Questions that focus analysis on the production - he says very little specific to the producer’s role. I find this surprising considering that this work is about recordings. Moore has said in the past that he considers production to be an important part of music, but only in conjunction with the results of the other musical decisions. Some more recognition here would not be out of place. This work is also not intended to provide instruction on how to write, perform or produce a popular song –
creative practitioners are first of all acting on intuitive imperatives, and as he notes, “you have every right to disagree [on a song’s meaning] (yes, even with the musicians who wrote and sang the song)”. As many artists will acknowledge, audiences take meanings that often differ widely from the author’s intentions. Nonetheless, for anyone interested in the academic analysis of a field of music that has profoundly influenced – some might say defined – whole generations, this book sets a benchmark that, I suspect, will last for a long time. And, as Moore makes clear, “from a good song, we learn about ourselves. From finding out what we make of the song, we make that learning conscious, and that seems to me to be of inestimable value.”

References


