



Everyday Tonality: Towards a Tonal Theory of What Most People Hear

Philip Tagg

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As written in the preface, this book has been conceived to fulfil an important gap in popular music studies: the total absence of a theory – with a subsequent lack of proper terminology – about tonal rules in popular music, usually replaced with ‘classical’ theory, which can be misleading (or wrong: e.g. the word ‘dominant’ is used improperly very often, as Tagg showed in the book and in YouTube clips) in many ‘popular’ contexts.

Divided into thirteen chapters, an addenda section and a glossary, with more than 30 tables, 150 examples and 700 musical references, the book begins with definitions of the very first elements in music theory: note, pitch, tone, tuning, octave, interval, modes, modality, melody, polyphony, harmony and chords. While discussing the correctness of the contrast ‘tonal vs. modal’, Tagg points at the intrinsic mistake in the word ‘tonal’: as tonal comes from tone (defined as ‘a note of discernible fundamental pitch’: 22), all musics using tones should be defined tonal. Those statements are not far from what Schönberg said about twelve-note music, usually called non-tonal. What Tagg adds is that music generally considered tonal has been written according to the rules of classical tonality, but the real defining element of that concept is the tonic, not the tone, so the adjective derived from it should be tonical and so on. At the same time, modal music has tonic notes too, ergo; the contraposition between tonal and modal is senseless.

Besides that, the so-called ‘classical tonality’ is actually built on two modes, the Ionian (major mode) and the Aeolian (minor mode). Analysis of modes through the whole book shows the particularities that made the Ionian the leading mode in Western classical music, and those of all other modes. In many forms of popular music, for example in rock and country, Dorian and Mixolydian modes are extremely important. In flamenco and songs from the Balkans, Phrygian is the most important mode. Demonstrating that the discourse about harmonic directionality from Western art music is not valid for many forms of popular music, and explaining concepts as extensional, intensional and Present Time Experience, a new terminology is created for songs (or song sections) built on just one (one chord changes, as in ‘Bo Diddley’ and Chuck Berry’s ‘Nadine’), two (chord shuttles, with an analysis of Pink Floyd’s ‘The Great Gig In The Sky’ and George Harrison’s ‘My Sweet Lord’) and three or four chords (chord loops, like ‘La Bamba’, ‘Twist And Shout’, ‘Blue Moon’s’ vamp loop, the ‘milkshap’ loop),

with an explanation of quartal harmony related to pentatonic scales and opposite direction (compared to classical) of harmonic movement on the circle of fifths.

With Glarean's hypomodes, Tagg illustrates important concepts as bimodality (i.e. how some chord sequences belong to two different modes at the same time) and bimodal reversibility (how a chord sequence, belonging to a mode, can belong to another one when reversed, as in the case of 'La Bamba' and 'Sweet Home Alabama'), introducing the word counterpoise (the 'other' tonic in a bimodal chord sequence) into the musicological vocabulary.

The book's last chapter is the analysis of the unofficial song from Obama's campaign, 'Yes We Can', using the terms introduced in the book and the Interobjective Comparison Material (music other than analysis object which bears sonic resemblance to the analysis object) to explain how that simple song, those four easy chords, those lyrics and that guitar sound were a vehicle to communicate hope and encouragement.

Tonal and harmonic aspects in popular music are considered and described extensively with an appropriate terminology fixed for the first time. Popular music studies and 'popular musicology' – one of the most important purposes of popular music studies according to Tagg – gained a brand new theory, untied to classical precepts, to describe everyday music. Many studies must be written about popular music tonal aspects, but this one is destined to become a milestone for all future research.