

Kay Kaufman Shelemay states, 'Melodies can only be borrowed when they are already part of the sound world of the singers who would appropriate them'.¹ In other words, the liturgy also creates contexts in which changes are manifested in action and sound. *A Fusion of Traditions* is a contribution to scholarly knowledge about musical tradition and change in general; however, the discussion throughout the book would have benefited from conferring more closely with the insights of other studies of sacred musical traditions, which would have shown, for example, that the Jewish liturgical musical tradition in Copenhagen is as variegated (though in its own idiosyncratic way) as many other Jewish traditions around the world. Rossen speaks of an 'unbroken' Jewish tradition in Denmark (p. 9) since the first Jews came to the duchy of Holstein in 1584. Whatever 'unbroken' means, it is clear that it does not imply that the tradition is unchanged but the contrary, which is precisely one of the main (and important) points of the book.

As an ethnographic work, *A Fusion of Tradition* places its emphasis on its empirical material and the presentation of its data. It does not aim at discussing the implications of the research methods that have been applied (reflection on fieldwork and the transcription process is absent); neither does it address the theoretical framework that implicitly makes out the bases for the interpretations in the study, as already mentioned. The critique aside, it remains clear that the aim of this book is to document the Jewish liturgical tradition based on unique material and to communicate the historical account to a wider audience also outside academia.

Rossen's and Sharvit's book is important reading and offers important insights into the cantorate and the formation of the Jewish liturgical tradition in the Copenhagen Synagogue. It calls also for future research within its cultural domain from a wide range of approaches including for example minority studies, anthropology, music history, and ethnomusicology. Such research might well be continued at the Danish Folklore Archives, or amongst the congregation in the living tradition in *Krystalgade*.

Tore Tvarnø Lind



Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music*

Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2007

221 pp., illus., music exx.

ISBN 0-226-35037-1/978-0-226-35037-0 (cloth),

0-226-35039-8/978-0-226-35039-4 (paper)

USD 50 (cloth) / 19 (paper)

What kind of book is Fabian Holt's *Genre in Popular Music*? Readers usually make such guesses based on the title: for example, it is likely that a text bearing a person's name in the title (like *Oliver Twist*, *Don Quixote*, *Madame Bovary* or *Doktor Faustus*) be a novel, unless that person is a king, or an emperor, or a famous politician, in which case we are probably dealing with a tragedy or a historical drama (*Julius Caesar*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Richard III*). But sometimes one can be misled. As one of the potential readers of *Genre in Popular Music*, probably very close to Fabian Holt's model reader (as a popular music scholar and musician, and one that started thinking and writing about genre long time ago), I must say I made my guesses and was also partially misled. With a title like that, especially considering that the publisher is the Univer-

1 Kay Kaufmann Shelemay, 'Mythologies and Realities in the Study of Jewish Music', in Lawrence E. Sullivan (ed.), *Enchanting Powers. Music in the World's Religions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 299–315, on 314.

sity of Chicago Press, one is led to think that the text is an essay, or a montage or sequence of short essays, dealing with the issue of genre, and circumscribing it to the field of popular music. Adding some contextual and circumstantial information – Holt already wrote about genre, and I met him on various occasions during conferences on popular music studies – I had reasons to believe that: 1, This would be a kind of *definitive* book about genre, both in the sense that it would include strong theory about the topic (with a clear definition of what a genre is, how it is constituted and works), and that it would cover the topic in ways that previous literature only hinted at, and 2, That the application of the concept to popular music would cover the ‘field’ extensively, in the broad sense that the term has come to mean not only in common sense, but in the name of a large organization like the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (as a matter of fact, when I first opened the book, I found the name of IASPM at the bottom of page one).

But I was wrong. Because: 1, the author explicitly refuses to build a systematic theory of genre and criticizes any former (or future?) effort to create anything similar: a series of ‘weak’, fragmented reflections on some aspects of genre seems to him more appropriate to the very nature of the topic; and 2, ‘This is a book about the work of genre categories in American popular music’, as stated at the beginning of chapter one (p. 1). So, this is not the book a naive reader like me would expect from its title, that is, an essay where a tentative theory of how genre works in musics in general is put to test (for falsification or refinement) with any genre in the worlds’ popular music, like Italian *canzone d’autore*, Russian *avtorskaya pesnya*, Greek *néo kyma*, French *nouvelle chanson*, Catalan *nova cançó*, Cuban *nueva trova*, etc., because, according to the author, 1, such a theory cannot be created; and 2, any of the genres/contexts mentioned would require an adjustment, a piece of theory of its own. And the latter is not to say, obviously, that all genres have (or consist in) their own conventions or social norms, but that a theory trying to understand how those categories work should be adjusted to each of them.

That said, it would be silly for a reviewer to criticize a book just on the basis of his/her expectations. Taken for what it is (and according to the author’s intentions) it is a serious and useful essay on popular music in the US and on some of the main genre-related contradictions and tensions within that country’s musical communities (audience, critics, musicians, producers, record companies, etc.). After a 29-page Introduction (chapter one) that includes considerations on the centrality of the concept of genre, a description of the project, a summary history of the term and a very brief overview of existing literature, and a final and short (9 pages) discussion of some basic theory, chapter two is devoted to a discussion of the impact of Joel Coen’s movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* on the US music market and audience, including reflections on categories like roots music, live performances of bluegrass, and the organization of large record stores. Chapter three and chapter four are grouped together in a ‘double session’ (Reactions to Rock) where the author elaborates on the impact of rock on country music (chapter three) and jazz (chapter four). Also chapters five and six are grouped in a ‘double session’ (Urban Boundaries) dealing with the jazz scene in Chicago and the work of Jeff Parker, a jazz guitarist (who also plays with the rock band Tortoise and in other independent ‘mixed’ projects). Finally, chapter seven (Music at American Borders) offers analyses of three recordings that in different ways challenge existing genres or are located by the author in ‘spaces between genres’: Ricky Martin’s *The Cup of Life*, Jimmy Peters and Ring Dance Singers’ *J’ai fait tout le tour du pays* (one of the recordings by John and Alan Lomax), and Flaco Jimenez’s *Indita mia*.

Most of the book’s content (chapters two to six) is based on the author’s own experience with local scenes, musicians, producers, record store managers, critics, etc.: Holt insists on the value of this ‘empirical’ research, ostensibly derived from the canons of music anthropol-

ogy, even if the difference between his ‘ethnography’ and previous accounts on genre (that he does not hesitate to describe as ‘armchair research’, p. 8) seems to be formal. The author suggests that such ethnographic work be more suitable for the topic (while other empirical evidence, like questionnaire-based interviews on a mass scale, does not seem to meet his requirements, cf. p. 15), but the reader remains with the doubt if some of the knowledge presented as the result of ethnography may not be considered as common sense in the musical community. So, if one scholar says that radio stations use music to target an audience for advertising other products, this might be (according to Holt) ‘armchair research’, but if the same very obvious piece of knowledge is presented as the result of an interview with a broadcaster (not in the 1920s, but today) then it is ‘empirical’, based on an ethnography. But the whole issue of what can be considered as empirical evidence in popular music studies deserves much more space than this review. However, most of the interviews and experiences reported in this book are quite valuable and interesting, and make it worth reading.

The weakest part, unfortunately, is the Introduction. One of the problems is that – as it happens quite too often in popular music studies – there is no specific reference to literature in languages other than English. Genre may have been (as the author says) out of fashion in anglophone popular music studies for a couple of decades, but in the meanwhile it has been one of the central issues of Latin American popular music studies (see Danilo Orozco González, for example). And there is more in other languages. Furthermore, the historical overview is very poor, giving no account of the birth of the usage of genre as a fundamental discursive tool for the arts in Aristotle’s school and forgetting that it was a central issue again from the Renaissance as well as in music long before the nineteenth century. The only reference to genre in other arts is about cinema, with the odd observation that the concept should be more easily applied to the standardized production of movies than to music; but what about theatre or literature? What about Northrop Frye’s theory, predicating the role of communities in the creation of literary genres? Most statements about musical meaning and music semiotics are frankly unacceptable, like this: ‘The specificity of musical signification is one of the reasons for the strikingly limited success of semiotics in musicology compared with film and literary studies’ (p. 5). Nattiez, Molino, Tagg, Stefani, and others are warned, and hundreds of students familiar with Tagg’s concept of genre synecdoche should be careful. But the most striking issue that emerges in the Introduction but also in other parts of the book, is that seemingly, according to the author, whatever music becomes the mainstream ceases to be a genre (or conversely, maybe, it becomes a genre as soon as it is not the mainstream anymore). One can guess which definition of genre may prevent *Tin Pan Alley* (up to the Fifties, that is, until it remained the mainstream) or *jazz* (similarly, up to the Forties) to be a genre: one could also find reasons, even sympathize with the author, and/or wonder if such statement could be valid anywhere else in the world at any time, but the fact is that in the book this particular issue is not discussed, it is just stated. And others too: is jazz popular music? When (just in case) did it cease to be popular music? So the ‘small theories and frameworks’ (p. 29) put forward by the author turn out to generate big new questions. To which maybe another book with the same or a similar title shall try to answer.

Franco Fabbri