

## MODERNISM AND POPULAR MUSIC

Traditionally, ideas about twentieth-century modernism – whether focused on literature, music, or the visual arts – have made a distinction between “high” art and the “popular” arts of best-selling fiction, jazz and other forms of popular music, and commercial art of one form or another. In *Modernism and Popular Music*, Ronald Schleifer instead shows how the music of George and Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, Thomas “Fats” Waller, and Billie Holiday can be considered as artistic expressions equal to those of the traditional high modernist art practices in music and literature. Combining detailed attention to the language and aesthetics of popular music with an examination of its early twentieth-century performance and dissemination through the new technologies of the radio and phonograph, Schleifer explores the “popularity” of popular music in order to reconsider received and seemingly self-evident truths about the differences between high art and popular art and, indeed, about twentieth-century modernism altogether.

RONALD SCHLEIFER is George Lynn Cross Research Professor of English and Adjunct Professor in Medicine at the University of Oklahoma. Among his other books, he has written *Modernism and Time: The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science, and Culture 1880–1930*, also published by Cambridge University Press.

# MODERNISM AND POPULAR MUSIC

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*for my twin brother, Robert Schleifer,  
with whom I have shared music all of my life;  
and to the memory of our father, Cy Schleifer,  
who brought music into our lives*

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## *Preface*

*Modernism and Popular Music* is a study that aims at enlarging our sense of cultural modernism by including within a working definition of modernism popular art forms – particularly, popular music – along with the usual high art practices in music and literature with which we are all familiar. To this end, I have tried to widen our sense of twentieth-century modernism by discussing it in the context of the relationship between Enlightenment modernity and the experience of the early twentieth century. This relationship is particularly clear in the study of music, because much of what we assume is “natural” about music really emerged in the early modern period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At that time, as I mention in the Introduction, methods of musical notation, musical instruments as we know them today, the very idea of a musical key, standardizations of “tempered” musical tuning, the creation of the modern shape of leisure in which listening to music can be understood as a focused leisure activity *separate* from other activities, and even the conception of a composer all emerged. Music is also an art form, as I argue throughout this book, that more forcefully than the other arts emphasizes the *materiality* of the production and consumption of art. Such an emphasis on materiality, I contend, is also a particular feature of the modernist arts in the new twentieth century, where all kinds of “defamiliarization” – in painting, prose, atonal music, poetry – became an important aspect of the arts. (Such defamiliarization was also a feature of post-Newtonian science of the early twentieth century as well.) Finally, the existence of performance as the primary modality of popular music underscores the performativity of modernist art forms – and, indeed, of the “modernist” intellectual disciplines such as literary criticism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, ordinary-language philosophy – more generally.

The very existence of popular music in performance is a function, in part, of remarkable technical innovations in the recording and dissemination of popular music in the early twentieth century: its commodification

in the forms of sheet music, records, microphones, and even that strange commodification of public broadcast. (It strangely exists as a commodity without a tangible price tag.) These innovations related to popular music take their place among the vast number of technical innovations of the second Industrial Revolution of the turn of the twentieth century that affected and transformed virtually all aspects of human life, its forms of knowledge, its quotidian experience, its formal and informal social relations. In other words, the study of the “best” popular music of the early twentieth century allows us to see more clearly than we otherwise might particular defining features of twentieth-century modernism: the historicity of its received ideas about the world; the strategies of defamiliarization – in this musical study, I call this “rhythmic decomposition” – that the powerfully changing world of finance capitalism and widespread availability of commodities gave rise to; the disturbances occasioned by the democratization of social organization, including the emergence of a new social class of lower-middle-class information workers (engaged in the institutions of finance capital) possessing an individualist ideology that made certain kinds of material self-fulfillments personally and popularly imperative; and the need, in any comprehension of these phenomena, to pursue a “performative” as well as a causal understanding.

In pursuit of this goal of articulating a more comprehensive understanding of twentieth-century modernism – including, as I note in Chapter 4, its “structure of feeling” – I present in the Introduction to this book an aesthetics of popular music. In this discussion, I address Theodor Adorno’s explicit dismissal of popular music as “trash” both by articulating what is valuable in popular music (at its “best”) and by specifying elements that might condition the realization of those values. In this discussion, I follow Adorno’s own analysis of the strategies and assumptions that govern and realize a modernist aesthetics for high art, and particularly for art music. In his work, Adorno describes three criteria for an aesthetics appropriate for modernist art in the twentieth century. Specifically, he notices the powerful strategies of modernist art to achieve a dialectical “wholeness” by means of decomposition – as noted above, in the context of popular music I describe this as “rhythmic decomposition” – and the particularly modernist art form of “montage.” In the Introduction, I pursue these categories in order to describe the power and importance of “modernist” popular music – what I mean by describing the music I study as the “best” instances of popular music – and in the chapters of Part II focused on Gershwin, Porter, Waller, and Holiday I demonstrate the ways that, in

close readings of their music and lyrics, these criteria can help us situate these musicians as “modernist” artists.

I also argue that at the heart of the difference between the art music Adorno valorizes and popular music, which he denigrates, is the category of pleasure. More specifically I argue, following Colin Campbell, that the provocations of “desire” and “pleasure” as well as articulations of “suffering” and “truth” – which Adorno claims are ends of art – are legitimate goals of art, and the aim and achievement of the best popular music. In this discussion, I take the opportunity of quoting Adorno’s powerful observation in *Aesthetic Theory* that “the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth.”<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, I do not want to suggest that tragic suffering cannot help us define important art forms and, indeed, important ways of understanding personal and social life. Nevertheless, pleasure also has an important place in understanding art and life; Campbell is clear on this, especially in discussing Wordsworth and Romanticism more generally. In *Modernism and Popular Music* I describe the pleasure of popular music in relation to the emotions it arouses (again, at its “best”) that celebrate and to some extent redeem, in the words of Robert Witkin, “life that is mutilated and suppressed by *modernity*.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, such pleasure also inhabits much of “high” modernism, and I also note, in passing but repeatedly, that pleasure was the particular end of many high modernist artists: Joyce most of all, but also William Carlos Williams, Aaron Copland, Virginia Woolf, Wallace Stevens, and many others. In fact, the description of the pleasures Joyce affords is the work of the Conclusion to *Modernism and Popular Music* which returns to “high” modernism, but in fact the pleasures of modernist art – both popular and unpopular – are a constant in my argument.

The inclusion of pleasure within the aesthetics of popular music, I believe, also helps describe how popular music opened up a social space to find community and home in the modern world for many people who simply did not have access to either leisure or the arts before the abundances of the second Industrial Revolution. In fact, I cite Witkin’s particularly strong discussion of Adorno’s relation to popular culture that explicitly describes how popular music creates such a space of celebration for people who have been traditionally excluded from the space of public life. I think particularly of Jews, like the Gershwin brothers, homosexuals, like Cole Porter, Africans and African-Americans, like Thomas Waller and Billie Holiday, and women, again like Billie Holiday – all of whom were able to achieve quotidian emotional and intellectual pleasures in the popular arts that came, in the modernist era, to surround us all. That

is, the new wealth of the new twentieth century afforded many hitherto disenfranchised groups and individuals the possibilities of leisure, self-realization, and, indeed, individual and social pleasure, and it is important to examine – as part of modernism – the highest achievements of this new freedom.

Closely related to this concern, I have developed this definition of aesthetics both in hopes it would answer another important question, of the way that modernism in general and popular music particularly challenges the received “universal” ideas of Enlightenment modernity – ideas that seem “natural” and self-evidently true – and to demonstrate the ways that popular music reasserts universals in a different way. I do this, as I mentioned, by emphasizing the pleasures art affords, which means emphasizing – in a gesture that comports well with the progressive democratization of social formations in the early twentieth century – the audiences of the arts as well as their composers. In part, this shift in focus follows from Campbell’s argument that social (and by implication aesthetic) formations beginning in Enlightenment modernity need to be understood in relation to a “consumptionist” as well as a “productionist” ethos. Campbell is particularly good and useful in relation to the examination of the similarities and differences between Enlightenment modernity and twentieth-century modernism, and throughout Part I of the book I work to make their relationship clear and pertinent to our understanding of the early twentieth century. One place I pursue this relationship is in noting that Sigmund Freud, with his focus on the “satisfaction” of needs, participates in the “productionist” ethos of modernity while Jacques Lacan, with his focus on the “pursuit” of desire, participates in the “consumerist” ethos of modernism. This abstract contrast is readily apparent, as I argue, in the music of Cole Porter. In this, as in much else concerning modernism, the value of using popular music to comprehend experience, understanding, and social formations in the early twentieth century, is clear.

My focus on consumerism, as I argue, reinforces a *performative* conception of pleasure that informs the aesthetics of popular music I present. Such a sense of performativity, focusing on the audience for music as well as the author of music, is, I suggest in the book’s conclusion but also implicitly throughout the book, an important element of modernism, high and “low,” altogether. The phenomenon of performativity is ubiquitously examined in *Modernism and Popular Music*. It is a significant aspect of my attempt to include more fully within a working concept of modernism some popular art forms along with the usual high art practices in music and literature with which we are all familiar. To this end, I discuss speech-act theory in

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the Introduction to emphasize the performative nature of pleasure, particularly in relation to the aesthetics of popular culture. In other chapters I also make clear the essentially performative elements in the writing of music by the Gershwins and Porter by emphasizing the ways their writings pursue pleasure, improvisation, and playfulness in a manner similar to the self-evident performativity in the actual musical performances of Waller and Holiday. (In the Conclusion I note that in 1929 Eugene Jolas emphasized in a similar way the performative aspects of Joyce's writings.) The focus on the concept of performativity also sharpens, I hope, the book's large contention that the "performative" human sciences – such as psychoanalysis, sociology, literary criticism, ordinary-language philosophy – are themselves productions of modernism.

An important concept, closely related to the performative aesthetics I develop, is the concept of "semantic formalism." This concept grows out of an observation that Igor Stravinsky made about Beethoven, that his music creates a "language structure" that reflects or organizes the phenomenal world.<sup>3</sup> Daniel Albright has observed that Stravinsky is accomplishing "the deep equivalence of the natural and the artificial,"<sup>4</sup> and such modeling of the natural, I also argue (following Mary Poovey and my own argument in *Intangible Materialism*), is a distinguishing feature of modernism. Moreover, Albright's mention of the "natural" also ties the idea of semantic formalism more closely to the distinction between the (more or less) pure formalism of Enlightenment modernity and what I am calling the semantic formalism of twentieth-century modernism. As with the definition of the aesthetics of popular music, this elaboration of semantic formalism governs local as well as global arguments in *Modernism and Popular Music*. Both locally and globally, it is particularly useful in relation to a ubiquitous criticism of popular music, that it depends inordinately on clichés in words and music. In Chapter 3 on the Gershwins, but also throughout *Modernism and Popular Music*, I describe in some detail how authors *inform* cliché with meaning by making clear that cliché is a formal device – like the received forms of popular music – that can be "semanticized."

Here, then, are the aims of this book: to locate popular music within a working comprehension of twentieth-century modernism, and in so doing to demonstrate the ways that the study of popular music makes clearer what an operational definition of "modernism" might look like. Such an operational definition would include a historical understanding of changes in experience, knowledge, and social relations in the early twentieth century; a sense of the materiality of these changes, including strategies of "defamiliarization" in order to discern them; the continuities and discontinuities

between Enlightenment modernity and twentieth-century modernism; the place of pleasure and consumerism in the new world of modernism; the “essential” operation of performance – even the *accidents* of performance – within any working definition of modernism; and a sense of modernism’s freedoms as well as its oppressions.

But along with all this, popular music is, in the word of Simon Frith, simply *fun*, pleasures bound into the rhythms of everyday life. This book, as I mention in the Acknowledgments, has been a particular pleasure for me. Here, in concluding this Preface, I would like to describe one moment in *Modernism and Popular Music* when I am having fun with scholarship. One such gesture appears, virtually silently, in Chapter 4 on Porter when I conjure up the Heideggerian battleship of ponderous philosophical pronouncement to talk about Porter’s nicely crafted music under the category of “thing.” I do this, in part, to underscore implicitly the opposition between seriousness-truth and playfulness-pleasure that governs my own and others’ discussions of popular music (both pro and con). But in its very cumbersomeness, I hope, my calling up of Heidegger’s hieratic seriousness in the context of Porter’s musical fun implicitly valorizes pleasure in the face of ponderous truth. (Such valorization, I believe, is the work of the popular signifyin’ that Waller performs for us.) The pursuit of “ponderous truth” is found in Adorno as well as Heidegger, and found more particularly in German Idealism, which writers about popular music repeatedly revert to in their understanding of the opposition between “serious” music and “popular” music. While there might not be much playfulness about Lacan, whom I hear in Porter in Chapter 4, surely there is a twinkle in Bakhtin’s eyes, who rings through the Gershwin’s music and lyrics in Chapter 3, and no doubt there is great pleasure, and the pleasures of virtuosity, in the African American signifyin’ which I listen for in Waller and in the virtuosities of the stride piano in Chapter 5. Finally, with Billie Holiday, in Chapter 6, I celebrate the pleasures of bringing things together, including what seemed to be missing or lost, recoveries that all have the feel to them of new beginnings, of Pound’s “making it new.” Wallace Stevens articulates such “modernist” beginnings, I note in Chapter 4, as “this beginning, not resuming, this / Booming and booming of the new-come bee.” It is my great hope, then, that *Modernism and Popular Music* will afford its readers (and its listeners!) a sense of recovering what we already knew, the community and space of shared music, art as the enactment of celebration, and the importance and pleasure of the music that most people in America born before the 1960s grew up with and have lived with all their lives.

## *Acknowledgments*

Working on this book has been one of the pleasures of my professional life. In 1995 my friend Russell Reising called and asked if I would like to join him in going to the conference for the International Association for the Study of Popular Music that was meeting that year in Kanazawa, Japan. Like myself, Russ is an English professor (in American Studies), though unlike me he has wide knowledge of rock 'n' roll of the 1950s and 1960s. I was excited to travel to Japan with Russ – who studied Asian languages in college – and was delighted to put together a talk about Cole Porter, whose music I've loved from early on when I was a saxophone player with my brother Robert in a small combo dance band which played all the old standards. I also played Porter, Gershwin, and Waller to my two infant sons, Cyrus and Benjamin, on the piano, and with my wife Nancy and our lifelong friends David and Stephanie Gross and Roy and Carolyn Male, who would sing these tunes wonderfully. It is these kinds of experiences – which I like to imagine most all of us have participated in – that create the power of popular music. Unlike other eras, where people also came together to sing – Colin Campbell, in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, lists “singing” among the “basic list of ‘pleasures’” that “human beings in all cultures seem to agree on” – we are able to add to our parlor music, because of “modernist” technological innovations, experiences of heard and remembered *performances* in recordings and covers of all the songs we sing. But as in all times, we shared our music in performance ourselves.

After Russ called, I couldn't wait to organize a paper around “Do do that voodoo that you do so well!” Two years later Russ called again, and we took Cyrus and Benjamin, and James Reising – along with our friend Robert Markley and his son, Stephen – to Sydney. There I presented a paper on the Gershwins' music and lyrics. Two years later Russ and I were in Turku, Finland, where I talked about Waller. Two years after that it was Montreal, where I discussed Billie Holiday. The next conference was in Rome, where I discussed the concept of musical modernism altogether. Finally, we were

scheduled to go together to Liverpool in 2009, after late drafts of this book were finished, where I had planned to talk about the relationship between classical modernity and popular music. Unfortunately, the death of my father, Cy Schleifer, at the age of 94 prevented my attending the Liverpool IASPM meeting.

These IASPM meetings, as all know who attend them, are remarkable for their intellectual excitement, warm friendliness, and diversity. In *Putting Popular Music in Its Place* Charles Hamm discusses the important impact these meetings have had, a “turning point,” he says, in musicology: “both [the journal] *Popular Music* and IASPM moved quickly and decisively towards the privileging of theoretical, critical, and ideological discourse.” As someone who works in literary and cultural modernism, literary theory, and cultural studies, I found myself wonderfully welcomed in this interdisciplinary organization. I found early on that the kinds of interests in language and poetry I brought to these meetings were useful to many, and the combination of historiography and musical analysis I encountered has been an important influence in my studies of literary and cultural modernism, especially *Modernism and Time: The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science, and Culture 1880–1930* and my more recent work focusing on materialism and economics at the turn of the twentieth century. The many friends and colleagues I met at IASPM include Hasse Huss, Walter Everett (whom I met earlier, again introduced by Russ, at the Beatles 2000 conference in Jyväskylä, Finland), Sheila Whiteley, Catherine Rudent, Derek Scott, Toru Mitsui, Jacqueline Warwick, Stephen Valdez, Steven Baur, Jim LeBlanc, and Matthew Bannister, among many others. As well as from these encounters, this book has greatly benefited from the three anonymous readers who my long-time (and remarkably patient) editor at Cambridge, Ray Ryan, brought to my work. The readers corrected, focused, and clarified my argument to such an extent that on one or two occasions I have paraphrased their comments to sharpen my argument. Several other people also were instrumentally helpful in responding to parts of the manuscript: I want to thank Robert Schleifer, Cristina Reyes, Derek Scott, Anne Jacobs, Walter Everett, and Russell Reising for helpful suggestions.

A shorter version of Chapter 4 of this volume appeared as “‘What Is This Thing Called Love?’: Cole Porter and the Rhythms of Desire,” in *Criticism*, 41 (1999), 7–23. Some pages from Chapter 1 appeared in a longer article, “The Beatles, Postmodernism, and Ill-Tempered Musical Form: Cleaning My Gun; or, The Use of Accidentals in *Revolver*,” in *‘Every Sound There Is’: The Beatles’ Revolver and The Transformation of Rock & Roll*, edited by



*Acknowledgments*

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Russell Reising (Hants, GB: Ashgate Publishers, 2002), pp. 222–33. I thank the editors and publishers of these essays for permission to include revised versions in the present volume. As well as at the IASPM meetings, I also had the pleasure of invitations of long-time friends, Professor Karen Klein, Professor Nancy West, and Dr. Sul Lee, Dean of the University Libraries here at Oklahoma, to discuss popular music of the 1930s at Brandeis University, the University of Missouri, and the Bizzell Library Society of the University of Oklahoma. In addition, I presented “Fats Waller and the Music of Modernism,” a more literary version of Chapter 5 than was the presentation in Turku or the chapter here, at the 2004 Twentieth-Century Literature Conference in Louisville, Kentucky. Conversations with people at these sites nicely complemented discussions with musicologists and ethnomusicologists at IASPM and helped shape *Modernism and Popular Music*. The shared music with another long-time friend and weekly chess partner, David Levy, informs my work in subtle ways. And as always my wife, Nancy Mergler, has supported me in this work in small and large ways.

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I am dedicating this book to my twin brother, Robert Schleifer, with whom I have shared music from the very beginning, and to the memory of our father, Cy Schleifer, who many times when we were boys met us on Bleeker Street after our music lessons and took us to the Italian fish market for clams and good cheer before driving us home. He gave us music and much more.