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Analyzing Form in Popular Music: History, Style, Aesthetics, and Data

ABSTRACT

Background

Various datasets have been used to create corpus studies of popular music. Such sets are typically analyzed to reveal characteristics of the music that might not otherwise be possible without powerful computer processing. This approach contrasts strikingly with the ways scholars have traditionally come to generalizations about musical structure, style, and development, which build up a corpus on the basis of preferences and practices that some might consider subjective, skewed, or incomplete. Large datasets seem to promise greater objectivity, though some scholars question if they produce results that provide useful or even valid insight. I have argued (Covach 2015) that such studies may lead to misleading or false conclusions, and this is due to both the ways in which the bodies of music examined are formed, as well to the manner in which they are examined.

Several popular music scholars have attempted to blend the objectivity of datasets with more traditional approaches of analysis, producing work based on some body of music that has been assembled by others. This corpus is then examined in traditional ways (not automated by computer) for certain features of interest to the scholar. These studies often present interesting and useful results, but the impact of the results can at times be attenuated by the manner in which the corpus was formed. In short: Do such studies always prove what they claim, or are these claims undercut by the nature of the corpus formation employed?

Aims and repertoire studied

This paper will consider popular music from 1945-1995, focusing especially on American and British rock music, and centering primarily (but not exclusively) on the analysis of musical form. The music of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones (among others) will provide examples. I will outline how the formation of the corpus can be coordinated with the nature of the questions that the study intends to pursue, and argue that such careful coordination is useful in avoiding the pitfalls of employing ready-made corpora.

Methods

Ways in which data sets and musical corpora have been formed will be compared with traditional ways of determining repertoires. Corpora as employed by Everett (2009), Summach (2012), de Clercq (2016) and Temperley/de Clercq (2013) and others will be compared with the traditional approach of Biamonte (2014 and 2016), Covach (2005 and forthcoming), Covach/Flory (2015), and Everett (2003) to explore how the nature of repertoire selection affects analytical findings and possible conclusions, historical narratives, and theory building.

Implications

This paper argues that meaningful results are most often obtained when the songs included in the dataset or corpus (digital or analog) are determined by characteristics that scholars find significant and not, say, by the *Billboard* charts, frequency of streaming in the recent past, *Rolling Stone* lists of top songs, etc. It is clear that traditional historical and analytical lenses are created (sometimes tacitly) by the music-historical and music-aesthetic preferences of scholars, and that this may create blind spots. But without such sorting applied to the music studied, the answers any given dataset provides may not address questions scholars would find significant or meaningful, even in the most ecumenical sense. Each approach brings with it powerful tools; it may be that a blend of traditional and digital approaches will ultimately produce the most useful results.

A brief consideration of de Clercq 2016 provides a representative example. That study is concerned with exploring whether the actual duration of a measure of music can be useful in establishing meter. Three corpora are employed, one of which is drawn from the almost one hundred examples found in Covach/Flory 2015. As lead author of that textbook, I can attest to how that corpus was formed. While each example is representative of a particular style of rock or pop music, each was chosen to provide easy understanding for general university students with no previous musical training. Had the examples been selected to provide the most accurate representation of the styles involved, other pieces might have been chosen—ones that would probably have introduced at least some degree of metric complexity and perhaps altered the results found in de Clercq 2016. I argue that in such cases, the author must form her own corpus, directed by knowledge and study of the repertory involved. While ready-made collections of music seem to offer

objectivity and may even speed up the research process, they can also weaken the conclusions that such a study can reliably assert.

Keywords

Form, popular music, structure, analytical theory, music aesthetics, musical modeling

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