

Popularity

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Popularity (Lat. populus = the people; popularis = of, belonging to, or involving the whole people or a majority of it): the quality or fact of being popular, i.e. being liked, favoured or approved by someone, some people or people in general. Accordingly, popularity in music could be described as a status of high individual or social relevance of music.

The first record of a published combination of the words *popular* and *music* in English are the installments of William Chappell's 'Popular Music of the Olden Times' starting in 1855.

However the term popular in relation to music can also be found in the 18th century sources, for example in the letters of Leopold Mozart to his son Wolfgang Amadeus.

The term popularity is dubious. It has a broad spectrum of meanings depending on the historical and socio-cultural contexts and can be used as well for downgrading as for legitimating purposes.

As a key concept for musical thinking and cultural studies popularity has been used in opposition to art and folk. Like other labels and oppositions (for example the ancient roman trichotomy of musica mundana, humana and instrumentalis or the dualism of black and white music), these three have been created to defend or establish cultural

identity or hegemony rather than to analyse it. The concept of popularity has been based on the assumption that there is a definable social subject related to it. However it is not clear, who someone, some people or people in general are. Mainly for this reason popularity in music - likewise authenticity and autonomy - is nowadays regarded as an contested ideological construction lacking conceptual clarity. (Hall 1981, Wicke 1992).

Birrer's typology of definitions for popular music lists the following four categories (Birrer 1985):

- 1)normative (Popularity as Inferiority)
- 2)negative (different from art and/or folk)
- 3)referring to social groups
- 4)relating to mass communications

Middleton (1990) differentiates between sociological essentialism and positivist approaches towards a definition of popular music:

When popularity is applied to fixed social subjects like the masses, ordinary people, the working class, the people, the society or the

public these subjects are often thought of as sharing homogeneous forms of musical practices. As a result of such sociological essentialism, the term popularity can also denote a set of structural qualities of musical texts which are supposed to fit the musical practices of the social subject. The music is then often characterized by terms such as 'light', 'simple' or 'trivial'. The main function of music in these contexts is supposed to be that of entertainment.

Positivists on the other hand focus on the quantitative aspects and view popularity as high degree of dissemination measurable for example in air play statistics or sales figures. It is often believed that record charts as published weekly since 1949 in the U.S. music magazine Billboard, measure popularity. In reality charts have been developed as a complex instrument to organize sales effectively and not to represent cultural reality. Thus, they effect the popularity of artists and records rather than express it. [SEE CHARTS]

Positivistic approaches have been blamed for making no distinction between availability and acceptance. In addition, the methods used in quantitative research often lead to reification: Music is reduced to records or songs. At the same time people are only regarded as consumers or listeners and not as participants in multidimensional cultural processes. Even if one succeeds in collecting reliable information on sales and rates, these figures can only tell us how many items (be it sheet music, tapes, CDs or audio files) were sold

or how many TV or radio sets were tuned to a certain station at a particular time. They usually don't tell us whether or to what extent the music is liked, influential, memorized or reproduced for a shorter or longer period. We don't get to know, whether and how it is meaningful for the individuals and groups nor in which context significance is produced.

Nevertheless there is little doubt on the potential of critical, quantitative studies on reception with refined methods, since they can at least be helpful to deconstruct popularity myths and enlighten the mystified processes within the music industry (Hamm 1985, Harker 1995, Parker 1991).

However, the empirical as well as theoretical approaches to a definition of popularity would always fail as a belated objective legitimation for decades of contradictory research practice, let alone the various forms of everyday discourse.

While there is no consent about a definition of popularity among cultural theorists and music scholars, most of them seem to agree with Shepherd's position who rejects a definition of popular music as „mystification“ advising his colleagues not to waste their time concentrating on „some putative category of music whose existence might only be established with the greatest difficulty“ (Shepherd 1985. p 95). Consequently Middleton makes no attempt to fence in

popularity with a rigid definition. Instead he confines himself on locating popular music as an „active tendency“ within the always changing whole musical field using theoretical and historical frameworks based on the writings of Foucault, Gramsci and Hall (Middleton 1990. p. 7)).

Futile attempts to achieve an agreeable definition find themselves replaced by the analysis of the respective discursive functions and prerequisites of the term popularity in various contexts.

From the economical point of view popularity equals the (supposed) sales potential, thus the popularity-issue is a vital criterion for investments.

Music historians however still tend to regard popularity as a feature of a certain set of genres and styles. Cultural theorists on the other hand usually evaluate and explain popularity as product and stabilizing element of the respectively criticised dominant ideologies.

Not only the respective result but also the role of the popularity-debate depends on the ways the music industry and musical discourse is organized. Thus, this role may change f.e. due to technological developments in production and dissemination means. Whether the term popularity will keep its prominent status as a flexible instrument to draw up borders between changing musical spheres or stiff to a

historical category, however it may be defined, remains to be seen.

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