

**Review of Philip Tagg "Music's Meanings", New York,  
Mass Media Music Scholar's Press**

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**Philip Tagg, *Music's Meanings: a modern musicology for non-musos*, New York & Huddersfield: Mass Media Music Scholars' Press, 2012, 691 pages.**

This fascinating work pleads for the integration of the analysis of musical activity more fully into cultural studies and cultural history. A musicologist and a composer, Philip Tagg was one of the co-founders, in 1981, of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, the organization which has been effective in introducing the study of popular music into university circles. His doctoral thesis was on the semiotics of music used on television. A previous work, *Ten Little Title Tunes*, analyzed, by surveying listener reactions, the communication involved in well-known theme tunes for television series.<sup>1</sup>

This, his latest book, summarizes, for an audience without formal musical training, the approach to the analysis of music which he has proposed to his university students in Sweden and in the UK over the last twenty five years. The subtitle is perhaps misleading: this is absolutely not “Musicology for Dummies”. Trained musicians will get as much out of its 700 pages as the rest of us, and find it just as challenging, just as skilled painters are just as likely to profit as others are from John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*,<sup>2</sup> the comparison which most easily springs to mind.

One notable feature of the work is its tone. If you like your musicology textbooks chirpy and chatty, and filled with personal anecdotes, this is the one for you. The book is a highly ambitious enterprise. It tries to cover ways of looking at, understanding and analyzing all kinds of music and begins with the argument that traditional musicology has generally been developed in order to discuss Western classical music, and does not have the vocabulary and concepts necessary to discuss more

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Tagg and Robert Clarida, *Ten Little Title Tunes*, New York and Montreal, Mass Media Music Scholars' Press, 2002, 898 pp.

<sup>2</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London, Penguin, 2008 (1972), 176 pp.

widely all forms of music (rock music, non-Western folk music, advertizing jingles or film music, for example).

The ideas are presented with tremendous pedagogy, giving wherever possible musical references which are well-known to Western readers (The violins in the shower scene from Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the ABBA song "Fernando", Handel's *Messiah*). New concepts are explained as simply as can be managed ("It's like queuing at the Post Office ..." p.517). And most chapters end with a summary of new concepts introduced and principal ideas explained. Nevertheless, as Tagg has had to invent or extend dozens of concepts, and there is much new terminology, the reader will need to concentrate.

The examples he uses are breathtaking in range. From death metal to medieval motets, from sub-Saharan cross-rhythm drumming to gospel music, from classic rock or disco anthems to Beethoven, Strauss and Chopin, Brazilian *baião* or house music hits: in all there are several hundred musical examples, and no reader is likely to recognize more than half of them. The index to the book gives internet links to recordings of many of the examples.

Tagg maintains that it is not useful to start from the idea that there is a fixed hierarchy of types of music which are "good" or "bad". In discourse around music, whether in everyday life or in the media, aesthetic judgements are generally rushed into immediately, instead of after careful consideration of how a piece of music works, and what its objectives are. The present work, then, concentrates, not on questions of aesthetic value, but on questions of communication.

The book is structured into fourteen chapters, briefly presented here. In the first, Tagg summarizes the importance of music in today's society, and goes on in chapters two and three to present some of the definitions and axioms of his book. He tries to account for the lack of a musicology which takes on the full range of musics and the full range of musical experience. Three reasons for this situation are put forward:

Firstly, there is the dogma of “absolute music”: the idea that music does not and cannot represent anything outside itself, a view which has been hugely influential in musicological circles. Tagg maintains that if we want to understand the phenomenon, it is essential to “think of music as if it really meant something other than itself” (p.vii).<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, established musicology has preferred not to deal with types of music - from house music or heavy metal to the advertising jingle or the video game accompaniment - which are less prestigious. Much of musicology has been developed for the purpose of analyzing Western classical music: a book entitled “A Music Dictionary”<sup>4</sup> or “Music and Meaning”<sup>5</sup> feels no need to explain or justify its coverage of only Western classical music.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, there exists a powerful tradition of only analyzing music from the point of view of the musician (the poietic), and using categories and terms defined around the playing of music, and not around the listening to it. Tagg regrets this since he is convinced that all listeners have a wide range of competence and knowledge about what music means, and about how that meaning is structured.

Tagg calls then for a broader conception of musicology, including all forms of music and examined from the point of view of the listener. This, he claims, would allow musical texts and experiences to be included in the field of cultural studies, cultural history and area studies. The importance of music to billions of human beings throughout history demands that all fields of the social sciences take the subject seriously. At the same time, Tagg takes issue with the commonly expressed idea that music is a universal language; it is, rather, for him, a non-linguistic form of communication.

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See Daniel Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Roy Bennett, *Music Dictionary*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Jenefer Robinson (dir.), *Music and Meaning*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> This is slowly changing. Some more recent books such as *The Story of Music* by Howard Goodall, (Chatto & Windus, London, 2013) and *Music: a very short introduction*, Nicolas Cook, (Oxford, Oxford Paperbacks, 2006), deal with a wider range of musics.

In Chapter four, the book presents some of the fields of study which have nevertheless made some limited progress in producing a wider understanding of music in society: ethnomusicology, the sociology of music and the semiotics of music. Ethnomusicologists have studied pre-industrial societies and examined the roles and meanings which music has in these cultures. Sociologists have looked at group identity (mods or punks or rappers, for example) and how music fits in as signifier and ritual. Semioticians have looked at the meanings of different musical structures. Tagg regrets however the restricted interests of almost all semioticians who have worked in the field: they study, he complains, internal structures of pieces of music. However,

Evidence linking musical structure to musician intentions or listener responses and discussion of these aspects of semiosis [in relation] to the technology, economy, society and ideology in which that semiosis takes place (pragmatics) is conspicuous by its absence (p.145-6).

He also points out the sore lack of links between the three fields of ethnomusicology, sociology and semiotics.

In the following chapter, the work deals with the problem of how we can know what music means, and what we need to know in order to listen appropriately to a given piece of music. Much of this knowledge is culturally based: the full meaning of Japanese opera is not available to European listeners with no training, or at least they risk not understanding its codes; the use of semitone dyads in Bulgarian women's folk songs is misinterpreted by uninformed Western ears as an expression of harshness, a meaning it does not have in that culture, where it is heard as fun-loving (p.20).

In Chapter six, (on "intersubjectivity") Tagg deals with the systematic study of a piece of music from the point of view of reception. If we play the same piece of music to a thousand people, will we find regularities in what they associate it with? Certainly, music libraries used by film and television producers,

which are full of pieces of music labelled “scary”, “dreamy”, “spy music” and so on, assume that there are such regularities. In this chapter, we visit briefly some of the methodology and the conclusions of Tagg’s previous book, *Ten Little Title Tunes*.

Chapter seven (on “interobjectivity”) looks at ways of understanding a given piece of music and its meaning by comparing it with other pieces which are structurally similar. It does this by taking a piece of music apart into its constituent *musemes*<sup>7</sup>, *museme stacks* or *museme strings*. Tagg shows how analysis resulting from formal musical training is not the only way to study the structure of a piece of music, and how “someone with little or no formal musical training, someone who can’t tell a diminished seventh from a hole in the wall” can dismantle and understand the communication involved in a song or tune.

Chapters eight nine and ten deal with the different variables which can be used by the musician, consciously or otherwise: from timbre and rhythm to loudness, pitch and tonality. Chapter eight “terms, time and space” looks in particular at the importance of “aural staging”. A flute can be made to sound as if it is static or moving, as if it is in a warehouse or in a small living room. Modern sound production makes it easy to choose the aural staging of each instrument or voice separately, or to change the aural staging from one minute to the next, to bring about a desired effect. Chapter nine, “Timbre, loudness and tonality” looks also at harmony, polyphony, chord progressions and other sound characteristics, asking in each case “What can they communicate?”

Chapter ten looks at the toolbox of the singer, who can choose a “vocal costume” to go with the personality they wish to put over, (nonchalant rocker, crooner, angry punk singer or world-weary bluesman, for example) or to match the genre they are singing in (fado, country music, gangster rap or opera, for example). We see how vocal costume can also be used in

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<sup>7</sup> A **museme** is a minimal unit of musical meaning, analogous to a morpheme in linguistics, the basic unit of musical expression which in a piece of music cannot be further divided without losing its meaning.

conversation (old-fashioned- teacher-talk for example: “You’ve let me down, you’ve let the school down, but most of all you’ve let yourself down.” or parent-baby talk “Are we going to put our booties on now, are we?”). We learn that casting agents for cartoon films are very experienced in describing the vocal costumes they require for particular characters (and many of us have noticed how excessive concentration on stereotypical vocal costume can produce poorly dubbed films).

In chapter eleven we move on to structure, elements of linear structure in songs or pieces of music (**diataxis**). A detailed analysis of what is going on in the song, “Fernando” by the Swedish group Abba, helps us understand how canvasses of connotation and denotation take the listener through a carefully structured listening experience. We are then taken on a tour around the classic structures used in popular songs. The extremely common “AABA” structure (for example in the blues classic “Blue Moon”, where the music of the first verse is repeated twice, followed by a different piece and then a return to the initial theme) is described and other possibilities are looked at. The decline of the structure AABA in Western pop music since the 1960s is commented on, as is the increasing diversification of diatactic structures within Western popular music over the last fifty years. A song from The Beatles (“A Day in the Life” p.402) and another from Gentle Giant (p.403) are analyzed in detail to show how the structure is used to accompany the lyrical content. We also explore the meaning of duration in song, and Tagg invites us to reflect on the fact that “John Cage’s famous piece of silence (4:33) lasts about as long as the ‘Hallelujah Chorus’ by Handel (4:34) or as ‘Gimme Shelter’ by the Rolling Stones (4:32).”

Chapter twelve looks at synchronic aspects of structure (syncrisis, what happens simultaneously in a piece of music), and what meanings these might carry. Responsorial songs in religious ceremonies, singing in unison or in close harmony, and other types of **syncrisis** are examined. We learn about the domination, over the last few hundred years, of a particular structure, that of melody/accompaniment. Tagg points out that

almost uniquely among Western popular musics, house music chooses to distance itself from the melody/accompaniment model (there is very little “tune”, it seems to be all “backing”) and poses the question of why this should be.

If, like the rise of monocentric paintings replacing polycentric around the time of the Renaissance (Da Vinci rather than Breughel), and the rise of the novel form in literature, the domination of the melody/accompaniment structure reflects the rise of individual consciousness in society as it moved out of feudalism, then what does the structure of house music say about the generation who produced it and broke to some extent with the type of oppositional subjectivity proposed by rock music? This is just one example of the fascinating questions Tagg puts forward.

Chapter thirteen tries to set up a typology of signs present in music. Various kinds of **anaphone** are examined (like analogies, but music-based: a stylization of a musical sound stands in for city traffic or rolling ocean waves or motorbike engines ...). What lets us know a piece of music has ended? **Finality markers** are examined, from the fade-out of many pop songs to the grandiose ending of romantic symphonies. We also come to understand other **episodic markers**, and see some which Abba, Chopin and Strauss have in common. Finally, the **genre synecdoche** is discussed. This is a sign consisting in the “quotation” of a characteristic on one kind of music (say Scottish bagpipes) within a piece of music from another genre. The quotation of Scottish bagpipes is used to mean Scottish traditional music, or indeed to “mean” Scotland in general, just as pan pipes “mean” South American folk music, etc.

The final chapter, number fourteen, takes a particular case study, that of music used in film and poses the question of how to analyze it. Tagg explains that the aim of the chapter is to try to show that the categories and concepts developed in the rest of the book are actually useful, and in parts it reads like a teacher’s handbook for a class in film music. This genre is particularly illuminating to study since it involves musicians and non-musicians cooperating to add extra meaning to the



filmed narrative. He also examines fascinating questions from the history of cinema, such as: Why was “silent” cinema accompanied by live music, and why was this music taken almost exclusively from the European classical tradition?

The study of popular music is still not fully recognized in universities, no doubt both because of reservations about the interest of analyzing popular music, and because of a lack of understanding of the sort of analysis which is possible. I believe that Tagg’s work could help to move this situation forward. But this volume is not only for proponents of “Popular Music Studies” like myself. The wide-ranging and fruitful fields of cultural history and of cultural studies in general have often sidelined musical activity, for lack of concepts and methods to understand music as a socially-constructed activity. This book deserves to be a seminal text which will help allow the integration of music into these fields, and the omnipresence of music in modern lives indicates sufficiently the desirability of such a change.

Philip Tagg is a man with a mission, who believes in the importance of work on a new, broader and deeper, musicology. His interest in making this work available has led him, now that his academic credentials are fully established, to sell his books in electronic form at low prices on his website<sup>8</sup> Tagg.org. It is certainly a book to re-read, or to dip into as a reference volume. You may feel you deserve a diploma at the end of the book, but your view of how music works will have changed, whether you are a trained musician or not.

John Mullen

Dr John Mullen is a lecturer and researcher at the University of Paris East at Creteil, France and a member of IMAGER. He has published research both on the history of British Trade Unionism and on the history of British popular music. His book on popular song in Britain during the First World War, which

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<sup>8</sup> [www.Tagg.org](http://www.Tagg.org)

analyzes over a thousand songs and the industry that produced them, was published in French in 2012 by L'Harmattan, Paris, and will be published by Ashgate in English in early 2015. Other recent publications have included "Anti-Black Racism in British Popular Music 1880-1920", as well as articles on Irish songs in Victorian and Edwardian music hall. He is currently editing a special issue of the *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* on the subject of the Great War.