

Introduction

How this book will work

Embarking on a project which highlights how and why pop songs communicate is akin to being on a journey you know will never end. You will never run out of material; great songs will always be written. The project will be delivered chapter by chapter in PDF form on my website. In the pursuit of songs to analyse I have consulted widely amongst colleagues and online. Songs are not chosen because I necessarily like them and they are not chosen because they're perceived as being fantastic works of genius. They are chosen because they contain characteristics, features or elements which made them stand apart from the rest, rise above their contemporaries and be remembered. In most cases they are hit singles. They all contain moments within which connect emotionally to listeners. This project discusses what those moments are and how and why they are so powerful. The songs featured in this book will be analysed in context of their structure, their use of harmony, arrangement, production and composition. Songs will also be analysed in context of how the 'function' of the different components affects the outcome of the song and enables it to communicate often quite specific emotions to listeners. Any music that succeeds in engaging us emotionally does so because it provides a function and fulfils a purpose which engages and satisfies us. Some historical and cultural environments will be referenced too, where they are relevant, but even then only in a supportive context. Lyrical context will be referenced even less; there are many good books out there which deal with lyrical meaning; this book primarily concerns itself with how songs communicate musically and structurally, not lyrically. A main part of the discussion will centre specifically round arranging and orchestration; in other words how harmony is applied and used in songs. Although an introduction to arranging has its own chapter, the practical applications of string arranging, horn arranging and other areas of orchestration and production are addressed when they become relevant in the analysis of songs in the main section, entitled 'song analysis'.

My motivation for analysing music

Ever since I can remember I could listen to music and then instantly replicate it on the piano. My sister (who is four years older than me) as an eight year old used to get annoyed when she came home from piano lessons, practiced the piano and then, when she'd finished, had to listen to me repeating what she'd just played. I played by ear back then. When I learned to read and was able to classify and categorise music through notation and harmony I was then able to know the notes I heard when listening to music. I would know the chords instantly too. From the age of fifteen, right through to now, I have played music, composed music and orchestrated music within the pop music and film music industries. When everything you hear is translated in your head into a visual form and categorised, where you see the chords literally as you hear them, the inevitable consequence of this is that you build up a vast database of information, based on your experiences. The inevitable consequence of all this is that eventually you begin to realise which sections in songs are the bits that engage people and make the hits. You begin to be able to hear a song, see the dots in your head and recognise the commonalities and the structures that bind music together as well as recognising the bits that make the song special or different. Eventually I became a session musician, professional composer of music for TV and Film and also an orchestrator. More recently in the past fifteen years or so my main work has been as an academic, where I continue to analyse music and lecture in composition and orchestration. The only reason I mention all this is by way of explaining what drove me to end up analysing music.

The way the material is organised

The order of songs in the main section of the book (entitled 'song analysis') was a major concern and took a while for me to work out. I couldn't decide whether to do it by decade, year, artist, writer, style, genre or alphabetically. Even within these systems songs have clear associations and connection to other songs which share similar characteristics but which don't fall conveniently in any of the aforementioned orders. So, for the most part the songs simply fall as they were analysed. Some songs have links with others, links which are explored, but equally many stand alone. The first stage of release will be the initial sections which come prior to the main section on 'Song Analysis'. These are:

- INTRODUCTION
- WHAT IS MUSIC?
- POP THEORY AND MUSICAL ANALYSIS
- ARRANGING

- SONG ANALYSIS

Songs

The history of music is the history of the world through music. Arguably more than any other creative art or product, our lives are contextualised by music. Many of our personal and shared experiences are distilled through the music we listen to. Even in the new world in which we all live, where people of all ages are drawn to alternative forms of interactive entertainment, songs still retain a unique place in people's lives. Perhaps this is because songs are not just entertainment; they manage to affect us in a way that goes way beyond simple entertainment. They represent a much deeper experience and cast a much bigger shadow in our lives than mere entertainment. Songs put down markers in our lives; often we remember key events in our own lives and in the world outside through the enduring power of songs.

Music and us

Whilst newer forms of 'interactive entertainment', such as video games, may satisfy us, songs become embedded within us; all of which is a little bit strange because music is not really ever 'understood' in a *literal* sense, except by people who read, interpret and understand it. Most people have a decent degree of understanding about most things creative, not least because they are able to rationalise them visually. Think about it: visual art we mostly understand because we can *see it* whereas music, for most people at least, only communicates aurally. Hundreds of thousands of people happily flock to museums such as the Tate Modern in London to see images, some of which are often quite abstract; and yet comparatively few people will interact or engage with abstract music; some things are definitely easier on the eye than the ear. People are more prepared to accept visual abstractions than they are musical abstractions. This is largely because with music they lack the visual dimension with which to rationalise it, but it is also because of the musical diet most people are exposed to, most of which corresponds to simple predictable formulas.

People generally have no proper understanding about how music is conceived or constructed; they have little awareness about how ideas are cultivated and how structure, harmony and texture are used to create emotion. Music journalists may disagree with this comment, but we only have to scan most articles to realise that whilst they will often go into commendable detail about the historical, social and cultural impact of songs and offer theories as to how the words communicate, little is offered in terms of specifics about the harmonic structure and structural makeup of songs.

The use of metaphor to understand music

One of the slightly odd things about musical pleasure is that the moment most listeners try to isolate and rationalise their experiences they are forced into a realm of the metaphor. We talk about harmony sounding 'sad' or 'anguished' or of textures sounding 'stormy' or of melodies sounding melancholic or plaintive. Vibrations in the air, which is what music amounts to, cannot literally be any of those things. And yet without these interpretative metaphors we wouldn't hear music, only sound. The 'meaning of music' is a relatively new area of discussion. Looking back to medieval times you will find endless writings on the mathematics of music, scrutinising harmonies purely in technical terms or in some cases you would find discussion about the link between music and the 'divine'. But about the expressive and emotional power of music little was ever said, until more recent times.

This project aims to discuss harmony intensely, not just in terms of maths and numbers and facts but in terms of how 'meaning' can be gained from music. I want to discuss and analyse music in depth to find out which elements cause it to have an emotional effect on us, and why this effect is usually social rather than merely personal.

Harmony as the central nervous system of music

Harmony is the central nervous system of music; it defines the character of most music and yet people hardly ever talk about it. This is because in order to understand it, people would need to classify and categorise what they were hearing and be able to comprehend the context in which it was heard. In other words, they would need to read and understand music, which few do.

Songwriters and artists have endured a prolonged onslaught by the perfect storm of, on the one hand, a society seemingly more and more disinterested with listening and experiencing music, and on the other hand online businesses which despoil and plunder the work of creatives with little financial return. Despite this, songs still manage to communicate in a way which newer forms of entertainment can only envy. Songs aren't just entertainment and nor are they simply escapism; they fulfil a function in our lives.

What kind of person is a composer?

Given the relative simplicity of music structure and the ease with which it has been appropriated, knowingly or unknowingly from composer to composer over the centuries, it's easy to form the opinion that writers often get disproportionate credit for things they merely *decided* to use, rather than created 'from scratch'. This exposes the truth, which is that usually, in reality composing tends to be more about arranging, architecture, placement and assembly than it is about truly ground-breaking original thinking. Most *successful* composers have three people living permanently inside their heads. One is the imaginative creative who constantly tries to come up with new ideas. Another is the pragmatist, the realist, the logician, the 'closer'; the voice which stops you endlessly pontificating to a point where you never finish or simply lose the thread. This person's guiding light is structure and form. The third person living inside your head is an arranger/producer. If we strip away daft metaphysical notions of genius we bring ourselves closer to knowing that composing isn't the closed circle we might assume it is. It isn't unknowable. It encompasses structure, which we can understand relatively easily. It encompasses arrangement, orchestration, texture, instrumentation, production. It is all those things to which we then add the things music doesn't itself have; choice, opinion, judgment, attitude, perspective. *Then* we have music. It's not impenetrable or unfathomable or indecipherable. It's not about genius or magic; it is all explainable.

But that doesn't mean it's easy, because if it was, everyone would do it. The reason only a few succeed is not because it's impossible unless you're a genius; it's because it requires an odd combination of skills. It is tremendously difficult to harness, reconcile and execute our imagination, creativity, ingenuity, skill, talent, expertise, judgement, perception, discrimination and mix it with an innate sense of structural and harmonic knowledge to make it into something which sounds new; not so new that it puts people off and not so predictable that people see it as a copy of someone else's work. *This* is why it's hard. If you're a successful composer, this is what you've managed to do well. Composing is not impossible but it is difficult, gruelling, challenging, arduous and tiring. One of the reasons it is so challenging is, as I said earlier, is because it requires an odd combination of skills and characteristics; on the one hand, someone who has a creative and imaginative free spirit, and on the other, someone who is focussed, dedicated, resolute, tenacious, obsessive, fanatical and driven and who has gallons of realism, pragmatism and logicity. *That's* why not many people do it and even less people succeed at it; not because it's impossible but because it requires such an odd mix of characteristics, knowledge, ability and skill. Many people can compose music insofar as they can 'think stuff up'. What makes composers into *successful* composers is the ability to close the deal, to zip the project up, to finish. A great many would-be composers have acres of ideas floating round in their studios or on paper. But it takes a different mentality to get it done and walk away. It takes a different mentality to finish the project and be prepared to be judged.

The fear of failure

Many people fear failure; this is what sometimes makes composers into terminal apologists for their own work when it is reviewed by their friends and contemporaries. They talk of it 'not being quite finished' or of it 'needing a bit of tweaking' or 'needing a different mix' often as a tool to avoid the reality of a finished product being judged. It is sometimes this inability to *conclude* that separates the amateurs from the professionals. There is often a perception of artists as scatty, absent-minded, eccentric, dreamy, hare-brained individuals.

Mostly this is untrue. They are often very strange people but if they were all as scatty as they are often portrayed to be, quite simply they would be too flaky; they wouldn't get things done, or it would simply take too long. The one common denominator of successful composers is that they are all fantastically organised and driven to the point of obsession. A good composer is one who understands the instrumental complexion of their creation and doesn't leave such vast considerations to chance. Songwriters usually have a fourth person inside their head; the lyricist, whose job is to create words which communicate in conjunction with the music.

Meaning in Music

This book's centre of gravity is the issue of how and why music suggests and implies meaning and emotion, how these translate and how they are used in songs. Obviously words contain actual, literal meanings on a surface level and often also on a deeper, sub-textual level, which help songs communicate in a specific way. Much less understood is the way the music aids this process; particularly the structure, the chords used and the textures employed. Hopefully this project will show that music *does* create common and predictable emotions within the listener and that emotions can be generated by the use of specific chord sequences and other harmonic and instrumental devices. I say this because centuries ago composers and musicologists were largely of the opinion that music (not lyrics) was incapable of imparting any kind of general meaning which could be understood. They were adamant that if music seemed to impart meaning, it just *seemed* that way.

Indeed, one reason given for the success of song, just as in film, is that music's non-representational nature is best used when *accompanying* something, i.e. words, to make a song, or pictures to make a film. Music's 'non-representational nature' refers to the ambiguity of its signifiers, i.e. the supposed supreme difficulty it has in communicating any meaning. Composers were at pains to suggest that *how* they wrote music was a process beyond rationalisation. But they were remarkably reticent about articulating how they thought all the stuff up. This fuelled the other prevailing idea; the absurd myth of the 'lone genius'. So in the end it went something like this: if composers, musicologists and academics couldn't figure out how people wrote music, then how they did it was beyond our understanding; if something is beyond our understanding we generally tend to either ridicule it or revere it. Luckily for composers we decided not to lock them up or burn them at the stake but instead to revere and worship; to admire and venerate. This has affected how they are perceived and how they are treated and how they are recompensed, with regard to royalties.

Composers would talk of 'inspiration' and of music being 'from the heart'. They would talk about musical ideas 'coming from nowhere'; about conceptualization being an ethereal almost spiritual event, beyond understanding. Whether composers actually believed this or whether it was simply good PR is unclear, but these sentiments continue to this day to foster a fundamentally flawed perception of how music is conceived and made; it affected for an eternity how listeners and music lovers rationalise music. Hundreds of years of music history tended to faithfully and happily restate the same views *as fact* and so the great lie continued. This is not to denigrate or malign the work of great composers or songwriters; merely to re-contextualise it with a modern perspective and more honest context.

If we look at postwar avant-garde 'serious' music, this is an area where the relationship between music and its 'explaining text' has become one of total dependence. This kind of music could rarely be understood without being explained first. The danger of this situation is that the relationship between music and the words that explain it becomes inverted; music is judged by how well it satisfies the programme notes. What this project seeks to identify is how music communicates a sense of meaning to listeners; not by giving people a set of essays to read before listening, but by highlighting how music satisfies or provokes our sensibilities by utilizing harmonic devices which can create emotion. People love listening to their favorite music; they don't need to read a thesis in order to be entertained and satisfied and unlighted and emotionally enriched. Their ability to read the meaning lies within *them*, not the music. Music suggests and infers emotional meaning and such meaning is the subject of intense discussion in most of the chapters in this project. To be clear, such meaning is not actually physically contained in the music itself, it is contained in our reaction and response *to* the music, just as words only possess meaning because of the collective consciousness and common beliefs and understanding of those who interpret them. The meanings music imparts are rarely only apparent to just one individual. They are frequently general and obvious to most listeners, albeit to varying levels of accuracy depending on someone's aural cognitive abilities, emotional intelligence and intellect.

True, the meaning harmony imparts does not translate literally to most people with the immediacy and succinctness inherent in the written or spoken word or the image, but that is simply because the meanings in words and images have evolved in more of an absolute, complete and unequivocal way; we can all convert words into meaning relatively quickly and concisely. But there *are* meanings, moods, emotions and feelings created within us by music which are ultimately governed by our unified and collective reactions and responses to specific harmonies, chords, intervals and other devices and situations. This means we can deduce how, why and in what circumstances certain harmonies, intervals, instrumental combinations or melodies continue to affect us in fairly consistent, predictable and reasonably uniform ways.

Warnings from history

History gives us a long list of composers from centuries ago right up to now, whose work is brilliantly imaginative. The creativity involved and the sheer level of skill, dedication and incredible ability is staggering. But it is not beyond belief because *it happened*. The great problem with history, or rather the *telling* of it, is that it is mired in sentimentality. Is every notable or historically famous act of musical composition to be seen as 'awesome'? And if some are and some aren't, who decides what is good and what is bad? Who decides who the geniuses are? Good and bad do not exist; they are merely opinions, not facts. Genius does not exist and as a means of evaluating the worth of a composer, it is a meaningless accolade which simply means that the person *giving* the accolade is unable to articulate their thoughts and opinions coherently and rationally and instead opts for the safe haven of a term nobody understands but everyone agrees must surely be fantastic.

Looking at how and why society places such high accolades on music from the so-called 'great composers', we need only look to how society reacts nowadays to any artist or composer or songwriter who achieves commercial success. Almost all are universally paraded as being 'brilliant' or 'superb' or 'awesome' or 'genius', as if anyone who succeeds commercially is also by definition excellent. There is a societal tendency to overcook the importance, relevance or ability of artists and writers. Partly this is the result of ignorance and partly it comes out of our need for winners and heroes. This is worse than it was two or three hundred years ago, but it would be a mistake to presume that these dynamics didn't exist centuries ago. But ultimately if we discuss music and creativity through these distorted prisms we actually, and ironically, debase the work of creative artists. As a society we tend to distil music through the flawed and infantile perspective of a media obsessed with celebrity, not ability, and in so doing we damage how society interacts with its musicians and composers.

As you may be aware my last three books were on film music. People might imagine that film music and songwriting are quite far apart, but this is wrong. The ability of the songwriter to link music with words to create something that communicates emotionally as one entity is little different from the film composer who links their music with moving images to create an emotional experience. Both involve the merging of two separate areas to create one experience. This project is based on my own research and is contextualised by my extensive work within the industry as a session musician, arranger and orchestrator. I hope you enjoy it and that it can be of benefit.