



What is Popular Music Studies Today? A review of the 19th biennial conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music

GABRIELLE KIELICH

McGill University, Montreal, Canada
E-mail: gabrielle.kielich@mail.mcgill.ca

The 19th biennial conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) took place in Kassel, Germany, from 26 to 30 June 2017 at the city's Kulturbahnhof. The theme of the conference was Popular Music Studies Today. Papers and panels were organised by various approaches to studying popular music, including researching, analysing, teaching and learning, remapping, narrating and technology. I am a third-year PhD student in the department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University and a first-time attendee of the international IASPM conference. This review offers an overview of key aspects of the conference, highlights papers which I view as being of particular note, provides general impressions of the wider structure of the conference and briefly summarises my personal view – albeit a hopefully reflective one – of what the conference indicates about the direction of popular music studies today.

The organising committee placed significance on the conference being held in Germany, noting that it was the first time that IASPM had been hosted in a German-speaking country since 1991. Moreover, they were particularly interested in drawing attention to the German-language branch of IASPM, D-A-CH, which launched in 2012. A reception was held on the first evening to introduce the organisation. Research on German perspectives of popular music studies was presented during a Thursday afternoon panel. Papers and panels throughout the conference addressed topics including German soul music, the role of religion and music in East and West Germany, the distribution and impact of streaming services throughout the country, and a specific look at paradigms of popular music studies in Germany by organiser Jan Hemming.

The conference was structured by seven to eight simultaneous panel sessions. They generally began at 9:00 a.m. and finished around 6:30 p.m. each day (with the exception of Wednesday afternoon, which was reserved for excursions). The

committee stated that the conference's acceptance rate was 95 per cent, although some presenters subsequently withdrew. One result of this was that panels varied from two to four paper presentations, with the imbalanced number creating confusion with start times and difficulties moving between panels.

Several papers made significant contributions and brought new and innovative approaches to studying popular music. My own research focuses on labour in the creative industries, and several papers addressed interesting perspectives on musicians' work and skills beyond and related to music-making. Eileen Karmy's (University of Glasgow) archival research uncovered how unions in Valparaiso shaped careers for musicians in Chile. Laura Watson (Maynooth University) theorised autobiographies as creative and performative spaces for well-known musicians by positioning them between the roles of author and character. Michael Dannhauer (Leuphana University Lüneburg) suggested that the acquisition of life skills, via higher education, would assist musicians with their career endeavours. What was missing in his discussion, however, was an understanding of the real conditions of work that musicians confront and how these skills prepare them. Nevertheless, Dannhauer's discussion on mindfulness was a reminder of the oversight on mental health issues, an area noticeably absent particularly considering recent occurrences in the music industries.

Nancy Bruseker's (Independent Scholar) research was one of the few papers featuring content on touring, centred on late 19th and early 20th century practices, and provided a view of the music industries' operation when centred on live performance. Colleagues spoke highly of Steve Waksman's (Smith College) problematisation of Philip Auslander's notion of 'liveness' during which he discussed how the concept of live music is shaped by factors other than recorded music. Kyle Devine (University of Oslo) presented research on shellac to argue for an expanded understanding of the recording industry, one that includes the materials that are needed for recordings to exist and circulate and that also become forms of cultural and environmental waste. These thought-provoking papers indicate that popular music is being written as a history of both live performance and recordings through critical re-examination of the industries and practices within which they develop.

The cultural and economic benefit of live music is clearly on the agenda. Matt Brennan (University of Edinburgh) and Emma Webster's (University of Edinburgh) UK Live Music Census provided a transferrable methodological framework to measure its impact on cities. Martin Cloonan's (University of Turku) critical view of the secondary concert ticket market explored issues of property and consumer interests. These papers importantly address the structure, value and impact of live music. However, they also leave room for a more focused understanding of its relation to inequality and privilege as related to gender, sexuality, race and class and in non-Anglophone contexts.

Some of these issues, particularly gender and feminism, were addressed in papers that several colleagues spoke highly of that should be mentioned here. Catherine Strong (RMIT University) explored grassroots feminist activism that demonstrated the marginalisation of women in Melbourne music scenes; and Norma Coates (University of Western Ontario) discussed 1960s teen music magazines from the perspective of how girls consumed them.

The conference featured two keynote speakers, Robin James (University of North Carolina at Charlotte) and André Doehring (University of Music and Performing Arts Graz). Their respective speeches exhibited the breadth of concerns

and interests of contemporary popular music scholars today. The former drew on Greek philosophy and 'demonic calculus' alongside contemporary pop to explore issues of gender and racial subordination. The latter, in observing an insufficient number of papers on jazz at the conference, prompted one audience member to draw attention to the striking difference between, and longer history of, jazz and popular music studies in North America as compared with Europe, thereby addressing the reflexive value of an international meeting.

In the past, IASPM conference reviews published in *Popular Music* have commented on the diminishing references to the field's influential scholars in paper presentations. This was briefly observed during this year's conference, when it was noted on the second day that the work of Simon Frith had only been mentioned once. This self-reflexivity suggests a genuine willingness not to take for granted the foundational figures in the field as it moves forward. At the same time, drawing attention to this is indicative of the field's healthy growth, richness and new research directions that expand the kinds of questions being asked about popular music.

From my perspective as a relative newcomer to the field, IASPM is a welcoming and enriching environment for researchers from all experience levels to openly discuss their research. In my graduate seminars, I was told by professors describing academic culture to expect difficult feedback and a range of critical questions and comments during Q&A sessions. In this way, the limited amount of healthy disagreement, debate or constructive criticism at IASPM was surprising. When it was present, these challenging comments brought interesting, important and necessary considerations to the field. Being a supportive community should not mean being an uncritical one.

As a PhD student, the issue of employment prospects for junior scholars and graduate students seeking entry to or advancement in the field is a pressing concern. The demands and uncertainty surrounding job placement draw attention to IASPM's role, and that of the international conference, in fostering awareness about and preparation for the realities of the job market. While individual branches do address this on some level, it does seem an oversight not to feature any panels or organised events regarding career paths at the organisation's largest meeting. Perhaps such activities could be included in the 2019 conference programme in Canberra, Australia.

Some of the conferences held by the major scholarly organisations in the field of media and communication studies feature topical working groups and one-day pre-conference workshops centred on scholars' areas of interest and expertise. The scale of the IASPM International conference and the great array of papers it encompasses, while thematically linked, could benefit from an additional system of organisation. Focused topic groups could be effective in generating discussion and facilitating networking, in addition to helping to establish areas of oversight or oversaturation.

In sum, as the theme of the conference was Popular Music Studies Today, then the research highlighted emphasises a contemporary focus on intervention and impact in the academy and beyond. It also expands the boundaries of what popular music studies is – and can be – as well as the diverse methods and approaches used to arrive there.