

A prescribed alternative mainstream: popular music and canon formation

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Abstract

This article applies the processes of canon formation suggested by Philip V. Bohlman in The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World to the historiography of popular music. Bohlman distinguishes between at least three different types of folk music canon: a small group canon, a mediated canon and an imagined canon. Adjusting Bohlman's ideas to the case of popular music, a reformulation is proposed in the form of an alternative canon, a mainstream canon, and a prescribed canon. The unstable power relations implied by the juxtaposition of different canons are considered, as well as the cumulative aspect of canon formation. The article also looks for each type of canon in the media through which historical knowledge is transmitted, and considers the tendency to narrate the historiography of marginal musics with more ephemeral media than the printed word.

To celebrate the alleged fiftieth birthday of rock music, the largest daily paper in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat* (*HS*), has since February 2004 been publishing short columns about the 'central' phenomena of rock music. The columns are published twice a week (predominantly in the Monday and Thursday editions; they are also compiled on *HS*'s website), and in them a few authors (mainly the paper's own staff member rock aficionados) put forward 'important' recordings by year – indeed only one recording per annum. Thus in 1954 Bill Haley was 'a step ahead' with 'Rock Around the Clock', in 1963 *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* 'shook up rock with his lyrics', and in 1967 'the high priest of psychedelic rock', Jimi Hendrix, took rock 'to a wild and unexpected direction' (*HS* 2004).¹

I am eagerly waiting to see the final list of rock's 'finest' that *HS* will eventually provide.² As the editors of the series themselves acknowledge, they are facing 'a mission impossible' as they are struggling with an abundance of choices in their attempt to find one record per year which would have been 'progressive in its time' and 'essentially influencing the development of popular music' (*HS* 2004). However, there is nothing particularly new in this kind of popular music 'historiography'; listings of recordings that are held to be controversial are as common as artist biographies. Gilbert B. Rodman, in fact, suggests that there are at least three 'strikingly different ways' to tell 'the same' story about how rock music has evolved: first, one can treat the music 'as a creative, artistic endeavour' and focus on the 'Great Artists responsible for making such Great Music'; second, it is possible to concentrate on the recording industry and emphasise how the music 'becomes more of a terrain created and fought over by shrewd entrepreneurs and media empires'; third, there is the option to deal with the music as 'a powerful social, cultural, and political force' and try

to ‘explain how popular music both shaped and was shaped by the culture around it’ (Rodman 1999, p. 42). By the looks of it thus far, *HS* seems to be especially utilising the first of these.

This kind of collection of famous names and precious pieces of music can be seen as the backbone of modern music historiography and canon formation. Jukka Sarjala, a Finnish cultural historian of music, refers to this as a purposeful practice to ‘promote the competitiveness of [national] musical life . . . [and] the parading and interpretation of works which belong to the regular repertoire’, especially in the realm of so-called art music (Sarjala 2002, pp. 14–15). To him, the question ‘What for?’ is an instrumental one, as the answers to this question will reveal what the respondents would like to do with historical knowledge. He claims that there is no such thing as natural historiographical tradition; instead history is always ‘*history for somebody*’ and its truths are the result of struggles over power to claim those ‘truths’. In relation to musical canons, Sarjala writes that ‘[i]f the music historians accommodate to the canon of authors and works, they at the same time approve the results of power-struggles and choices made in the past’ (*ibid.*, p. 19).

Yet I would hesitate to dismiss the notion of canon altogether. As Philip V. Bohlman writes in his ‘study of folk music in the modern world’, canons represent a way for members of a community to express their shared values (Bohlman 1988, p. 105). I am not proposing that challenging existing canons is futile, quite the contrary, but as Bohlman further suggests, it is possible to detect processes of canon formation on different levels. In the context of folk music, it is, according to Bohlman, feasible to distinguish between at least three different types of canon: a small group canon, a mediated canon, and an imagined canon (*ibid.*, p. 111).

There is no reason for me to suspect that canon formation would not also work in the same manner in the context of popular music. Yet the discussion about canonisation in popular music is virtually non-existent. Therefore, to activate and stimulate this discussion, I find it reasonable to ask whether the processes of canon formation suggested by Bohlman would be applicable to the historiography of popular music.

On historiography and canonisation

Writing history is always about selecting things to tell – writing total history is impossible. Sarjala points out that ‘historiography is a struggle about what is worth remembering in a society’ (Sarjala 2002, p. 19); to this I would add that it also concerns *how* things should be remembered. In any case, it seems that under relatively stable societal conditions certain things are remembered more often than others, and from a certain point of view. Liberal societies allow perhaps more debate over historical facts and interpretations, but they nevertheless tend to emphasise certain forms of historiography over others. For example, the ‘heroic’ Winter War of 1939 has been (and quite probably still is) much more attractive to Finnish historians and audiences than the years 1940–1944 fought alongside Nazi Germany.

The same goes for music, of course. It is virtually impossible to write the history of Finnish music without reference to Jean Sibelius, the *man* who ‘invented the Finnish tone language’ (Salmenhaara 1996, p. 66). In contrast, it has been quite easy to write the ‘same’ history with no reference to *women* composers (Moisala and Valkeila 1994, p. 11; cf. Citron 1993, p. 4) – this, quite apparently, has to do not only with the practices of music historiography, but also education. In this respect, the history of

popular music has not been at all different; with few notable exceptions, the popular music history books represent a very masculine story.

When the significance of all the Sibeliuses and their works is reiterated in the form of music historiography, one is amidst canon formation. Regarding this, it may be instructive to consider the religious meanings of the word 'canon'; according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* it can refer to 'any set of sacred books' or to 'the list of [acknowledged] saints' (OED 2004). These definitions are illuminating in that they first of all make clear that canonisation or canon formation is dependent on writing history (or reproducing it in one form or another) and that it very often centres on a group of people whose abilities are praised endlessly.

So, if history is about choosing those things that are worth telling, then canonisation could be described as choosing those things that are worth repeating. In addition, there obviously is a need for some kind of shared recognition when it comes to canon formation; in a sense, it is possible to write the history of anybody, but in order to be canonised that anybody must be accepted more broadly. One of the most popular ways to conduct historiographical investigation at the moment seems to be so-called microhistory, in which the objective is to form large-scale conclusions based on scrutinies of small-scale phenomena; the history of everyday life, some might call it, and as such it clearly stands opposed to the iteration of canonic order. Instead of the most acclaimed and 'holy', what is now interesting and important is the 'insignificant' and mundane.

Sarjala (2002, pp. 119–85) distinguishes between three trends and seven approaches in the historiography of music. The first trend, 'author-and-works-centred', can be divided into a biographical and a style history approach. In both cases, however, the object of description is elevated to ultimate heights; composers (and performers) are celebrated as true geniuses, and compositions as authentic High Art. Second, there is a trend which can be labelled as 'social history', and it divides into Dahlhausian 'structural history', Jaußian 'reception history', and finally 'conceptual history'. In all these approaches, a historian is trying to examine music in relation to its surroundings, as it were: society at large, the way people (especially critics) think about music, and the ways in which 'music' is conceptualised to begin with. Forms of social history may, nonetheless, easily support traditional value hierarchies and maintain the rigid distinction between 'music' and 'extramusical' elements. The third trend, a constructivist one, instead departs from the premise that 'music' is not autonomous and detached from its socio-historical contexts. Both feminist scholars and cultural historians, for example, aim to prove this; the former by demonstrating how various musical practices and conceptualisations are gendered, and the latter by examining 'how a perceiver, a witness and a member of culture acts' rather than 'whether cultural products . . . carry values and meanings that are independent of given contexts' (Sarjala 2002, p. 181).

The implication is, I think, that constructivist historians are somehow in a 'better' place for challenging the canonic representations of history, or, perhaps, avoiding the pitfalls of canonisation altogether. Still I find it difficult to accept that any historian would somehow be outside the processes of canon formation. This is for a simple reason: even when deliberately avoiding traditional canonised objects of study, a historian is defining (although through negation, as it were) the canon. Furthermore, the 'non-canonic' objects introduced this way may very well become canonic in their own right. It is not my intention to suggest that creating history anew from different perspectives would be a pointless task; quite the contrary. But to

acknowledge this inevitable link between historiography and partaking in canon formation is, to me, paramount. And not least for self-reflexive purposes; as Negus points out, historical knowledge (about music, too) is central for communities in creating a sense of identity (Negus 1996, pp. 137–8), and likewise is canon formation. To put it in Bohlman's words:

The processes of canon-formation result from a community's transformation of cultural values into aesthetic expression. One might say that the general path of these processes is from social context to aesthetic text; the . . . repertory thus becomes genre for the 'inscription' of cultural meaning . . . Different communities shape and express . . . canons in various ways. (Bohlman 1988, p. 106)

But canon formation is not only a question concerning various formulations of historical knowledge. As Adam Krims notes, it 'can be deeply symptomatic of music-theoretical approaches to popular music' (Krims 2003, p. 199). A prime example of this tendency is, I think, Allan F. Moore's detailed investigation into the music of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (Moore 1997), but nevertheless I would extend the significance of Krim's notion to virtually all music-theoretical approaches, regardless of the style or genre in question. In effect, this might result in a certain kind of circular argumentation, where, on the one hand, the apparent transgressiveness of a given repertoire yields to theoretical examination, and, on the other, this examination reinforces the apparent transgressiveness.

On the historiography of popular music

Sarjala's grouping is by no means exhaustive, but I think it is useful not only for critical examination of Western classical music historiography. Quite clearly, some of its central ideas are present also in various histories of rock, for instance. To begin with, there is an enormous tendency to emphasise the importance of societal factors when historicising 'rock music'; hence it is not uncommon to find the subtitle 'a social history' in books about the topic (cf. Szatmary 1991; Friedlander 1996). These most often are closer to 'structural' than, for instance, 'cultural history' (which for Sarjala seems to be *the* way to conduct historiographical survey), as they aim for holistic views on rock music and culture, while clinging to strict value systems. Thus, like any self-respecting rock historian, Paul Friedlander does not hesitate in stating that 'the performers [of the teen idol music of late 1950s] . . . sang ersatz rock music that contained little or no beat, saccharine string arrangements, and a multitude of non-sexual, romantically safe messages' (Friedlander 1996, p. 71). The same goes for Reebee Garofalo, when he is describing Pat Boone as *the* representative of 'the epitome of cultural theft' (Garofalo 1997, p. 156), and for the writers of *Jee jee jee*, the history of Finnish rock, when they state that '[a]fter all, the essence of steel-wired music [a national equivalent to surf and the music of the Shadows] did not specifically emphasise creativity or such' (Bruun *et al.* 1998, p. 68). For all these writers, 'rock's' significance is more or less taken for granted. What is more important, I believe, is that they are less interested in what people have thought and done than in what people should think about 'rock'.

Alongside 'social histories', there is a vivid tradition of biographical histories of popular music artists. These may occasionally extend in temporal terms over several decades and as such document aspects of broader socio-historical changes, but as Sarjala notes about biographical study in general, while it is usually accessible

and concretises the past, it nevertheless tends to 'hallow the life and deeds of its object' (Sarjala 2002, pp. 120, 122, 126). It is also worth observing that while in the historiography of Western classical music autonomous works and unequalled geniuses live somewhat paradoxically (as these geniuses are, after all, responsible for the creation of these works) side by side in style histories and biographies (cf. Sarjala 2002, pp. 124–5), in the historiography of popular music, stylistic analysis is relatively sparse. Few notable exceptions in this respect include Joe Stuessy's examination of rock'n'roll's 'history and stylistic development' (Stuessy 1994), David Hatch's and Stephen Millward's 'analytical history of pop music' (Hatch and Millward 1990) and, outside the Anglophone nexus of popular music studies, Pekka Jalkanen's and Vesa Kurkela's recent history of Finnish popular music from the early nineteenth century to the advent of Fenno-rap (Jalkanen and Kurkela 2003).

Whether a 'social', 'stylistic' or 'biographical history' of popular music, they all seem to agree on certain central phases. This agreement aligns usually with what Negus claims has been called 'the rock era'; that is, the view that rock emerged in the form of rock'n'roll in the early 1950s, lived its progressive heyday in the late 1960s, and waned with punk in the late 1970s. For Negus, this way of organising musical activities into neat eras is by no means neutral, but 'is based on a particular experience of rock . . . which fails to allow for how musical forms are transformed and move on in different ways across the planet, acquiring new significance in different situations and as part of other dialogues'. As 'history' in general, the beginnings and ends of musical genres and styles are *produced* 'as particular rock stories have been constructed and narrated' (Negus 1996, pp. 136–9.)

What is more, the historiography of popular music, especially in connection with mainstream genres, is clearly dominated by non-academic interests, as it were. The underlying reasons are: (i) as the topic is a 'popular' one, this popularity (and hence profitability) is best not disturbed by alienating academic 'monk latin' (Kurkela 2000, p. 7); as a result, (ii) popular music histories are more often written by journalists and other connoisseurs than by music scholars or historians *per se*; this is also so because of (iii) the traditional reluctance inherent to the academic community to engage itself with forms of popular culture. Clear evidence of the last point is that popular music studies as an academic discipline (although I would claim that it does not yet hold such a status in Finland, for example) owes as much to rock journalism as it does to various more traditional disciplines, such as sociology, folkloristics and ethnomusicology (see Hesmondhalgh and Negus 2002, pp. 3–4).

Jee jee jee (Bruun *et al.* 1998), for instance, is written by four radio journalists working with YLE (the Finnish broadcasting company). In fact, the book is based on their extensive radio series of the same name. Likewise, as noted already, the ongoing *HS* (2004) history writing of rock is discharged by journalists. In turn, the author of a recent history of 'Fenno-metal' (Nikula 2002) was, at the time of writing, a freelance journalist and the tour manager for rock group Hanoi Rocks (currently he works as a marketing manager for EMI Finland). Furthermore, another recent history book, on Finnish female rock (Aho and Taskinen 2003), is credited to two female journalists, one of whom is well known also as a rock musician. On a more international scale, there are notable exceptions (e.g. Hatch and Millward 1987; Garofalo 1997), but in many chronicles of Anglo-American popular music, even when written by persons distinguished in academic community, the trend towards the more 'popular' question of 'how it really was' is significantly stronger than towards asking 'was it really like that' (cf. Miller 1980; also Friedlander 1996).

The difference between these questions is, practically, the one between maintaining and questioning a canon.

Introducing folk music canons

The issue of canonisation is quite probably raised most often in the context of so-called art music, where the pantheon of Composers (and Works) is long established. While there clearly is the same kind of inclination towards worshipping certain artists as the foundation of the history of popular music, the existence of this inclination has been far less discussed and documented in that context. The same goes for folk music. Here Bohlman's division between three processes of canon formation serves as a precedent.

The fundamental criterion by which Bohlman separates different folk music canons is 'the extensiveness of the community'; other decisive factors include transmission and origin of repertoires, specialisation of musicians and the relationship to other musical genres. It is worth noting that Bohlman does not deny that there may be other patterns of canon formation which are based on different criteria (Bohlman 1988, p. 111).

In the case of a *small group canon*, it is possible, at least theoretically, for the members of the community that can be held responsible for constituting it to know each other in an unmediated sense. In fact, because of the sense of belonging and the emphasis on companionship offered by a small group canon, its formation may at least in part be consciously purposeful. According to Bohlman, this is perhaps most common in 'traditional' communities, where many canonical pieces of music often articulate certain social activities. In these situations, the repertory is familiar for most members of the group, oral tradition holds a high status, and the tradition itself may not demonstrate any signs of significant change. Yet a small group canon can also provide urban dwellers with a social alternative, and 'establishing a direct interrelation may be a motivation in the formation of small groups in a more urbanised society'. Whereas a small group canon in its traditional form remains fairly independent of modernisation, it can in some cases 'emerge as a response to modernisation and as a means of emphasising more intimate cultural expression' (Bohlman 1988, pp. 111–12).

The existence of a *mediated canon*, writes Bohlman, is due to certain historical developments, such as the spread of people over a given geographical area or a shared experience like immigration. A mediated canon is maintained most probably by people who feel they share several aspects of the 'same' culture, but who at the same time are unable to exchange them without mediation, mostly because of physical, geographical distance. 'Folk music repertory and social structure', states Bohlman, 'often have fairly extensive historical connections in the case of mediated canons, although circumstances have intervened to attenuate these connections' (*ibid.*, p. 111). Therefore, instead of specific musical pieces, more abstract elements of social structure like style are more likely shared among the members of the dispersed community behind a mediated canon. Here also, the modern communication channels as well as the production and distribution of music in mass quantities, play a crucial role in ensuring stylistic coherence. Thus, as Bohlman observes, a mediated canon is utterly dependent on modernisation; without the communicative links provided by this process it would be difficult to establish folk music traditions among the scattered community in question. Furthermore, owing to the physical distance of the members of this 'community', its social base is characteristically very diverse, and it can be held

as a good example of pluralism. A mediated canon can, in addition, reflect certain forms of resistance towards the mainstream culture (*ibid.*, pp. 111–14). Bohlman sums up in this way:

Thus, a mediated musical style may forge a diverse complement of cultural differences into a normative style that allows a degree of cultural sharing and a more intensive drawing of cultural boundaries. The resulting tradition retains elements of the old while admitting the new in patterns consistent with underlying pluralism. (*ibid.*, p. 115)

A community maintaining an *imagined canon* is extremely large. The members of this community have often only weak historical connections, and because of the sheer vastness of the community they cannot know each other. The boundaries of these kinds of communities are generally political and, in many cases, equivalent to those of the modern nation-state. And, since the tradition of an imagined canon frequently is invented, ‘connections between repertory and social structure may be skewed and disjunct. They are not, however, arbitrary’ (*ibid.*, pp. 111–12).

The imagined canon is an inseparable part of modernisation, because of its immanent links to nationalism (*ibid.*, p. 112). In a sense, it is a bricolage highly independent of history, for in some cases it requires, in fact, the ignoring of history, in order to strengthen the existence of the canon through the imagined past. An imagined canon is created by dissolving and then conflating previous traditions, which is a practice very useful for the purposes of nationalism. Folk music has, on several occasions, become a premeditated national symbol (*ibid.*, pp. 116–17).

From folk to popular music

In order to examine how Bohlman’s folk music canons could be utilised in the context of popular music, one must first find out how he distinguishes these two musical idioms from each other. This proves to be a bit tricky, since he deliberately avoids ‘offering a single definition of *folk music*’, on the grounds of that (i) ‘the different contexts of folk music . . . yield very different definitions’ and (ii) because change is ‘ineluctably bound to folk music tradition . . . the dynamic nature of folk music belies the stasis of definition’ (Bohlman 1988, p. xviii). It is hard for me to think that any musical idiom would be essentially different in relation to these notions, and therefore Bohlman’s stance appears rather unhelpful. What is the point of using certain terms, if their content is translated as utterly relativistic or, in the last instance, empty? And yet, for Bohlman, as for a majority of ‘western’ people, ‘folk music’ stands as a distinct category against ‘art music’ and ‘popular music’, and this leads to the suspicion that he, like many a ‘westerner’, is relying on certain characteristics either/both in music or/and socio-cultural practices that make such a distinction possible.

To give Bohlman well-deserved credit, I think that he quite plausibly relies on a ‘discursive’ approach to the classificatory boundaries of ‘folk music’. This is to say that the intention is not so much – i(n)f(act,) at all – to provide readers with one’s own definition, but rather to examine how the label has been used in ‘reality’. To use classificatory genre labels, for example, is ‘a metaphor for our attempts to understand and describe folk music in an orderly fashion’ (*ibid.*, p. 34), and thus it provides us with a powerful tool to communicate about music (Frith 1996, p. 87). Yet there are significant essentialising dangers in using classification, as inductively it may limit theoretical models, whereas deductively it ‘prescrib[es] a model and then determin[es] which aspects . . . fit the model’. Momentously, ‘these approaches frequently result in

a fixing and ossification of the canon, which leads to a seductiveness that may underlie classification' (Bohlman 1988, p. 34).

Although I feel that genre labels and other classificatory concepts can never be defined exhaustively, I would still encourage writers to try and pinpoint a little more exactly just what they are referring to when they are using appellations like 'popular music' and 'rock'. Negus, for one, states that a label like popular music 'really needs qualifying', but then ends up by specifying it really only in temporal terms, as he claims to be dealing with 'recorded popular music, made since the phonograph, and mostly during the latter half of the twentieth century' (Negus 1996, p. 5). As a counterbalance for this kind of rather elusive way of defining 'popular music', one can always turn to encyclopedias and dictionaries. For example, in the 1980 edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the term is used to 'embrace the music that, with the growth of industrialisation in the 19th century, began to develop distinctive characteristics in line with the tastes and interests of the expanding urban middle classes' (Grove 1980, p. 87). More precisely:

The essence of popular music is that it should be readily comprehensible to (and perhaps also performable by) a large proportion of the populace, and that its appreciation presupposes little or no knowledge of musical theory or techniques. The music so defined thus comprises pieces of modest length with a prominent melodic line (often vocal) and a simple and restricted harmonic accompaniment. Pieces are often originally planned for performance in a theatrical or other public context and in consequence of their appeal come to be enjoyed domestically either in practical performance or in recorded reproduction. (*ibid.*, p. 87)

Despite the rather clear value hierarchy apparent in this citation, it nevertheless is quite informative in relation to how I believe many people do think – if not always in such specific terms – about music. Of course, the fact that this particular encyclopedia itself holds a canonic status within music scholarship, intensifies the significance of the views expressed on its pages. These views are then echoed in other 'official' contexts, as can be demonstrated by a quote from the website of *Kulturo*, a Finnish 'Centre of Expertise in Cultural Production', funded by the Ministry of the Interior:

Art culture is exclusive and its products are created as different, entirely new by an artist. The art works are appreciated and evaluated as they are – not for example because of easy accessibility or social effects. Traditional culture (folk culture) is personal culture of everyday life, in which authors and recipients can be in very unmediated contact with each other. Popular culture is extensive, attempting to touch upon an audience as large as possible. Popular culture is demand orientated and strives for a consensus with its audience. (*Kulturo* 2004)

In addition to this kind of governmental statement, the traditional division between High Art, unmediated folk culture and utterly commercial pop is kept alive, implicitly at least, by many a media institution. The same kind of definitions are often replicated in scholarly connections; the personnel at Bowling Green State University's Department of Popular Culture apparently rely on a conception of 'popular culture' as 'expressive forms widely disseminated in society'. These forms often represent themselves as various media genres, whether in television, film, literature or music, but they also include 'non-mediated aspects . . . such . . . as clothing styles, fads, holidays and celebrations, amusement parks, both amateur and professional sports' (BGSU 2004). What both aspects strongly imply is that at heart 'popular culture' is a very commercial enterprise indeed.

Thus, while all definitions of 'popular culture' and 'music' can be juxtaposed and challenged with several others (Street 1997, p. 8), there nevertheless seems to be

at least some seeds for consensus in these matters. And what is of uttermost importance in relation to Bohlman's conception of 'folk music' and its canons is that mediation, for the clear majority of commentators, is one of the fundamental ingredients of 'popular culture' and hence also 'popular music'. Peter Manuel, for one, writes that 'the most important distinguishing feature of popular music is its close relationship with the mass media. Popular music, as we are employing the term, arose hand-in-hand with the media, is disseminated primarily through them, and is embedded in a music industry based on marketing of recordings on a mass commodity basis' (Manuel 1988, p. 4). Therefore, it becomes apparent that any formulation of 'popular music canons' that takes its foundation from Bohlman's theorisation of folk music canons cannot be based on a distinction between the 'mediated' nature of the music and whatever other criteria there may be.

Also, as the connection between 'mediation' and 'modernisation' is organic for Bohlman, 'popular music canons' according to his ideas must abandon the latter (modernisation) as a determining factor, too. It would be tempting to apply the notion of postmodernity as a replacement; after all, 'popular culture' is frequently defined also in relation to this concept. However, this would most certainly lead to pointless bickering about the constitutive characters of 'postmodernity' and/or 'postmodern aesthetics' in music, since they are (apart from being *passé*) more contested than the definition of 'popular culture' in the first place. Rather, what becomes central is the role of different social functions of different styles of music and the role and scope of media and music industry practices.

From mediation to mainstreaming

In other words, as popular music canon formation would be in any case characterised by mediation, there is a need to reformulate and rename the sorting proposed by Bohlman. As a derivative of the mediated canon I will propose a process of *mainstream* canon formation. The reasons for this are as follows. First of all, as Jason Toynbee defines 'mainstream', it is 'a formation that brings together large numbers of people from diverse social groups and across large geographical areas in common affiliation to a musical style' (Toynbee 2002, p. 150). In this sense, it is quite obvious that it can be characterised by the Andersonian notion of 'imagined community' (*ibid.*, p. 159). Toynbee further explains how the process of mainstreaming is essentially connected to the 'currents' of hegemony, 'aesthetics of the centre' and economy. That is, there is a constant process of negotiation going on between the centre and subordinate groups, and this has effects on the levels of value, style and money (*ibid.*, pp. 150–6).

Due to this tension between the centre and margins, it is plausible to think of the mainstream as something that produces Others, be they self-conscious or more subtly marginalised (*ibid.*, p. 160). Regarding the latter, a case in point is the tendency to fill bookstore shelves with various histories of 'rock', as if it somehow would constitute a genre that is more valuable than many others. In fact, Motti Regev (1994) points out exhaustively how the 'classic' canonising processes – emphasising (or constructing) authenticity, masterpieces and geniuses – are effectively present in the 'field of production' that is generally referred to as 'rock'. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is Regev's proposition that these kinds of 'artistic hierarchies', based on 'the ideology of autonomous art', may be 'becoming a central structuring force in a growing number of fields of production' (Regev 1994, p. 98).

Regardless of this apparent tendency, as well as the widely criticised division between 'rock' and 'pop', I have yet to encounter a 'history of pop music' – that is, in the sense of a history that would be opposed (implicitly, at least) to concise Grand Narratives relying on issues of authenticity and rebelliousness as determining factors of value and acceptability. Of course, as alluded to above, some representatives of 'pop' – such as the Monkees, the Bee Gees and Michael Jackson – have earned their place as despised examples (for different reasons, though) in the epic of popular music. Although some of these acts might be regarded as morally dubious because of their apparent exploitative tendencies, the significant point is that if and when they are dismissed, so is the taste of their fans. 'Ultimately', as Robert Walser puts it, 'judgements of music are judgements of people' (Walser 2003, p. 38).

In addition to the derogatory practices concerning some genres, styles and performers, it is customary for mainstream canon formation to emphasise certain 'root' elements at the expense of others. For example, it clearly is far more important for 'rock historians' to stress the significance of blues than that of the Tin Pan Alley tradition. In the academy, this might quite rapidly be recognised as one strategy in 'authenticating' certain forms of popular music through a reference to an apparently (at least partially) untamed source of Otherness (cf. Toynbee 2002, p. 154). But as Paul Gilroy forcefully suggests, this infatuation of 'white' mainstream with various and more marginal forms of 'black' music and culture can also be thought of as an unashamedly commercial practice (Gilroy 1993, p. 99). Nevertheless, the utmost relevance of 'black' music is still frequently acknowledged in the more public domain, and often with a distinctive mythologising stance, as in the recent 'history of funk, disco and hiphop' written by two Finnish journalists:

The musical styles of the new continent's slaves' descendants have been central to the development of the popular music of the whole world, starting from the 1920s' jazz-fever. . . . The Anglo-Saxon pop and rock that have dominated since the 1960s are based entirely on a black foundation. (Hilamaa and Varjus 2001, p. 7)

Be that as it may, a comparison of Hilamaa's and Varjus's stand with the contents of *Aution saaren levyt* ('Albums of a desert island'), a book compiled by Jake Nyman (1997), one of the leading rock critics in Finland, yields engrossing results. Nyman had asked over eighty Finnish music journalists – seventy-two of whom participated – to name one hundred popular music albums they would take with them to a desert island. As a result he received a list of roughly 1,500 albums, and 'when you take the 100 most voted-for out of that many candidates, it is clear that the result is some kind of a compromise. Also a certain spirit of consensus was detectable, as the old and already many times acknowledged classics were actually surprisingly strong in this vote' (Nyman 1997, p. 6). In the final list there are seven albums from the Beatles (five of which are in the top ten), four from the Rolling Stones and from Neil Young, three from the Jimi Hendrix Experience, from Creedence Clearwater Revival, from Bruce Springsteen, and from Tuomari Nurmio, the best Finnish artist by this standard. For some people it might feel odd that such artists and acts as Elvis Presley, Pink Floyd, David Bowie, and Michael Jackson each have only one album in the list – but, after all, we are talking about albums here, not artists; Madonna, for example, has not one album in the top 100, and her *Like a Prayer* is situated in the 'Bubbling Under' section, the album positions 101–200 (see *ibid.*, p. 194). About the top 100 list one could mention also the fact that there are only ten Finnish albums, and a mere dozen by acts who feature 'black' artists.

I have a strong feeling that Nyman has succeeded in creating (or reproducing) a blueprint for the mainstream canon for popular music – which, as might be expected, consists mostly of those kind of recorded performances that are mainly attached to the category of ‘rock’. This also has a temporal dimension: roughly three fourths of the albums date back to the 1960s and 1970s, the golden era of album-oriented rock, as they say. On this score, what I am most surprised by is Nyman’s surprise at the presence of ‘classics’ in the vote. Hence, I think journalist Vesa Sirén reaches the core of the matter quite well: ‘you would think that you would take only the most subjective darlings with you to a desert island, but one hundred albums will surely include also the kind of favourites which are a part of the “official” rock canon’ (*ibid.*, p. 6).

From small groups to alternative

In the case of small group canon, I think that many of the elements Bohlman lists are quite applicable also in the context of popular music, but in order to mark the contextual change, it is helpful to rename this type of canon formation too. For the reasons outlined below, I will call it the *alternative* canon.

One of the most important ideas in Bohlman’s canonisation theory is his notion that the specific size of the community is neither prerequisite nor hindrance for canon formation. And the same goes for the more qualitative aspects, such as class. If that is the case the question of how alternative canons are produced will concern, more than anything else, the tension between the centre and margins, be the latter conceived in terms of musical genre, nationality or gender. Regarding the first two, there are apparently a substantial number of ‘genre histories’ as well as ‘grand narratives’ of national developments in popular music forms. *Jee jee jee*, in a sense, fulfils both these functions; it is (according to its subtitle) a ‘history of Finnish rock’ (Bruun *et al.* 1998). ‘Rock’, of course, can be an irrationally wide category, and therefore an ‘imperialist’ category too. Such imperial breadth can certainly be detected in *Jee jee jee* (cf. Negus 1996, p. 162). Thus, to get a more instructive impression of the mechanisms of an alternative canon, it may be worthwhile to examine some other and perhaps more distinctive genres or even their sub-categories.

With his recent ‘history of Fenno-metal’, *Rauta-aika* (‘Iron Age’), Nikula provides us with what I believe is a rather typical account of an alternative canon formation in process. Not so much a critical inquiry into the genre’s past as a homage to it, Nikula’s account begins with a statement about how the year 1988 represents ‘the zero point of modern Finnish metal’ (Nikula 2002, p. 11). This tale, in the form Nikula has chosen, is indeed filled with teleology and rigid notions of ‘pure’ representatives of various sub-genres of metal – authenticity, masterpieces and geniuses once more, only this time within a more subcultural setting (cf. Regev 1994). *Rauta-aika* is, however, quite educating in respect to some central elements of alternative canon formation.

Most prominently, what becomes obvious is that the channels of communication are small-scale when compared to the production context and media coverage of most representatives of the mainstream canon. In the case of alternative canon formation, these channels include small ‘independent’ record companies, marketing and promotion through specialised magazines or, better yet, flyers and informal contact networks, and, from the turn of the millennium on, increasingly the Internet. One particular form of interaction deserves mentioning in relation to the formation of both

musical community and canon: 'tape-trading', i.e. exchanging cassettes or CDR-discs filled with the latest hits or one's own musical enterprises (which can, of course, be the same thing).

In the case of trash, speed, death and black metal (which for Nikula constitute the phenomenon of 'modern Finnish metal') the reluctance of mainstream media to expose them is notable. Apparently, these styles hold such a transgressive potential that their representatives are interpreted as not suitable for primetime coverage. As Aleksi Wildchild Laiho, the singer-guitarist of Children of Bodom, a prominent black metal band, stated in an interview some years ago: 'A band can be proud if it gets itself audible with this kind of music. It's nothing when XL5 [a popular boy-band at that time, not operational anymore] succeeds. Just bring all the good-looking guys together and make them swing on the stage. That's it' (Isokangas 1998). In other words, there is a confrontation between the mainstream (the good-looking guys), as it were, and the alternative to it (sometimes taking the physical form of blood, sweat and tears), acknowledged also by the actors on the musical scene themselves.

The contemporary metal scene may very well represent a quintessential example of alternative canon formation in progress, and as such it has to a certain extent become a canonic model of this in its own right. A different kind of alternative canon is constructed by Jukka Järvelä, who has written 'the history of a small town', namely Hämeenlinna (located some 100 km north of Helsinki with a population of 47,000). There is a list of the town's pop artists in the book, and to me it feels quite comprehensive – or at least there are more names that I do not recognise than vice versa. But as Järvelä reminds us, '[b]ands come and go, and no list can be perfect'; the criteria for inclusion in this case have been 'that the band or soloist has performed at least a couple of gigs and that it is distinguished also outside the training hut' (Järvelä 1997, p. 282). In the actual narrative of 'what really happened', these techniques of inclusion and exclusion that are so essential to canon formation are even more present: 'I will introduce on the following pages the most significant groups, persons and events of Hämeenlinna's pop music. Because Hämeenlinna was for a moment the national pop centre in the 1960s, I will of course concentrate on that period, it after all feeling the most historical' (*ibid.*, p. 7). But, in any case, this particular 'regional pop history' usefully reminds us of the fact that quite often the 'national histories' are dominated by some distinct locations – the biggest cities. And yet, whilst travelling the remotest countryside one can encounter musical practices that are as vivid and as important for the formation of musical communities and the expression of their values as anywhere else.

In addition to the alternative canons formed on the basis of musical genre or geographical location, there is also the question of the role of gender in the history of popular music. Let us return for a brief moment to Nyman's desert island; the women musicians listed in the top 100 are (in rank order) Carole King (#29), Björk, Janis Joplin, Aretha Franklin, Nico (but only with Velvet Underground), Marianne Faithfull, Chrissie Hynde (implicitly, as a Pretender) together with Agnetha Fältskog and Anni-Frid Lyngstad (from ABBA). The 'bubbling under' section increases this number by six (Nyman 1997, pp. 7, 194). None of these artists is or ever has been a Finnish citizen. Thus, the book *Rockin korkeat korot* ('The High Heels of Rock', Aho and Taskinen 2003) clearly fills a gap, as it claims to be 'the history of Finnish female rock'! Like the previous two examples, this particular piece of historiography leans heavily on numerous interviews and in so doing gives plenty of room for musicians' own

opinions without questioning them too much, if at all. While Nikula's mythology of metal is structured chronologically and utilises heavy periodisation, *Rockin korkeat korot* moves on from one artist to the next, although they are grouped by the decade. What is telling about the gender structures of different musical genres is that whereas Nikula just about manages to mention the female members in some metal groups and to quote only one of them, they have actually found their way onto the pages of *Rockin korkeat korot*, and with plenty of pages devoted to their comments.

From imagination to prescription

If in the context of popular music the mainstream canon formation can be characterised by an Andersonian idea of 'imagined community' (cf. Toynbee 2002, p. 159), as suggested above, the implication is that an 'imagined popular music canon' would be a contradiction in terms. In fact, the area of the imagined canon is where I think Bohlman's ideas are on the shakiest ground, for various reasons. First, the thought that an imagined canon would be just one particular type of canon strikes me as contradictory given Bohlman's argument about the fundamentally communal basis of canon formation and references to general processes of inventing and imagining communities and traditions, especially in relation to music (Bohlman 1988, pp. 108–9). Second, and organically linked to the previous, the idea of an imagined canon implies that there are canons that are less imagined, or perhaps even 'real'. But as should be clear by now, Bohlman himself suggests that canons are more a process than anything concrete; they can be maintained and subverted, but they cannot, *as such*, be bought from stores or put on a turntable. Textual representatives of canons (whose status is constantly contested), can instead be purchased and played. Therefore, as a product of a community, a canon is always a result of imaginative action.

Third, Bohlman's linkage between imagined canon and political purpose is problematic. Obviously, by 'politics' Bohlman means explicit state intervention and decision-making, but nonetheless it is troubling for me that this element should be reserved for just one form of canon formation. Regardless of alleged ruptures caused by accelerating globalisation in the status of the nation-state, states still have a lot to say about where, when and who can perform what kind of popular music. Even when there is no apparent state censorship, media companies, for instance, can be thought of as utilising a certain kind of auto-censorship, as they utilise 'public opinion' to regulate what is appropriate to release at a given time. This same 'public opinion' is also used in the interests of political leaders, for obvious reasons. This is precisely why the word 'vittu' (a common Finnish obscenity, referring to female genitalia) was cut out from two recent popular songs (*Laulu petetyille* ['A Song for the Betrayed'] by rocker Anssi Kela and *Jarden träkki* [Jarde's Track] by rapper Steen 1) – apart from the inevitable increase in commercial potential accrued through this action. As a result, there are now two versions of these songs, the more prime-time-media-friendly and the uncensored one.

On these grounds it is quite difficult to make any sensible distinction between a mainstream canon and its popular-imagined counterpart. In both cases political factors in the broadest sense are at work. However, in more totalitarian societal settings the state-political interventions as to what constitutes acceptable and most valuable forms of popular music may be significantly more intense and explicit. Take, for example, the case of the former GDR:

Throughout its history the most powerful influence on popular music in the GDR was political, exercised by the leadership of the autocratic *SED* [‘Socialist Unity Party of Germany’]. At the same time there was a gap between the official politics of popular music and the live scene, in which young people found some space to follow their own musical interests and to ignore the *SED*’s musical dictats. The history of popular music in the GDR, in other words, has to be seen as a mixture of political guidelines (including economic restrictions) and counter influences. (Maas and Reszel 1998, p. 267)

The contrast between ‘guidelines’ and ‘influences’ suggests that there might be sufficient base for a distinction between ‘political’ and ‘alternative’ canon formation. The former implies a much more deliberate form of action and presence of power relations. But even in the case of the autocratic musical regime of the GDR, I would be hesitant about using the term ‘political’ as a way of distinguishing musical practices shaped by state cultural policy from more autonomous kinds of music making. For in fact both forms exist due to the decisions and practices of government. ‘Institutional’ comes to mind as one potential solution, but on a closer examination it also proves unsatisfactory; mainstream canon formation, for example, is inextricably tied to institutionalised practices of critique and education. Still, because it is nonetheless useful to emphasise the difference between more explicitly state-mandated and pre-formulated criteria on the one hand, and less obviously pre-given instructions on the other, I will replace Bohlman’s term ‘imagined canon’ (which he applied only to folk music of course) with the term ‘prescribed popular music canon’.

Occasionally, other than ‘purely’ state-governed issues may insinuate themselves into the prescribed canon formation. One exceptionally potent source for these insinuations is the recording industry in its attempts to control markets. One curious example of this dates some ten years back, to the heyday of the formation of girl- and boy-bands such as All Saints, Backstreet Boys, En Vogue, N’Sync, Spice Girls, Take That and so on. Many of these bands were put together largely on the initiative of the music industry. ‘We were put together but we were told to lie in the interviews that we had known each other for a longer time, and that the idea of the band originated from us ourselves’, said a singer in a former Finnish girl-band Plus. ‘There wasn’t a bit of rebelliousness in it. They just wanted to make money on us, nothing else. And you needn’t know how to sing. It’s enough if you’re sick for celebrity, good-looking, stupid enough, and you dare to perform almost naked’ (Ojanen 1997). In other words, in some cases the record company might be quite willing to create an imagined past, as it were, for the performers, presumably to match their ‘career’ better with ‘public opinion’. Thus there are suddenly pop acts which are ‘classics from birth’.

The case of tango is also a peculiar one in respect of prescribed canon formation, and especially in relation to the problematics of national identity in (popular) music. Most often considered the quintessential Argentinian popular musical form, tango is also appropriated in the construction of various other ‘popular music national identities’ – for example, ‘Finnish-ness’. According to Pekka Jalkanen, it was during the 1940s and 1950s when a distinctively ‘Finnish’ tango was born, mainly through the compositions of Toivo Kärki (Jalkanen 1992, p. 20). These compositions, in turn, have served as prescriptions for subsequent tangos, which ultimately are ‘much closer to Japanese or Czech tangos than Argentinian’ (*ibid.*, p. 13). What is also revealing is that ‘La Cumparsita’, ‘the tango of all tangos’, has been chosen as the ‘theme song’ for Tangomarkkinat (‘Tango Market’), a gigantic annual tango festival organised early in July in Seinäjoki, with around 1,000 participants in extensive (pre)qualifying rounds all over the country and in some Swedish cities too. In Yrjö Heinonen’s (2004) opinion,

this particular tango and several others of more national origin have become national emblems almost comparable to national anthems.

Prescribed canon formation is also implicated in the process of producing Others. Whereas in the case of mainstream canon formation this process can be characterised at least partially by subtlety, in this case the marginalisation is rather coercive. The period of East German rock between the 1960s and 1980s clearly points to this, as the state openly dictated which forms of popular music were the appropriate ones and, therefore, which would be granted permission to be performed in public, either in concerts or in the media (Wicke 1992). A very similar example is provided by 1970s and 1980s Chinese popular music; there too the officials have been keen on defining suitable sorts of pop, and as a result a more transgressive (in that particular context) genre or style of *yaogun yinyue*, i.e. 'rock'n'roll', has been subject to many regulatory actions (Brace and Friedlander 1992). In both cases, it is interesting to note how the actions taken by the oppressed musical minority are clearly in an alignment with the processes of alternative canon formation.

Conclusion: mind the cracks!

The structure of mainstream, alternative and prescribed canons implies the presence of power relations and inequalities. What is crucial, however, is that these relations are not stable, but under constant negotiation and reformulation. Thus, if today interpretations about the value of certain elements of popular music made by Bruun *et al.* (1998), Nyman (1997), Nikula (2002), Järvelä (1997) and Aho and Taskinen (2003) represent various canons within the larger formation of popular music, tomorrow their status will be likely to have changed.

The cumulative aspect of canon formation, especially in relation to the mainstream, needs to be emphasised in this context, too. This process affects not only the avowedness of a given musical phenomenon, but also its more material base; Nikula notes how the situation for new kinds of metal at the end of 1980s changed:

Bands who had started their career on small indie labels moved with the aid of new contracts or corporate acquisitions to the ownership of bigger recording companies. More efficient distribution channels and bigger promotion budgets than before broke the phenomenon through for good. (Nikula 2002, p. 12)

So, while Metallica, Guns'n'Roses and Slayer serve for Nikula as starting points (*ibid.*, p. 11), Friedlander (1996, p. 272) and Garofalo (1997, pp. 405–6) mention the first two only in passing, and the last, 'the honorable antecedent of death metal' (Nikula 2002, p. 82), is left unnoticed. In the next general history of popular music written by an Anglo-American author, Slayer will probably be included – but then again, some acts that were considered important in the mid-90s may very well 'fall through the cracks' (cf. Friedlander 1996, pp. 297–303).

This points to a still central aspect of canon formation, namely the media through which historical knowledge is transmitted. As noted in relation to alternative canon formation, there are other ways than just the history book to distribute statements about music. Especially in more marginal settings the significance of oral history, as it were, may be drastically greater than within the mainstream. Furthermore, there is obviously a tendency to begin the more 'official' historiography of marginal musics with more ephemeral media than the printed word. In the case of *Jee jee jee*, this was done through radio, and *Rockin korkeat korot* was born out of a

documentary television series of the same name. Nevertheless, the status of ‘the written word’ in the ‘epistemological hit parade’ is so high (cf. Tagg 1995) that it is only after the publication of a book that a historian and her or his supportive community can feel their story to be ‘officially’ told – and for the representatives of the margin this may take a considerable amount of time. What is also at stake are certain dissemination practices. You can go to the bookstore and buy the book (unless out of print), but for the time being, at least, there is virtually no other way to obtain copies of *Jee jee jee* and *Rockin korkeat korot* in audio/visual form than to record them during the broadcast.

Finally, there is an apparent danger of conflating canons with genres. I think it is very likely that genres are to a great extent defined through certain canonic representatives. It is because of the way in which the Rolling Stones, among others, play their music and behave in general that we know what ‘rock music’ means and, if we are inclined to do so, how to perform it ourselves. In fact, this is precisely the point: the conventions of a genre extend themselves over canonic and non-canonic performances, be they compositions or ‘live’ or even in the form of written commentary. To give an example: when I am practising a song with my fellow band members, we may very well agree that the song belongs to the genre of ‘rock’, but at the same time (unless very drunk, or otherwise in a sentimental state of mind) we do not imagine for a moment that our song is a component of the (Finnish) rock canon. We utilise some formal and cultural qualities to label our music, but to get it accepted more largely is another matter completely. Our song, however good we may consider it to be, is not even a representative of an alternative canon.

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Endnotes

1. All translations from works originally published in Finnish are by the author.
2. The list was completed during the editing process of this article. It comprises the following fifty ‘rock’ artists in chronological order: Bill Haley & the Comets (1954), Little Richard, Elvis Presley, Sam Cooke, Chuck Berry, Ray Charles, the Shadows (1960), the Marvelettes, James Brown, Bob Dylan, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones (1965), the Beach Boys, Jimi Hendrix Experience, MC5, Led Zeppelin, Neil Young (1970), Marvin Gaye, David Bowie, Pink Floyd, Kraftwerk, Bob Marley & the Wailers (1975), Ramones, Television, Chic, the Clash, Sugarhill Gang (1980), the Human League, Michael Jackson, U2, Prince, Red Hot Chili Peppers (1985), Metallica, Guns N’Roses, Sonic Youth,

the Stone Roses, Public Enemy (1990), Nirvana, Rage Against the Machine, Björk, Prodigy, PJ Harvey (1995), Fugees, Radiohead, Massive Attack, Moby, Eminem (2000), the White Stripes, Queens of the Stone Age, OutKast (2003). The list may include more than just a few unexpected choices, but nevertheless it can be argued that the most salient names of ‘the rock canon’ are firmly in place. But of course; what would be the value of the journalists’ authority or expertise otherwise? In a sense, canon formation is also crucial for this authority: one has to know the essentials, but at the same time one is compelled to explicate one’s hipness through introducing less canonised phenomena. What is also obvious in this listing is the male hegemony of ‘rock’.

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