Jean-Nicolas De Surmont

From Vocal Poetry to Song

Towards a Theory of Song Objects

With a foreword by Geoff Stahl

Translated by Anastasija Ropa

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Foreword

Geoff Stahl
Media Studies Programme
Victoria University of Wellington

In his landmark work, *Keywords* (1976), Raymond Williams, the Marxist historian and founding figure establishing the parameters of what would later be called "cultural studies," notes that the word "popular" has layered as well as shifting meanings that continue to inform how it resonates for producers and consumers of popular culture, its critics, and, of course, those who study it:

> Popular was being seen from the point of view of the people rather than from those seeking favour or power from them. Yet the earlier sense has not died. Popular culture was not identified by *the people* but by others, and it still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work… and work deliberately setting out to win favour… as well as the more modern sense of well-liked by many people, with which of course, in many cases, the earlier senses overlap. The sense of popular culture as the culture actually made by people for themselves… relates, evidently, to Herder's sense *of Kultur des Volkes*, 1C18, but what came through in English as *folk*-culture… is distinguishable from recent senses of popular culture as contemporary as well as historical.

He continues:

> In (twentieth-century) popular song and popular art were characteristically shortened to pop, and the familiar range of senses, from unfavourable to favourable, gathered again around this. The shortening gave the word a lively informality but opened it, more easily, to a sense of the trivial. It is hard to say whether older senses of pop have become fused with this use: the common sense of a sudden lively movement, in many familiar and generally pleasing contexts, is certainly appropriate. (Williams, 1983: 237-238)

Williams' etymological efforts, which are genealogical and discursive simultaneously, reminds us that the various meanings of "popular" have been parsed out over time such that previous meanings can be effaced and the semantic horizons narrowed, but those meanings may also persevere courtesy the accumulated residue picked up through the word's movement through different historical moments and contexts of use, leaving it with an aura of ambiguity. Williams' larger point, of course, is that there is power involved here, but that power is manifold: on the one hand, there is the power

to discriminate, primarily through the lens of criticism from on high informed by a deep immersion in terminologies, expertise and the ability to "discern" and thus determine what's good and bad; on the other hand, there is a social power that motivates and underpins what are often deemed to be "the popular's" democratic intents and impulses. The popular gets mobilized, then, depending on how, where and why it gets deployed and to suit whatever means or ends. It is framing device as much as it is an entraining tool, in that it shapes taxonomies of good and bad, but also shores up the borders of the both the lay as well as the scholarly habitus, allowing us to adjudicate, advocate for and against, and to consolidate positions of discrimination and consecration.

For popular music scholars of any persuasion, this presents an interesting entry point in to the field, a gateway that has historically bifurcated along two main avenues: one musicological, one sociological. The consequences of this divide take hold at the level of epistemic regimes and institutional imperatives, and they extend to organizational politics in the form of various associations which tend to divvy up along the differing and seemingly incommensurate methodologies, yet both of these are bound up in the politics surrounding notions of the popular and each has taken this notion as an axis upon which certain debates come to define themselves. While the division might be crudely imagined as text vs. context, with sociologists asking of the detailed exegetical feats of the musicologists "And…?, the musicologists demanding "Where's the music?" of the sociologists. This is a facile caricature to make but it is not meant to be dismissive of either; rather, it is shorthand way that indicates how the differing approaches to popular music studies get caught up in looking inwardly all too easily, at the expense of finding common ground. The more memorable moments in popular music studies are those where the differing perspectives come together. It is certainly the case, and we have an example of this in front of us here, that at various moments these avenues have merged to produce some foundational moments and enlivened debates across and within disciplines, most notably around how "the popular" gets framed in these respective approaches.

Central to early formulations of how musicology might tackle the subject of popular music as a serious object musicology's hermeneutical gaze is found in the work of Philip Tagg. His longstanding investment in pointing to the blinders in traditional musicology and developing a multifaceted toolkit for making sense of popular music is an

important grounding for a musicology willing to grapple with the unique qualities of popular music as worthy object of study. In a seminal discussion regarding the importance of instituting a semiotic-based musicology of popular music, Tagg suggests:

> Explaining the nature, qualities and uses of this omnipresent music is an interdisciplinary task, involving everything from business studies to theology, from electronics and acoustics to semiotics and linguistics, not to mention sociology, anthropology, psychology and musicology…. It is with musicology that our problems start. The vast majority of music in our society falls under neither of the headings 'art' or 'folk' — the tradition- ally legitimate areas of serious music studies —, the only current terms available for denoting the music most used by most people being *mesomusica* or popular music. There is no room here to explain why, at least until quite recently, musicology has managed to ignore most of the music produced and used in the post-Edison era…, but it does seem that this discipline has had considerable difficulty in expanding its range of methodological tools (chiefly developed as a conceptual system for demonstrating the aesthetic superiority and mythologically supra-social, 'eternal' or 'absolute' quality of Central European art music styles) to deal with other music. (Tagg, 1987: 280)

Tagg has consistently and forcefully presented the case for the musicological analysis of popular music as one that points to many of the weaknesses and blindspots of the discipline, particularly at a time, during the 80s, when cultural studies with its sociological and critical theory bent, was busy claiming popular music as a legitimate area and object of analysis. At the time, while musicology remained mired in the hermeneutical minutiae of classical and art music, other disciplines were leading the charge in finding ways to approach popular music as broadly as possible, and doing much to firm up the field of popular music studies along the way, often at the expense of any musicological input. As a way of prompting his musicology colleagues to urgently imagine an alternate world of musical notation outside the narrow realm of art music, and as a means of breaking out of the Euro-centric strictures of that system, Tagg offers a provocative footnote, listing examples that when considered in the suggested fashion, reveal the nuances and deeper complexities of popular music and at the same time the limits of a traditional musicology:

> Some empirical tests to prove this point: (a) try getting your average chorister to 'swing' a birhythmic Byrd madrigal properly when he/she structures passing music time with the help of bar lines; (b) transcribe a Hendrix solo, an Aretha Franklin vocal line or a Keith Richards guitar riff; (c) transcribe a kwela, a gamelan piece in slendro or any raga performance; (d) sight-read some Pandered or transcribe the music to any murder scene on television. Good luck! (Tagg, 282)

What Tagg has consistently suggested, in both his chastening of musicologists for their intransigence when it comes to popular music and his pointedness regarding sociomusical studies' narrower preference for the contextual over the textual, is that there is a text worth contextualizing (the sentiment is an echo of other contemporaneous debates happening in other disciplines, most notably in literature and is best captured in the work of Stanley Fish, most notably his cheekily titled, "*Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980).) The relative lateness and reticence of musicology in taking up popular music as an appropriate and legitimate object of analysis meant that the field had to play catch up. Tagg's tireless early efforts to bring musicology up-to-date has provided, and continues to provide, the scaffolding upon which much of the current field hangs its theories and concepts.

There are others who have done much to bring musicology up-to-date, to resituate popular song and music as a legitimate object of study in the field, notably the work of Richard Middleton, Franco Fabbri, Paul Oliver, Susan McClary, among many others. There have also been those on the so-called "sociological" side of the field that have made good use of this body of work. Most notable of these has to be Simon Frith, a peer of Tagg's, there on the ground floor with him helping to build what would soon become the twin towers of popular music studies. While a great deal of this very important body of work has deepened and strengthened the sociological approach to popular music studies, Frith has also engaged with the musicological, drawing from Tagg, Fabbri, McClary, *et al.,* most notably in one of his later efforts, *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (2002). Here he also engages with "the popular," primarily through a sociological lens, but he goes much further in widening the scope of this consideration by drawing heavily upon musicological scholarship. Making use of a musicological lexicon as part of his larger argument, in *Rites* Frith takes on the value of popular music in ways germane to those more expansive approaches, looking now at the "event" of music. In one chapter devoted quite heavily to musicology, he draws from the work of McClary (particularly a discussion about Beethoven), and others, suggesting there are arguments to made about musical structure but also musical appreciation. This is but one instance of Frith reaching out to musicologists to strengthen his argument; his concern throughout this book, which grapples with the limits and potential of musicology more fully than anywhere else in his *oeuvre*, is about that articulation of value and meaning to feeling, emotion or what has lately become known

as affect studies. This is an important gauge of where musicology stands in the field of popular music studies: as an indispensable toolkit for the analysis and understanding of how music "works," at the level of structure, but also affect.

Following from Frith and others, there has been a great deal of conversation had between popular music scholars of either persuasion, and some of the most engaged and engaging work in the field bridges the divide deftly. One of the more compelling approaches is the work of Georgina Born. Her work on genre in particular seeks to find a conceptual and theoretical framework that aims to provide a more expansive analytical approach for getting at the various mediations involved in the shaping of identity around and through popular music, extending and deepening Frith's interest in structure and affect but with the added dimensions of materiality and mediation. An essay on genre gives us a clear sense of the varied terms of reference that can be marshalled together to make her case:

> [M]y discussion of genre as an assumed point of convergence or translation between aesthetic figure, musically imagined community and wider identity formation is intended to destabilize what is too often taken as smoothly conjoined. Rather than any assured linkage between music and wider social formations, it is by analysing genre as entailing a mutual mediation between two self-organizing historical entities – musical formations (on the one hand) and social identity formations (on the other) – that we can grasp the way that wider social identity formations are refracted in music, and that musical genres entangle themselves in evolving social formations. In this analysis, both musical and social identity formations are conceived as being in process of becoming; both are reliant on the collective production of memory as well as the anticipation of futures. In other words, genre is understood as a radically contingent and material process – one that is, however, oriented to the production of teleology and thus the erasure of its own contingency. (Born, 2011: 384)

Born's recent work is a useful way to grasp the import of what Jean Nicolas De Surmont has long been doing with his own work, albeit with a different set of imperatives and theoretical touchstones. He shares with Born an interest in genre, song and to varying degrees notions of "the popular" and the various mediating forces that shape the definition of those terms and the use to which they are put and by whom, though his work is more firmly genealogical and much more informed by musicology, philology and history. His take on genre in what follows, for example, asks questions of genre which, in certain respects, echo Born's commentary:

To begin with, how shall we draw the conceptual outline of a genre? To the extent that the word *song* groups together particular form of aesthetics, various song objects,

which can be studied from a number of angles, it is useful to refer to the *song phenomenon*. The *song phenomenon* denotes a set of practices, expressions or traditions, as well as distribution and mediatisation aids for the song object, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a set of studies and publications on the song, which may influence its status in cultural, economic and symbolic domains. (14-15)

How these things get shaped or more pointedly how they take the shape of "things," through processes of mediatisation for both Born and De Surmont but in different ways, is central to their thinking. De Surmont uses this discussion of genre and song phenomenon (he notes that a "phenomenon, in the Kantian sense of the word, is not a thing but an experience" (16)) as a way of establishing the central conceit of this book, which then puts into relief notions of the *song object* and music, popular and otherwise, as expansive, pliable and ambiguous terms. This opens up a fertile area of discussion, one which, in its presentation of semantic history, wants to loosen up the contemporary musicological field to better apprehend what the song object is and is not, but also, more importantly, what it could be.

In an earlier discussion of the relationship between the song object, the signed song and the traditional song (2009), De Surmont stresses the need to put into place an appropriately attuned lexicon when it comes to *chanson*. His approach is both linguistic and metalinguistic, working to find a way to develop a better set of tools through which one can map the semantic shifts of *chanson* as it moves across space and time. How song objects on the one had get oralised, folkorised and commercialised points to the ways in which traditional song and signed song "interbreed" in rich and complicated ways particularly around the mediatised song becomes the dominant mode in a global music industry. He continues and extends further that argument here in a manner that builds on what has been a larger project in his writing, which asserts that the notion of the song is indeed a complex object worthy of serious musicological study, but De Surmont presents this to us in a fashion that embraces an array of approaches more amenable to further broadening the horizons of what constitutes the proper objects of analysis that make up music studies.

I began this *Foreword* with Raymond Williams and his *Keywords* project because it suggestively allows us to consider the import of De Surmont's aim with this book project, particularly around the notion of the popular, and, more to the point, popular song, and what (and who) constitutes the phenomenon of the song object, but also

around the notions of the folk, the masses and the commercialisation of culture. This, however, is only one dimension of what he offers us in terms of approaching the nature of the song object more generally. De Surmont's work is invested in redefining the relationship between text and context over many centuries in relation to the sometimes naïve but always complicated relationship between music, voices, lyrics and the context of their production and consumption, as well as notion of authorship and cultural authority. Drawing from the work of Tagg and others, particularly those working in French musicology and sociology, which includes the work of Line Grenier and Val Morrison, figures so central to popular music studies in Quebec, his work is interdisciplinary in its intent and scope, at once genealogical, philological, semiotic, ethnomusicological and musicological and more, working to extend the work of Tagg, Franco Fabbri, Adorno, Umberto Eco, Michel Chion, Paul Zumthor and others.

In moving beyond the cantology of Stéphane Hirschi, by way of devising a "neological solution" to create a supradisciplinary approach to the song object, it is a project the scope of which is geographically and linguistically diverse, even though it is primarily invested in the *francophonie*, notably taking up distinctions between the evolution of *chanson* and its relationship to oral and other traditions in France and Quebec. Here the relationship between an ethnos and an ethos becomes an important framing mechanism in the book, where the connection between history, place and evaluative regimes and aesthetic dictates around the notion of song become intimately and sometimes inextricably entwined. This link is one of the virtues of De Surmont's project, revealing ways in which francophone exemplars guide his considerations of the import of this new lexicon and methodology and its bearing on music studies in the Anglophone world. This approach is a laudable one, in no small part because De Surmont's work gains it purchase due to his ability to translate the work of scholars otherwise unknown to many Anglophones who are engaged in music studies, thereby making accessible a body of scholarship that rarely finds a voice outside of French musicology. He does this by developing his central trope of the "song object," mapping out its semantic forebears from vocal poetry onward, through debates and discussions about *chanson* and *lied*, about "popular song," as well as folk and oral traditions and their imbrication in modern commercial institutions.

The discussion of "popular song" is but a small part of what De Surmont is trying to achieve here, and while it is an important part of the larger discussion and of admitted

interest to myself, it is only one piece of the musical puzzle he's trying to assemble (and, more pointedly, disassemble). His larger intent with this project is to provide those of us interested in music, particularly those unfamiliar with a body of scholarship well debated and discussed in non-Anglo contexts, with an expanded terminology, a new sort of metalanguage, for challenging some of taken-for granted views of music and its multifarious forms and formats. Throughout the book, we see the elaboration of this robust metalanguage, which draws its strength from the richness of a long-established Francophone tradition of musical analysis that has grappled with the complexity of the notion of "song" and the complex ways in which it has mediated between text and context as an object of critical scrutiny. The central tenet of the book, his innovative claim for the notion that "vocal poetry" deserves to supersede "oral poetry" as an analytical category, offers scholars a new paradigm that seeks to broadens the horizons of musical inquiry. In this important respect, De Surmont puts forward different ways of considering the song object as more than just a phenomenon tied to an oral tradition; instead, he prods us to think about its potential to capture a more rounded notion of song which includes performance and the use and staging of voice across a range of musical contexts (from live performance to videos, etc.), as well as how these might all interrelate to produce the song object. This original contribution also opens up new avenues for comprehending the song object that sees certain concepts, terms and analytical tools migrate across linguist borders, proffering a form of what he terms "lexical engineering" which makes available to non-Francophone scholars a provocative and novel set of terms of reference ripe for rethinking approaches to music studies.

The border crossings De Surmont proposes here are a noteworthy prompt to those working in the field of music studies, but not limited solely to this field. In mapping out the genealogies of musical terminology as he does, noting the parallel itineraries that unfolded in different linguistic domains, De Surmont gives us both a survey of salutary literature but also a deeper analysis of assumptions and discursive stagings tied to research domains sometimes hamstrung by linguistic bias. He works through these rigorously, and, like his predecessor Tagg, develops an expanded vocabulary for analysis of what he has convincingly called a "polysemiotic object." As a polysemiotic object, of course, the many ways in which we might understand the song object and how and where it fits into a broader and nimbler set of approaches, armed now with a new analytical lexicon set before us as important cues and resources, with De Surmont

leaving us to consider ways we might challenge entrenched orthodoxies within music studies and the social sciences more generally. It is a fitting opening to with which to close his book.

In the interest of transparency, I should note that I write this from the position of someone who sits quite firmly in the "context camp" of popular music studies, and therefore I read this from the perspective of someone only passingly familiar with much of the material discussed here. In that sense, I am the ideal audience for this book. As a scholar who is decidedly sociological in my approach to popular music (I teach popular music in a media studies department), I admit to not being as *au fait* with current debates in musicology or linguistics as I should be, thus part of the exercise of putting this *Foreword* together was for me to be reminded of the ongoing value of an interdisciplinarily disposed musicology for my own thinking about popular music, as well as music in general. This is a daunting project De Surmont has endeavoured to marshal together, and I suspect it will provoke much and debate and discussion among a number of scholars of music and across a range of disciplines. This is not least because of its revelatory nature, dedicated to producing a new lexical and metalingual framework to analyse the song in all its ambiguously yet richly signifying objecthood. I am indebted to Jean Nicolas for approaching me to contribute to this important volume and I thank him for producing a book on popular music that challenged my own thinking as it will no doubt challenge that of others.

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