Classical Forms in Modern Popular Music

Popular music can be used as background knowledge by music educators in order to educate students on elements of classical music, such as form and compositional devices.

Research by: Emily Williams

The Period

The period is an 8 measure theme built out of two phrases: a 4 measure antecedent, followed by a 4 measure consequent... An antecedent phrase begins with a 2 measure basic idea followed by a two measure contrasting idea... The consequent phrase repeats the antecedent by bringing back the original basic idea.

House of Gold (Twenty One Pilots - 2013)

Symphony No. 94 in G major, Hob.I:94 (2nd Movement) (Haydn - 1791)

According to classical theory, this appears to be a basic ternary form; however, Spektor and Handel add an element that elevates this to a form known as the “Da Capo Aria”. This element is added embellishment, for the purpose of personalization and expression.

Da Capo Aria

Musicbox (Regina Spektor - 2006)

Spektor uniquely embellishes the repeat of the A section with noises illustrating the sound of swallowing bubbles, as per the lyrics of the song.

“Alexander Hamilton” (m. 43)

This motif denotes a character: Alexander Hamilton

“Satisfied” (m. 51)

Handel leaves the ornamentation up to the performer. These elements include trills, appoggiaturas, and turns, as well as cadenzas. This task, which was once common practice, must now be carefully studied in order to be historically accurate. Modern performance practice can easily over-embellish these Baroque period works.

Leitmotifs

Leitmotif: a theme, or other coherent musical idea, clearly defined so as to retain its identity if modified on subsequent appearances, whose purpose it to represent or symbolizes a person, object, place, idea, state of mind, supernatural force, or any other ingredient in a dramatic work.

(Shortens: Oxford Music Dictionary)

“Das Rheingold”/“Die Walküre” (Wagner - 1848)

The motif, called the “Renunciation of Love Motif”, denotes Siegmund’s need for love

Background knowledge is “the knowledge students have learned both formally in the classroom as well as informally through life experiences”. By understanding the many ways that classical forms and compositional devices have influenced the popular, mainstream music our students listen to every day, we can access our students’ background knowledge and interest to bring understanding to music history and theory. In this way, we can introduce musical concepts students may not have otherwise understood and enjoyed.


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