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In this book Philip Tagg endeavours to lay out the basics of a tonal theory of popular music. Its eclectic range thus covers “La Bamba”, Sweet Home Alabama, La flute indienne, The Who, Haris Alexiou, Carlos Puebla or a twelve-bar blues’ (p. 4). Although written for a student audience, it should be of value to anyone with a modicum of musical literacy who wants to understand not only how harmony, that most ineffable of musical topics, works in practice, but also why it is the most substantive contributor to demonstrations of musical meaning. As always with Tagg’s writing, he has an eye to the larger picture, which here results in an exhaustive and highly insightful study of Yes We Can, Barack Obama’s campaign video made in 2008. (After all, there is perhaps little point in understanding how something works without addressing why it matters.) Unusually, this is the only significant place in the book in which his familiar semiotic methodology can be found – the volume’s main task is to lay some of the necessary foundations for such work, foundations which make no concessions to the still established view that popular music, ultimately, only uses a debased form of the major–minor system.

There are potential methodological problems with his approach. The very spread of his repertoire, and its subsumption of many musics within a single explanatory system, could be read as a colonising move, were it not that Tagg’s aim is unambiguously explanatory, and is set against the mass of his published output. The book is surely better seen as a response to the gradual incorporation of the developmental histories of many musics within a Western harmonic system. There is then an implication of universality in the system Tagg explores which may be far from his purpose, but is perhaps an inevitable potential interpretation. He is explicit, though, that this must represent work-in-progress since there are so many important (but generally superstructural) topics which he (almost) promises to deal with elsewhere. Perhaps this issue will be among them. And he is also explicit in acknowledging his own authorship, rather than offering the pretence of an objective view (other perspectives on the operation of harmony and tonality are available) of an objectively circumscribed field. A reader is, then, always aware of reading Philip Tagg on this topic, with the concomitant senses of authority, expertise, systemisation, frustration and sheer enjoyment that brings. Theory textbooks tend to be dry, it being hard to avoid a didactic tone with such material. On some topics (I have in mind the chapter on the formation and notation of chords), Tagg is too, but elsewhere the book is full of characteristic insights, asides and contextualisation. The brief aside on ‘harmonic impoverishment’ (pp. 159–61) is a case in point, particularly as it turns out to be not an aside, but the basis for a detailed discussion of harmonic function. His coverage of modal harmony is, I think, probably the clearest and most careful exposition I know.

One of the book’s particular strengths is that, even if you have no understanding of the technicalities of music (but have time and commitment), he takes you from a painstaking analysis of what is meant by a range of basic terms – pitch, interval, melody, mode for instance – right through to his final analysis. We may have a rough idea of what is meant by terms such as these, but no matter how solid that understanding, Tagg’s discussion of them is likely to add something to that knowledge. Perhaps such an approach is in vogue – Walter Everett’s recent *Foundations of Rock* has something of the same aim, and a similar repertory base, although the results are somewhat different (comparison of the two would be highly insightful but is beyond my aim here). Many examples are notated, but audio clips of pretty well everything he references are readily available, either generally on the web or from Tagg’s own website. I can think of nobody interested in popular music who would not benefit from reading this book, and for music students or those trying to teach them, it is indispensable. It is available as an e-book only for little more than the price of a pint. It’ll last you, though, much longer.

Reference

Everett, W. 2009. *The Foundations of Rock* (Oxford, Oxford University Press)