

REVIEW OF NANCY MURPHY, *TIME'S A-CHANGIN': FLEXIBLE METER AS SELF-EXPRESSION IN SINGER-SONGWRITER MUSIC* (2023)

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THE NEWEST MONOGRAPH in the Oxford Studies in Music Theory series, Nancy Murphy's *Time's A-Changin': Flexible Meter as Self-Expression in Singer-Songwriter Music*, offers a framework for interpreting meter applied to a collection of analyses engaging the relationship of metric structure to extramusical meaning in recordings by Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Paul Simon, and Cat Stevens. The author identifies four elements—"self-presentation, [...] personal lyrics, striking techniques of vocal production, and flexible meter"—as central to music written by singer-songwriters in the 1960s and '70s that emphasizes self-expression (3). The book focuses on the fourth category—flexible meter—defined as “a metric structure that contains malleable performance timings, either in the form of ambiguous or vague meter or as vacillations between ambiguous and regular meter” (5). As the title of the monograph suggests, the author examines flexible metric structures in recordings by the five artists and connects them to specific expressive meanings, related to the songs' lyrics.

The object of the author's inquiry comprises “singer-songwriter music” written in North America between 1962 and 1972, which Murphy describes as original music both performed and accompanied by the songwriter featuring lyrics that seem central both to the artist and their audiences. She highlights this body of music's association “with an aesthetic of musical self-expression that generates an empathetic response with audiences and gives the impression of an ‘authentic’ and ‘unmediated’ performance practice in which songs are vehicles for per-

sonal truths” (14). Unlike other terms that describe genres, “singer-songwriter music” does not neatly encompass a particular style with similar musical markers and cohesive generic features.¹ While the term remains murky in terms of denoting musical style, Murphy's use of “singer-songwriter music” in this context suffices to describe this specific body of music. In what follows, I will present a summary and evaluation of the book's six chapters, reflect on the concept of authenticity as it relates to the monograph, and offer concluding thoughts.

SUMMARY

The opening chapter of *Time's A-Changin'* introduces readers to the work of the five songwriters explored in this study, characterizing them as pioneers in self-expressive songwriting, and provides a rationale for the study. An introductory analysis of Mitchell's “A Fiddle and the Drum” compellingly shows how fragmented, flexible meter musically conveys the artist's pro-peace plea, while the establishment of regular meter not only relieves the earlier metric flexibility but also connotes battle imagery. Ultimately, Murphy argues for an approach to interpreting meter that makes room for not only standard periodic and regular

¹ See arguments made by Tim Wise (“Singer-songwriter,” in *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*, vol. 8, *Genres: North America*, ed. David Horn, 430–34 [New York and London: Continuum, 2012] and Charlotte Grieg (“Female Identity and the Woman Songwriter,” in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley, 168–77 [London and New York: Routledge, 1997], 168).

metric structures, but also changes within recordings to accommodate more flexible meter structures, appropriate for this particular body of music. Identifying the expressive potential of flexible meter to convey specific imagery or narrative content as well as its broader potential to convey the appearance of imperfection and spontaneity associated with this body of music, the author writes, “the seemingly spontaneous moments of flexible meter in these performances are critical features of the poetics of self-expression in 1960s and 1970s singer-songwriter music” (10).

Solidly grounded in key scholarship related to rhythm and meter, Chapter 2 provides an overview of the book’s overarching theoretic framework and offers five types of flexible meter—“Ideal Meter,” “Regular Meter,” “Reinterpreted Meter,” “Lost Meter,” and “Ambiguous Meter”—based on degree of regular periodicity.² Murphy conceives of “Ideal Meter” as a prototype—a category more hypothetical than practiced—featuring precisely periodic, isochronous rhythms, nearly impossible for humans to perform unless assisted with technologies like quantization. More common in the music Murphy analyzes is the category of “Regular Meter,” which features regular, periodic spacing and durations of beats but lacks the isochronous precision of Ideal Meter, as its timings are subject to subtle expressive human deviations in performance. “Reinterpreted Meter” features some interruptions in regularity resulting from the addition or removal of beats in an otherwise periodic meter. A related category, “Lost Meter,” involves the lengthening of time between beats, resulting in a temporary loss of Regular Meter, also marked by an expectation for it to return. The fifth category, “Ambiguous Meter,” results from unrealized durations and ungrounded beats, is devoid of any regularity or periodicity, and does not invite any expectation for Regular Meter to emerge.

Building upon the work of Berry (1976) and Schachter (1999), the author offers five aspects of meter that serve as metric cues:

- 1) “stress,” which results from “accentual cues,”
- 2) “duration,”
- 3) “pulse,” defined as that which “emerges when a level of equally spaced beats is created between at least three events,”
- 4) “strong-weak organization,” and
- 5) “metric hierarchy” (51).

This chapter also summarizes theories of projection put forth by Hasty (1997) in an easy-to-follow manner and provides the groundwork for Murphy’s adaptation of Hasty’s methodology throughout the rest of the book, a helpful and

effective contribution to the literature on rhythm and meter in popular music, especially as it relates to listeners’ expectations.

Chapter 3 begins with an analysis of Mitchell’s “Little Green” to demonstrate Regular Meter. Metric accents on the word “green” relate to the meaning of the song, an ode to the daughter she gave up for adoption (55–56). Murphy then explores Reinterpreted Meter, which she defines as a result of added or omitted beats, in an analysis of Mitchell’s “A Case of You.” Observing irregularity in the poetic structure that relates to irregularity in hypermetric structure, the author connects irregularity in both related domains to emotional nostalgia expressed in the song (58–59). Additionally, an analysis of Mitchell’s “All I Want” shows how the placement of opposing words of “love” and “hate,” indicative of the singer’s mixed emotions, directs listeners to hear reinterpreted hyper-downbeats, which create a flexible metric structure in the recording. The author also offers two analyses engaging Reinterpreted Meter in Simon’s songs. Murphy observes that in “The Sound of Silence,” Simon emphasizes the word “silence” on hyper-downbeats, and in “April Come She Will,” metric flexibility evokes images of expansive time and space described in the lyrics. Murphy also analyzes three recordings by Stevens—“The Wind,” “Into White,” and “Kathmandu”—connecting flexible meter in these recordings with the artist’s transformation from “teenage pop star to a serious, introspective singer-songwriter” (73). Annotated transcriptions of passages from Steven’s recordings compellingly illustrate changing meter and hypermetric interpretation. The chapter concludes with an in-depth analysis of Mitchell’s “Lesson in Survival” (74–84). Murphy argues, “Since many listeners took Mitchell’s songs to be autobiographical, these passages of flexible meter indicate a connection between the singer revealing personal truths in her songs and a malleable metric rhetoric that responds to her expressive whims” (84–85).

Chapter 4 focuses on Lost Meter. Opening with an analysis of Dylan’s “Only a Pawn,” the author identifies two ways in which metric flexibility manifests: “with varying stanza lengths and an irregular number of line repetitions” and “vacillations between Regular Meter and Lost Meter” (88), with “deliberately unpredictable” timings (94). The author connects these metric features with Dylan’s self-expressive rhetorical style associated with protest song and argues that flexibility in terms of form aligns with Dylan’s “broader aesthetic of unpredictability” (91).

The author offers two complementary interpretations of Stevens’s “Time” (1970)—one that attends to irregularly shifting meters in which metric regularity is never established, and another, following Hasty (1997), using projective, process-based analysis intended to capture how listeners might experience spans of time between articulations in

² Capitalization of the five categories appears throughout the book with one or two exceptions, and I have retained the capitalization of these terms throughout this review.

the recording. Murphy characterizes “Time” as exemplary of the autobiographical, “confessional” type of songwriting in which “introspective narrative [is] expressed through flexible meter” (100). The author argues that larger-level durations musically depict the “lived experiences of temporal spans” (107), a theme explored in the song’s lyrical content, while smaller-level “beat articulations” represent “minutes or seconds, the ticking of a clock between larger events” (107). Murphy observes that the recording’s final section returns to simple quadruple (4/4) reflective of the lyrical theme of “going back” (108).

Effectively combining generative-style dots following Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1983) with projection arrows following Hasty (1997), the chapter concludes with an analysis of Joni Mitchell’s “Blue.” Here, Murphy shows how parallel melodic content undergoes change in metrically different contexts, exemplifying the effects of metric flexibility, and connecting those effects to meanings in the song lyrics. The author argues that the recording’s metric flexibility “express[es] an ideological tension between intimacy and freedom,” which connect to lyrical themes related to a love lost, as well as broader themes in Mitchell’s career regarding artistic freedom (111).

Chapter 5 presents a series of detailed, line-by-line and fragment-by-fragment analyses to explore Ambiguous Meter in recordings by Dylan, Mitchell, and Sainte-Marie. Murphy explores the ways in which “flexible, ‘imperfect’ timings” may convey “narrative meaning” as a marker of each artist’s individuality more broadly (125). Ambiguous Meter implies an ongoing “*potential* for metric regularity to emerge” (125, author’s emphasis). Building on work by Horlacher (2000/2001), the author defines “emerging meter” as “the process by which metric cues (stresses, pulse levels, and alternating strong and weak beats) gradually or swiftly organize into more regular levels of meter” (125).

In an analysis of “Down the Highway,” Murphy observes that Dylan’s guitar strumming patterns create metric flexibility and irregularity. She argues that Dylan obfuscates Regular Meter, feeding into “his broader ‘imperfect’ performance aesthetic” (128). At once these techniques both situate Dylan as a participant in the Delta blues tradition (a curious marker of authenticity, ostensibly at odds with his Minnesotan roots) and as expressive of his seemingly original, creative style. Murphy also explores the first five lines of Dylan’s “Restless Farewell,” which adapts the harmony and narrative content of a Scottish folk song, “The Parting Glass.” The lyrics engage the theme of leaving, and the author connects Dylan’s expressive timing, a result of inconsistency between the vocal part and the guitar strumming, to the restlessness articulated in the lyrics. Specifically, Dylan obscures meter in the guitar part by adding beats and competing with the vocal part. The author observes contrast between metric ambiguity in the first four lines of the

recording and metric emergence in the fifth line, which introduces lyrical content referencing “killed” bottles, signaling the end of an evening (146). Readers may be interested in pursuing how the lyrics of the subsequent verses, beyond the first five lines, interact with metric structures as the recording unfolds, which isn’t addressed here.

In this chapter, Murphy also revisits the analysis of Mitchell’s “The Fiddle and the Drum” in greater depth, connecting the artist’s identity as a Canadian, female outsider to “timidity” and an “initially Ambiguous metric structure” (148). In the final analysis of Chapter 5, the author perceives no clear pulse level in the recording of Sainte-Marie’s “Sir Patrick Spens” and connects Ambiguous Meter in the recording with the folk style, instrumentation, and a “seafaring source narrative” (155) borrowed from a Scottish ballad of the same name. As one of the most extreme examples of Ambiguous Meter, the author uses projection arrows following Hasty (1997) in the transcriptions of “Sir Patrick Spens” to show how listeners might experience Ambiguous Meter in this recording. Murphy explores how the artist’s mouthbow instrument articulates “ungrouped beats” while the double bass plays “unrealized durations,” defined as the phenomena “which occur when a clear stressed event initiates a duration’s onset but no second event occurs to confirm a time span” (159). Murphy observes that, in this recording, metric emergence occurs in tandem with narration, “organizing the story telling, giving agency to the narrator” (161). Finally, the author argues that Sainte-Marie’s adaptation of “Sir Patrick Spens” may be understood as reflective of her identity as a Native American and her activism against the oppression of and violence toward indigenous people.

The final chapter presents analyses of three different versions of Sainte-Marie’s “My Country” (two 1966 performances and a more recent recording from 2017). While Murphy addresses important aspects and the impact of vocal delivery in these recordings, there may be an opportunity to connect prosodic aspects of vocal delivery more directly to metric aspects central to the analysis, specifically what I have characterized elsewhere as consonantal articulation and vocal motility, here expressed as artful vibrato and pressed phonation.³ Murphy reads the 2017 recording of “My Country” in dialogue with the earlier versions and

³ I argue that consonantal articulation and vocal motility impact an artist’s prosody, understood broadly as the pacing of vocal delivery, which is an oft overlooked but central aspect of shaping an artist’s singing voice (*A Blaze of Light in Every Word: Analyzing the Popular Singing Voice* [Oxford University Press, 2020], 69–71). Specific to the interpretation of Sainte-Marie’s recording of “My Country” on *Little Wheel Spin and Spin* (1966), we can observe distinct contrasts between some choppy, intra-phrase discontinuity of the opening 45 seconds, heightened by marked consonantal articulation of ending consonants, and the more languid, more continuous phrases that

notes changes in vocal pitch and quality, including greater raspiness and growling, and observes intensification of the metric properties of earlier versions in the more recent recording.

Overall, Murphy's monograph is well-written and presents many illustrative musical examples and transcriptions, in spite of a few typos that somehow got past the editing process. For the most part, musical examples are easy to read and laid out effectively. Occasionally some formatting is a little difficult to read in the print version of the book. For example, highlighted text in Figure 3.13 (75) does not show up well in greyscale, and Figure 5.7 (136) uses a small font, which may be difficult for some readers to read in the print version of the book. Strengths of the book include its solid grounding in literature on rhythm and meter—especially the effective combination of methodologies from work by Lerdahl and Jackendoff (1983) and Hasty (1997)—to show aspects of how listeners might experience flexible meter in the song recordings. There may be an additional opportunity here as well for engagement of Kramer's concept of nondirected linear time—meaning a processive but unpredictable experience of time, which moves forward but without a single expected outcome—as it relates to Murphy's category of Ambiguous Meter.⁴

AUTHENTICITY

Even though the concept of authenticity is not the book's primary focus, readers might benefit from a more in-depth engagement of the literature on authenticity as it relates to the analyses in the book. Specifically, Allan Moore's "Authenticity as Authentication" could provide an engaging critical frame for this discussion.⁵ Arguing that authenticity is an ascribed phenomenon, Moore offers three categories of authentication: (1) "first-person," which involves listeners believing artists are speaking "from the heart" as if what they say reflects their own genuine identity or perspective; (2) "second-person," occurring when listeners can identify with the situations and perspectives the singers portray in their songs; and (3) "third-person," arising when artists seem to be participating in a specific musical tradition with particular musical features and expectations. When Murphy observes, "there may be some conscious intention on the part of these artists to have included flexible meter both as a technique of self-expression and as

follow, marked by the lingering on nasal consonants that Murphy observes. The variation in phrasing, heightened by consonantal articulation and different phrase and subphrase lengths directly contributes to the recording's metric flexibility.

⁴ See Jonathan Kramer, *The Time of Music* (New York and London: Schirmer Books, 1988), 39–40, 61–62, and 453.

⁵ Allan F. Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," *Popular Music* 21, no. 2 (2002): 209–23.

a way to align their output with self-expressive traditions" (21), these easily correspond to Moore's first- and third-person types of authenticity respectively.

These categories may aptly provide a framework for understanding how authenticity (as an ascribed value) plays out in several analyses. For example, in the analysis of "Down the Highway," Murphy identifies Dylan as a participant in the Delta blues tradition, which illustrates Moore's third-person authenticity while the artist's seemingly original, creative style connects to Moore's first-person authenticity. Also, in the analysis of "Restless Farewell," we can connect Dylan's alignment with the folk tradition in this recording with Moore's third-person authenticity, which establishes his role as legitimate participant within a musical tradition. In addition, Murphy positions Dylan as an "outsider and renegade, rebelling against regularity and signaling a broader 'aesthetic of imperfection'" (147), which she connects directly to Ambiguous Meter in the recording. These attributes, as they relate to listeners' perceptions of authenticity, reflect Moore's first-person authenticity, as listeners may understand the "aesthetic of imperfection" to convey sincerity and Dylan's own personal truth. Finally, in the analysis of "My Country," the author interprets Sainte-Marie's distinctive vibrato and emphasized consonantal articulation as central to listeners' understanding of her vocal delivery as connoting "raw and 'authentic' emotions," which could be understood as a marker of Moore's first-person authenticity.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This book will likely appeal to several different kinds of scholars. First, for those of us craving detailed, thoughtful analysis of music by this set of prominent artists (whose work has to date been underrepresented in music-theoretic scholarship) will delight in Murphy's thorough consideration of dozens of their recordings. Murphy's monograph complements literature that already exists on Dylan's and Mitchell's music, and paves the way for new, sophisticated analysis of music by Sainte-Marie, Simon, and Stevens. Adding to scholarship by Steven Rings that considers a broader range of musical parameters (phrasing, pitch, timbre, articulation, and rhythm) applied to multiple recordings of a single song, Murphy zeroes in on the specific ways Dylan uses metric flexibility as an expressive device in a wide sample of his iconic recordings.⁶ In addition, by focusing on meter, Murphy also enhances pre-existing analytic scholarship by Lloyd Whitesell that consid-

⁶ Steven Rings, "A Foreign Sound to Your Ear: Bob Dylan Performs 'It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding),' 1964–2009," *Music Theory Online* 19, no. 4 (Dec. 2013). <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.13.19.4/mto.13.19.4.rings.php>.

ers lyrics, harmony, melody, and form in Mitchell's recordings.⁷

Second, this book will also appeal to scholars interested in metric flexibility in any genre—especially as it connects to extramusical meaning. The author's artful combination of hierarchical dot notation (following Lerdahl and Jackendoff 1983) with projective arrows (following Hasty 1997) shows complementary retrospective and processive interpretations respectively, especially in the analysis of Mitchell's "Blue." Building on Whitesell's analysis of "Blue" (2008), which connects harmonic content with the song's lost-love lyrical narrative, Murphy's analysis of flexible meter further supports the recording's lyrics. While the author does not explicitly engage existing theories of musical meaning in this and other analyses, the analytic methodology effectively models compelling connections between metric structure and song lyric narratives.

Third, anyone interested in political and confessional aspects of music associated with the late 1960s and early 1970s folk-inspired singer-songwriter scene, will find in Murphy's book, useful information about the historical and biographical contexts from which the music emerged beautifully weaved into the analyses, along with how they connect to musical content and specifically metric aspects in the recordings considered. Connections are made seamlessly throughout, and readers more interested in historical context may easily navigate the analyses, while readers more interested in musical content will find the pertinent contextual information enhances the analyses. A great deal of care was taken with the writing of the prose and crafting of the musical examples, as the book is a pleasure to read and easy to understand—no small feat for a slim volume that offers sophisticated analysis at a high level.

⁷ Lloyd Whitesell, *The Music of Joni Mitchell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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