
Introduction

FROM PAUL WHITEMAN, TO BARRY WHITE, MAN

THIS MONOGRAPH EXPLORES a long-standing tradition of merging popular music idioms with lush string orchestrations, big-band instrumentation, traditional symphonic instruments, and other markers of musical sophistication, glamour, spectacle, theatricality, and epic or “cinematic” qualities. I call such deluxe—or “luxe”—pop arrangements and performance events “conspicuous symphonization.” This phrasing underscores entertainment parallels to Thorstein Veblen’s notion of “conspicuous consumption,” wherein luxury goods and services are employed for displays of social status, wealth, or cultural sophistication. A colloquialism with a similar social meaning is “bling,” a hip-hop slang term referring to displays of an ostentatious lifestyle of lavish and excessive spending. Conspicuous consumption and bling display are both tied to the purpose of inspiring envy. However, with bling, there is an aversion to melting-pot uniformity in that bling displays involve ironic stylistic tensions through juxtapositions of “low” vernacular/pop culture and the high-status symbols of social power, whether real or perceived. Similar qualities permeate the US “luxe pop” repertoires and events explored in this book. This music further reflects important changes in the character and aesthetic discourses of American culture and entertainment.

Across the twentieth century, the United States experienced unprecedented economic prosperity, resulting in middle-class expansion, particularly following World War II. American popular media thrived and became a world-dominant force, frequently celebrating the American Dream. The latter is founded on aspirations and ideals of upward economic and social mobility, with the potential of prosperity and success “for all” in the freedom to engage in the “pursuit of happiness.” American advertising and entertainment media have routinely depicted the look, mannerisms, values,

life experiences, homes, fashions, and consumption habits of glamorous and successful individuals—often celebrities—leading the “good life” or, rather, comparatively cosmopolitan, modern, sophisticated lives. These media and goods were positioned as self-reflections of—and a tool for influencing and defining—middle-class experience, ideals, and social and economic aspirations. Popular music was central to these narratives, both personal and collective, and it accompanied images of elevated glamour, sophistication, prosperity, and social mobility.

The social hierarchies associated with music are central to the study in this book, with traditional “high” art music understood to lie at one end, and “low” popular culture at the other. There is, however, much activity that existed between these two poles. Especially through the mid-twentieth century, consumers widely understood many genres, styles, and idioms along the class-hierarchy continuum of the brows, high to low. The latter meant various things at different times, but lowbrow was commonly associated with popular music of the most democratic, commercial, and accessible sorts. While popular-music studies have long illustrated the complexity of “simple” lowbrow pop, class-hierarchy discourse on music typically overlooked the wealth of trends that resided in the broad “middle” between these poles. Within the past decade, however, scholars have started to explore this culturally middle-ish territory under middlebrow and middlebrow-music studies.¹

Genres, styles, idioms, and instrumental textures can evoke loose associations tied to cultural and social class, with some musical textures being seen as more culturally elevated than others. In musicology, such evocative textures are termed “musical topics.” Film music is one of the most obvious media practices that relies upon evocative music to convey cultural associations in the service of narrative and contextual understanding. Popular music routinely engages in such topical practices via textures that implicate the associations of genre and style as well as narrative and expressive qualities, registers, and modes. Certain practices of popular music reflect class discourse to audiences via instrumental timbre and texture, musical gestures, qualities of record production, and modes of presentation and promotion. This is the territory of luxe pop.

Hearing Luxe Pop concerns how a family of orchestral pop music intersects with historical aspirational notions tied to ideals of glamour, sophistication, cosmopolitanism, and otherwise “classy” lifestyles. This study’s central questions are: how are the modes and class registers of glamour, sophistication, and cosmopolitanism expressed in these deluxe production trends, and how

do these traits relate to the aspirational ideals of contemporaneous society and its reflection in entertainment?

The book centrally considers the era from the 1920s through early 1970s, though it also includes an introductory chapter that explores how select music from the early 2000s can be heard through the long legacy of this tradition. This monograph is further a musicological contribution to sound studies. Like other contributions to the “California Studies in Music, Sound, and Media” series, *Hearing Luxe Pop* builds its research around a complex web of interconnected cross-media history and audio culture. This recording-industry study further includes considerations of radio, film, stage, print, and technologies and platforms of the internet era, as well as the practices of production and promotion, and the phenomenologies and histories of listening, particularly in the associative and metaphorical senses. “Hearing” in the book means inserting the reader into cultural discourses of a given moment so that they can hear the music discussed with ears that are more finely attuned to period associative reception. This work closely considers the intellectual and social history of the associations tied to specific tone and timbre combinations in popular-music production and performance practice, and how pop has built up accretions of cultural and aural associations through networks of historically accumulated meaning, through the stylistic legacies of influential music, and through the rhetorical sense of sounds as they have grown over time.

Hearing Luxe Pop is also a study of record production. In its balance of thematic and subject-area concerns, there is indebtedness to the scholarship of both Albin Zak and Simon Zagorski-Thomas.² Particularly useful are Zagorski-Thomas’s proposed eight categories for the study of recorded popular music, which build off of Zak. These areas include:

- record production as an expanded mode of creative composition that needs to be understood via the characteristics and metaphorical meanings of recorded sound, and how technology mediates the recording process (“sonic cartoons”);
- the sonic space and stagings imparted by production that suggest particular interpretations of performances;
- the relations of recordings to the development of technology;
- how developments in technology affect production trends and sound;
- the creative roles of producers and engineers, as well as their historically situated practices;

- the studio as a performance environment; how perceived artistic authenticity relates to audience influence, production practice, and areas of production economics;
- how the production of recordings is impacted by music-industry business practices;
- and the role of consumer influence on aesthetics and creativity.³

While this list offers “a way to elucidate many of the complexities of the subject,” this field of perspectives also reveals that “there are no fixed genres and there are no fixed rules” when attempting to “identify and quantify different musical communities through genre, historical period, geographical area or some other criteria.”⁴ Indeed, Zagorski-Thomas concedes that “there is a complex mass of individuals and there is no ‘system’—just an unholy mess.”⁵ *Hearing Luxe Pop* resonates with this sentiment, and some of the “messiness” of the project is tied to its breadth; the multifarious associative connections simultaneously pointing in past, present, and future directions; and the intermedia connections that are articulated.

The case studies that form the chapters of this book follow no fixed rules and instead bring to the fore the most illuminating sides of the potential sub-fields that Zagorski-Thomas outlines. This list, however, is misleadingly imbalanced, as he advocates a “reception/production dichotomy” as the framework for “a way of explaining and interpreting musical activity rather than simply characterising it.” Even more central here is “how the listener interprets a musical event or experience, how it was produced and how . . . technology, history, geography and sociology . . . have influenced both its creation and interpretation.”⁶ *Hearing Luxe Pop* aims for similar interpretive goals.

In this book’s agenda of understanding and interpreting both the music itself and its cultural, historical, and multifarious individual contexts, my primary sources have involved a wide range of media and document types, including: manuscript and published arrangement scores and arrangement sketches, manuscript notebooks, copyright scores, and personally transcribed materials; artist diaries and career-clippings scrapbooks; correspondence; recordings, both commercial and unreleased studio outtakes and multitrack masters; pirate recordings—video or audio—from live performances; orchestration and instrumentation method books; commercial and private films; newspaper and magazine clippings; media kits and promotional materials; audiovisual and text-based advertising, marketing, and recording packaging; and concert programs, program notes, and album-liner notes. Beyond

these media and writings, I have also included interviews of musicians; composers; arrangers; producers and engineers; critics; and concert-, record-, promotional-, and publishing-industry figures. Work with this panoply of sources embodies what Jann Pasler has called “postmodern positivism.”⁷ By this, Pasler means a mutually enriched and historically informed balance between (a) pre-1980 musicology’s concerns for the primacy of historical source materials in guiding the interpretation of history, and (b) the interdisciplinary agenda of post-1985 “new musicology,” which has placed primacy on deep engagement with critical theory for interpreting cultural meaning, particularly with relation to the politics and discourses of identity via class, gender, race, and so on. *Hearing Luxe Pop* is thus fundamentally a work of historical musicology, but cultural and sociological theory—when historically grounded and relevant to interpreting source-based evidence—firmly informs this book’s methodological and interpretive practice.

While American-based sociological discourse on class hierarchy plays an important role across this book, this is not a sociological study. This work engages—*must* engage—areas of more recent class and taste-culture theory from central figures like Pierre Bourdieu and Richard Peterson, among others. Quite relevant, of course, is Bourdieu’s conception of habitus, meaning socially reinforced communal beliefs, dispositions, knowledge, and perspectives that are so deeply embodied that they seem natural. Bourdieu articulates the relationship “established between the pertinent characteristics of economic and social condition” that shape an individual’s habitus, on the one hand, and the “distinctive features associated with the corresponding position in the universe of life-styles,” on the other hand. He argues that this relationship “only becomes intelligible” when habitus is understood to be “the generative formula which makes it possible to account both for the classifiable practices and products and for the [taste] judgements, themselves classified, which make these practices and works into a system of distinctive signs.”⁸ This system of signs and habitus determine the parameters and distinctions of taste cultures in the social world and lifestyles, and these are the central fields of inquiry under which luxe-pop music and culture must be examined.

Although luxe pop and its middlebrow-adjacent, classy- and glamour-based discourses are inherently linked to the habitus practices and conditions that intersect in American lower middlebrow culture (see chapters 4 and 5), following Bourdieu, the class, educational, and taste subculture trajectories do, in fact, change over time. Such changes are central to the narratives of *Hearing Luxe Pop*. Nonetheless, despite the immense value and influence of Bourdieu,

for the purposes of this American-centric work, I have found greater critical value in culture-specific sociological studies relating to historical moments and contexts relevant to the present work. These materials are valuable tools—when employed critically with present-day insight—for guiding historically informed interpretations. For example, sociologist Herbert Gans’s 1974 *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluations of Taste*, offers vital, research-based, period reading and explications of American taste cultures. This is nearly contemporaneous to Bourdieu’s 1979 *Distinction*, and a 1999 edition does briefly place his work in relation to Bourdieu. Nonetheless, Gans focuses his taste-subculture study specifically on an American rather than French cultural/sociological demographic.⁹ While archival interview materials do reveal private elements of the habitus of individual subjects, the present study documents habitus through historical primary sources and through widely circulated public discourse as present in the press, in the commentary of artists, and in the promotional material of recording companies, among other related sources, rather than fieldwork data.

The first chapter offers a broad overview of luxe-pop via considerations of recent hip-hop events involving full orchestral backing. With an eye toward low-high cultural tensions between, on the one hand, street-level hip-hop lyrics, thematic content, and cultural posturing and, on the other, artist adoptions and displays of aural and fashion luxury and status, the chapter examines Jay-Z’s celebrated return from retirement in a lavish 2006 concert at New York’s Radio City Music Hall with the so-called Hustler’s Symphony Orchestra. The chapter sketches the relation of this event—historically and sonically—to the 1920s–1970s luxe-pop history and cultural discourses that are explored in depth across chapters 2 through 8. There are clear entertainment connections between this bestringed, spectacle-oriented hip-hop event and the image constructions, performance practices, and musical-style and genre-based sound worlds of earlier orchestral pop trends, even as far back as 1920s symphonic jazz, a cornerstone genre of orchestral pop, but an idiom that period “highbrow” critics disparaged as “the very essence of musical vulgarity” in its “perfect fusion of the pretentious and commonplace” (see chapter 2).

The book traces the development of luxe pop through four distinct eras. Chapters 2 and 3 examine an era of “glorified jazz,” from the 1920s up through the 1940s. The pre-1960 subjects of chapters 2 and 3 include 1920s symphonic jazz dance bands, movie palace prologue revues, interwar radio orchestras, production numbers of stage and film musicals in the late 1920s and 1930s,

areas of Hollywood film scoring, and ultimately the 1940s jazz-with-strings vogue—from early 1940s “symphonic swing” orchestras to the many jazz-soloist-plus-strings instrumental albums of the late 1940s and 1950s.

Chapters 4 through 8 follow both the further development of these initial jazz-related idioms across the postwar years and the transformation of luxe-pop arranging in the new popular music idioms up to through the 1970s. These chapters are structured around case studies that each illustrate an emergent moment for both luxe-pop subgenres and central associative qualities in post-1950 luxe pop. Each chapter further involves some attention to articulating broader historical developments, chains of influence, and the porous connections between distinct eras, artists, and international creative communities.

The second major era spans the 1950s and early 1960s. The pre-rock territory of this period helped to canonize what came to be called the “Great American Songbook,” an idiom that the Recording Academy and the Grammys now refer to as “traditional pop.” Chapter 4 considers areas of 1950s Capitol Records recordings, with emphasis on Nat “King” Cole and Frank Sinatra, but connecting the big-band-plus-strings swing of these artists to “classy” cocktail lounges, Hollywood “crime jazz” underscoring, mood music and exotica album trends, middle-of-the-road pop, and easy listening. This model informed trends in the pop music of the subsequent rock ‘n’ roll era, most notably in Brill Building pop (Burt Bacharach, et al.), Motown, and—chapter 5’s main focus—the celebrated “Wall of Sound” ideals of producer Phil Spector’s early 1960s hits with the Ronettes and the Crystals. The study explores the aspirational discourse of Spector and his arranger Jack Nitzsche, and situates their “teenage symphonies” in relation to lower-middlebrow aesthetics, string-laden instrumental surf rock, Tom Wolfe’s interpretations of celebrity culture (the “statusphere”), and the glamorous image of the Ronettes.

Thomas Hine coined the term *populuxe* to describe prominent American consumer trends of the mid-1950s to mid-1960s (chapter 4).¹⁰ This word’s connections to notions of “popular luxury,” and marketing of “luxury for all,” make it an ideal term for the deluxe pop arranging traditions of this second era. By uncoupling and inverting the roots of this term to luxe pop, a term that I use to cover all the musical trends discussed in this book, I mean to carry many of the qualities of “populuxe” over to a general-purpose description of the broader aesthetic that defines the rich history of orchestral pop from the 1920s forward. (While the term orchestral pop is somewhat suitable, it does not convey the same mixed qualities of popular luxury,