

Popular music

A term used widely in everyday discourse, generally to refer to types of music that are considered to be of lower value and complexity than art music, and to be readily accessible to large numbers of musically uneducated listeners rather than to an élite. It is, however, one of the most difficult terms to define precisely.

This is partly because its meaning (and that of equivalent words in other languages) has shifted historically and often varies in different cultures; partly because its boundaries are hazy, with individual pieces or genres moving into or out of the category, or being located either inside or outside it by different observers; and partly because the broader historical usages of the word ‘popular’ have given it a semantic richness that resists reduction. The question of definition is further discussed in §I, 1, below.

Even if ‘popular’ music is hard to define, and even if forms of popular music, in some sense of the term, can be found in most parts of the world over a lengthy historical period, in practice its most common references are to types of music characteristic of ‘modern’ and ‘modernizing’ societies – in Europe and North America from about 1800, and even more from about 1900, and in Latin America and ‘Third World’ countries since the 20th century, and even more strongly since World War II.

The focus in this article is on these musical types; the emphasis is on the main themes, debates, and historical trends, and, in particular, on the USA and Britain, since 20th-century styles and practices originating in the USA (together with styles originating in Britain since about 1960) have come to dominate popular music worldwide.

The period after about 1955 is discussed in more detail in [POP](#) and in other entries on specific genres. Further information will also be found in articles on individual countries.

[I. POPULAR MUSIC IN THE WEST](#)

[II. WORLD POPULAR MUSIC](#)