Music with Expressive Power

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An Audio and Musical Quest

By

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Aim

I have two aims in writing this book. Firstly, to understand the current state of music, including its hi-fidelity reproduction. In progressing this aim, I will show how peoples' musical experience is shaped by the evolution of music. Changes in audio technology, in culture, in business practices, and in how people are exposed to music all play a role in the evolution of music. And secondly, to identify factors and initiatives that can encourage and positively shape the creation and performance of expressive music, the quality of audio reproduction, and people's experience of music.

Listening

I investigate why a large portion of people are not listening to music attentively. There will always be differences in people's acuity in listening to music. The intention is not to criticise those people who are not expert-level listeners, rather to understand what is shaping people's engagement with music. In this book I discuss commodified music and associated musical experiences at length. While people are free to make and like commodified music, and listen inattentively, this book shows that there is an alternative approach that is valuable to adopt.

Musical Expression Eroded

As the late music scholar and philosopher Roger Scruton[1] showed, truth-seeking is a valuable quest. Yet this necessitates calling out things as "they actually are" rather than as you would like them to be. Truth-seeking may identify things that some may might find unpleasant, objectionable or even annoying. I can understand that highlighting in this book an epidemic of poor listening practices, commodified music, and audio equipment with inadequate sound quality may be discomforting. However, poor listening, music with weak to little expression, kitsch music, and musical equipment and acoustic environments which have poor sound quality are common. I can respect those who might want to argue this is not the case. They are free to hold this view, yet after an extensive investigation I identify some reasons why this is the case, and provide some examples.

Musical expression in the contemporary era has been eroded by recording and marketing practices, and technological and cultural change. Song lyrics are frequently childishly simple; "nursey rhyme like."[2] The tonally of many contemporary songs is minimal; there is little internal variation or prolongation, and no modulations. They converse in empty circles, and "they go nowhere" as they lack a bridge.[3] A constant repetition of "musical platitudes" is commonplace. As the music critic Rick Beato called out in a recent interview, "today's lyrics are pathetically bad."[4] He quotes the hugely successful song by Jack Harlow, "Lovin on Me,"[5] and says they are "god awful lyrics"[6]:

> I don't like no whips and chains, and you can't tie me down
> But you can whip your lovin' on me,
> Whip your lovin' on me, baby

> I'm vanilla, baby, I'll choke you, but I ain't no killer, baby (I don't like no whips and chains)
> She 28, telling me I'm still a baby (and you can't tie me down)
> But you can whip your lovin' on me, baby (that's right, that's right)
> Whip your lovin' on me, baby
> Young J-A-C-K, AKA Rico, like Suave, Young Enrique
> Speakin' of AKA, she's a alpha

"Lovin on Me" also is "a quarter step out of tune" and its chords are "anaemically bad."[7] He also quotes from another song in the top 10, "Texas Hold 'Em"[8] by Beyoncé:

> This ain't Texas (woo), ain't no hold 'em (hey)
> So lay your cards down, down, down, down
> So park your Lexus (woo) and throw your keys up (hey)
> Stick around, 'round, 'round, 'round, 'round (stick around)
> And I'll be damned if I can't slow dance with you
> Come pour some sugar on me, honey too
> It's a real-life boogie and a real-life hoedown
> Don't be a bitch, come take it to the floor now, woo, huh (woo)

Many people barely listen to lyrics anymore. There is a loss involved here, and music is losing much of the poetry that made it special. George Orwell described such music well in a dystopia:

> "The tune had been haunting London for weeks past. It was one of countless similar songs published for the benefit of the proles by a sub-section of the Music Department. The words of these songs were composed without any human intervention whatever on an instrument known as a

> versificator. But the woman sang so tunefully as to turn the dreadful rubbish into an almost pleasant sound."[9]

Scruton identifies the impact of this form of music in the following:

> "Banal melodies and mechanical rhythms, stock harmonies recycled in song after song, these things signify the eclipse of the musical ear. For many people, music is no longer a language shaped by our deepest feelings, no longer a place of refuge from the tawdriness and distraction of everyday life, no longer an art in which gripping ideas are followed to their distant conclusions. It is simply a carpet of sound, designed to bring all thought and feeling down to its own level lest something serious might be felt or said."[10]

Musical Expression Recovered

In this book I refuse to succumb to cynicism and embrace the view that "music has just turned to crap." Rather than dwell exclusively on the loss of musical expression, this book celebrates noticing and appreciating musicians, and the places and contexts where the expressive power of music is already being nourished. This book seeks something better; something more than contemporary music frequently is. This is music that lights up the world as meaningful.

Tangents

The reader might initially find some of the factors identified in shaping music and hi-fi audio reproduction unexpected, and perhaps strange. Some readers might wonder what Sherlock Holmes or medical care have to do with music reproduction and experiencing music. They are relevant because they provide important insights on what is required for the quality reproduction of music.

To get the most from this investigation, the reader will benefit from having an open mind. It is much easier for people to follow ideas that they have already heard, and are in wide circulation, yet circulation or familiarity of an idea doesn't make it reliable. It may be false or misleading. I have conducted a wide-ranging multidisciplinary investigation. Some readers may not have previously encountered some of the ideas shared in this book.

Musical Choice

This book seeks to encourage a more informed choice on how people experience music. While the consumption of music and associated listening behaviour may appear to be "freely chosen," it may not necessarily be derived from a meaningful choice. To exercise meaningful choice, it needs to be informed, freely chosen, and driven by judgement.[11] Identifying the factors affecting our music choices and the way we experience music provides an opportunity to assess and possibly reconsider our choices, habits, and practices. Understanding the benefits of attentive musical experiences might provide some motivation for change. By becoming more aware of the forces and factors that may be influencing them, people can have a greater capability of informed choice over the music they experience.

Recently I encountered a touching account of a person who was undergoing cancer treatment who bought a quality audio system. The patient credited the music they were able to experience through the system as playing a role in his recovery.

While some of the music that is explored in this book may not be a particular reader's "cup of tea," there is still much to be learned and appreciated about the artists discussed and their musical ethos. As an adjunct to this book, I encourage the reader to play some of the music made

by artists I have covered. It may prove to be an artistically rewarding and educative experience.

Overview

I begin by exploring the context for experiencing music. I then trace the impact of instrumentalism on music and identify how it might be resisted and overcome. I also investigate some of the main factors and challenges involved in the quality reproduction of music. I explain why achieving quality reproduction is much more difficult than most people may assume.

Many people might think that the use of more advanced technology overcomes many of the challenges involved in quality audio reproduction, yet the answer is a yes and a no. Some of the challenges involve our human capacities and perspectives, which can't be simply addressed by technology.

Next, I explore the role of experimentation in quality audio, particularly in terms of its contribution to knowledge and the actual achievement of high-quality playback of music. I then raise the problem of "the elephant in the room," the reproduction of emotions in music, which is routinely neglected in audio reproduction. I posit some likely reasons why this oversight has occurred. As emotions make a major contribution to musical expression, I argue that they need to be considered in initiatives to achieve quality audio reproduction of music.

Moving towards the end of the book's musical and audio journey, I take some imaginative leaps in order to consider what a more engaged musical experience could be like and what benefits could accrue from it. In the final chapter, I explore some initiatives and features of expressive music, focusing on how it can be encouraged. In the afterword I provide summaries of some of the main insights arising from this inquiry.

Notes

[1] See Roger Scruton's personal website: https://www.roger-scruton.com.

[2] "An Analysis of Why Modern Music Is So Awful," StereoMono Sunday, March 2019, https://stereomonosunday.com/2019/03/23/why-modern-music-is-so-awful.

[3] In music, a bridge is used to facilitate transitions from sections of a song, such as a verse to a chorus.

[4] Rick Beato, "Today's Lyrics Are Pathetically Bad," YouTube, March 21, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQoWUtsVFV0&t=2s.

[5] Jack Harlow, "Lovin' on Me," https://www.billboard.com/music/lyrics/jack-harlow-lovin-on-me-lyrics-1235551786.

[6] Rick Beato, "Today's Lyrics Are Pathetically Bad."

[7] Ibid.

[8] Beyoncé, "Texas Hold 'Em," Genius, https://genius.com/Beyonce-texas-hold-em-lyrics.

[9] George Orwell, "1984," Sandy Maguire, https://sandymaguire.me/books/orwell-george-1984.html.

[10] Roger Scruton, "The Tyranny of Pop," https://jotaguedes.medi.um.com/the-tyranny-of-pop-6b01c6b54e78.

[11] See for example Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox Of Choice: Why More Is Less* (New York: HarperCollins US: 2016); Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action*, 2nd ed. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982).

CHAPTER TWO

THE CONTEXT FOR EXPERIENCING MUSIC

Music Never Speaks Wholly for Itself

Gene Weingarten, a reporter for *The Washington Post*, asked Joshua Bell (an internationally acclaimed virtuoso) to play an intricate piece of music with a Stradivari violin in the morning rush hour. Bell's mini concert aimed to find out if beauty would overcome a banal setting. Bell's test of the public perception of music shows that music does not speak wholly for itself. While playing the violin at the L'enfant Plaza Station, 1,097 people passed by. Only seven stopped to appreciate the performance. Twenty-seven gave money, leaving 1,070 people who "hurried by," oblivious to the music. There was never a crowd, not even for a second.[1] This is a splendid contemporary demonstration of the question of context and presentation in art, and what is required for aesthetic appreciation.

Weingarten's story about Bell's performance "Pearls Before Breakfast," won the Pulitzer Prize. The YouTube clip of Bell's performance has over seven million views. While Bell's experiment has major flaws, it shows that musical quality, even genius, won't necessarily be recognised. Weingarten posed the question: is the "rat race" mode of existence too frenetic to pause and savour beauty? People's behaviour and context influence their appreciation of music. As Weingarten says:

> "The grim *danse macabre* to indifference, and the grey rush of modernity was exemplified in the fast walk passengers seemed to play around the talented soloist."[2]

People may not perceive and appreciate glorious music if they have not cultivated a taste for good music and the ability to listen attentively. A vivid example is Llewyn's audition of "The Death of Queen Jane" in the film *Inside Llewyn Davis*.[3] Llewyn's music has integrity. Llewyn is not a showman. Llewyn is a genuinely talented artist who refuses the easy road of charm, of selling out. He relies on the quality of his voice, his playing and the resonance of the old folk songs. Llewyn Davis's audition is spellbinding, it is richly nuanced, intimate and consummately human. Above all it is beautiful. Yet the critic's response is short, sharp and steely cold: "I don't see a lot of money here."[4] The critic's evaluation focuses on the "lowest common denominator"; immediately catchy/catchable and bankable tunes that don't require any aesthetic value.

Musical Expression Is Co-created

Some music may be expressive, and the experience of that expression is co-created between musicians and the listeners. While music may invite and entice us to pay attention, it does not necessarily make us listen. Listening is the action of those who choose to listen. The listener may be unreceptive for a variety of reasons and thereby deaf to any musical expressions being shared. Musicians may not always strive for musical expression, and there are many ways that musical expression can be impeded, blunted, eroded and destroyed. Yet, as this book explores, musical expression can foster valuable and enlightening human experiences.

Notes

[1] Gene Weingarten, "Pearls Before Breakfast: Can one of the nation's great musicians cut through the fog of a D.C. rush hour? Let's find out," *The Washington Post*, September 23, 2014 (https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle /magazine/pearls-before-breakfast-can-one-of-the-nations-great-musicians-cut-through-the-fog-of-a-dc-rush-hour-lets-find-out/2014/09/23/8a6d46da-4331-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f_story.html).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Peter Bradshaw, "*Inside Llewyn Davis* – Review," *The Guardian*, January 23, 2014 (https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jan/23/inside-llewyn-davis-review).

[4] Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

THE IMPACT OF INSTRUMENTALISM ON MUSIC

Instrumentalism and Music

Throughout history, music has always been used instrumentality, as a tool, as a "means to an end." Music was, for example, used to inspire, rouse and encourage troops in their military campaigns.

As Adorno says, music has become a commodity: "an object of economic value to be sold and consumed."[1] In the current era, most music is assimilated within the system of commodities almost as soon as it is produced, such as via assimilation into the data and advertising markets of the internet. Audio recordings are monetised via advertising and data sales due to viewing within a browser or on a steaming site, through social media, or a news site featuring advertising.

While music can and does have a role "as a means to an end," there is a need for greater recognition of the contribution of music beyond any instrumental value it may provide. While music may be fashioned and shaped as a commodity, it may alternatively be a unique artistic practice.

As will be shown in chapters four and five, artistic music may furnish us with richer ways of living. It may even allow us to experience some enchantment. Almost all musical creations borne out of an aesthetic impulse, and not for economic gain, are potent materials for contemplative immersion. As the philosopher Roger Scruton says:

> "In the past, even up to today, a work of art (such as a painting) can capture the attention of an audience and lead them to mediated reflection. Likewise, an opera or an orchestra has the power to captivate its audience and bring them into a non-predetermined aesthetic experience. Today, any popular song may result in either an increased critical awareness or a useless distraction. It may serve to side-track reality temporarily and bring the absent-minded listener to a fleeting trance."[2]

Productivity's culture seeks an "end product" for everything we do, and everything has to have a measurable material value. Otherwise, it would be useless. Productivity is enshrined in the idea of immediacy, the value and ability to satisfy our needs or desires as quickly as possible, and with little effort. This approach misses the transcendent aspects of music. Music can have an intentionality in its own right. Music has an overreaching intentionality without object or subject, yet it can be asked to have an account. This musical space has no purpose other than its own existence. "Our highest response to music is the presence of the transcendent beauty contained in it. It may provide us with insights into what kind of person it is good to be."[3]

Music has become a commodity "first and foremost." Commodification removes genuine compositional spontaneity and soul from music and replaces it with empty virtuoso gestures of showmanship and flair. Concerns about bland music dominating musical culture go back at least thirty years. An example of this is the longstanding frequent criticism made by rock critics and fans about "middle of the road" and "easy listening" music. To refer to music as art now seems to jar, like it is some kind of highbrow relic from a much earlier era. Yet changes in the creation and use of music can be contrasted with music as art; music based on artistic forms of expression. The transition of music from what may be regarded as works of art to "mere

content" was first critiqued by Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their essay on "the culture industry and mass enlightenment as deception."[4]

The music critic Adorno[5] became a talented pianist who had a deep knowledge and love of music. For Adorno, some artworks are just better than others; and popular culture is, by and large, "trash."[6] He sees people as easily fooled and misled. Writing seventy years ago, he accurately described the main features of mainstream music and many of the problems occurring with the creation and use of recorded music.[7]

Adorno is concerned about "how the world prevents us from realising our potential and closes off any chance of a pleasure other than that which merely repeats the demands of work," or which relies on "deep immoral inequality."[8] Adorno's complaints focus on the "obstacles that are placed in our way." He finds that the structure of the modern world ensures that our pleasure is always incomplete and qualified. I can take pleasure immediately and simply in popular culture, and in return must subject myself to its distracting, dis-unified and insincere manipulation of my senses and emotions.

> "While a person might be fortunate enough to be able to dedicate large swathes of time and money to the appreciation of high art, their ability to do so is based on an unequal distribution of wealth; my temporary freedom comes at a cost to others."[9]

In the current era, there is only a small group of major labels and celebrity artists that profit from the system. All other artists continue struggling. Just because there's more money being made by music now, that doesn't mean that wealth trickles down to the average working independent artist or local musician.

For Adorno, popular music, especially in today's marketplace, is never about praxis[10]; rather, it is about lulling the individual's critical awareness to sleep, "wallowing in passivity."[11] The use of music as background requires no conscious thought to be "appreciated." As Adorno identifies, popular music rarely asks a listener to engage with it at any level of complexity; it instead encourages vicarious flights of fantasy. If Adorno were alive now, he would see:

> "The hegemony of popular music largely complete, music superstars dominate the media and wield the economic might of tycoons. They live full-time as mega-rich, yet they hide behind a folksy façade, wolfing down pizza at the Oscars and cheering sports teams from V.I.P. boxes."[12]

Experiencing Music

For Adorno, the introduction of the radio and phonograph caused the music experience to become increasingly passive. As Botstein argues, "the cause of the 'impoverishment' of musical culture was that music was no longer practised in the home."[13] Adorno believed that by the 1940s the mechanical reproduction of records had degraded the reception of music irretrievably.[14] By the 1940s, deep listening had degenerated into experiencing the "hit songs." The audience for hit songs had regressed to the point where only familiarity and instant intelligibility could satisfy people's needs.

Technological advances formed the basis of the music industry which Adorno analysed and criticised. He saw the industry reduce musical products to music's most accessible elements and then standardise those elements so that they could be repeated and "sold over and over" again. He saw listeners "dumbed down" under the constant pressure of lowest common denominator marketing and the relentless exposure of the simplified, standardised product of the music industry.[15]

Adorno predicted that the significant power of culture industries would turn us into regressed, passive consumers. The commoditisation, trivialisation and regression process has extended beyond music and the food industry to news services as entertainment, theatre, film, shopping, travel and other leisure activities.

Adorno claims that popular culture, as well as being a source of pleasure, is also a kind of training; it engages us in and reinforces certain patterns of thought and self-understanding that undermine our ability to live as truly free people. It accomplishes this partly through its very predictability.[16] In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno writes:

> "In a film, the outcome can invariably be predicted at the start – who will be rewarded, punished, forgotten – and in light music the prepared ear can always guess the continuation after the first bars of a hit song and is gratified when it occurs. No space is left for consumers to exhibit "imagination and spontaneity" – rather, they are swept along in a succession of predictable moments, each of which is so easy to digest that they can be "alertly consumed even in a state of distraction." And if, as Adorno believes, in the wider world we are under ever-increasing pressure to conform, to produce, and to pour our energies into our work, this loss of a place where we can think freely, imagine, and consider new possibilities is a deep and harmful loss. Even in our freedom from work, we are not free to truly take the kind of free and spontaneous pleasure that might help us recognise and reject the harmful lack of pleasure we find in our working lives."[17]

Our lack of aesthetic freedom, then, also helps to build an obstacle to the realisation of social freedom. If popular culture puts us to work even in our leisure – if we are nowhere given space to think and experience freely and unpredictably – then we will lose sight of the possibility of a world not

completely dominated by work. We will have increasingly less space to consider such a thing; and increasingly less experience of anything different to what work demands. For Adorno, the progressive element in music is subsumed under its entertainment value. What appears to be the "substantive character" of music is:

> "Nothing more than a thin veil that conceals its main purpose: profit. Entertainment shows, concerts, tours, radio programs, and competitions are apparatuses for product placements, promotion of media personalities and product endorsements. Artists fall prey to the "commodifying" proclivities of the industry that turn them into objects of consumption, rather than agents of social critique and emancipation."[18]

Popular music's intensifying merger with advertising, television, and film under music branding suggests that:

> "Now more than ever, the individual branches are similar in structure or at least fit into each other, ordering themselves into a system almost without a gap."[19]

The prioritisation of the profit-maximising motive serves as a tool for manipulating populations rather than being an expression of freedom. In Adorno's words:

> "The culture industry arouses a feeling of well-being that the world is precisely in that order suggested by the culture industry, the substitute gratification that it prepares for human beings cheats them out of the same happiness which it deceitfully projects."[20]

Pre-recorded music has become a ubiquitous presence at virtually every place and event of modern life. People are exposed to so much music that they may not always be aware they are hearing it. Adorno argues that the

rigid sameness of music presents itself under the guise of rebellion and novelty:

> "The general influence of this stylisation may already be more binding than the official rules and prohibitions; a hit song is treated more leniently today if it does not respect the thirty-two bars or the compass of the ninth … Realistic indignation is the trademark of those with a new idea to sell."[21]

Here, too, complaints and aggression that build up in us are given outlets in supposedly "rebellious art."[22] From The Doors to Rage Against the Machine, social provocation and protest have been harnessed to create digestible music, backed by business, and used to provide the harmless release of dissatisfaction.

> "In this fashion, popular culture meets our needs; but it ties them back into the process of profit-making, and disperses the energies we might have needed to make genuine change. The temporary pleasure we take in satisfying our needs, and discharging our frustrations, in popular culture stands in the way of a more powerful change in our way of life that could ameliorate our frustrations, and serve our pleasures, in a deeper and more lasting way."[23]

The anti-establishment punk band the Sex Pistols realised that commercial success undermined their artistic endeavours. Achieving their anti-establishment aims required them to have a limited lifespan. They needed to be on the outside of the economic machine of the music and culture industries so they were not subsumed by them.

Culture and Contemporary Music

For Adorno:

> "High culture creates, at its best, works of art that give us true aesthetic freedom and escape from labour. But these artworks come with high barriers to entry, that help to close off the perfect conditions for experiencing such art to all but the few. To attend a performance of a symphony takes not only money, but also time, and freedom from immediate needs and anxieties – it requires insulation against worries about money, food and security that are increasingly unavailable in a world where employment becomes ever more precarious and less well-paid."[24]

The growth and popularity of music streaming "are seen as a win for music consumers, giving them greater freedom and virtually limitless access to musical content. These services foster new cultures, practices and economies of musical circulation and consumption."[25] Yet they confirm Adorno's dictum that the culture industry allows the "freedom to choose what is always the same."[26] "The culture industry has become more monolithic, Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon preside over unprecedented monopolies."[27]

"Music streaming is far ahead of other forms of music distribution."[28] Top streaming applications include: "Spotify, Apple Music, Amazon Music, YouTube, Pandora and SoundCloud."[29] Streaming is now the primary revenue source for most music labels.[30] Major record labels, with their enormous catalogue of current and past music as a bargaining chip, are in a strong position to negotiate preferential playlist access for their artists on these streaming platforms.[31] Their bargaining power is further enhanced by the minimum payment guarantees they include in their contracts with streaming platforms, and the equity stakes they hold in some of them. The

major labels also have their large playlists, such as Filtr and Topsify, which further enhances playlist access for their artists. Internet discourse has also become tighter and more coercive. Search engines guide you away from peculiar words. “Most read lists at the top of websites imply that you should read the same stories everyone else is reading.”[32]

> “Cultural products in the age of technological reproduction are perceived as commodities that sustain the social and political status quo rather than stimulating creativity, freedom, intellectual activity, and autonomous thinking.”[33]

As works of art became more accessible that may remove the “last barrier to their debasement as cultural assets.”[34] Here music is “reduced to mere adjuncts … serving its listeners in pacifying, elevating, or steadying mood and emotion.”[35] As popular music rewards chart-topping successes, homogenisation continues under the guise of individualism, wherein catchy songs with repeated phrases proliferate. Within streaming platforms, creative freedom and user-generated content abound in the form of mashups, remixes, memes, and parodies. Commodification within the culture industry is pervasive. As Gillian Rose explains:

> “The present-day preoccupation with market “lifestyle” claims to produce a range of goods through which the consumer can satisfy his or her particular individual needs. Shopping becomes the activity through which personal identities are constructed and maintained. There is good reason to think of it as a vehicle for personal emotional expression. The recorded song has been the perfect commodity: it conceals reality by seeming, inherently, to carry access to the artist’s subjectivity, this guise of intimacy with another human personality. The core of the music is a manufacture of illusion: a masquerade of authenticity.”[36]

Most contemporary music is reflective of the current culture. In contrast to symphonies which would last more than thirty minutes, modern songs speak of the short attention span of contemporary listeners. More than half of current hit songs are less than three minutes and average at around two minutes and thirty seconds. Shorter songs have become more common over recent decades. Shorter songs are efficient for consumption, not contemplation; for entertainment, not reflection. Adorno would argue that current mainstream music culture is "numbing people's aesthetic consciousness."[37] This is achieved by an abundant supply of hit-making music, and parading celebrities promoting favoured (fashionable) lifestyles. "Genuine and pseudo-nursery rhymes are combined with purposeful alterations of the lyrics of original nursery rhymes to make them commercial hits."[38] As Joan Serra says:

> "Lyric intelligence has declined, lyrics have become shorter, and there is a greater tendency to repeat the same words more often."[39]

Research conducted by Zangerle and her co-authors spanning five decades (1970–2020) on a music dataset found that "Across all genres, lyrics had a tendency to become more simple and more repetitive."[40] They also discovered that "the ratio of repeated to non-repeated lines has ticked up across genres over the years, nearly doubling for pop songs and rising even more rapidly for rap music."[41]

To promote greater sales lyrics have been made easier for people to process and memorise. The chorus is repeated frequently, and only a limited vocabulary is used. For many consumers music is the background while they are multitasking. Music is not something they pay attention to. The lexical complexity of lyrics has decreased, as has the structural complexity of music. Also, many of the biggest contemporary hits sound similar because they recycle the same chord progressions and harmonies.

There has also been a rise of "snippet culture" where there is great demand to stay up to date with short content (of often fifteen to thirty seconds). Increasingly, people want tasters, pre-release versions of music, film, of all content.

TikTok is a highly successful short-video format that is routinely used to promote music, as it is often used for music discovery. A study conducted by Microsoft shows that TikTok has been linked to a decrease in attention span. "After 20 minutes on TikTok, users experienced a significant decrease in attention span and working memory."[42]

> "Apps like TikTok are designed to grab your attention, only to disappear from your memory a split-second later as you swipe on to the next … and the next … and the next. There is now a culture of "scrolling" and "swiping," where users quickly move through content without fully engaging or processing it."[43]

Aesthetic Wasteland

The success of commodified music is partly helped by consumers lacking sufficient capacity to differentiate good from bad music. Market forces strongly shape and condition the musical taste of people and set the parameters of what is supposed to be regarded as "good" music. This results in an aesthetic wasteland where no new "musical idea" is being put forward. As Scruton would say, it is scandalous when "low art" is uncritically elevated to the standards of genius. There is a conflation of quality with statistical ratings. The more people who "consume" a work, the more it is exalted to a high-level stature. Ratings numbers act as the primary determinant of aesthetics.

Most chart-topping hits with mass appeal are driven by a similar beat and melodic pattern to their predecessors, evoking nostalgia from older

audiences while offering an easily digestible form of content. They are sold to consumers "as the next big thing," an exclusive commodity with social value. Popular music preys upon an individual's need to be different and express themselves through association with the new fashionable cultural artefacts, though each person is consuming the same thing. Adorno explains this practice as:

> "The sacrifice of individuality, which accommodates itself to the regularity of the successful, the doing of what everybody does, follows from the basic fact that in broad areas the same thing is offered to everybody by the standardised production of consumption goods. But the commercial necessity of connecting this identity leads to the manipulation of taste and the official culture's pretence of individualism which necessarily increases in proportion to the liquidation of the individual."[44]

This pretence of individualism has grown in prevalence. Standardisation is packaged instead under the facade of "free choice" and cultivation of "individual taste." Here an illusion of freedom to choose masks the extensive amount of optimisation that has gone into effectively engineering a song to be "well-received." Commodification imposes the need for cultural products to reproduce what has been "market-tested" while gesturing (albeit often on a surface level) towards originality. This practice underlines the facade that the music industry[45] star performers have become successful based on their own merits, and consumers have freely chosen to enjoy the songs that have been marketed to them, when in fact "algorithms and behavioural data have pre-determined much of the current process of discovering music."[46]

"The Hit Parade" – the mechanism put in place by publications such as Billboard – plays an important role in keeping people buying more and more music when contemporary music is inherently similar or repetitive.