Sound in Motion

Sound in Motion:

Cinema, Videogames, Technology and Audiences

Edited by

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PREFACE

NEW HORIZONS

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It is a great pleasure for me to have been asked to contribute a preface to the second book of essays to come out of the MUCA research forum, made up by a group of international scholars who are dedicated to the analysis of audio-visual cultures. As the President of the Iberian Association of Cultural Studies (IBACS) it has been a very rewarding experience to see how all kinds of discourses on music cultures, which reflect the interdisciplinary character of cultural studies, have been assembled to make up the present book.

The eclectic nature of the book can be gleaned from the general headings, which mark out the wide thematic boundaries of each section and give the reader an idea of how the book engages with a series of important contemporary questions concerning audio-visual cultures. After Simon Frith's questioning of the very notion of popular music, which sets the tone of the book, the authors consider music and technology, which zigzags through trends as varied as the influence of 'audio correctors' on creative processes, 'mimetextuality' and streaming, and the influence of audio production on listening habits. The state-of-the-art tone of the collection is reinforced by a series of reflections on music and new audiences with relation to YouTube, rap as an affective tool, cyberculture, the pedagogical possibilities of symphonic metal lyrics in terms of literary narratives, and affect, response, temporal suspension and imagery.

The book then moves on to consider two other dominant media: the videogame and TV. Here there are essays that focus on player experiences, the notion of 'endless horizon', technology as a tool of ethnic decontextualization, the mediatisation of music, and the experimental filming of music.

The final section considers identities in movement in terms of the cinema, focussing on image, sound and the LP in the phonographic industry and the use of classic music in modern French cinema, and the role of *fados* in the Portuguese cinema of the 1940s and 50s. These essays are complemented by a chapter with a more theoretical slant, which discusses enunciation and focalization within film music narrative.

It is hardly surprising, then, that this collection puts a great deal of emphasis on the idea of new horizons because the authors of the various contributions to this compilation take up the challenge of reflecting on the way music and audiovisual cultures are evolving in different cultural contexts across the globe. These reflections also draw on a host of different theories to put forward their arguments and claims.

If one had to devise a theory of culture from these contributions one would be thrown back onto the common contemporary conundrum in much cultural criticism: that while we continue to use the word 'culture' it only serves (to mix a few metaphors) as a kind of shorthand, an alarm bell – a reminder that it is an umbrella term that covers a multitude of different objects and practises. As I have stated elsewhere,[1] and something which tends to be suggested by the present collection of essays, it is probably more effective to see the notion of culture as a 'contested *space* in which a very diverse set of analytical practices take place'.[2] Thus, the collection of essays which form the present book, very much in line with many cultural studies' publications, open up new horizons that slide between disciplines as varied as Musicology, Literary Studies, Media and Film Studies Sociology, Social Studies, cultural studies and Communications. In one sense the studies themselves, in opening up new horizons, are actually involved in evolving and expanding the notion of culture itself.

In my view, this up-to-the-minute and innovative volume is a credit to Enrique Encabo and his fellow MUCA collaborators and I hope this will be followed by many more in the years to come.

Notes

[1] See Walton, David. *Introducing Cultural Studies: Learning Through Practice*. London: Sage, 2008, and Walton, David. *Doing Cultural Theory*. London: Sage, 2012.

[2] Walton, David. *Doing Cultural Theory*, p. 2f

CHAPTER ONE

WHY THERE IS NOT SUCH A THING AS POPULAR MUSIC

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In the early days of popular music studies, at the beginning of the 1980s, the issue that seemed to concern people most was what I now think of as the Adorno problem: how could we claim that commercially produced music had any aesthetic value when Adorno had explained with such analytic certainty that it hadn't? There were various ways of dealing with this, ranging from detailed critiques of Adorno's aesthetics through attempts to show that some sorts of commercially produced popular music were less determined by commerce (less 'standardized') than others (this was an aspect of the way 'rock' was distinguished from 'pop') to accounts of musical meaning that focused on listeners' ability to 'resist' pop's ideological determinations (as in cultural and subcultural studies). The traces of such strategies can still be seen in contemporary popular music studies, but scholars today tend to focus more on 'the materiality of sound' than on the ideology of music, and to address not the Adorno question but something broader, *the problem of musicology*.[1]

For me, as a sociologist of music, the Adorno question seemed easy enough to answer: all musical experiences are socially constructed and therefore worth studying; how value judgements work is itself a question that a sociologist should be able to answer. I was interested in how we had reached a high/low cultural situation in which the university study of music paid no attention whatsoever to the music that most people listened to for most of the time.

Popular music studies emerged as a response to this. Its starting point was that music outside the western classical/art music tradition could and should be studied academically. But as this argument was slowly and

reluctantly accepted, I came to realise that the problem was not simply that academic musicology was focussed only on a limited range of music but also that it had a rather limited understanding of what 'music' and 'music listening' involve. It was certainly possible to apply conventional analytic approaches to progressive rock, heavy metal, funk etc.[2] but this seemed to me to misrepresent in some ways how such music worked—how sound decisions were made and understood—and I came to the conclusion that the task for popular musicology was not so much to devise a new analytic vocabulary as to develop a new account of 'the music' to which the vocabulary could be applied.

What bothered me, to put this another way, was that even as popular music studies were taken on academically so was the assumption that there could and should still be an underlying, specifically musicological understanding of music. It became commonplace of the field to argue that while sociologists of music provided good accounts of the *context* of music making and listening, they thereby ignored 'the music itself'. This argument has been made most consistently (and eloquently) by the pioneering popular music scholar, Philip Tagg. In his words, "popular music studies involves music *as well* as its social and historical contexts"; from his perspective someone like me, a sociologist of music, studies "everything but the music".[3] My response is that the reason I don't say anything about "the music itself" is because I don't believe there is such a thing. There is not some kernel of music-ness, some essential sonic event that is left when one strips away all the encultured ways in which music—all music— is made and heard. The notion of 'the music itself' is itself a social construction. Music doesn't just happen; it is an effect of all the things that are meant by the phrase "social and historical contexts".

I am not arguing that academic (and non-academic) musicologists don't say interesting things about music or that formal musicology isn't a useful analytical tool for composers, arrangers, producers and performers. The point is, rather, that there are ways of understanding music, even 'music itself', which start with different questions: not what is *a* musical work but what is musical work, not how is this piece of music structured but how does it sound, not what does music mean but how is it heard. These are the questions I want to address here.

What is musical work?

A musical work is easy enough to point to—a score, a text, a commodity, a track, a download; it is as much a visual as an aural object; it is a thing (or, in the digital world, a quasi-thing) and its thingness is what underlies the analysis of music though visual metaphors. When someone says "I forgot my music" they mean they've forgotten a physical object, their score or music sheet. When they say "I've forgotten the music' they might mean also that they can't remember the playing instructions that the score (which might be an imaginary score) would provide.

This *textual* understanding of music is still fundamental to many of the ways—both scholarly and common sense ways—in which we think about popular music: on the one hand, in terms of musical authors (and their special qualities); on the other hand, in terms of musical meaning and interpretation. And it's hardly surprising that such approaches are dominant. They are fundamental to both the music industry, organised as it is around copyright and the notion of music as someone's intellectual property, and to music education, organised as it is around chronologies of great composers and performances of their great works; and this as true of historical accounts of rock and pop as of historical accounts of Western art music—both are organised around canons.

But to understand music in this way, work as a noun, is not helpful in understanding music as work, work as a verb. From the latter perspective music is a process not a thing, a performance not a score; it necessarily involves collaborative action, collaboration not just in the production of notes (as in the classic composer/ conductor/orchestra model) but also, just as importantly, a much more extensive set of collaborations in the production of sound. A song, that is to say, is not a thing, with a moment of conception/creation/production, but has, rather a career, and there is no reason why one moment in this career should be privileged over any other.

Three points about the nature of musical collaboration are particularly important. To begin with, I need to draw attention to the *extent* and *complexity* of music-making networks. Among other things this means that the usual, Romantically-derived distinction between art and commerce is misleading. The issue here is not separation but complicity. 'Art' and 'commerce' are ideological terms, give us a way of thinking about processes that are, in practice, inseparable. Art and commerce, in other words, don't describe separate music making networks but, rather, theorise a single field. Even in the classical music world the role of patrons,

publishers, promoters, commissioners, award and prize givers, teachers and mentors, as well as of producers, record companies, sound engineers, acoustic architects, managers and marketing departments shouldn't be bracketed off as somehow irrelevant to the sounds heard on record and in concert halls.

The second point to draw out is the extensive *timeframe* of such collaboration, something that is immediately obvious if we shift analytic attention from musical work to musical instruments—the 'things' that make musical work possible (and in my view the best starting point for the sociology of music is the study of musical instruments).[4] Certainly to follow this route is immediately to throw up interesting questions.

For example, it may seem a truism to say that most musical instruments are manufactured with the purpose of being musical instruments, and with specific music making techniques in mind. But how does cause and effect work here? Does (existing) music call forth the musical instrument or does the musical instrument call forth (new) music? The history of the piano exemplifies the complexities here.[5] And histories of technology draw attention to other issues, such as mismatch—the way an instrument is used and played may not be the way it was designed to be used and played—and the ever-changing ways in which 'musical instruments' are distinguished from other sorts of sonic device.[6]

It may seem obvious to us today that amplification equipment is musical equipment, that a singer 'plays' the microphone and that a variety of pedals, speakers, leads and levers are necessary components of the electric guitar as a musical tool, but the distinction between 'natural' and 'artificial' sound, between 'authentic' and 'manufactured' sound, remains a living thread of musical debate, even if the parameters are continually changing.

A musical instrument, in short, is always an ideological object even if the way sounds are heard is changed by a changing sound context. Some instruments are conservative: they are expected to conserve and perfect established ways of music making and teaching (as in the continuing fetishization of classical musical instruments such as the Stradivarius violin and Steinway piano). Other instruments are innovative, designed to change established ways of making music. In different cultural systems instruments may be valued for being old or for being new. 'Old' instruments, instruments no longer used but on display, are celebrated by museums and by collectors (who are likely to be concerned too by

provenance: this is the guitar played by John Lennon) or else, taken off the shelf, they are adored by nostalgic amateurs:

> Thus the *ToneQuest Report,* a respected critical voice in the high-end guitar world, cheerfully sends every one of its readers on an obligatory and costly "tone quest," a "personal, profoundly important journey" to discover their "unique, signature guitar tone … Many of the fifty-something white hobbyists who sign on to the trek end up back in their living rooms, making love in front of the fire to exotic gear, trying to capture the magic of a Billy Gibbons, Stevie Ray Vaughan, or Carlos Santana. Failing that, the complex tones of a hand-wired tube amp, like the hand-rubbed finish of a vintage guitar or the finish of a vintage wine on the palate, are still there to be savored by the adventurer turned connoisseur.[7]

An instrument's 'authenticity' matters equally, if differently, to ethnomusicologists and traditional musicians—see, for example, Jan Fairley's discussion of the *charango*, 'the small South American mandolin whose back is traditionally made from the shell of an armadillo'.[8]. A sound-making instrument is not just the source of sounds; it is also and as significantly a source of sound meanings. Consider, for example, Veronica Doubleday's introduction to a special issue of *Ethnomusicology Forum* on musical instruments and gender:

> Musical instruments are significant cultural artefacts invested with a wide range of meanings and powers. Through their presence and through the sounds they produce, they have a special ability to transform consciousness. To possess or play a musical instrument is to wield power … Around the world instrumental sounds are indispensible to many religious and secular rituals, and in some situations instruments achieve iconic status.[9]

As commodities, as Doubleday explains:

> Musical instruments thus lend themselves to contestation. Through the agency of monopolies and taboos, one group may claim possession over an instrument to the exclusion of another. Gender is one of the most important parameters in human power relations, influencing most aspects of life, and the power play between humans over musical instruments is often enacted along gender lines.[10]

This leads me to my third point: musical instruments are not simply functional, a means to a sonic end. Their use can also be *ritual*. Musical instruments (and their makers) are thus essential collaborators in the cultural as well as physical activity of music making. To be a musical instrument, to put this another way, is to be in a relationship. The physical

thing only becomes a musical instrument when it is used as such, when it is played, when a relationship is established between the instrument and the person playing it, and with other instruments and their players. From a musician's point of view a musical instrument is no more stable than any other musical relationship; from the audience perspective, the nature of the instrument is revealed by how it is performed, by the bodily gestures involved, but also by its place in particular social circumstances. This is one reason why, at a concert, it is difficult to know what could possibly be meant by 'the music itself'.

In abstract terms my argument here is this. An instrument is something that enables people to do things they otherwise couldn't do (or only with great difficulty). An instrument is therefore something that enables people to do new things or to do old things more effectively, more efficiently, on a bigger scale, collaboratively, and so forth. In short, it increases human possibilities. If humans determine what an instrument is for, an instrument determines what a human can do, and thus what it means to be human. It follows that musical instruments enable humans to make sounds that they otherwise couldn't or to make them more efficiently, more effectively, on a bigger scale, collaboratively, etc. Musical instruments increase human sound-making possibilities and thus what it means to be musical. And what is historically fascinating is that these decisions about efficiency etc. are made not only by 'musicians' (the people who play the instruments) but also by 'non-musicians', by craftsmen, engineers, acoustic scientists, sound designers, and so forth. Material decisions determine musical decisions and vice versa. The distinction between musicians and non-musician in this context is as unstable, as ideological, as the distinction between art and commerce. Again what is involved is a particular way of thinking about a single field.

What is musical materiality?

In academic musicology, the term 'musical material' is used to describe musical ideas—the ideas a composer works with—things that are clearly not material, that exist only in thought and the imagination. What happens to the term when we think of music not in as composition, but by reference to music as a 'sound system'? Robert Fink has noted that in the world of contemporary club music (in which music is routinely described as being an effect of sound systems rather than the expression of compositional ideas) sound itself is taken to be have physical rather than intellectual effects; its materiality—the result of particular chains of amplification,

compression and noise engineering—is what gives a track its meaning. This is an argument that has been explored academically by Steve Goodman, in the aptly titled, *Sonic Warfare. Sound, Affect and the Ecology of Fear* (2009) and Julian Henriques, in *Sonic Bodies* (2011). But as Robert Fink notes, with reference to their arguments in a discussion of subbass,

> while it may be true … that sound is force as well as text […] in the subbass register, the force is largely wasted on us. Most bass pressure goes around our heads, not into them. This is, in some ways, a good thing, as any teenager who ever curled up inside a bass bin can attest. Even the highest levels of bass "pressure" pose almost no physical danger to human hearing.[11]

The materiality of sound, in other words, may not be as straightforwardly material as it seems. The perceived physicality of subbass involves a response to sound that is indirect, an effect on the body mediated by the movement of the mind. 'Musical material' doesn't just involve ideas (as implied by conventional musicology) nor just physical causes and effects (as implied by dance floor ideologues) but, rather, as Fink suggests, the relationship between the two.

Again, this is most obvious when we consider the materiality of musical instruments. It is, for example, possible to construct a typology of instrumental *affordances*, to consider the sound possibilities that musical instruments offer through their materiality, in their size, shape, solidity, pliability and so forth: audibility (the extension and control of sonic volume, of loudness and softness); playability (related to existing technique, to music teaching and training, and to what is meant ideologically by something being 'easy' or 'difficult' to play); flexibility (the extension and restriction of the range of sounds available); uniformity (does the instrument enable the player to make a distinctive sound or to sound like everyone else playing this instrument); reliability (are the sounds it makes predictable/controllable); and durability (will the instrument last).

Whatever instruments may afford, though, the sounds they are used to make depend on human agency, on contingencies, on practice, on how players develop tacit knowledge of their instruments. One question here is to what extent a player can make an instrument their own, can possess and be possessed by it. Of course this depends, in part, on the instrument's material qualities, its size, portability and so forth but it also depends on how the instrument is heard and seen to give value to music and its

performance. The materiality of a musical instrument is entangled with the ideology of the music world in which it is used. It is clear, for example, that instruments are necessarily used in particular physical places (churches and concert halls, homes and arenas, studios, clubs and dance halls), for particular cultural events (dances and recitals, to celebrate community and the familiar, to confront the new and the unfamiliar), by players and audiences with different accounts of what is the sound of music is and should be. How music is heard—whether an instrument sounds 'sweet' or 'ugly', for example, or 'beautiful' or 'crude'—has shaped and has been shaped by, among other things, ideas about gender and race. The voice, as a musical instrument, epitomises the impossibility of disentangling the physical and the cultural: when we listen to someone singing we do not—cannot—just hear 'the notes'.

What musical instruments do depends on what they are for, which, in turn, relates to how they are played, to performance gesture and intention, which is, in most cases, collective: instruments are played with other instruments. And in doing something an instrument says something; it therefore gets tied into notions of musical agency—an organising intelligence. It is heard as a vehicle for meaning, even as it acts as a limit on what can be said. How a musical instrument works is thus a matter of negotiation, reflects the play of forces between instrument makers, instrument users, the material and technological conditions of production, scientific knowledge, musical markets and ideologies, craft and imagination. In his discussion of subbass, cited above, Robert Fink thus criticises the tendency in recent popular music studies to treat EDM, electronic dance music, as involving a new kind of haptic perception of sound. Dance music has always been thought to 'touch' the body, to involve hearing music *through* movement (and in many dance forms through movement with other people). But music here is not so much causing people to dance, through its physical impact (as in the St Vitus dance imagery used in 1950s denunciations of rock 'n' roll[12] as being created by the dancers: their 'physical' response to music is a way of articulating their 'mental' organisation of the sounds to which they are listening.

One problem of thinking about music in terms of the flow of sounds rather than the organisation of notes is the lack of an agreed descriptive sonic vocabulary. A reason for the continued dominance of tonal analysis in academic musicology is that everyone can agree the terms of analysis; they can be taught and tested. The urgent task for popular music studies now is therefore to agree a vocabulary for the analysis of sounds.

Such a search for agreed descriptive words is implicitly a search for objectivity, for empirical, measurable distinctions between one sound and another on which we can all agree. In the early days of the Reid School of Music at my university, Edinburgh, founded in 1839, this meant turning to acoustics. A *science* of sound was then essential to establishing music as a university subject. Eventually, though, sonic terms derived from maths and physics became marginal to the teaching of musicology, which developed a different, tone-based abstract and objective language. (Only the organologists, based in the university's historical collection of musical instruments, continued to understand sound studies as a branch of physics.)

The linguistic tensions between the science and the art of sound continue. Writers on 'the cognitive process of interpretation that we engage in when listening to electronically-mediated music', like Simon Zagorsky-Thomas (2017), thus make use of spectrography, and assume readers' knowledge of frequency theory, hertz measurements, etc. and while I find such accounts of 'embodied listening' and 'sonic cartoons' persuasive and illuminating, this acoustic vocabulary is as esoteric to me as musicologists' tonal language. On the other hand, the technical terms Zagorsky-Thomas uses are undoubtedly much more in line with the way in which contemporary popular music makers think than the vocabulary developed for the benefit of classical composers and performers. My point, though, is that these sound engineering terms still have the same purpose, to describe *how* sounds work (their grammar, as it were) but not, thereby, to describe something we could call 'the music itself'. To become music, sounds need listeners to ask why as well as how questions.

Listening Practice

In the introduction to *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone*, the editors refer to "one of the most deeply ingrained experiences of timbre available to humans—the perception of vowel shifting in speech". There is a broader point to make about this. In the process of acquiring spoken language—the most taken-for-granted and the most mysterious of human learning skills—we become adept at hearing and interpreting ceaseless shifts of tone and timbral register. I'm less interested here in the science of how this cognitive process relates to musicality than in the cultural consequences for what we mean by listening and sound 'expertise'. In everyday conversation, to say that someone is a good listener is not to describe their technical skills (perfect pitch or an understanding of sound technology) but

rather a quality of sympathy, their ability to hear and appreciate the whole range of sonic messages that talking to someone involves. In this context to be tone deaf is to misread an emotional situation; it is seen as a problem of sympathy. Good listening is thus more an effect of enculturation than formal training.

What does sympathetic listening mean in music? I will organise my answer under three headings: sound context, sound space, sound expression. The text/context argument here refers not to musicology *vs.* sociology but to the imbrication—implicit and explicit—of sounds with other sounds, sounds either immediately present or suggestive in their absence, so that, for example, as Albin Zak persuasively argues, the appeal of early rock 'n' roll and doowop records lay in the way such 'amateur' recordings "flaunted audio-musical sins that violated the standards of major label recording practices", their producers "seemingly untroubled by electronic distortion, muddy acoustics, limited frequency response, or poorly balanced ensembles." The pleasure of this music lay as much in what it didn't sound like as in what it did. As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it,

> Perhaps we never *listen* to anything but the non-encoded, what is not yet framed in a system of signifying references, and we never *hear* [*entend*] anything but the already coded, which we decode.[13]

Nancy suggests that listening is not about decoding meanings or significations; rather, it is about noticing the elements of sound that do not conform to our expectations of meanings and significations, and considering what they might mean or become.

The second point to make about sympathetic music listening is that we hear sounds in space as well as in time. Indeed, music's sense of place is more immediately apparent to our ears than its 'development'; music's 'presence' describes something spatial as well as temporal. Sounds work as music through the construction of audio place. Discussion of this will, inevitably, use visual metaphors for music listening, but the experience described is not just visual. It is architectural; it involves resonance, three rather than two-dimensional analogies; one listens by going *into* the music.

But the essence of sympathetic listening is that one is listening not to words as such but to the person whom these words and sounds express. Sympathetic music listening therefore involves an understanding of sonic expressivity. Each performer has a characteristic array of sounds, and makes characteristic choices from them (this relates to what classical musicologists would call a composer's 'style'). The point is not that a

personality, person or persona determines the sound of the music made but, rather, that the sound choices construct—'express'—the only sense there is of a musical personality and of its 'coherent variability'.[14] There isn't first a meaning, to be expressed, and then an expression, to be interpreted, but, rather, musically, expression and meaning are the same thing. There isn't something behind the sound we hear. Listening sympathetically means listening to what is there, what is being presented to our ears, not listening for what isn't there, a real meaning to be discovered by decoding (or by referring to a composer's biographer). To make the point again, music-as–sound does not have depth but resonance.

Conclusion

I gave this chapter a deliberately provocative title and I hope that, by now, it is clear how it should be read. My argument has been that popular music is not a *thing* but, rather, a term that describes a process, a set of relationships in music making and music listening that can be contrasted to other such processes and relationships which get other labels—folk music, classical music, jazz, or whatever.

I'm also aware that my arguments here are sometimes confused and sometimes contradictory. I suggest, for example, that to listen sympathetically is to listen to what is there (rather than to what is not there) while previously suggesting that the sounds we hear are necessarily imbricated with other sounds, not just sounds immediately present but also sounds suggestive in their absence. I make no apologies for this. My point is that music making and listening are themselves confusing experiences, and that such confusion needs to be an aspect of the way we make sense of them.

And this, in the end, is why I believe that the best way to approach popular music sociologically is through the study of musical instruments. Musical instruments clearly are things; material objects, commodities, tools, possessions; musical instruments are more thing-like than musical works, one could say. Yet they only become *musical* instruments when they are used. They have to be understood in terms of their contribution to performance, to musical processes and musical relationships. To approach the study of popular music through the study of musical instruments, rather than with a focus on songs or records, is, in short, not simply a different kind of analytic materialism. Rather, it means immediately

understanding that, like all music, popular music is not a thing but an activity.

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Notes

[1] As will become apparent, this essay was inspired by the opportunity to read and add an afterword to *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music,* a collection of essays that greatly clarified my thinking on these issues. My thanks to Robert Fink and his colleagues.

[2] Holm-Hudson, *Music Theory Remixed: A Blended Approach for the Practicing Musician*.
[3] The best account of Tagg's approach is his online publication, *Music's Meaning. A Modern Musicology* http://tagg.org/mmmsp/NonMusoInfo.htm, Accessed September, 5, 2017.
[4] My thinking here has been enriched by discussions with my colleagues at Edinburgh University, Matt Brennan and Nick Prior.
[5] Isacoff, *A Natural History of the Piano*.
[6] The classic text here is Pinch and Trocco, *Analog Days: the Invention and Impact of the Synthesiser*.
[7] Fink, Latour and Wallmark, *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*.
[8] Fairley, *Living Politics, Making Music*, 98-103.
[9] Doubleday, *Sounds of Power: An Overview of Musical Instruments and Gender*, 3.
[10] *Ibid*. p. 4.
[11] Fink, *Below 100 Hz: Toward a Musicology of Subbass*
[12] See Martin and Segrave, *Anti-Rock. The Opposition of Rock 'n' Roll*.
[13] Nancy, *Listening*, 36.
[14] I take this concept from Samples, *Timbre and Legal Likeness: The Case of Tom Waits*".

PART 1:

MUSIC AND TECHNOLOGY: NEW HORIZONS

CHAPTER TWO

SOUND HYPERREALITY IN POPULAR MUSIC: ON THE INFLUENCE OF AUDIO PRODUCTION IN OUR SOUND EXPECTATIONS

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Some years ago, I was asked to make a fake version of "Summertime" for a short film. While listening to different versions and getting some ideas from both classic and modern sound approaches, I came up with an essential question: how should the reception of sound be considered in terms of quality? I remember that I was comparing Billie Holiday's 1936 version (Columbia, 1987) with the one that Angelique Kidjo recorded more than half a century later (Island, 1997). The difference between these two recordings seemed quite evident: Kidjo's track, with its (then) modern production tricks, achieved a sound so clear, crystalline and close, that was really difficult not to give it a better assessment. But suddenly, I realized how we tend to emit this judgement in a tremendously hurried manner, since in Holiday's 1936 version everything was also audible with absolute clarity. Then, what was it that made me think that one was so much better than the other? The answer, without a doubt, has a lot to do with how technology has modified our sound expectations: Holiday's recording was the result of a mic capture necessarily influenced by the acoustic response of the room, and the sound perspective in Kidjo's version was not only radically different, but totally unreal from an acoustic point of view. Most of the objects that shaped the piece were presented in an exaggeratedly close plane, and the multiple voices—treated with impeccable compression and equalization—had an unreal proximity. Some of these voices were literally whispering in your ear, and their crystalline brightness was unreal but, at the same time, as real as an illusion… Thus, this unrealistic presence, far from representing a disadvantage—and here lies the paradox—was an attribute that favoured the balance in my initial judgement. Far beyond the concept of quality—which is always

subjective—, the truth is that technology has substantially conditioned our perception of sound reality: we have been seduced to participate in an audio virtual reality experience that we now accept as natural. We have become accustomed to enjoying a sound perspective created, on many occasions, by means of technological devices that radically influence our aesthetic judgements.

So, what is sound hyperreality?

In 2006, neuroscientist and musician Daniel Levitin proposed the term *sound hyperreality* to define those "sensory impressions we would never really have in the real world" (2006: 2). Even though he doesn't really elaborate on it, Levitin opens an interesting path towards the study of the creative capacities of sound production. Yet, to properly contextualise the term, we must go back to the notion of hyperreality found in works by theorists like Umberto Eco, Daniel J. Boorstin or Jean Baudrillard. In Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality* (1986) we find a description of the way contemporary culture uses re-creations and cloned environments to come up with something that can be conceived as better than real. Before Eco, historian Daniel J. Boorstin had suggested the same idea in *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1961), proposing that simulation could act as a distinct social category in which illusions and fabrications had become a dominant force in society (Sanes: 2013). Also, Baudrillard furthered the idea that our society tends to replace reality and meaning with symbols and signs, building new human experiences based on the simulation of reality. To explain his notion of hyperreality, Baudrillard uses the example of the real-scale map proposed by Jorge Luis Borges in his one-paragraph story "On Exactitude in Science" (1946). In fact, Borges's idea of a 1:1 map makes us go back in time still further to the end of the 19th century to find the same idea in Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno* (2004 [1889]). On various occasions, Baudrillard's approaches to musical consumption and reception exemplify some of his theses. In this sense, his ideas on the notion of *high fidelity* lead us to a vision that, albeit somewhat apocalyptic, is interesting to analyze for its linking to the usage of audio equipment as some kind of denaturalization act:

> We are all obsessed with high fidelity, with the quality of musical 'reproduction'. At the consoles of our stereos, armed with our tuners, amplifiers and speakers, we mix, adjust settings, multiply tracks in pursuit of a flawless sound. Is this still music? Where is the high fidelity threshold beyond which music disappears as such? It does not disappear for lack of music but because it passed this limit point; it disappears into the

> perfection of its materiality, into its own special effect. (Baudrillard, 1994: 5)

While Baudrillard himself argues that a simulacrum "is not a copy of the real, but becomes truth in its own right" (Mann, 2010), he uses high fidelity as a "metaphor to illustrate how we have gone beyond the vanishing point into the era of news over direct experience, digitally created collaborations over live ensemble playing, the triumph of represented experience, in all aspects of life" (Roberts, 2015). His standpoint gets even more drastic when, showing an undeniable parallelism with some—let's say—Adornian statements, he proposes that "an obsessive focus on the […] perceptual artefacts of reproduction technology virtually guarantees a non-musical experience" (ibid). This is a critical approach to music technology as a creative activity, according to which its presence does nothing more than move us away from the "real music" to the realm of the "other music", the hyperreal. For him, it is enough to "read audio magazines and note how we have developed parallel definitions of real sound that apply only to reproduced sound, without thinking it unnatural in the least to do so" (Roberts, 2015). This should indicate that, as listeners, we have been somehow bewitched by all this audio production trickery, ignoring the fact that real and reproduced sound "are not the same thing, [...] that hi-fi and music exist in a state of tension such that one denies the other when you really get down to it" (ibid). In such a manner it seems that in the last years the notion of hyperrealism has been extended to various disciplines, from semiotics to sociology and anthropology, consolidating a point of view that associates the term *hyperreality* with cultural criticism. Almost all of these notions are often perceived or analyzed rather by their hypothetical negative effects of adulteration or deviation from reality than by their ability to create new realities (even though they are simulations, they are still new representations of reality). It is mainly in the audiovisual field in which the notion of hyperrealistic sound is more easily and usually located: actually, in the sound design of plenty of cinematographic products, we will certainly find quite a lot of examples of hyperrealistic sounds. These hyperrealistic sounds are, then, absolutely necessary because, in terms of auditory reception, the consumer's expectations have less to do with the sonic reality that surrounds us but with how the industry has told us that this reality should sound... Or could it be that someone believes that all those iconic cinematographic *punches* sound like that in real life? Sonic hyperreality is, therefore, a fictional pact between artists and consumers; a process mediated by industry and, obviously, by all the technical tools involved in its production. It is in the middle of these two poles already

described (those of cultural criticism and creation value) where we find the notion of sound hyperrealism proposed by Levitin, which is probably the first one directly related to audio production. With his proposal, Levitin forces us to think about this mediation between creators—including not only composers, but also producers and sound engineers—and listeners. This implies asking ourselves in which ways creative uses of technology have turned quite an amount of unrealistic sound representations into natural. Or, in other words: what kind of fictional pact(s) have we made in popular music? I find it quite a relevant question as we have been listening to music for decades without paying any attention to this fact. And, of course, this is something we could perfectly well ignore forever, and music would still be there, spinning its marvellous, incompressible and infinite web of mediated emotions between humans. Nevertheless, the goal of this article is to shed some light on this topic by simply referring to some well-known procedures of historical audio production that have turned into some kind of magic wands for our music perception and, by extension, also for some of our aesthetic expectations.

Some *macro* processes: Stereo, multitrack recording and mic improvements

Historically, we must take into account some aspects of audio production that are the basis of many of these changes in our listening habits. Our interest here is not to study technical procedures (well covered in specific literature, even with some crucial socio-technological approaches)[1] but to reflect on how and why they have modified some of our aesthetic schemes related to sound conceptualisation in popular music. We propose to establish a historical/conceptual separation between macro and micro processes. A difference that, despite being obviously subjective, can help conceptualise the nature of some sound hyperrealities and their historical and technological connection with musical reception. Within the group of macro processes, we will consider the appearance of stereo, multitrack recording and mic improvements as especially influential because they form a foundational basis for other creative procedures. On the other hand, some other specific procedures—that can be explained by the historical/technological influence of the previous ones—will be classified as micro processes. The macro processes act as a general basis for many procedures that we understand as "natural" today, not only in the world of audio production, but also in how we hear music every day. A good example of this is the idea of the stereo field, which, adapted to our natural condition of binaural beings, also enables us—through various panning

techniques explained below as a micro process—to treat spatial movement in ways that can go far beyond our ordinary binaural experiences[2]. While the technical implications of stereo recording have been widely covered by specific literature, less attention has been paid to its collateral effects in terms of reception or even in terms of aesthetics. As suggested by Jonathan Sterne (2003: 23-30), with the arrival of sound recording, the technologies that tried to reproduce sound as a form of movement—like Edison's phonograph or Bell's telephone—devised transducers to reproduce the functioning of the human tympanum. Due to this connection between the physiology of the ear and the technology of sound reproduction, Sterne refers to this type of reproduction as *tympanic*. The concept of tympanic reproduction has been quite successful and, by means of its acceptance, the language used to describe any recording is now closely linked to this paradigm. In this way, terms such as *vivacity* or *fidelity* have a direct relation to this principle. Nonetheless, while tympanic reproduction appeals to the sound reality in temporal, dynamic and frequency domains (with all of their complexities), it would not be until the arrival of stereo that sound reproduction would aspire to a certain spatial realism through binaurality. Even though the first stereo tape machines were introduced in the early 1950s, the acceptance of stereo systems (both technical and commercial) would be subject to a relatively long process. Throughout the decade, multitrack recording would become established and the progressive increase in the number of tracks were accompanied by some crucial improvements like the sync-head by Ampex or the inclusion of EQ and compression in each of the desk channels. Subsequently, the evolution of production techniques during the second half of the 1960s rapidly induced the mass production of more sophisticated machines (Julien, 1999: 359). When commercially expanded, the stereophonic paradigm supposed—mainly through the 1960s and 1970s—the creation of some kind of manual of style that, as a result of creative experimentation, ended up with some aesthetic pacts in terms of spatial distribution. The instruments had to "negotiate" their position in the mix because the new possibilities in terms of field location were absolutely revolutionary. Thereupon, there began to emerge a huge amount of creative panning ideas to work in that area. On the other hand, some instruments (e.g., kick and bass guitar) found in their low frequency responses a strong reason to (usually) stay in the centre of the stereo field. And those weren't necessarily the closest representations to sound reality, they were just new—and maybe more attractive—representations of it.

Despite being only a tiny little part of the whole, stereo represents a massive change because it creates links to a huge amount of other