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cybersounds

Essays on Virtual Music Culture

Michael D. Ayers, EDITOR



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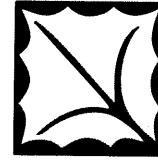
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For Doug and Elaine—from whom I learned about life and Peter, Paul and Mary



AFTERWORD

On the Future of Music

Jonathan Sterne

Though it is possible to point to articles that address the role of the Internet and music production, circulation, and consumption (e.g., Jones 2000; Jorda 1999; McCourt and Burkart 2003), *Cybersounds* offers us an unprecedented opportunity to reflect on music on the Internet and the state of scholarship about music on the Internet. *Cybersounds* situates music as an important site for Internet culture—as something that attracts people to particular online sites or conditions their modes of online practice. Even as it elevates the Internet as an important social site for understanding musical culture, the book's contributors collectively deflate the sense that the Internet is a “special case” of social relations. When approached with an ethnographic curiosity, we find many of the same characteristics in online “communities” as ethnographers have been finding in musical subcultures for years. Genre-savvy breakcore producers mock outsiders but welcome and even console persistent newbies. New Model Army fans argue amongst themselves—and with the band—about the meaning of fandom. Progressive rock fans develop their own ethics for illegal file sharing. DJ Dangermouse uses Internet distribution to circulate an illegal product that would be stopped in its tracks if it were released as a compact disc. As these examples from the collection suggest, music culture is not a “purely” online culture. It systematically violates the “online/offline” distinction upon which much Internet ethnography is still based. This much is obvious when we talk about fans of bands or genres who meet on bulletin boards to discuss their experiences and the meaning of their fandom. But even the Internet-based compositions discussed in Trace Reddell's chapter have

the exact same status as any other musical sound when they exit the computer in headphones or speakers: they are no more or less “virtual” than the sounds that come out of a computer when the user pops in a compact disc. Thus, the online ethnography of music cultures offers us one useful way to think about the role of the Internet in people’s everyday lives, rather than a space apart or a special case of culture. Some of the chapters in the book are also quite harmonious with other work on cyberculture. There’s a good bit of “grist for the mill” for people interested in the construction of online identity and authenticity, or for people interested in the ongoing debates around file sharing and media ownership.

The most radical theme in *Cybersounds* is an emerging debate around the status and future of musical creativity. “Future of music” questions have tended to revolve around the intellectual property debates and matters of industry control over professional musicians or musicians who aspire to make their living as musicians (see <http://www.futureofmusic.org>). While intellectual property remains a crucial political question, to say that it is *the* question for the future of music assumes that music should first be understood as a profession and an industry, and only later as a social practice. While questions concerning the nature of creativity have long haunted music scholars, they are relatively rare in Internet studies, even in discussions of net art. *Cybersounds* is at its most urgent and innovative when the authors ask us to consider questions about the changing nature of creativity (whether corporate or individual), the status of collaboration in music production and listening, and the relationship between amateurism and professionalism. Tied up with these questions are long-standing debates around what counts as creativity in modern capitalism; how to think about and value acts of production, circulation, and consumption; and of course the specter of the recording industry, which at once nourishes and shuts down creative energy at all points in the circuit of culture.

As a subject of study, musical creativity has undergone tremendous shifts in the past few decades. Though the model of the romantic genius is still alive and well, it has been challenged by a variety of critical approaches that highlight the social and collaborative nature of music making. The most engaging work has come from a group of ethnomusicologists who see creativity as a socially dispersed quality that exists in the spaces among performers and audiences. Because he uses the “lone genius” model as a straw figure, Christopher Small’s classic *Music-Society-Education* states the stakes clearly: the aesthetic ideal of gifted individuals who produce singular artistic works is rooted in a peculiar Western worldview. For Small, the “lone genius” ideal is essentially authoritarian and antidemocratic. Small casts the “lone genius” model as a building block of modern music education, which treats education as “preparation for life rather than part of life” (Small 1977, 209), and where musical pedagogy is tied to scientific rationality and class mobility. Despite its centrality to Western musical culture, Small views the figure of the compositional genius as a pathetic character. I quote at length to give a flavor of Small’s tone and argument:

The great dilemma of our musical culture today is the position of the composer, who is an isolated figure, cut off from the vast majority of the community, sending out his messages into the void and wondering if anyone is listening, condemned always to speak to an essentially passive audience, with whom the closest relationship he can hope to achieve is that of producer to paying customers at a concert. He has not even the satisfaction of feeling that he is doing something that the community values; most composers have to fight hard even to have their music heard, and if a plague were to carry off every composer listed in John Vinton’s *Twentieth-Century Music Dictionary* I very much doubt if the majority of the community would even notice their absence.

That this need not necessarily be so is clear from our cursory examination of other musical cultures, as well as that of eighteenth-century New England, where all are free to participate in the work of creation (not everyone wants to, but that is another matter) and the composer is a valued and necessary member of the community. From the point of view of individual virtuosity, speaking technologically these are all ‘low energy’ cultures. The position of the ‘professional,’ in so far as he exists at all, is that of leader, of pacemaker, of mentor, rather than of producer and his work is intimately bound up with the community of which he is so important a member. (Small 1977, 217).

Although Small’s book is just under 30 years old as I write, it does seem to call out from another era, another paradigm. Small is obviously writing about Western art music, so-called classical music, which is produced and enjoyed by a relative minority of people. Small’s unreconstructed utopianism, normative language, and use of the male pronoun date him stylistically and his idealization of African culture and of 18th-century New England have both been widely noted and criticized by others. Yet the passage—and the book as a whole—are a fascinating read against musical practices that emerge with digital media.

Small’s critique of big technology and idealization of “low-energy” cultures comes from Ivan Illich, specifically Illich’s book *Energy and Equity* (1974), which argued that once energy consumption exceeds a certain per capita level in a society, inevitable inequities will follow in the form of a necessary division of labor. It is a provocative and terrifying environmental hypothesis, but it also operates within the paradigm of “big” technology that reigned in the 1960 and 1970s. Certainly an Illichian today could point out that digital technologies also are predicated on a monstrous division of labor and waste that cement world inequalities (Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1998; Puckett et al. 2002). And yet at the level of musical practice, which is the plane upon which Small wants to operate, one needs only to follow digital recording technologies a short distance to find some of the erosion of the professional ethos for which Small calls.

Since we are talking about music and technology, let us turn to one of the most “technologized” roles in music today for an example. Consider the fate of

the professional recording engineer and the so-called professional studio. It is now cliché to note that it costs a fraction of what it once did to get into recording. It is cheaper than ever to self-release a CD. A musician or group of musicians with about US\$2,000 (depending on genre and creativity, it can be done with even less money) can put together a passable digital home studio (either based around a computer or a standalone all-in-one “digital audio workstation”), complete with microphones and cables, that has considerably more technical capacity than a low-level professional studio would have had even two decades ago (though they will still need to spend more money or find a benefactor to release the CD). Of course, such a person would still need to learn the skills of recording, but as with music, the skills of a recording engineer improve most with routine practice.

Three major studios closed in the winter of 2005: Cello Studios in Los Angeles, Muscle Shoals Sound Studio in Sheffield, Alabama, and the Hit Factory in New York City. All three closures were greeted by laments in the music industry press and mainstream outlets like *Rolling Stone* and the *New York Times*, which claimed that these closures marked the end of an era and possibly the decline of the “recording” section of the music industry. All three studios were based on an old business model of recording, where record labels paid well over a thousand dollars a day to a major facility for a band to essentially “move in” for months at a time. Studios like these are struggling, and the genre itself may well be in decline, as is suggested by *The Mixerman Diaries* (2004), a parody written from an anonymous recording engineer’s point of view that chronicles his travails as he works on an ill-fated big-budget project.

To use another concept from Ivan Illich, professional studios used to hold a “radical monopoly” on the recording of music: “I speak about radical monopoly when one industrial production process exercises an exclusive control over the satisfaction of a pressing need, and excludes nonindustrial activities from competition” (Illich 1973, 52). As a byproduct of a new sphere of industrial competition, we are witnessing a moment when that radical monopoly of the professional recording studio is deteriorating. There are now many, many ways to get your music recorded.

To state it in plainer language, Larry Crane, editor of the independent recording magazine *Tape Op*, writes that “the business model of ‘we have the technology needed to make records—you don’t’ is gone. This model allowed many studios to charge whatever prices they could” (Crane 2005, 82). Today, smaller and mid-level studios adapt by becoming educational facilities that hold recording workshops and work with home recordists who want to spend a few hours or a few days in a professional facility to do what they can’t at home, rather than spending a few weeks or months in a facility to do an entire album. As Crane points out, the old big studios would lose money on such arrangements whereas smaller operations can adapt. For him, the so-called crisis of professional recording is not a crisis at all:

In terms of studios, it seems that smaller, versatile and community-oriented types might be more apt to survive. We can lament the loss of historic rooms like Cello/Western, a place that should rightly become a museum if it doesn’t keep functioning as a studio, but just as the government’s funding of the sinking airline business makes me nervous, I don’t see why a studio should just stay open because we are afraid of change. For me, the loss of Hit Factory is different than that of Cello. I had the opportunity to tour this gigantic facility a few years back. A more boring, soulless place for making records I cannot imagine. (Crane 2005, 81)

Crane’s column reads to me like a distant echo of Small’s hope for the future of music. Crane’s ideal professional engineer is not far from Small’s role for the composer: a leader, a pacemaker, a mentor, whose work is intimately bound up with his or her community. The political continuity is interesting because here, the ideal is decoupled from Small’s adaptation of the Illichian “low-energy” norm. In other words, we don’t need to wait for the end of modern capitalism in order to begin noting and effecting changes in musical culture. To use an old cultural studies standby, music, creativity, and industry are *articulated* phenomena: they have no “necessary” connection with one another; rather their connections are forged through social practice (Grossberg 1992; Hall 1986).

It is tempting to put Small and Crane in dialogue with Jacques Attali, whose *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985), was first published in French in the same year as *Music-Society-Education*. *Noise* famously ends on a utopian note, calling for a coming age of “composition”: “doing solely for the sake of doing, without trying artificially to recreate the old codes in order to reinsert communication into them. Inventing new codes, inventing the message at the same time as the language. Playing for one’s own pleasure, which alone can create the condition for new communication” (134). Later, Attali calls composition “participation in collective play, in an ongoing quest for new, immediate communication, without ritual and always unstable” (141). Attali writes about elite musics, but his language evokes images similar to Small’s: music as a dispersed activity; a musical world where music creation and enjoyment is a collective enterprise, rather than one located in the solitary individual. One could imagine a heady mix of Attali’s romanticism with a 1990s style of cyberutopianism to argue that digital recording heralds the new age of composition.

That is why some caveats about amateurism and location are in order here. We should not get too excited about the liberating power or leading edge of digital technologies, because the line between professional and amateur has long been blurred in actual practice. The move into the textualized world of online musical practice may have led us to rediscover something old, rather than to discover something new. Academics have tended to focus on those spheres of musical practice closest to their own habitus, leading to many considerations of high art, or the segments of popular culture most likely to appeal to cultural

studies scholars, when in fact a much wider range of musical practice already exists once we look outside the world of professional musicians and dedicated fans. As George Lipsitz puts it in his introduction to the very interesting book *My Music* (a compilation of 41 interviews with residents of Buffalo, New York), “music as a social experience is broader and more complex than the musical activities encompassed by social institutions concerned with music” (Lipsitz in Crafts, Cavicchi, and Keil 1993, xiii). To that I would add that musical experience is broader and more complex than the sites which academics are disposed to study would lead us to believe. Rob Drew’s artful ethnography of karaoke takes this thread a step further by mounting a persuasive defense of amateur singing and amateur musical performance. He points out that the disappearance of the amateur is largely a myth:

Though we’re surrounded by music nearly everywhere, many of us see musical creation not as an everyday form of communication but as an occult affair marked off by concert stages and studio walls. It’s become a platitude of cultural history that Americans don’t make music anymore—that, over the past century and a half, amateur and regional forms of music and leisure have been superseded by mediated, commercial forms. The case is easily overstated. Plenty of music is being made out there, much of it aided by the very technologies that are commonly blamed for killing music making. The parlor piano has given way to the Casio keyboard, hip-hop and dance musicians have turned cutting and mixing into an artful mode of performance, and pretty much every town has its complement of rock and pop bands that slog it out on the local bar circuit. Yet much of this musical activity is hidden from view. (Drew 2001, 13)

When it does get noticed, Drew points out, local music is treated by reporters, scholars, and sometimes the musicians themselves as “something to get *beyond*” (Drew 2001, 13, emphasis in original). His point is well-taken. Amateur, para-professional, and everyday forms of music making tend not to be as valorized in scholarship about music and culture. So when we hail the proliferation of cheap digital technologies for music making, we need to be careful to note that this represents the expansion of an already-present condition into the realm of engineering, rather than a revolution in contemporary musical culture writ large.

Additionally, as musical cultures vary around the world, we need to be careful to mark the place of digital technology in an expansively “globalized” musical culture that nevertheless always has particularly local manifestations. Drew is careful to contrast American attitudes toward public singing with stories of more casual attitudes toward karaoke in Hong Kong and several Japanese towns. His point is that the resistance to public singing which so conditions karaoke practice in the United States is not a universal phenomenon. This point can be expanded to other realms of musical practice, including the recording studio itself. In what is probably the first full-length ethnographic

study of a recording studio, Louise Meintjes’ study of Downtown Studios in Johannesburg, South Africa, meticulously documents the power struggles over sounds, studio knowledge, the boundaries of the studio itself, and technology in the studio. In parts, Meintjes’ tale is similar to other stories we have heard: as digital recording technologies proliferated, “small studios with facility to produce competitive sound quality mushroomed in backyards, garages, offices, flats and houses” (Meintjes 2003, 78). Her attention to the iconography of space travel in studio design also rings familiar to anyone who has spent time in a large North American studio. But in Downtown Studios, perhaps the biggest studio in South Africa, the equipment also signifies a certain level of internationality: “simply by owning an SSL [a brand of mixing board, what Meintjes calls the ‘Mercedes Benz 560EL of the studio world’], Downtown indexes the internationally competitive quality of its technicians and the elevated positioning of the studio within the hierarchy of the domestic recording industry” (Meintjes 2003, 82). Meintjes casts other signal processing equipment in the same light: “the multinationals are wired into the studio system. They name their indelible presence—Lexicon, Roland, Yamaha, Korg, Technics, Amcron—on the face of their products” (Meintjes 2003, 87). The point here (perhaps obvious to any ethnographer) is that like all technologies, digital technologies mean different things in different places. So again, any desire to hail the proliferation of digital recording technology as the herald of a new formation in musical practice needs to be tempered by the knowledge that while such a formation may have international reach, its various endpoints will not register in an identical fashion.

All this is to say that new things like digital audio may lead us to attend again to old things, like amateurism and the locally differentiated meaning of global technologies. Indeed, digital audio signals very contradictory developments. While cheap (relatively speaking) digital audio production has damaged big studios’ radical monopoly over the recording of music, it has not deindustrialized music. The 1990s saw a boom in magazines dedicated to music equipment as sales of recording equipment soared. The shift from analog to digital technology has allowed the manufacturers of musical instruments to subject them to the much more rapid product cycles of computing equipment (see Sterne forthcoming; Théberge 1997, 242–57). Similarly, the final stages of production, such as mastering, are still heavily professionalized. Mastering engineers used to cut the master copies of records, making sure that the needle didn’t jump the groove. Today, they put the final polish on recorded mixes and set levels among songs on albums before they go to CD production plants for mass replication. While anyone *could* do this, the fact is that there are still only a handful of mastering engineers who handle the vast majority of recorded music that people hear. In other words, the aesthetics of recorded music are still very much subject to industrial control even if the making of recorded music is more dispersed than ever.

If that's not enough, the rise of the home studio has also in some ways buttressed the ideology of the lone musical genius. After all, a single person can now theoretically control the creation of an entire oeuvre of music at every step from conceptualization to small-scale replication. As John Ryan and Michael Hughes point out, musical collaboration is in some ways more optional than ever before, and there may well be an aesthetic cost to people "going it alone" in musical creation. Yet it is interesting to read their essay alongside Trace Reddell's ideas about using the world wide web as a musical source, Andrew Whelan's study of amateur musicians who listen to and critique one another, and Andre Pinard and Sean Jacobs' documentation of a transnational hip-hop scene. The list could go on. *Cybersounds* outlines the initial contours of a debate I hope to see flourish in the coming years concerning the future of musical creativity and the role of digital technologies in that future.

Music scenes are as vital as ever around the world, and as several chapters of *Cybersounds* demonstrate, their online presence allows musicians and listeners who might otherwise toil alone to find one another and collaborate. Indeed, those of us interested in the study of music and media technologies must now include the Internet in our research, because not only is it a space where music technology is discussed, it is also *itself* a set of technologies for musical practice in a wide range of genres and cultures. Changes in industry structure and technological design have occasioned a mild democratization of the tools for musical communication. We thus stand at an exciting juncture, where musical practice could follow and become more democratic, or it could be recuperated back into some new radical monopoly. Perhaps, dear reader, you would like a prediction. But I will instead end by turning the question around to you: how do you want musical practice to change, and what will you do to see those changes through?

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