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Bull Michael

### **Popular music as sound and listening**

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Reyes Ian

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# POPULAR MUSIC AS SOUND AND LISTENING

*Ian Reyes*

## Locating the object of music at an epistemological crossroads

“Popular music” is a form, not a style. Not to be confused with a genre—“pop music”—or whether that genre is widely liked—“popular” with listeners—it is best understood as music coming from a certain, non-art mode of production, synonymous with commercial, recorded music (Adorno, 2000; Anderson, 2006; Negus, 1996). But if the object at issue is not art, maybe not even music, how should it be understood and evaluated? This can be difficult to answer because the mediation of musical sound and listening presents a number of challenges to dominant ways of knowing and critiquing music as sound and listening.

Sakakeeny (2015) observed that music studies are a pillar of what is now called sound studies, despite the epistemological chasm between the two, across which musicological analyses and constructions of canonical works appear at odds with the more anti-canonical social, material, and political analyses of sound studies. According to Coates (2008), a major contribution of sound studies to other fields is a critical perspective on popular music as an audible phenomenon, not just as a “sound track.” This comes from focusing on the audible, not just musical or semiotic aspects of popular music, framed as the outcome of industrial processes and market forces not unlike those for visual culture.

Still, Garcia Quinones (2016) found the study of music a “deaf spot” for sound studies, still underdeveloped compared to work on other sonic domains; to the extent that sound studies engage music, scholars typically prefer “experimental” art music or the more technical, studio-oriented side of popular music production. Rather than consider these emphases on experimental music and audio technologies as deaf spots, however, this chapter considers why these themes make sense with regard to the contrasting epistemologies of music and sound studies.

The crux of the matter is that traditional epistemologies of music address only particular, ideal qualities of musical sound, like pitch and rhythm. What about other aspects of sound, like timbre or spatiality? Truax (2001) argued this limit could be transcended by incorporating psychoacoustics and communication theory with musicology, thus acknowledging and building upon the listener as the center of “information exchange” between oneself and the environment, whereby sonic phenomena—sounds—are understood as the products of this listening exchange. Yet Truax (2001) also acknowledged that sounds and listeners are not independent of social and cultural forces, and that expanding music analysis to include “environmental” context is equally important as expanding what counts as the musical “text.”

This, essentially, is where sound studies and popular music studies are joined today. As noted above, this is still an ongoing project, hardly the most common way to study music or the most common theme in sound studies. And there is still good reason for old, musicological epistemologies of sound to remain strong. Limited though they may be, they have served the study of sound well. Prior to the emergence of modern acoustical sciences, many of the best tools, techniques, and vocabularies for creating, controlling, and knowing sound came from the study and practice of music. Sterne found:

Prior to the nineteenth century, philosophies of sound usually considered their object through a particular, idealized instance such as speech or music. [...] As the notion of frequency took hold in nineteenth-century physics, acoustics, otology, and physiology, these fields broke with the older philosophies of sound. Where speech or music had been the general categories through which sound was understood, they were now special cases of the general phenomenon of sound.

(Sterne, 2003, p. 23)

Nonetheless, this more techno-scientific understanding of sound and listening—the “tympanic function” (Sterne, 2003) or “energy transfer model” (Truax, 2001)—was not easily bridged with old, musically oriented philosophies of sound. This is because listening to sound *as if* it were music is anathema to entrenched aesthetic and social values.

In the following, this is observed in a brief account of sound and listening as problematics in popular music studies beginning in the early 20th century. In this account, the productive friction, intellectually and materially, comes from audio media technologies and cultures. In this regard, the strength of contemporary sound studies is rigorous attention to listening. Yet the road to such attention begins roughly as critical studies of popular music listeners in the early and mid-20th century regarded the sounds of popular music and listeners who enjoyed them as suspicious, to say the least.

In the mass culture tradition (for example, T.W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, David Riesman), music recordings were stand-ins for real, live music. Diminished though they may be, recorded substitutes were not without potential. Like any delivery system, recordings could bring the best a culture has created or it could bring insignificant trash. Ultimately, the trouble for these early scholars and their sympathizers was that the record industry decided to be agnostic on the matter, leaving modern cultural evolution in the hands of the mass market, no matter what old world elites would like.

In the cultural studies tradition (for example, Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie), aesthetic values are immanent to the cultures espousing them. This is not relativism, rather an attunement to social power within cultural phenomena. But this means, initially, the sounds of music recordings were of less scholarly interest than the meanings of music consumption in youth cultures. The sounds of popular music were merely aesthetic markers of underlying social processes. Later scholars would validate music fans as semiotically “active” and “productive” but how listening might be sonically active and what results from that activity requires further explanation. To begin thinking of music as listening, one must first contend with music as sound.

### **Music as sound: against tonal hegemony**

Social and economic forces affect the differences between musical and non-musical sounds, thus these differences are historically and culturally specific (Attali, 1996). In the West, tonality is what makes music different from other sonic phenomena (Adorno, 2002; Schopenhauer, 1969;

Scruton, 2010). Think of tonality as relationships between pitched sounds, or notes—the sort of thing indicated by standard music notation. Tonality alone is not enough, however; *good* music must be *complex*, which excludes the simple, predictable, repetitive tunes of most popular music (Adorno, 2000; Scruton, 2010). Further, the corollary of complexity is *difficulty*. Good music should be difficult to write, perform, and even enjoy.

In earlier epochs, technical virtuosity, at least, was demanded of singing stars, the castrati and prima donnas. Today, the material as such, destitute of any function, is celebrated. One need not even ask about capacity for musical performance. Even mechanical control of the instrument is no longer really expected. To legitimate the fame of its owner, a voice need only be especially voluminous or especially high.

(Adorno, 2002, p. 277)

Because music is essentially tonal, non-tonal aspects of musical sound are non-musical (Scruton, 2010). The sound of popular music is its greatest appeal and its greatest liability. From this standpoint, it is possible to be a connoisseur of non-tonal qualities of music, but to do so is to pursue something other than music.

At worst, listening for sound is a moral failure and/or a means for social control. Therefore, musical tastes are central, not incidental, to political life. So, declining taste for complex, tonal music is related to declines in moral and political structures (Adorno, 2000; Schopenhauer, 1969; Scruton, 2010). At best—and this is the turn I aim to follow herein—this is where knowledge about musical sounds, tonal and otherwise, ground social, cultural, and economic distinctions essential for individual and collective agency (Gracyk, 2010; Hebdige, 1988; Meintjes, 2003). This is more than an alternate perspective on the sounds of popular music; this is a necessary response to a technological, social, and economic evolution of music.

Broadcasting and sound recording resulted in an ontological break, de-centering tonality. Modern systems for creating and disseminating music through audio media upset dominant ways of knowing and evaluating music. With audio recording, a reduction to pitched sounds is unnecessary for the storage, transmission, and reproduction of music. This is a fissure in the material foundation of aesthetic tradition. The music/songwriting industry gave way to the broadcasting/recording industry, and the new industry's mission to sell records by imparting social, not musical, distinction to its products would obliterate the old socio-economic bases equating musical quality with complex tonality.

Initially, phonograph marketing offered upper-class experiences to middle-class consumers (Katz, 2004; Millard, 2005; Symes, 2004). Being a cultured person, for the emerging, modern middle class, largely required consuming the right cultural objects. Even though such objects may be highly de-contextualized in form and substance—like an opera on record—the promise of listening to high fidelity sound was that, somehow, the representation of authentic concert-hall acoustics and performances might transform the listener into the sort of person who has *actual* access to such spaces and experiences, economically, socially, and culturally. Still, this means that even the consumption of good music on record is *déclassé* from the start, because the sounds alone lose their value when extracted from the larger gestalt of an upper-class habitus.

Eventually, by the mid-20th century, even nominal connections to such a prior social reality were unnecessary; recorded music became more of an art and world unto itself. Songwriters could be supplanted by producers, musicians by disc-jockeys. Nonetheless, pursuing production values—having “a sound”—was a suspicious adjunct to the standard market practice of substituting spectacle for substance (Anderson, 2006). This is a development that still causes anxiety to this day, as though some authentic essence of music, which is more than just sound, may be lost

behind sonic smoke and mirrors. When Adorno (2002) wrote of the “fetish character in music,” he was referring precisely to the dubious pleasures of listening to these sonic spectacles, which are not really music.

After the mid-20th century, many if not most popular music styles were largely simulacral, with fewer necessary references to “real” sounds as they may be in the world outside of music recordings (Doyle, 2005; Frith, 1996; Théberge, 1997). Yet sound studies, especially those orienting on science and technology, value these developments in the art of record production (for example, Greene & Porcello, 2005; Meintjes, 2003; Moorefield, 2005; Reyes, 2010; Zak, 2001). The lesson of such work is not that new technologies change traditional cultures, rather that technological design, use, and innovation are largely shaped by pre-existing cultural priorities. Popular music represents more than new sounds, it also, and more importantly, represents *new ways of listening*. Unpacking this requires putting listening first in the ontology of music.

### Music as listening: towards an aural ontology of popular music

As traditional musicology affected ways of thinking about music as sound, so modern experiments in art music influenced thinking on music as listening. Broadcast and recording aside, notions of composition and performance can be saved from tonality by incorporating new noise instruments better suited to the ears of industrial-age, urban listeners (for example, F.T. Marinetti and Luigi Russolo, Pierre Schaeffer). The standout artist and work for the music-as-listening paradigm is undoubtedly John Cage’s *4’33”*, the “silent piece,” because of the way it positions the musically productive capacities of listening as the object of attention.

The World Soundscape Project (for example, R. Murray Schafer, Barry Truax) goes far on both of these fronts, to push the possibilities for composing with non-tonal voices, like the sounds of nature, as well as the possibilities for active listening, especially listening to the sounds of nature, as a musical practice: “Today all sounds belong to a continuous field of possibilities lying *within the comprehensive dominion of music*. Behold the new orchestra: the sonic universe!” (Schafer, 1994, p. 5, original emphasis). But, even in this expanded view, listening to popular music is still of less value because it is more passive or, simply, easier:

The radio has actually become the bird-song of modern life, the “natural” soundscape, excluding the inimical forces from outside. To serve this function sound need not be elaborately presented, any more than wallpaper has to be painted by Michelangelo to render the drawing room attractive. Thus, the development of greater fidelity in sound reproduction ... is now canceled by a tendency to return to simpler forms of expression.

*(Schafer, 1994, p. 93)*

Here, it is tonality writ large—cocooning the listener by replacing nature with music—that is too easy for the listener: “Radio was the first sound wall, enclosing the individual with the familiar and excluding the enemy” (Schafer, 1994, p. 93). Truax (2001) has similar objections to the de-contextualized and distracted listening habits enabled and encouraged by audio media. The value of difficulty comes up here, too, though now it is to be sought purely on the side of listening. Musicality, in this way, can begin to be perceived less in the arrangement of sounds and more in the activity of listening. Although most styles of popular music seem more musicologically conservative and traditional by comparison to experimental art music, they nonetheless use tonality—simple, predictable, and repetitive as it may sometimes be—as a frame for aural expression, appeal, and innovation. Doing so involves listening as a creative act.

Studying the sounds of popular music, however, comes relatively late to the academic party. Outside of musicological analyses, popular music scholarship has been dominated by sociologically influenced studies of fan cultures and literary-criticism-style studies of lyrics (for example, Hebdige, 1988; Weinstein, 2000; Rose, 1994). One reason is undoubtedly academic disciplinaryity. Given how widespread is training in ethnographic observation, literary analysis, attitude surveys, and such, it is understandable that these would become standard methods for expanding music studies. Another reason is one of the basic problematics of sound studies: a general lack of listening skills and critical vocabularies for whatever those skills might reveal. Among researchers and their human subjects, this is a culturally ingrained incapacity that neither enhanced methods nor greater inter-disciplinaryity can solve easily. This leaves a silence, or “deaf spot,” in the study of music cultures and texts.

Research on music technologies, however, brings sound and listening to the fore. Discourses about the sounds of music technologies offer some of the most direct access to knowledge about sound and listening in music. Record production is a privileged activity because recordists are forced by the technical and collaborative nature of their work to use more precise discursive strategies to guide, shape, and manifest specific, musical sounds in the creative process (Meintjes, 2003; Porcello, 2004; Schmidt Horning, 2004; Théberge, 1997). As the outcome of such processes of critical, collaborative listening, popular music recordings are, in and of themselves, “ontologically thick” (Gracyk, 1996) “web[s] of particularity” (Zak, 2001) that document musical *listening* as well as sound.

To better grasp this perspective, consider that the essential interface for this activity is recordings.

We generally know the music by playing tapes, albums, or compact discs. When rock music is discussed, the relevant musical work is not simply the song being performed. To employ terminology currently in vogue, we can say that recordings are the ‘primary texts’ of this music.

(Gracyk, 1996, p. 21)

While some recordings may document musical performances, such is not their essence; for popular music, the sound on record is the song itself. Even when the original artist performs that song live, it is not the “real” version, rather it is a “thin” iteration of the original (recorded) song. When recordings are the primary texts for music, listening to the sounds of those recordings is how musical knowledge is (re)produced. Frith (1996) observed:

Only when we can accept that someone is hearing what we’re hearing but just doesn’t value it will we cede to subjective taste and agree that there’s no point to further argument. Popular cultural arguments, in other words, are not about likes and dislikes as such, but about ways of listening, about ways of hearing, about ways of being.

(Frith, 1996, p. 8)

But how does one know that another is hearing something (in)correctly? Gracyk (2010) explained:

understanding is not a private matter. It demands a public act that allows individuals to determine whether others have the same response. Music is objectively expressive when informed listeners can respond to it in recognizably parallel ways. The public character of that response (laughing with “D’Yer Mak’Er” or dancing in waltz time

to the verses of the Beatles' "I Me Mine" and then moving in common time to the chorus) is a defining element of our relationship to the larger community of listeners.

(Gracyk, 2010, pp. 167–168)

Yet knowing when to laugh and how to dance are hardly the only indicators of understanding. As far as public demonstrations of aural understanding go, none is more crucial to popular music than record production.

Recording is different from other ways of demonstrating understanding because the public is largely absent from the exchange. Music recordings are the sum and substance of asynchronous, aural discourses about musical value connecting private and public acts of listening. A record producer's function is to be the listener who best understands the music and demonstrates this publicly by crafting sounds that will speak to other, knowledgeable listeners (Hennion, 2000; Meintjes, 2003; Moorefield, 2005; Reyes, 2010; Zak, 2001). Gracyk's take on "D'Yer Mak'Er" as a joke hinges on the record producers' ability to communicate something that would sound ironic to the committed Led Zeppelin fan. To encode and decode the joke requires both parties to have deep, aural experience with the timbres and tonalities of far-flung references including Rosie and the Originals and roots reggae in addition to the Led Zeppelin catalog. Deep, active, knowledgeable listening on the side of production means that popular music recordings may well be engaged with equally complex, difficult listening on the side of reception. From this view, there is nothing inherent in popular music that should result in the kinds of passivity and ignorance feared by some. Yet scholars like Frith and Gracyk are responding to the activities and norms of dedicated fan cultures. While the difficult, complex listening constituting popular music recordings may welcome and reward equal aural efforts from serious fans, it also enables the opposite.

This aural ontology of popular music also suggests that certain technologies and cultures of popular music encourage (inter)passivity. Pfaller (2014) explained:

For interpassive artworks ... viewers are not required to participate; moreover, they are not even required to view. The work is there, completely finished—not only completely produced, but completely consumed as well. Contained within such works is not simply the necessary activity, but also the requisite passivity. Interpassive art absolves viewers of any necessary activity whatsoever, and also of their passivity. They can now be even more passive than passive.

(Pfaller 2014, p. 18)

Though Pfaller looked mostly at visual media, it is possible to see how this would operate with music based on the basic concepts and practices of audio mediation. Sterne (2003), explaining the tympanic function in the work of Helmholtz, showed that audio recording devices are conceived as machines to "hear for us":

Hearing is thereby tripled—once by the machine hearing "for us," a second time by the machine vibrating a diaphragm in reproducing the sound, and a third time in vibrating our own tympanic membranes so that the sound may be conveyed into the inner ear.

(Helmholtz, 2003, p. 67)

To produce a record is thus to compound music, making it "thick" by virtue of the intentional organization of listening *vis-à-vis* machines that hear for us. The reproduction of sound

from a recording is a matter of reproducing an intended listening experience (Hennion, 2000; Reyes, 2010; Zak, 2001). If, even after deploying all the possible means for audio artifice afforded by today's technologies, something is "documented" or "represented" by a popular music recording, it is the critical listening of the record's producers. It is in this sense, however, that recorded music is aurally predigested, particularly compared to the kinds of listening required for live music.

Through Pfaller (2014), one can take this concept further by asking what it means for recording/duplication devices to be in the hands of everyday consumers. Audio duplication technologies, whether dual-cassette decks or bit-torrent, do more than copy sounds; they also "listen" to those sounds. Especially today, when copying and consuming music are virtually the same thing, this begins to make some sense. The engine of interpassivity is not laziness or ignorance, rather it is that listeners are overwhelmed by the cultural output of an information society. In the time that it takes to listen to a three-minute pop song, untold numbers of new recordings will come online. To comprehensively engage this material is beyond the scope of any individual listener. It may be that digital music subscription services are attractive because they skip the unnecessary step of copying music (which will not really be heard)—with a Spotify account, one may be relieved from even briefly thinking about what not to listen to.

This perspective allows the contemporary sound studies scholar to connect back to the critical priorities of earlier scholarship of the previous century. An aural ontology of popular music shows that the capacity for passivity originates in technologies that enable, capture, and reproduce active listening. This is exacerbated by the record industry, which has relieved listeners from their responsibilities as a listening public. With declining record sales and the corresponding rise of new commercial streams like social media, branding, licensing, and "360 deals," fans can be thoroughly engaged on multiple levels without ever listening to the music. Unlike the phonograph era that promised distinction by delivering the sounds of good music, today no sound is necessary for people to enjoy the social and cultural distinctions and pleasures articulated with popular music texts.

The concept of interpassivity may be a bridge too far for some scholars of sound. Nonetheless, it undoubtedly allows one to see through this theory of popular music *as* listening to its most radical end. Moreover, within the bounds of this principle, one can better appreciate that, if sound and listening continue to be rarely articulated with popular music, it may well be due to the fact that the kinds of listening prioritized by sound studies are mostly found within somewhat uncommon circles like record production, fan cultures, and experimental art music. Outside these domains, it turns out that, in an era when listeners can, technically, enjoy the greatest quality audio the world has known, culturally, most people prefer quantity and convenience over quality (Sterne, 2012).

### **Regarding trajectories of sound and listening in popular music studies**

This chapter has been hemmed by a rather traditional emphasis on text over context. It takes a certain reverence for texts to become concerned with issues like interpassivity. Research regarding the use of these texts for extra-musical purposes, like the control of space or time (cf. Gopinath & Stanyek, 2014), suggest other possible avenues for approaching this topic from a more contextual standpoint. Still, these are exactly the non-musical uses of music that worried earlier critics. Therefore, a move towards context requires this re-conceptualization of the object of music, its construction, and its evaluation. Shifting attention from sound objects to listening subjects is the move that promises to connect text and context. But this cannot be done without contending with entrenched resistances to music as sound and listening.



The biggest is a suspicion of, sometimes aversion to, the actual sound of music, which is conceived as other to the music itself. This, alongside a general disrespect for the tastes and intellectual abilities of listeners, offers only a shaky bridge for bringing sound studies on board. Perhaps an even greater hurdle is a tradition of open hostility and disdain towards the culture industry. Targeting its products and the commercial logic behind them, distancing them from real art, obscures the critical, creative acts of listening in both production and consumption. Shining a light on these areas, one can readily find the active, knowledgeable aural cultures said to be lacking in the listening public.

Nonetheless, these may be exceptions that prove the rule. What if the listening public is as Adorno and cohort feared? The average listener may not well understand how to listen—musically or sonically—and maybe does not care to. Compared to public understanding of other media arts, particularly film, critical understandings of popular music are astoundingly inadequate. Whereas scholars, filmgoers, and the mainstream press seem to grasp the nuances of the medium and its various moving parts (for example, producers, directors, screenwriters, cinematographers) the same is not true for popular music. Scholars, audiences, and the press are relatively less sophisticated when it comes to popular music due to their inordinate interest in performers as opposed to other creative industry personnel, a situation the record industry encourages (Anderson, 2006; Zak, 2001). Lack of aural literacy, or even curiosity, is an obvious place for sound studies scholars to intervene, as many have.

Seeking better concepts, vocabularies, and techniques for popular music listening is necessary; therefore the merits of studying record production should be clear. Just as the study of music composition and performance was a key point of reference for early modern scholars of sound. Today, popular music production offers much more than examples of active listening, it also offers a remarkably useful set of terms and concepts for better understanding music as sound and listening in the context of its primary mode of production and consumption.

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