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Sound and Vision: Record of the Past or Performance in the Present?

I have chosen to use my time today to explore relationships among music, recording media, the concept of performance, and my own not yet fully theorized sense of a difference between audio recordings and audiovisual recordings. I will speak today primarily from experience in the hope that there can be some dialogue around the issues I raise. I will frame my current dilemma with two moments in my own research.

First Moment

In my essay "Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto," my first attempt at codifying a performance studies-based approach to discussing musical performances, published a bit over a year ago in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, I came down squarely on the side of understanding recordings of music as musical performances in themselves rather than records of a performance that had taken place at another time, in another place.[1] Here is the relevant part of the article:

A discussion of how to analyze popular music as performance must begin with the question of what will count as a performance in this context. [Patrice] Pavis [the author of a book on performance analysis] asserts that only live theatrical performances are appropriate objects of analysis, that the performance analyst should use photographs or recordings of performances only as additional documentation of the original live events.[2] If applied to the realm of popular music, this stipulation would bring performance analysis to a grinding halt, for recordings are the primary form in which the audience consumes popular music. The media economy of popular music thus dictates that sound recordings be considered performances, which is how listeners experience them.

Despite the physical absence of the performer at the time of listening, listeners do not perceive recorded music as disembodied. "In my view," writes Susan Fast, "the performer's body is very much present, in the particular sonoric gestures shaped and played in the first instance by him or her (they are human gestures, after all) through his or her body in such a way that they connect with the bodies of those listening."[3] Perhaps that is why people often feel compelled to respond to recorded music by moving or dancing, singing along, or playing air guitar: the bodily gestures encoded in the recorded sound seem to demand an embodied response. Regardless of the ontological status of recorded music, its phenomenological status for listeners is that of a performance unfolding at the time and in the place of listening. Sound recordings of musical performances should therefore be considered legitimate objects for performance analysis—especially in light of the privilege it grants to the spectator's experience—

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[1] I first took this position in my book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[2] Patrice Pavis, *L'Analyse des spectacles* (Paris: Editions Nathan, 1996), pp. 39-42.

[3] Susan Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 114.

alongside live musical performances, documentation of live performances, and music videos.

Although the listener both hears and feels recorded music as embodied, the experience of recorded music is not confined to the auditory and haptic senses. As Simon Frith points out, it is also a visual experience:

> to hear music is to see it performed, on stage, with all the trappings. I listen to records in the full knowledge that what I hear is something that never existed, that never could exist, as a "performance," something happening in a single time and space; nevertheless, it is *now* happening, in a single time and space: it is thus a performance and I hear it as one [and] imagine the performers performing. . . .[4]

The experience of recorded music as performance derives not only from our direct somatic experience of the sound and our sense of the physical gestures the musicians made to produce it but also from various forms of cultural knowledge, including knowledge of the performance conventions of particular genres of music and the performance styles of specific performers. As an audience, we acquire these kinds of knowledge from our experience of live performances and the visual culture that surrounds popular music.[5]

Later in the essay, I extend the argument that audio recordings are appropriate objects for performance analysis to video recordings.

Second Moment:

While working on the manuscript for my book, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press in 2006), I made a conscious decision to discuss audio recordings of the music in the *present* tense and video recordings of performances of the songs, whether live performances or lip-synched television performances, in the *past* tense. This decision derived from my sense that whereas audio recordings function for me as I just described, as performances that are taking place at the moment I'm listening to them, videos and films do not. I experience them much more as historical records documenting a specific event that took place at a particular time and place, before a particular audience, and I treat them that way in the book. I subject the video performances to performance analysis but as means of recreating the historical past rather than as performances experienced in the present.

Perhaps you see my dilemma. On the one hand, I have argued that audio and audiovisual recordings of music should count equally as performances alongside of live events, at least for the purposes of performance analysis.

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[4] Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 211. Frith's suggestion that listeners mentally produce the aspects of performance not present in sound recordings is comparable to Wolfgang Iser's notion that because literary texts are radically incomplete in themselves, the act of reading consists of filling in the gaps of the text. See the excerpt from Iser's "Interaction Between Text and Reader" in Colin Counsell and Laurie Wolf (eds), *Performance Analysis: An Introductory Coursebook* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 179-84. .

[5] Philip Auslander, "Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 14(1), 2004, p. 5. Article available at www.lcc.gatech.edu/~auslander.

But in a spirit of phenomenological honesty, I cannot contend that the playback of a video recording constitutes the same kind of performance that the playback of an audio recording does because I don't experience it that way. At a theoretical level, I am not at all comfortable with what seems to be an implicit idealization of the audio recording as somehow timeless and the condemnation of the audiovisual recording to the dustbin of history. At an experiential level, however, I have to admit that that is how it seems to me.[6] In the remainder of this presentation, I shall try to come to grips with a distinction I have made thus far only intuitively rather than analytically.

There is an obvious paradox here. Fast suggests that what we hear on an audio recording are the audible traces of physical gestures; Frith proposes that we imaginatively reconstruct those gestures and the bodies that made them. In that sense, the sound recording actually *is* a document of a series of events that occurred in the past rather than a performance in the present (whether those events occurred on a stage or in a studio). But, as Frith suggests, I don't experience it that way. It is only when the bodies that produced the sounds, the physical gestures they used to produce them, and the circumstances under which they did so are literally made to appear in audiovisual recordings that I experience the recording primarily as a historical document.

When I listen, for example, to the audio recording of T. Rex's "20th Century Boy" (1973) my experience of it centers on that wonderful, crunching riff and a catchy verse/chorus structure that sounds as vivid and exciting now as it did the first time I heard it. Watching the group perform the same song on video in a performance for the German television program *Musikladen*, however, I have a very different experience.[7] The musical performance itself is different, of course, since it lacks the background vocals and overdubs present on the recording. It is nevertheless a strong performance of the song in my estimation, just as compelling in its own way as the studio recording. But my experience of the video centers not on the riff and the song but on Marc Bolan's feather boa, his strutting and preening, his exaggerated guitarist's histrionics, all of which wonderfully exemplify his glam performance style. My attention is captured as well by the puffiness of Bolan's face, the hooded and somewhat glazed appearance of his eyes, and an air of dissipation, all of which speak to his condition in 1973-4 as the glam star was beginning to fade.

It should be apparent that I do not in any way devalue audiovisual recordings of musical performances because I experience them in this time-capsule way. Quite the contrary: I find them invaluable as historical documents from which one can get a sense of the circumstances under which a particular performance unfolded and how it might have signified in its own time. I am

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[6] I'm pleased to be able to report that reactions to my presentation at the CHARM symposium suggested that my perception here is not altogether idiosyncratic.

[7] This performance is available on the DVD *Roxy Music & T. Rex* in the series The Best of Musikladen, EME America/Pioneer Video (2002).

simply saying that this experience differs from the immediate experience of recorded music Frith describes.

The particular video performance of "20th Century Boy" that I am discussing does not include an audience, but I want to say a word about what the presence of an audience can mean. Many years ago, I saw a film of Jerzy Grotowski's legendary 1968 experimental theatre production *Akropolis*. The film seemed to provide a fairly good idea of what the live performance had been like. But what I actually remember most from the film is an audience that in its dresses, pearls, Brooks Brothers suits and ties, and thick-rimmed eyeglasses looked like a completely mainstream theatre audience of the time (to be fair, I have to admit that I don't know where the film was made so I'm not entirely sure what audience this was—I am relying here entirely on my own, possibly distorted, memory). As much as anything, the film became for me a document of those people, who looked entirely conventional yet were gathered for an entirely unconventional evening of theatre. This circumstance speaks of that particular historical moment as eloquently as the fashions and made *Akropolis* itself seem to be very much a product of that moment rather than something one could imagine unfolding in the here and now.

Clearly, then, it is the presence of visual information that makes the audiovisual recording seem to me to be a historical document. Because my own recent work has focused on the late 1960s and the 1970s, I have been looking at a lot of dated fashions, both onstage and in the audience, and dated production techniques in the filming. I don't think, however, that the effect to which I am referring derives solely from changes in fashion and style over time. When I look at current concert videos, I have the same feeling of experiencing an event defined by its own immediate circumstances rather than mine.

Roland Barthes hypothesizes in his famous essay "The Rhetoric of the Image" that the caption of a photograph anchors the meaning of the image: "the text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to receive some and avoid others. . . ."[8] Even though the relationship between image and music I am discussing is not exactly analogous to that between caption and photograph, I will invert Barthes's hypothesis and say that my experience is that the visual elements of audiovisual recordings seem to anchor my perception of the musical sound in a particular historical moment and inhibit my ability to contextualize that sound in other ways. Whereas Barthes proposes that images are intrinsically polysemic and verbal texts shut down that polysemy in favor of a limited range of meanings, I am proposing that musical sound is intrinsically polysemic and that the visual information purveyed by audiovisual recordings limits its denotative range.

I am interested in asking why that is, but very leery of conventional responses to such questions. I certainly want to avoid the kind of argument

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[8] Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image" (1964), Stephen Heath (trans.), in Ann Gray and Jim McGuigan (eds), *Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1993), p. 20.

that greeted the introduction of television after radio and of music video after, well, music on the radio. You know the kind of argument I mean: compared with radio, television offers an impoverished experience because it provides too much information and does not call upon the listener to fill in the gaps imaginatively. This argument, which Marshall McLuhan reified in the 1960s as the difference between "hot" and "cool" media, was also deployed in the 1980s against music video on the grounds that television ruined the experience of music by causing specific images to be too closely associated with particular songs, again limiting the viewer's imaginative activity.

I also prefer to eschew the pieties of what Jonathan Sterne calls in *The Audible Past* "the audiovisual litany," that list of the "differences between hearing and seeing . . . often considered as biological, psychological, and physical facts, the implication being that they are a necessary starting point for the cultural analysis of sound."[9] I lean, like Sterne, toward the view that sensory experience is socially and culturally constructed rather than hard-wired or biological, but I shall not invoke the argument that image anchors sound because sight is the culturally privileged sense in Western societies, or any similar shibboleth.[10]

Sterne, in his analysis of the cultural emplacement of what he calls "audile technique"—the kind of directed and mediated listening that developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries alongside of sound reproduction technologies—points toward another framework for thinking about my question. Sterne shows that "audile technique is based on the individuation of the listener" and that it "requires the sonic equivalent of private property" (158-9). He provides multiple examples of representations of technically mediated listening in which the use of sound reproduction technologies effectively isolates the listener, including cases in which groups of people (families, friends) listening to the same material at the same time do so through such isolating devices as listening tubes or headphones. He borrows from William Kenney the phrase "alone together" to describe this kind of social yet individuated listening (163). It is particularly significant in the present context that he extends his analysis to listening at public performances:

> Even public spaces become more and more private [at this time]. Where opera and concert audiences had been noisy and unruly, quieting down only for their favorite passages, they gradually became silent—individually contemplating the music that they had enshrined as autonomous art. We can see a similar trend with the gradual silencing of later audiences for vaudeville and film. . . . This quieting has the effect of atomizing an audience into individual listeners. As we

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[9] Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 15. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text.

[10] I have argued that sensory privilege is contextual rather than absolute, even within a single culture. In the context of recorded music and its culture, hearing is privileged over seeing. See Philip Auslander, "Looking at Records," *TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies*, Vol. 45(1), 2001, pp. 77-83. Article available at www.lcc.gatech.edu/~auslander.

> are told today every time we go to the movie theater, in "observing silence" we respect other people's "right" to enjoy the film without being bothered by noisy fellow audience members. The premise behind the custom is that, in movie theaters (and a variety of other places) people are entitled to their private acoustic space and that others are not entitled to violate it. (160-1)

The implication of Sterne's analysis of audile technique is that mapping the terms public and private onto my initial dichotomy of sight and sound may yield a more useful matrix for understanding the difference between audio and audiovisual media I experience. Extrapolating from Sterne's description of the opera, vaudeville, and movies, it would seem that private acoustic space constitutes the "alone" part of the phrase "alone together" that he uses to describe the social experience of such forms. If sound is what atomizes the audience into individual listeners each in his or her own private space, then what holds them together, what constitutes them as a collective, is what they are all *seeing.*

Returning to Frith's description of experiencing recorded music as performance, we find that he does imply, through his use of the first person singular, that the experience is an individual one:

> **I** listen to records in the full knowledge that what **I** hear is something that never existed, that never could exist, as a "performance," something happening in a single time and space; nevertheless, it is *now* happening, in a single time and space: it is thus a performance and **I** hear it as one [and] imagine the performers performing. . . .

Reading Frith through Sterne, it would seem that the possibility of experiencing audio recordings of music as performance depends on the ability to listen in private, even when in the presence of others.

If technically mediated listening, audile technique, has been culturally emplaced as a dimension of private property, then perhaps technically mediated seeing has been culturally emplaced as a dimension of public space. To watch a film or video of a musical performance is to experience the collective aspect of such performances, the part that is shared rather than the part that individuates. If it is the case that listening to reproduced sound is always experienced culturally as private, even when done in public, perhaps it is also the case that watching recorded visual material is always experienced culturally as public, even when done in private. Listening to music, I experience the individuated, private performance Frith describes. Watching musicians on film or video, however, I feel myself to be part of an audience and, therefore, of a specific occasion that is defined, in principle, collectively, in visual space, not privately in auditory space.

None of this gives me any reason to retract my initial claim that both audio and audiovisual recordings of music should count as performances, but it does lead me to suppose that the claim needs to be qualified. Both count as performances, but not as the same kind of performance, neither

phenomenologically nor culturally. The kind of performance Frith describes takes place in the private space of the listener’s own hearing and is therefore subjective and indefinitely renewable. A performance on film or video, by contrast, implicitly takes place in the public space of spectatorship, a space of collective rather than subjective experience, and is therefore rooted in a specific historical moment and situation.

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