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Probing the Reception History of Recording Media: A Case Study

Introduction

In the course of the last century, the conditions for music listening and music use have undergone radical changes. As a result of these changes, the 'here and now' situation of listening to a live musical performance is today an exception, as the overwhelmingly largest part of contact with music takes place by way of technological mediation. This is certainly true of the industrialised part of the world, but to an increasing extent globally as well. The object of the research project *The Cultural History of Music Technology in Sweden*, recently initiated by the author, is to study the consequences of this technification of music for music use, listening patterns, conceptualizations of music, and the cultural meanings associated with music technology. The project will deal with both recording and broadcast media, and emphasis will be placed on the reception of music rather than its production. Largely due to matters of availability of source material, the project will focus on developments in Sweden; however, it appears likely that many of the tendencies observable in a Swedish context have been of a more general prevalence throughout the industrialised Western world. As of the time of writing, the project is still in an early, exploratory stage.

The general problem addressed by this research project can be formulated in terms of the question: how do we trace historically specific modes of reception and use of technologically mediated music? Within the framework of this general problem, several different perspectives on the history of music technology may be identified. Of these, four have been selected as particularly pertinent to a mapping-out of the cultural impact of music technology:

- the role of music technology in musical socialisation ('growing up with music technology');
- the practices of mobile listening ('moving with music technology');
- the transparency of musical media in different use-contexts ('getting used to music technology'); and
- the relationships between music technology and amateur music activity ('appropriating music technology').

The purpose of this paper is to discuss, in the form of a case study, the third of these issues: the transparency of musical media. In this connection, I will focus on recording media rather than music technology in general. The case study concerns developments in Sweden during the first half of the 1950s, a period characterised by rapid changes to the technical resources used in record production, and thus an important phase in the transition from a notion of the recording as primarily a reproduced live musical performance to a notion of the recording as an

independent object, not necessarily connected to a live performance. One aim of the study is to suggest some ways in which this new form of sonic object, or original 'musical work', may have been construed by listeners in a contemporary context.

The transparency of the medium

An important theoretical basis for the following discussion is constituted by the notion of the 'transparency' of musical (technological) media. A transparent medium is 'unnoticeable': it allows the listener to listen to 'the music' rather than 'the technical reproduction of the music', i.e. the listener can perceive the technologically mediated music as a 'normal' or 'naturalistic' form of musical communication. This is obviously not a constant property of any given medium, but rather a question of the listener's orientation and degree of familiarity with the particular medium. It appears reasonable to assume that a new medium, when first introduced, is relatively 'opaque' to the listener; over time, by way of an habituation process, a gradual 'normalisation' of music in the particular mediated form takes place, making the medium increasingly transparent. After the completion of this normalisation process, however, various forms of deliberate 'misuse' of the mediating technology may serve to refocus attention on the medium, thus once more rendering it opaque.

A particularly striking example of the last point is offered by a passage from the 1968 Mothers of Invention album *We're only in it for the money*. Towards the end of the track 'Nasal retentive calliope music'—a collage-like piece of *musique concrète*—the sound of breaking waves is faded in, followed by what sounds like the intro to a rather cheesy piece of instrumental surf music. This is suddenly interrupted, however, by the unmistakable sound of the gramophone stylus skidding across the surface of the entire record; after a few skips and another particularly grinding stylus-scratch noise, the intro to the next track, 'Let's make the water turn black', follows *attacca*. To anyone acclimatized to the medium of the vinyl gramophone record, these noises signal major disaster, effectively disrupting the record listener's illusion of hearing a 'natural' musical performance.[1]

The particular form of 'misuse' I want to discuss here is not of this radically disruptive nature; a more appropriate term than 'misuse' would perhaps be Julien's (1999) expression 'diverting of musical technology'. What I am referring to is the first instances, dating from around 1950, of popular music recording procedures using recording equipment, especially the recently introduced tape recorder, for other purposes than its nominal one, i.e. the utilisation of the potential of recording equipment for the creation of previously unheard music by way of sound-on-sound recording. My primary question in this context concerns the consequences of this kind of manipulation of the medium in

[1] This album is interesting in several respects, many of which are related to its elaborated intertextual relationship to the Beatles' 'misuse' of the medium on the *Sgt. Pepper album*: the carefully parodied album cover, the respective presence and absence of 'lead in' gaps between tracks etc.

phenomenological terms, i.e. how listeners in a historical context construed what they heard, for example, in terms of 'real' music or 'artificial' music, and in what ways the latter's artificiality made it different from the 'real thing'.

The early Swedish history of sound-on-sound

The history of music technology in the first half of the 20th century may be described in general terms as a gradual habituation of listeners to 'non-naturalistic' music. This process was brought about by listening to recorded music—throughout this period generally characterised by a sound quality perceptibly inferior to that of live music—but also to music broadcasting on the radio: the distinctly artificial sound-collage, combining different sound-sources and sonic perspectives in a way which is manifestly 'unreal', has formed an important basis for the criteria of 'radiogenicity' since the early 1930s.[2] In Sweden, the public-service Swedish Broadcasting Corporation, largely modelled after the BBC, in addition to its radio programming activities also served the Swedish recording industry, regularly giving record companies access to its studio facilities. In the first post-war decades, the Broadcasting Corporation also played a seminal part in the development of and experimentation with recording technology.[3] This experimentation included several sound-on-sound experiments; for example, in 1949, jazz musician Charles Redland made a sound-on-sound recording of one chorus of 'I'm looking over a four-leaf clover' as a novelty item for the family entertainment radio show *Lördagskväll* ('Saturday Night'). The recording features six layers of sound, and all parts—drums, bass, piano, two clarinet parts and lead trumpet—are played by Redland alone. As the recording was made with acetate disc technology, the sound quality is rather poor, but enough of the music can be perceived to give contemporary audiences a glimpse of the musical potential of new recording technology. Another sound-on-sound experiment was made in 1951 for *Kuriosa i toner* ('Curiosities in notes'), a radio series presenting technological experiments and novelties. Here, choir director and concert hall manager Johannes Norrby demonstrated his impressive vocal range by singing all four parts of a male choir arrangement of 'Robin m'aime' from Adam de la Halle's 13th-century pastoral *Le jeu de Robin et de Marion* (an arrangement which at the time was a popular serenade piece for student male choirs). The recording, like Redland's made on acetate disc, pedagogically demonstrates the procedure by adding the parts one at a time.

According to Cunningham (1996:25), the technique of sound-on-sound recording was pioneered by American Les Paul in 1930. In the 1930s and early 1940s the procedure was used occasionally on commercial

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[2] The term 'radiogenicity' is an attempt at translation of the Swedish word *radiomässighet*, which was a recurring buzzword in Swedish discussions of the specific characteristics of the aesthetics of radio programming throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

[3] Cf. the often crucial part played by a public-service radio in the development of *musique concrète* and electronic music. Like many other public-service organizations on the Continent, Swedish radio had a central role in these developments in the late 1950s and 1960s.

recordings (*ibid*.:26; Day 2000:28f), but its popular breakthrough came in 1947, when hit records using the technique were made by popular singer Patti Page as well as by Les Paul. In Sweden, the recordings made by Paul with his wife Mary Ford from 1950 onwards appear to have been the most influential models for domestic experiments with sound-on-sound on commercial recordings. In the first half of the 1950s, such experiments were primarily connected with the record company Metronome, established in 1949, which was the first Swedish record company to use tape recorders in record production.[4] Until 1953, all the company's recordings were made in Swedish Broadcasting Corporation's studios. In the years 1951 to 1954, Metronome made several Swedish-language covers of Les Paul/Mary Ford sound-on-sound novelty numbers, featuring jazz/popular song vocal star Alice Babs; on some of these records, the artist was specified as 'the vocal quartet Alice Babs'. Her first sound-on-sound recording, recorded and released in May 1951 was 'Adress Rosenhill', a cover of 'Mocking Bird Hill'. The recording featured two-part harmony vocals and simultaneous yodelling by Alice Babs and became a minor hit on the domestic market.

In order to investigate how early popular recordings using sound-on-sound were received in Sweden, I have examined record reviews in *Estrad*, on of the leading jazz and entertainment trade magazines, starting in early 1950, when Les Paul/Mary Ford recordings on Capitol were made available in Sweden. Thus, in a review of Les Paul's 'Lover'/'Brazil' in February 1950 the reviewer states that '[t]he most original thing about this record is its tricky recording—as the guitarist Paul is playing about eight parts by himself. As to his technical skill there can be no doubts—but there are more musical ways to show it.' As this quote indicates, the technique is often referred to under the designation 'trick recording', a term which seems to carry slightly derogatory connotations. In September 1950, the reviewer mentions 'Les Paul, who here comes back with one of his clever trick recordings', and in a May 1951 review of Mary Ford's performance of 'Sugar sweet', she is said to be singing a 'duet with herself—a kind of personality split which does not seem to cause her any great difficulties'. At the time, sound-on-sound recordings appear to be admired more as technological achievements than for their musical merits, and it is taken for granted that their production has involved a number of professional studio engineers: in March 1951, 'Little Rock getaway' and 'Tennessee waltz' are characterised as 'another couple of mixed trick recordings where he is playing several parts, backings etc., which then have been assembled by the engineers on one disc', and the May 1951 review cited states of Les Paul that 'one must admire not only his own skill but also that of the recording engineers'.

The Swedish cover versions are judged by the same standards as the US originals. The review of 'Adress Rosenhill' in June 1951 states that '[t]he recording also shows that our domestic engineers [i.e. Broadcasting

[4] Englund (1992) states that tape was used on all of Metronome's productions; however, according to one contemporary source, some of the early records were made from wire recordings of jazz concerts.

Corporation staff] know all the tricks; Babs is singing two-part harmony and yodelling at the same time, and the whole thing works at least as well as on the American models'. In May 1953, 'Godmorgon Mr. Eko'—a cover of 'Good morning, Mr. Echo'—is described as 'another skilful example of trick recording', and 'Valpen i fönstret' ('That doggie in the window') as one of 'a couple of new splendid recordings with multipart trick vocals (…) skilfully made, despite the simple material'. Many of the reviews seem to indicate a certain contradiction between the musicianship expected of the professional jazz/dance musician and the 'trick' practice of sound-on-sound recording, and in contrast to the jazz records reviewed in the magazine, these records are reviewed in a separate section, headlined 'Commercial'.

Following Alice Babs's example, in the following years several other Swedish artists made sound-on-sound recordings with multipart vocals, although none of them were as prolific in the field as her. In 1955, Metronome issued the first recordings by comic singer/songwriter Owe Thörnqvist, who in the following years produced a number of musically and lyrically inventive records, often parodying new popular music influences from abroad. Thörnqvist's 1956 recording 'Rotmos-rock' (Mashed turnips rock')—the first Swedish recording with a title containing the work 'rock'—displays a distinctively self-referential and playful use of sound-on-sound multipart lead vocals, where the protagonist's self-conscious comments on what is happening in the recording are utilised as a comic metaphor in the lyrics' representation of a domestic triangle. In the following excerpt (my own rough translation), two-part vocals are indicated by italics and three-part vocals by bold italics:

> One was my little sunflower
> The other was cooking my mashed turnips
> Till she took everything and fled away
> To Dalecarlia for a fortnight's vacation
> Ha ha, *then I started singing two-part harmony*
> *I though it swung real nicely*
> *But then one day it became* ***three-part harmony***
> ***Toot-toot, toot-toot***, that was the end

Thörnqvist was not, however, the first Swedish artist to use this technique in a playful way. In 1945, freelance musician/playwright Thomas Funck started producing children's radio programmes where he impersonated several different fairytale animals in dialogue and songs. The popularity of these programmes gave Funck the opportunity to make records featuring his fairytale characters, starting with 'Kalle Stropps födelsedag' ('Kalle Stropp's birthday') in 1954. This recording and the 1955 'Kalle Stropps paradmarsch' ('Kalle Stropp's parade march') were produced using Swedish Broadcasting Corporation equipment, and featured some pioneering examples of recording technology experimentation, such as sound-on-sound multipart vocals, reverse playback and double-speed playback. During the recording sessions, Funck had some difficulties persuading the rather reluctant Broadcasting Corporation engineers into

‘misusing’ their equipment in this manner. This use of recording technology quite literally seems to indicated the unreal, ‘magic’ or ‘fairytale’ quality of technological treatment of musical material. Despite the advanced recording procedures, these records appear to have attracted rather little attention at the time, probably due to the use of this technology in the decidedly low-status popular genre of children’s music, a connection which may also serve to underline the association of music technology with ‘toys’ in general.

In the course of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the use of sound-on-sound procedures seems to have been gradually normalised in mainstream record production, at least as far as their use for additional harmony parts sung by the lead singer, as in the early Mary Ford and Alice Babs recordings, is still concerned. Still, it is also possible to find instances of the use of such procedures for the ‘irregular’ effects. One striking example is provided by popular singer Thore SKogman’s 1964 recording ‘Surströmmingspolkan’ (‘The fermented Baltic herring polka’). In the recurring refrain section of this song, the singer has added, in a (by this time) perfectly ordinary fashion, a second vocal part in parallel thirds to the lead melody. The verse sections of the song, however, feature a more unusual procedure: in these sections, verbal phrases alternate with highly energetic but incomprehensible phrases of nonsense syllables, and these two kinds of material have been recorded in two separate takes. All of the nonsense phrases start with a rolled ‘r’, and in order to be able to indulge in this energetic sound, the singer starts these phrases early, i.e. before the preceding verbal phrase has finished, thus effectively interrupting himself. The device sounds rather like a flaw in the recording, and it appears rather difficult to determine its purpose. To my ears, it give a slightly uncanny impression, as the effect is one of a rupture between the energetic but genial protagonist and the somewhat frantic creature breaking in upon verbal discourse with incomprehensible ramblings: these two can no longer be construed as one and the same person, or rather, these two seem to constitute a ‘supernatural’ doubling of the ordinary, everyday figure of the middle-of-the-road entertainment artist.

Conclusion

Admittedly, the scope of the case study presented here is severely limited, and the source material utilised to enable deductions as to the reception patterns applied to this music in a contemporary context amounts to little more than a small sample. Nevertheless, I would like to formulate some tentative conclusions on the basis of the preceding discussion, conclusions which should be regarded as hypotheses to be evaluated in the course of future research. Thus, it appears that a conspicuous use of recording technology, i.e. a deliberately introduced ‘opacity’ of the medium of recording, may be perceived by the listener in one of the following ways:

- As ‘fake’, according to criteria of professional musicianship. This interpretation would be based on a view on the part of the listener implying that music which cannot be reproduced by non-

technologised means constitutes an inferior form of musical craft. Such a view seems to be clearly discernible in the discourse of the jazz and entertainment trade magazines in the early 1950s.

- As 'play', according to notions of seriousness in music, which may or may not be the views associated with 'serious' professional musicianship. Such musical frivolity would seem to position the music in question within the realm of children's games.[5]
- As 'larger than life', in the sense that technology makes possible the creation of previously-unheard music, whose audible extraordinariness confers upon it a particular sort of technologised 'aura' (cf. Bull 2000:124f). A potential tension appears likely to exist between this aspect of recording technology and the contemporaneously, i.e. in the 1950s and 1960s, evolving discourse of 'high fidelity', insofar as the latter is centred around notions of fidelity to 'natural sound'. The contradictions of this discourse have previously been pointed out in the work of other scholars (cf. Chanan 1995:94; Keightley 1996), and it is the aim of the research outlined here to examine in more detail this, as well as other aspects of the Swedish reception history of recording media.

[5] This connection would also seem to indicate that the 'fun' of popular music is an adult, not a childish, sort of fun.

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