

Ananay Aguilar
(Royal Holloway, University of London)

**CHARM symposium 5:
Cultures of recording**

10-12 April 2008, Royal Holloway, University of London

Organised by CHARM's Director Nicholas Cook and Coordinator Carol Chan, the fifth CHARM symposium offered engaged discussion on and around the practices of recording. Delegates from across the UK, continental Europe, North America, Japan, and Australia came together to pool their expertise under the inclusive title 'Cultures of recording', and the disciplines represented included not only musicology but also media and communication studies, history, literature, philosophy, anthropology, and sociology. Royal Holloway and its peaceful surroundings served once more as the setting for this residential meeting held from 10-12 April 2008.

From the start, central issues arose which revolved around an approach to the body that Tia DeNora (Exeter University) clearly encapsulated in her presentation on the final day: she presented the body as a vehicle in which cultural and social practices are articulated through individual experience. While, in her paper, discourse, social practices, values and images were focussed around therapeutic processes, it became clear throughout the symposium that those features may as well define a broader spectrum of creative processes, whether they involve music-making, recording, listening, writing or healing.

Starting off with the birth of hip-hop and a definition of its history through the development of break and scratch, Mark Katz (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) discussed the circumstances in which these particular technological affordances became aestheticised. Eric D. Barry (a PhD student at Rutgers University, NJ) traced the transformation of high fidelity discourse in the 1950s; based on specialist magazines of the time, he showed how the discourse shifted from fidelity to the performance to fidelity to the record, and indeed that of the playback situation itself. Intrigued by what he calls Elvis Presley's hiccup vocal style, Jens Gerrit Papenburg (a PhD student at Humboldt University, Berlin) traced the history and development of magnetic tape and its technical affordances. By showing how Elvis shaped his voice around what the technology of the time had to offer, Papenburg suggested that, from the beginning, rock 'n' roll embraced technology in a constructive rather than a merely documentary way. Similarly, with examples ranging from hip-hop to different types of electronic music, Joseph Auner (Tufts University, Boston) placed the concepts of the uncanny and the post-human in the disembodiedness of the sampled voice.

Central to these discussions was an argument put forward by Thomas Porcello (Vassar College, New York). By implying that music circulates not only through the singing voice, but also via musical discourse, Porcello situated Barthes' concept of vocal grain at the crossroads of language about music and music itself. He further argued that, as the body embraces technology through the creative use of the voice and the formulation of musical discourse, technology is embraced by the concept of grain.

The first day finished with a short poster presentation by Per Dahl (Stavanger University College, Norway), featuring a selection of *Peer Gynt* LP covers and the presentation of different marketing strategies around the world, reflecting the negotiation of meaning through the act of consumption. Similar concerns returned on

the following days. The commodification of classical music was central to a paper by Adam Krims (University of Nottingham), which touched upon this in the context of retailing and lifestyle design. Steen Kaargaard Nielson (Aarhus University, Denmark), on the other hand, traced the recorded history of 'Gone with the Wind', showing how it has been marketed in changing and conflicting ways that reflect shifting conceptions of what is meaningful in film music as an art form.

The need to analyse general concerns in terms of specific situations was highlighted in a number of eclectic papers that touched upon specific genres, different moments in time, and changing locations. Keir Keightley (University of Western Ontario), for instance, showed through pictures and texts on LP covers and specialist magazines from the 1950s to the 1970s how the recording studio was increasingly woven into the sonic imagination of popular music. Peter Doyle (Macquarie University, Sydney) drew an illuminating parallel between a discourse of the casual and the everyday in early country music and blues recordings, and a series of Australian police mug shots of the time: artistically conceived portraits of individual criminals drew attention both to the criminals' and musicians' embodied personae and to the ways in which authenticity was narrated. Andrew Flory (Shenandoah Conservatory, Winchester, VA) concentrated on the life and work of Marvin Gaye at Motown, tracing through score-based, aural and biographical analysis a creative process that challenged traditional structures within the recording studio. Jonathan Tyack presented some initial findings on politicians' musical choices from a pilot study of the long-running radio programme 'Desert Island Discs', which is being conducted at Royal Holloway in conjunction with Julie Brown and Nicholas Cook.

Central to the second day were two papers that questioned in different ways the paradigm of teleological forms of attentiveness and narrative listening strategies consolidated by Adorno, offering multiple sites for the discussion of collective creation of meaning, unconscious listening, and bodily, affective engagements with music. Jazz guitarist and Professor of Philosophy at the University of East Anglia, Garry L. Hagberg chose jazz improvisation for exploring categories of ethical content in intentional action. In discussing the functioning of memory as not necessarily teleological, but rather contextual and relative, he presented jazz improvisation as a site for dialogic interaction, where meaning, shared values and levels of appropriate attentiveness are collectively defined. Anahid Kassabian (University of Liverpool), on the other hand, questioned the paradigm of narrative, teleological listening by drawing attention to today's ubiquitous musics and their implications for the act of listening. Outlining a more holistic engagement with music that is not necessarily structured around the concepts of attentiveness and consciousness but involves the slippery concept of affect, Kassabian underlined the necessity of finding alternative and more satisfying methods of musical analysis.

The third day was wittily introduced by a perspective from literature studies: John Michael Gómez Connor (PhD student in English at Cambridge University) illustrated through advertisements and literary texts how the domestic device of the gramophone became in its portable form a 'valuable asset to the morale of the troops' during wartime: in this way, the understanding of the gramophone gradually shifted from a carrier of the past and of death, to a device associated with home, a restored future and thus, with social enjoyment. Also from literature studies, Sam Halliday (Queen Mary, University of London) offered insight into the shift of language about sound in novels and plays after the invention of the gramophone, exploring the conception of the gramophone and recorded sound as a means to connect past and present. A sociological perspective came from the composer François Ribac (Metz and Stirling Universities), who is interested in how amateur musicians understand and appropriate

popular music through records: through interviews and network mappings, Ribac explored music making through imitation, domestication of the record and the recording process, and the use of internet as a means and conveyer of musical interaction.

Standing rather apart in terms of subject matter was a presentation by Jonathan Sterne (McGill University, Canada): interpreting the mp3 as representative of a historically situated theory of perceptual encoding, he demonstrated the intimate links between technology and cultural practice, so exposing the potential for a rich field of study which he terms format theory. His presentation was a sampler of his forthcoming book, tentatively entitled *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*.

While the final discussion was very brief, the symposium timetable had allowed plenty of time after each paper and during intervals and meals for lively discussions of all sorts. The point was however made that issues of place and space had played a major role throughout the event: whether in the Bronx, a particular studio, the trenches, or a range of other private and public places, broader discourses concerning creative processes reflect the individual qualities of multiple local stories of understanding.

Congratulations are once again due to the organisers, programme committee, speakers and other participants for an inspiring event.