

Francisco López

MUSIC DEMATERIALIZED?

The disappearance of the object seems to be a *fait accompli* in recorded commercial music. Leaving aside the rare nostalgic, the format fetishist/fundamentalist, the minor industry of retro replicas, and also the no-industry of so-called underground experimental music, nobody cares anymore about the traditional physical carriers of audio when it comes to *actually listening* to music (whatever that might mean today).

Not only the shellac and vinyl records are gone; the “compact disc” – incarnation of the “digital music revolution” – is also gone. In pure techno-theological fashion, but well beyond the simple metaphor, one could think of the CD as the martyr who first brought the digital gospel and then sacrificed his body for the eternal salvation of the digital audio files dwelling in cloud-heaven today.

After a burgeoning century that saw a novel object-based music industry appear, rise and collapse, the process of digitization – so the story goes – has eventually dematerialized music, which now moves disembodied at lightning speed (or so they claim it does) among mythical servers, multiple personal devices and up and down “the cloud”.

But wasn't radio broadcast the first dematerialization of music?

Despite the obvious differences (not least of all the dramatically reduced possibility of *à la carte* selection through the listener's request phone call, or the incomparably more limited geographical reach), radio transmission is virtually instantaneous, took place all over the world, and always had music as one of its main – if not *the* main – features.

Perhaps even more significantly, *dematerialized* radio-broadcasted music indeed massively replaced record-*embodied* music through the intertwined processes of popularization/accessibility of radio receivers and the collapse of the record industry after the Great Depression, during the 1930s and the 1940s. It

took a post-war global economic recovery – and the development of the new “Long Play” format – for music to become *re-materialized* again, socially speaking. Compared to these sheer forces, and in the face of the techno-historical evidence, the now classic analog-digital divide seems like a feeble argument for the explanation of the dematerialization of music.

But there’s more: 136 years of recorded music have somehow made us forget that for most of human history music had always been “immaterial”. Or seen somehow in reverse: musical notation is of course a variant of recorded, materialized music. For around ten centuries in the case of Western music (longer in other traditions, like the Chinese or the Indian), musical scores have materialized music in the form of symbolic code on paper.

Naturally, anybody would immediately argue – and I would agree – that this is not what we all understand today as “recorded” music. Like a CD, however, a musical score contains code (symbolic instead of binary) fixed on a material medium (macroscopically printed on paper as opposed to microscopically etched on plastic) that can be decoded (musicians vs. laser) to reproduce / playback the music. In fact, most classically-trained composers would likely argue that a musical score is more truly *the* music than any recordings, which, after all, are always individual “instantiations” of the immutable, universal, model-based, original music composition embodied in the score.

So, in a musical sense, what is essentially recorded in a recording? Is there something in it fundamentally different from the musical score? Or is it – as many persistently repeat – just “documentation” of the “real” thing?

For the past 136 years, for most people, from the average music aficionado to most historians of recording technology, a music recording materializes a *representation*, a simulation of the original performance. That might be of course true, but it dramatically underestimates what recording technology has done and misses a fundamental techno-historical event.

Along with the semantic, the symbolic, the iconic... another layer of musical “reality” sneaked in the sound recordings: the sonic, the phenomenological, the Schaefferian *concrète*. That, and not “music”, is what became materialized for the first time in history. Or, we could say, music... *as heard and memorized by machines*.

When we hear what machines have heard and memorized, we might experience a revelation: the unfolding of the non-representational layers of sonic reality.

Even more, the questioning of music “reality” itself. In my view, this is the true, natural, and fruitful *cooperation* with machines of perception, particularly in their current state. Not the constant scorn of their “limitations” to replicate that “reality” we seem to know so well, but rather our deep appreciation of what they have truly become as non-cognitive collaborators in our constant – perceptive, rational, aesthetic, spiritual... – quest in our interaction with reality; whether direct, referred, recorded or broadcasted.

It took a non-negligible seventy years since the invention of the first recording machine for someone to consciously *hear* this other non-representational layer and attempt the challenging development of a phenomenology of sound. This was of course Pierre Schaeffer’s quest with his concept of the “objet sonore”: essentially, understanding the recording process as generative of new philosophical/perceptive entities.

What to me is somehow even more remarkable, however, is that, since the beginning of the social experience of recorded sound – and primarily as a consequence of the music recording industry – there has been a process of what I would call *unconscious social concretization of music*. Naturally non-explicit and obviously not articulated, this is basically the appreciation of the specificity of particular instantiations of musical pieces as the “original” or “historical” recordings. To the point of the reversal of live-music-represented-in-the-recording to the studio recording becoming *the* music, to be re-enacted in live performances.

Interestingly, contra Walter Benjamin, the mechanical reproduction of materialized music at the root of this social concretization did not produce a “loss of aura” but precisely the opposite: the dramatic increase/magnification or even the sheer generation of massive amounts of “aura”. First with regards to the original music being represented (Benjaminian “reproduction” is only such as surrogate representation by photographic, phonographic or cinematographic means) and then in relation to objectified special units of true reproduction, like “masters” or copies of “original or limited editions”.

This particular materialization of music through *machines of perception and memory*, therefore, gave rise, as a paramount (side-)effect, and through the machine-mediated access to the concrète, to the philosophical/perceptive “objectification” of music. This objectification remains fully in place after the dematerialization from analog to digital. Perhaps even more so by the significant increase in informational diffusion of the music.

The making of copies of music apparently also remains in place after this analog-digital dematerialization (again, even more so, because of the ease, accessibility and “immateriality” of this process). But it is precisely here where a fundamental change has taken place: while an analog copy is indeed a copy because it is not identical to the original (by means of noise incorporation in the duplication process), there is not, in essence, such a thing as a digital “copy” of an already digital “original” (other than in a virtual or metaphorical sense). Instead, in the digital realm we have an identical replication without introduced noise, a *clone* without *recombination*, a multiplication without unique reference.

The fundamental difference is of course not the “sound quality” but the qualitative change in ontological, economic and even political status of “original” and “copy” in this realm. When there is no difference between these latter categories, each and every immaterially-replicated unit has – potentially; if no other artificial factors are added – the same perceptive and economic value. And perhaps even more importantly: these replicated entities cease to be referential or representational reflections of any original but become – each and all of them, simultaneously – the *thing* itself.

We might expect significant consequences of this novel situation in at least two main classic realms: preservation and ownership.

The possibility of generation of identical clones gives rise to a survival paradigm shift: the traditional preservation of one or a few material “master” embodiments is substituted by an endless (eternal, perhaps?) multiplication of entities, each one of them with exactly the same capability to be a “master”. A shift from what is known in population dynamics as a “K-strategy” (few well-protected offspring) – a carefully preserved materially – embodied original (like a master tape) – to a “r-strategy” (many non-protected offspring) – large numbers of dispersed replicas of the same recording. There is no precedent in history for this type of storage and transmission of the encoded information: not only noise-free (for replication) but also *interpretation-free* (for decoding).

In terms of ownership, when the “original” is digital and non-representational, any listener with a “copy” has exactly the same thing than the composer/artist (needless to say, this is also the case in the visual art realm). Again in this case, there is no historical precedent for such a situation of *ownership equality*.

The “broadcasting/streaming” dematerialization (both analog and digital; from classic radio to piped muzak to online/“cloud” streaming) can be seen as a

further degree of dematerialized ownership or accessibility. We do not even have the encoded information – whether analog or digital – but instead have (own, buy, get granted) the right to access it as a *decoded physical perceptive manifestation* (audible sound in the case of music).

And somehow, with obvious telematic and portability twists of far-reaching consequences, we are thus back to the agelong situation of our hands (and our shelves) being empty of any imaginable materialized music. That is, back to an *ethereal* state of listening.

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