Improvisation, Technology, and Representation

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Ellington at Newport

In 1956, Duke Ellington, suffering from a slump in his fortunes in recent years, staged a remarkable comeback at the Newport Jazz Festival in Rhode Island. This concert was an incredible success for Ellington, owing especially to his tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves' extraordinary 27-chorus solo on "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue." Gonsalves generated such excitement from the audience that festival management and security feared there would be a riot. The album from this concert, *Ellington at Newport*, became Ellington's best selling record and was hailed for decades as one of the greatest live jazz recordings of all time… except that it wasn't. It seems that soon after the concert, Ellington was informed by Columbia Records producer George Avakian that the live recordings were "flawed" (Schaap 21). Two separate recording microphones had been placed on stage at the concert, one for Columbia Records, and one for the federal radio broadcast system, Voice of America. While all the previous soloists had performed into the Columbia microphone, at the pivotal moment Paul Gonsalves stepped up to the wrong mike.

Thus Columbia tried to have the Ellington orchestra recreate the concert in the studio. During the recording session, however, Ellington refused to allow a studio performance of Gonsalves' solo to be recorded, supposedly because he believed "that the feeling of the performance could not be duplicated" (Schaap 22). Therefore, the "flawed"

live recording of "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue" was released along with a studio recording of the "Festival Suite."

This subterfuge was only brought to light in 1999 when record producer Phil Schapp released *Ellington at Newport 1956 (Complete)*. In the early 1990s, the Voice of America recordings and the Columbia live recordings were discovered. Combining these two separate mono recordings, Schaap and the Columbia recording engineers restored the entire concert in stereo and released these live recordings alongside the studio recordings in a two-disc set.

Constructing Liveness

The Ellington at Newport recordings provide an excellent example of how sound recording technology can be used to construct representations of musical performance. While music as embodied on paper or in film is seen as having been clearly translated from one artistic medium to another, many listeners casually accept sound recordings as repetitions or "reproductions," as the products of a process of "technological impartiality and receptivity" (Gitelman 267). I believe that these same listeners will, however, when prompted, readily concede that the artistic processes that produce sound recordings, that produce "sound art," are quite distinct from those behind the production of music.

The very fact that Columbia Records declared the live recordings to be flawed strongly refutes any claims for the "technological impartiality" of sound recording. In marketing *Ellington at Newport*, Columbia was of course targeting the millions of listeners who had no first-hand knowledge of the actual concert, listeners whose expectations were clearly influenced by the standard sound of recorded music at this time, whether produced in the studio or "recorded live." Glenn Gould points out in an

article from 1966 titled "The Prospects of Recording" that "today's listeners have come to associate musical performance with sounds possessed of characteristics which two generations ago were neither available to the profession nor wanted by the public—characteristics such as analytic clarity, immediacy, and indeed almost tactile proximity" (115-16). Operating on this premise, Columbia Records decided that the live recordings of Ellington at Newport would not live up to the public's preconceptions of what a live performance, particularly one of this calibre, should sound like, and therefore opted to construct a more marketable representation of the "authentic" Newport experience.

Improvisation as Liveness

More significant, however, is the fact that Columbia was obliged, owing to Ellington's objections, to retain the live, unedited recording of "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue." Schaap indicates in his liner notes that in the decades before the Newport Jazz Festival, the use of canned applause to mask studio material was common (21-22). The shocking event that occurred that day in the Columbia studio was not the record producers' efforts to reenact the Newport concert, but Ellington's determined stance that such reproduction was impossible. Prior to the concert, Ellington gave Paul Gonsalves free rein to solo for as long as he wanted during an interlude between two separate compositions, "Diminuendo in Blue" and "Crescendo in Blue." The unexpected length and fervour of this performance subsequently became a symbol for the quintessential liveness of improvised musical performance. As George Wein, producer of the Newport Jazz Festival, states in his autobiography, "Although the album was in large part a studio fabrication, the piece 'Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue' was the

genuine article. It would have been futile to attempt to recapture that once-in-a-lifetime performance" (156).

Juggling Competing Ideas of Authenticity

As it turns out, this "genuine article" was actually captured twice, and the recording Wein refers to supposedly is the inferior version. While Schaap professes to have addressed the whole "awkward circumstance" (19) of *Ellington at Newport* through his reissue, however, he does so not by replacing flawed recordings and studio recordings with the genuine article, but by constructing a stereo sound from the two separate mono recordings of the concert. My copy of *Ellington at Newport 1956 (Complete)* has a yellow sticker on the front of the CD case that includes, among other statements, the following marketing slogans:

> CONTAINS OVER 100 MINUTES OF NEW MUSIC!
>
> IN STEREO FOR FIRST TIME!
>
> New music reveals incredible new mysteries of the event!

That the original live recordings from Newport should be described as "new music" is most intriguing. Strictly speaking, these recordings are two days older than the studio tracks on the original LP, but because they have never been heard by the general public before, they are new commodities. In this way, Columbia privileges its commodity object as the original source of the music, even while establishing a connection with the live event, one that further promises the illumination of "new mysteries."

Schaap himself, in his liner notes, articulates a clear awareness of and discomfort with the slippery representational terrain on which he is operating:

> As mentioned, there was no stereo engineer at Newport. When a Voice of America or Columbia Records engineer changed his mono mix, there was no balancing or compensatory move made by his colleague running the other system. Combined and heard in stereo, such moments occasionally sound awkward. The stereo mix could have been improved had I panned or centered the VOA and Columbia mono mixes, but we would have lost the original mono recordings. (28)

Thus he creates his stereo mix by panning the VOA recording completely to the left and the Columbia recordings completely to the right. Ironically, while Schaap criticizes his predecessors in 1956 for producing "a flawed mixture" instead of "a well-done—but fake—recording of studio music" (22), he has repeated this process here, rejecting the best possible stereo representation in favour of a hybrid construction that attempts to both recreate the Newport concert and retain a direct connection to the real event by preserving the original mono recordings, the source texts.

Digital Remastering

Schaap's nervousness about the validity of his stereo construction of Ellington at Newport may stem from a realization that while he has remedied past deceptions surrounding this concert, he has also translated the representation of liveness into a new form, that of the remastered record. Since the late 1980s, the genres of jazz, blues, folk, and country have been flooded by digitally remastered versions of classic records. Fans have eagerly consumed these products under the premise that modern sound technology has overcome the limitations of earlier recording practices, thus bringing the listener closer to the "original" music. However, while the quality of this remastered sound may

be superior according to the aesthetic standards of our time, how are we to know that it is more authentic, more faithful to the music as performed?

In his book *Performing Rites*, Simon Frith describes a remastered record as "a performance reconstructed according to today's sound values," based on the judgment of "neither the original musicians nor the original studio producer/engineer but of the contemporary remaster" (235). This observation raises significant questions about the fidelity of Schaap's reissue to the original Newport performance: upon careful scrutiny, the presumption that Schaap's stereo version of the "Festival Suite" is more authentic than the studio constructions from 1956 is not as certain as one might think. While Schaap uses the live mono recordings, his reconstruction of this raw material is done more than forty years after the fact and is based on the judgment of individuals who were not at the original concert and whose ears are unavoidably attuned to the sounds of a different music and recording culture. Despite all the technology and material at his disposal, Schaap clearly recognizes that it is impossible to truly reproduce the Ellington concert at Newport: hence his concern that the Columbia and VOA mono recordings remain intact and accessible to the listener (although few CD players nowadays are still equipped with balance control or a mono switch).

Listen for Yourself

As to the quality of these two different representations, I invite readers to listen to the attached audio files, one from the live version of the "Festival Suite" and one from the same point in the studio version. Cat Anderson concludes the first movement of the Suite, titled "Festival Junction," with an extremely impressive trumpet solo. In the live version, Anderson seems to be reaching towards some idealized, impossibly high note.

While he displays an impressive range, his tone and articulation become sloppy as he strains unsuccessfully towards his goal. The orchestra also seems uncertain of his intentions, prematurely performing a cadence in the middle of his solo before repeating this movement ten seconds later. In contrast, in the studio recording Anderson's solo and the band's response appear well rehearsed. His articulation and phrasing are clean and polished as he flawlessly reaches into the higher register, and the band's entry is perfectly timed as he climaxes on a high note. To my ear, the studio version clearly presents a superior display of musicianship. The relative merits of these different recorded constructions, however, may ultimately be a matter of taste. Those who enjoy a tighter, more polished performance may prefer the studio recordings, while those who desire the unpredictability and risk of live music, and those who simply wish to experience the Newport concert as performed, will likely favour the live version.

Sound Recording as Representation

Ingrid Monson, in *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*, states that "Jazz performances are not musical texts in and of themselves[…] but when such performances are recorded and disseminated through LPs, CDs and cassettes, they become texts" (126) and that "the recording of music on CDs is a mode of writing by virtue of its creation of something repeatable" (208). By this logic, the recording of music may be viewed as a translation, not only from the temporal to the physical, but also from the auditory medium to the realm of representation and language. The language of sound recording is certainly very different from that of written language and musical notation; however, the many recorded constructions of Ellington at Newport produced both in

1956 and in 1999 show that such technology can create representations as readily as the pen or the brush.

Suggestions for Further Reading

For theoretical grounding on the subject of mechanical reproduction and art, I would first urge readers to consult the work of Frankfurt School theorists Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. Benjamin wrote one of the seminal essays on the effect of modern technology on art: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." While this essay does not analyze music, focusing on painting, sculpture, photography, and film, it raises many issues relevant to the recording/representation of improvised music. Benjamin argues that mechanical reproduction destroys the aura of the original artwork, thereby freeing it from its ritual and cultic setting, a theory that becomes particularly intriguing in the context of performance art where the "original" does not exist as an object. He also speaks of "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly[…] to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction" (223), a desire that impacts upon music perhaps even more strongly than on painting or sculpture. "The Task of the Translator" may also be of some interest for analyzing processes of translation both between different languages and between different representational media. Both essays can be found in the collection *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt.

Theodor Adorno is something of a devil's advocate on the subject of jazz and popular music; however, it is important to be aware of his criticisms. His essay "On Jazz" may seem like an ignorant rant against popular culture, but "On the Fetish-Character in

Music and the Regression of Listening" contains a far more articulate critique. Here, Adorno argues that improvisation in popular music is a myth, that "Perfect, immaculate performance in the latest style preserves the work at the price of its definitive reification," that "The protective fixation of the work leads to its destruction, for its unity is realized in precisely that spontaneity which is sacrificed to the fixation" (301). Both essays can be found in the collection *Essays On Music*.

On the subject of original and copy, readers should consult Jacques Derrida's work, including "Cartouches" from *The Truth in Painting*, "Signature Event Context" from *Limited Inc.*, and *Writing and Difference*. Derrida famously remarks in *Writing and Difference* that "representation is death" (227), insofar as any representation carries within it the potential to outlive its original context. Jean Baudrillard's book *Simulacra and Simulation* echoes these ideas, arguing that there has never been an origin, only perpetual "simulacra," that "God himself was never anything but his own simulacrum" (4). Philip Auslander, in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, applies these arguments within the context of live performances of popular music, where "all performance modes, live or mediatized, are now equal," where "the live performance is just one more reproduction of a given text or one more reproducible text" (50). In contrast, Peggy Phelan, in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, argues that "Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representation: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance" (146). Finally, Judith Butler's essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" offers an intriguing queer perspective on this subject, asserting that

homosexuality is not a "bad copy" of heterosexuality, but rather originates and defines heterosexuality by virtue of delineating what it is not.

Frank Kofsky's *Black Music, White Business* offers a powerful critique of the racial prejudices that have predominantly governed the translation of improvised music from performance to commodity object in North America over the past century. On this subject, one may also wish to consult James Lincoln Collier: *The Reception of Jazz in America* and Ernest Cashmore: *The Black Culture Industry*. For a broader though less political and racial account of the history of musical economics, see Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. There are also a number of excellent essay collections on the cultural reception of jazz, including two edited by Krin Gabbard: *Jazz Among the Discourses* and *Representing Jazz* and one edited by our ICASP project director, Ajay Heble, and his colleague Daniel Fischlin: *The Other Side of Nowhere*.

For more formal analyses of the history of sound reproduction, there is Michael Chanan's *Repeated Takes*, James P. Kraft's *Stage to Studio: Musicians and the Sound Revolution*, Michael Richard Dellaira's *For the Record*, Friedrich Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, and Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past*. There are also a number of specific studies on the introduction of stereo and artificial space into sound recording, including Peter Doyle's *Echo and Reverb*, Tim Anderson's *Making Easy Listening*, and Colin Symes' *Setting the Record Straight*.

A search of almost any university library database will show that there is a woeful dearth of scholarship on the subject of audio art, especially in comparison to other technologically contemporary art forms like film and photography. There are, however, a number of useful books, including William Furlong's *Audio Arts: Discourse and Practice*

in Contemporary Art and the essay collections *Wireless Imagination*, edited by Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, and *Sound By Artists*, edited by Dan Lander and Micah Lexier. These studies reveal a large and growing critical community whose work illustrates not only how far the art of sound recording goes beyond the boundaries of music, only one of many raw materials available, but also how this technology can be used to redefine the nature of music and improvisation.

In light of Ingrid Monson's assertion that sound recordings function as texts, one may also wish to explore how improvisation is manifest within literary texts. Daniel Belgrad's *The Culture of Spontaneity* presents an excellent comparative study of improvisational practices in music, painting, and literature, devoting several chapters to exploring the "spontaneous bop prosody" of Jack Kerouac and the Beat writers. Also, Aldon Lynn Nielsen, in *Black Chant*, and Nathaniel Mackey, in *Discrepant Engagement*, engage in broad explorations of the dialectical relationship between orality and literacy in African American music and literature.

Finally, a book devoted exclusively to Ellington at Newport, *Backstory in Blue*, was just published in June 2008. Written by John Fass Morton, this book presents a unique account of the concert based on interviews with fans and music professionals who were actually witness to this extraordinary event.

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