

Point of Audition

Karl Coulthard

In his essay “Reading, Writing, and Representing Sound,” James Lastra states, “the point of audition can clearly divide an apparently ‘single’ sound into a potentially limitless number of different events” (67). Here, Lastra is forwarding an argument about reception theory, one wherein each individual perspective can constitute a distinct experience or version of a sonic occurrence.¹ In a mediatised environment thoroughly infiltrated by recorded sound, sound technology, and concepts of audio fidelity, it is very easy to casually accept our reception of musical performances as fixed.² We first experience most music through sound recordings—on the radio, the CD player, the computer, the iPod—and the live performance of much popular music is predicated on providing listeners with a familiar experience by replicating the recorded versions of hit songs. When one goes to purchase tickets for a concert, however, it quickly becomes apparent that not all points of audition (POAs) are equal. Seats are divided into A, B, C, and sometimes D sections, with price tags corresponding to the supposed value of the relative positions; special box seats are often available for many times the cost of regular seats; and some venues may offer both seated and standing-room-only sections. Present also may be sound technicians, given very particular aural perspectives; VIPs with backstage passes; and impoverished souls like Francis from the film *Round Midnight*, relegated to listening to his idol, Dale Turner, through a basement window. There are indeed virtually limitless perspectives from which one can experience a musical

performance. This observation is particularly significant as concerns the production and reception of improvised music.

“Liveness” is a concept that carries great currency in Western culture. Walter Benjamin famously laments in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (221). Discussing this concept of “aura” within the context of sculpture and painting, Benjamin argues that no reproduction can replace the cultic power of an object’s live presence. Philip Auslander, speaking specifically of music in his book *Liveness*, also observes, that “far more symbolic capital is attached to live events than to mediatized ones” (59). Owing to this symbolic capital, early developments in sound recording technology were focused around the faithful reproduction of live musical performances.

Between 1915 and 1925, the Edison Phonograph Company held thousands of “tone tests” across the United States: a female vocalist would sing on stage alongside a recording of her voice, and when the lights went out, audience members would be unable to tell when she was and wasn’t singing. From a contemporary post-structuralist perspective, of course, such claims to technological impartiality are highly flawed. The female voice was chosen because the technology of the time captured this sound better than that of any other instrument (Thompson 156). Furthermore, in order to make such a demonstration convincing, the vocalist had to alter her singing style to match that of the recording: as Jonathan Sterne glibly observes in *The Audible Past*, the tone test performer “certainly did not improvise in [her] performance” (262).

This circumstance raises an intriguing paradox. Improvisation is often regarded as the aspect of musical performance most quintessentially live: fans of avant-garde jazz praise the music precisely because of its unpredictability. In the context of the tone tests, however, the recorded performance could not be improvisational or unpredictable, as it would then be too difficult for the vocalist to reproduce that performance in a live setting, nor could this recording contain any extra-musical sounds that might allow listeners to distinguish it from the singer during the tests: “Recording did not simply capture reality as it was; it aimed to capture reality suitable for reproduction” (Sterne 236). Indeed, Thomas Edison regarded his Diamond Discs as superior to reality: “with a phonograph I can record voices better than any person in the theatre can hear them” (qtd. in Milner 40).³ Edison constructed liveness precisely by eliminating all improvisation and spontaneity, by constructing for the listener an ideal POA free from all the auditory distractions that inherently characterize a natural live setting.

In reaction to this deification of recording technology, there emerged in the later twentieth century a chorus of theoretical voices insisting “on the fundamental importance of presuming non-identity between original and copy” (Lastra, *Sound Technology* 125). 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). Alan Williams states, “it is never the literal, original ‘sound’ that is reproduced in recording, but one perspective on it, a *sample*, a *reading* of it” (53). Rick Altman also echoes this position in “The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound”: “recorded sound creates an illusion of presence while constituting a new version of the sound events

that actually transpired” (29). Like Benjamin, many later performance and film theorists perceive the records of performance as secondary, degraded versions of the live presence of the original event. Like Edison, however, these theorists still privilege an ideal, unmediated POA; they simply differ on the ability of sound recording technology to render this aural experience.

A third theoretical perspective on sound recording argues that the very notion of “liveness” is itself suspect. John Mowitt, in his essay “The Sound of Music in the Era of its Electronic Reproducibility,” asks a particularly discerning question: “if listening cannot be trusted to differentiate between the original and the copy, how are we to perceive the validity of the original’s notarization of the copy since the aural original might always already be the copy from which it can no longer be aurally differentiated?” (178). Michel Chion, in *Audio-Vision*, also echoes this concern: “The more we use recorded and/or transmitted sound, the more we mythify its contrary: a natural acoustical experience that we actually have less and less frequently” (104). Lastra is the most provocative on this front, suggesting that “the primary ideological effect of sound recording might be creation of the effect that there is an ‘original’ independent of its representation” (“Representing Sound” 70).

Indeed, most of what passes for live performance today is, as Auslander posits, “always already inscribed with traces of the possibility of technical mediation (i.e. mediatization) that defines it as live” (53). The vast majority of live concerts now involve microphones and electronic amplification, usually carefully and continually adjusted by sound technicians, partly for the benefit of the listeners present, but also often for the recording of the live album: a highly popular commodity. Most large-scale pop concerts

and sporting events also feature video screens, sometimes several stories tall, relaying, and sometimes replaying, the live event. According to Steve Wurtzler, in his essay “She Sang Live, but the Microphone was Turned Off,” “the co-presence of the live and the recorded contribute to a potential crisis in our notions of a real that exists prior to representation” (94).⁴ Furthermore, as Lastra observes, “before the appearance of a microphone, the symphony is *already* the product of an advanced sound technology—architecture—and therefore not innocent of technological mediation in its primary form” (*Sound Technology* 133).⁵ The rapid development over the last century of electronic and digital modes of aural representation has caused listeners to blindly accept earlier forms of technological representation as natural.

Rather than provoking a perceptual crisis, however, an awareness of the constructed nature of musical performance can open up numerous improvisational possibilities for both performers and listeners. Creative musicians can improvise not only with music, but also with the POA itself. Significant spatial movement on the part of performing musicians, while more difficult to amplify or record, can present many intriguing possibilities for restructuring the aural characteristics of a performance, in both outdoor and indoor venues. A good example of this is the “outstallations” performed at the 2009 Guelph Jazz Festival. These events included counterpoint parades converging and diverging on downtown Guelph streets and soundscape walking tours, described as “acoustic orienteering,” of interacting musicians and pedestrians in urban spaces.⁶ Such sonic experiments highlight the inherently fragmentary nature of musical reception—something too easily forgotten in our haste to construct an ideal, singular musical

experience—by virtue of the impossibility of any one listener perceiving the full performance.

Sound recording technology itself also affords musicians many opportunities to improvise: jazz, pop, and hip-hop artists all experiment with using recorded sound in live performance, recasting possibly idealized sonic constructions within new aural contexts. Most intriguing, I believe, is the potential for such technology to create “impossible performances.” For example, in the album *Conversations with Myself*, pianist Bill Evans has used overdubbing to construct a trio performance produced by only one musician. He recorded a single track, then a second track playing and responding to the first, and finally a third track responding to the duo on the second track. The result is a recording with no possible original live antecedent: the only available POAs for this performance are those heard through the speaker of recorded sound.

Since recorded sound can be used as a performative tool, and sometimes as an instrument itself, it follows that listeners may improvise their POA not only when attending live events, but also when hearing recorded music. Just as one can choose different locations within a concert hall or music club, one can also listen to reproduced sound in different acoustic environments: in a moving car, with the dishwasher running, through headphones, through a home entertainment system with surround sound, or even perhaps at the same venue where the music was originally performed. Auslander cites a free jazz concert in Central Park where “some spectators were listening to the radio broadcast of the very concert they were attending” and a rock concert in Atlanta where “the group’s set-up included a system that permitted those attending the concert to listen to it on headphones plugged directly into the group’s mixing board” (34). On the

remastered jazz album *Ellington at Newport 1956 (Complete)*, producer Phil Schaap has constructed a stereo sound by combining two separate live mono recordings from the original concert. He has, however, left each mono recording intact, panned completely to the left and right respectively, and invites the listener to “Use your balance control to create your own stereo mix” (28).⁷ Sound technology affords almost unlimited possibilities for constructing one’s listening experience.

I will conclude with a final quote from Lastra: “This theoretical insistence on the autonomous original, therefore, needlessly privileges presence over mediation rather than simply illustrating transformation” (133). On this note, I urge the reader to take the critical model outlined here and go forth and actively experiment in mediating and transforming his auditory environment, in improvising her point of audition.

Notes

¹ See also Altman: “Usually discussed as the most transparent of classical narratives, sound is in fact a *Rashomon* phenomenon, existing only in the separate stories of various perceivers of the original event” (24).

² Consider the following explanation by Williams concerning the tendency of listeners to gloss over auditory difference: “So it is that ‘identical’ sounds (voices, instruments) seem different in different acoustic environments, a fact that one does not consciously notice in everyday life precisely because the very constitution of a subject that can *listen* (understand, unify in terms of a common point of reference) requires the (learned) process of ignoring such variations in favor of an identity posited as *necessary* to them” (53).

³ Consider also Friedrich Kittler, who intriguingly suggests that modern sound recording technology can bypass the impediments placed between performer and listener by more primitive forms of mediation: “The ‘sound of music in my ear’ can exist only once mouthpieces and microphones are capable of recording any whisper. As if there were no distance between the recorded voice and listening ears, as if voices traveled along the transmitting bones of acoustic self-perception directly from the mouth into the ear’s labyrinth” (37).

⁴ On this subject, readers might consult Jean Baudrillard’s book *Simulacra and Simulation*, where he theorizes that there has never been an origin, only perpetual “simulacra.”

⁵ Dellaira carries this argument even further, arguing that “the moment man ceased to make music with his own voice alone the art became machine ridden” (28).

⁶For more on these projects, see the video “Three Parades” and Nicholas Loess’ film “Acoustic Orienteering,” both available in the ICASP research database. For a more classic example of varying the POA, consider the sixteenth-century Venetian composer Giovanni Gabrieli, whose multipart brass and choral pieces utilized the unique layout and acoustics of *San Marco di Venezia* (St. Mark’s Basilica) to create striking spatial effects.

⁷See “Improvisation, Technology, and Representation.”

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