

MEDIA-SPECIFIC ARTISTS' RECORDS BETWEEN REPRODUCTION AND PERFORMANCE¹

Volker Straebel

Technische Universität Berlin, Fachgebiet Audiokommunikation
volker.straebel@tu-berlin.de

Abstract: Various media-specific artists' records are discussed. The pieces question the roles of medium and user either by upholding the established paradigms of recording and reproduction, or by turning the record from a mass-produced item into an unique art object. The playing of a record may turn into an ephemeral performance, whereby the reassuring notion of repetition and accessibility is deliberately undermined.

Keywords: media-specific artist records, multi-groove records, performative aspects of record playing, liveness vs. reproduction.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his study *Toward a new music. Music and electricity* of 1937, Mexican composer and conductor Carlos Chavez analyzed the impact of mechanical and electrical production, reproduction and transmission of sound on music composition and perception (CHAVEZ, 1939). In the chapter *Electric instruments of musical reproduction* Chavez discusses not only various mechanical instruments like player pianos, orchestrions and organs, but the phonograph as well. As we can see from countless reviews and magazine articles of that period, to consider the phonograph an instrument was common practice till the late 1930's. This seemed fair enough for an object that was meant to emit sound. Calling the phonograph an instrument however placed the device in both the realms of music and technology. It also emphasized its physicality as an object that was to become a piece of living room furniture, and diminished the understanding of the phonograph as a medium of technical reproduction. Listening to records in a social context—for example, the “mechanical-musical presentations” in bourgeois living rooms of the 1940's described by Thomas Mann (2007: chapter XXXVIII)—turned the representation of a recorded musical performance into a performative practice itself: a private record concert, where connoisseurs would pick from a record collection and discuss arias and sections of instrumental works.

The word “live” was introduced in relation to performance in the BBC Yearbook for 1934 to distinguish between live and recorded sound on the radio (c.f. AUSLANDER, 2002: 27). The term served as an opposition to sound recording in a situation where the difference was not easy to make out. The fact that radio broadcasts were sometimes referred to as “delayed repeats” was discussed in the New York Times as late as 1943 in a report about BBC radio documentaries, most notably on the subject of the bombing of German cities (HUTCHENS, 1943). Theodor W. Adorno, however, had emphasized in his radio theory, written in New York in the late 1930's, the “live qualities of radio” even when recordings are being played: “If the record is broadcast you can listen to it only at the moment it is broadcast. It has lost its mobility in time” (ADORNO, 2006: 122-24).

Today, with vast collections of audio tracks easily available on portable devices or file hosting systems, the experience of a live broadcast seems to have become a special and socially valued exception. At the same time, audio tracks have long ceased to represent a

¹ This paper is based on my unpublished (STRAEBEL, 2010).

live performance.² We have become used to media-music, a media-related practice of creating a musical reality in which production, reproduction and perception blur (GROSSMANN, 1997). Yet, media-music is not limited to digital media. In this paper, I will discuss works specifically created for gramophone records, thereby adding to earlier research on media-specific music for compact disc (cf. Straebel, 2009). My aim is to survey different approaches that question the playing of a record as a representation of music stored on that media, thereby turning the playing of a record into a live performance.

2. SOUND PRODUCTION

From early on, several attempts have been made to establish gramophone-specific music. In 1922, Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy suggested creating “new, not yet existing sounds and tone-relations” by means of cutting synthetic curves into a wax record, a suggestion he most likely never realized. According to Moholy-Nagy, the “scratch-handwriting” would have been a method of sound synthesis that turned the gramophone from a medium of reproduction into a medium of production (MOHOLY-NAGY, 1922).

In 2010, Swiss composer and percussionist Martin Lorenz adapted Moholy-Nagy’s approach and cut short, rectangular lines onto a record groove that contained sine-tones every now and then. His *Loop 06* (Fig. 1) presents either single scratches, groups of four or twenty rather equidistant cuts, or groups of scratches that thin out over time, thereby creating a descending glissando. The percussive scratch-sounds never overlap with the sine wave, which has a frequency of 1333hz, or as Lorenz emphasizes, 40 times the disk’s frequency of rotation. While the spiral groove with the sine-tones was pressed in a regular way, Lorenz cut the scratches on each record by hand and created an edition of ten records. The scratches follow a score and should vary only slightly, just as every performance of a score differs slightly from any other (LORENZ, 2010, 2012).



Fig. 1: Martin Lorenz, *Loop 06* (2010). Edition of 10 unique single-sided LP records.

² Anthropologist Edmund Carpenter has described this shift in perception of recording among American youths in the early 1970s: “They don’t relate recorded music back to performance. That music [...] is complete, no mere shadow of some distant original.” (CARPENTER, 1973: 45-47).

With *Loop 06* and other similar works, Martin Lorenz not only turned the gramophone from a medium of reproduction into a medium of production, he also created unique records that represent always unique realizations of a rhythmical score. To speak of an edition as an edition of art prints is misleading, since each record is unique.

3. THE SOUND OF RECORDS

One of the aims of sound reproduction is to have the medium vanish from the listener's awareness. Given the limitations of sound recording in the 1930's in terms of sound quality and playback duration, it comes as a surprise that reviewers claimed "[w]hat one hears on the modern instruments [i.e. the gramophones] is actually the performance of the artists themselves" (AUGUST, 1931: 143). The music listener's ability to experience sounds in reference to the *intention* of acoustic emanations, i.e. taking a heavily distorted violin sound for the in-person playing of a violin, allowed one to disregard the rather poor sonic reality.

In other words, listening to records, even to the high-fidelity long playing record, requires one to adopt a basic practice: the mental disregard of distortion and surface noise. This unspoken agreement became the subject of Roger Miller's single *Pop Records/Evolving* (1984/85). One side consists of a collage of sounds of the grooves before or between music tracks of used records. For the uninformed listener, it takes a while to realize that what one hears is not the surface noise of the record itself – the actual noise, if you will – but recorded noise of other records.

To devote a record to the unintended noise that unavoidably accompanies the use of that very medium re-establishes the listener's awareness of the medium. Miller didn't present a blank groove that had enabled us to listen to the medium itself. Instead, here the medium is the music. In terms of media studies we might call this approach auto- or self-remediation.

4. USING RECORDS

Other artists addressed the record medium's implications as well, but rather focused on how the record is handled. The record listener interacts with the medium in different ways. For example, one has to adjust the turntable to the desired play back speed. The speed is usually implied by the record's size, with 45 rpm for singles and maxi-singles and 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm for long playing records. So, with Rob Wortman's *A Child's Garden of Noise* (WORTMAN, 1994) the listener gets fooled twice when the cover of the single carries the mark "45", but the transparent record produces Mickey Mouse voices at this speed. Stopping the record, adjusting speed and restarting is not so much an annoyance as the result of an aesthetic confusion. Am I supposed to listen to this record at obviously the wrong speed? Am I entitled to change the speed against the cover's indication?

Similarly, the listener gets confused when he or she is about to play the fourth side of the double LP set *You're the Guy I Want To Share My Money With* by Laurie Anderson, John Giorno, and William S. Burroughs (1981). Not mentioned on the record sleeve and impossible to visually detect on the record itself, the grooves of the three tracks on this side are interlocked. Therefore, it is pure coincidence which of the three interweaved spirals get actually played.

The record *Various 500 Lock-Grooves by 500 Artists* (1998) finally pushes the concept of the multi-grooved or multi-sided record to its extreme. It presents 250 concentric loops on each side, which makes it impossible to locate and play a certain track. At the same time, the listener cannot simply play the whole side and wait for the desired section to appear. To handle this record appears to be pleasantly difficult, and the listener is faced with the dilemma of a medium

that provides, and at the same time refuses, access to sound recordings.

5. PERFORMING RECORDS

The above described concepts of artists designing or changing the usage of records are close to turning the playing of a record into a performance. Rolf Großmann has rightly remarked that once the sound reproduction is considered the music itself and no longer refers to an original of a past performance, the playing of a reproduction becomes a second-order performance (GROSSMANN, 2008: 6). This is especially true for digital practices where playlists are automatically generated according to desired emotional stimuli or to meet the changing tempi of workout routines. A more anarchic social practice of second-order performance is *jack sharing*, where iPod users pluck their earphones into the iPod jacks of strangers, listen to their music for half a minute and walk off without a word being exchanged (c.f. KAHNEY, 2003).

In 1969, French composer Eliane Radique released the two-single set $\Sigma = a = b = a+b$ of electronic music. The two records can be played at any speed (16, 33, 45, or 78 rpm) separately or simultaneously, synchronous or asynchronous. The listener is free to manipulate the levels on a mixing board.

With her Σ Eliane Radique turned the playing of a record unavoidably into a performance. Even if one chose to play only one of the two records and to not alter the volume, the decision at what speed to play the record needs to be considered an interpretation. This way, the notion of live music is introduced to living room record playing, and the illusion of reproducing a recorded performance is destroyed.



Fig. 2: Janek Schaefer, On/Off LP (2001). Single-sided LP record with two grooves: one centric, one eccentric. Originally intended to be played on a turntable with two pickup systems.

Gramophone records can create the notion of live music even without a performer actively participating. For his *On/Off LP* (2001), British artist and composer Janek Schaefer cut the same signal of a dense electronic drone in two different grooves on one side of a record. One groove presents the common centric spiral, while the other was cut eccentric (Fig. 2). Originally intended to be played on a turntable with two pickup systems that allowed simultaneous playback forwards and backwards, one may play this record on any turntable at any speed.

The eccentric groove alters the signal during playback. Since the pickup system travels faster or slower on the groove depending on its position in relation to the hole in the center, we hear a sine wave shaped glissando on every rotation. This glissando is not recorded and reproduced, it is merely created live in each performance of the record.

6. UNIQUE RECORDS

The last field of records to be considered here are unique records. While the concept of the gramophone record is usually tied to the notion of mass media, visual artists developed means to turn records into unique objects. In 1989, Christian Marclay installed 3,500 records on a gallery floor and invited visitors to step on them. The recordings of footsteps of different speeds in different rooms got scratched by footsteps and individually altered (MARCLAY, 1989).

Even more radical is Marclay's *Record without a cover* of 1985, re-issued in 1999. As its title suggests, the record was released without a cover or other means to protect its sensitive surface. Therefore, scratching the record that contains a re-mix of a large variety of other records is unavoidable. This is reminiscent of Roger Miller's recordings of grooves before and between tracks, where the surface noise of the record itself can at times not be distinguished from the recorded noise.



Fig. 3: Jonathan Monk, *Surprise Records* (2009). Issued in an edition of 100 unique found single records.

While Christian Marclay addressed the alteration of the record's surface that would make a given record unique, British artist Jonathan Monk focused on the aspect of context in record listening. For his *Surprise Records*, issued in 2009, Monk covered the labels of found singles

with an anonymous sticker. This way, the listener does not know what music to expect, and if she or he is not familiar with the music encoded on the record, there is no chance to find out. The recorded music becomes de-contextualized, and the listener is deprived from any information other than the record's sounding reality.

7. CONCLUSION

In this survey of media-specific artist records, I tried to point out the limitations of the common practice of media and performance studies alike to focus on mass media phenomena. Sound recording media do not reproduce a recorded performance, nor do they necessarily claim to do so. In a minute process of production, an artificial sound image is created that meets the media's specific requirements and is later subjected to various practices of reception. To influence, if not to control, these practices of perception may be in the artist's interest and may be achieved by means of various subtexts, internal or external to the medium and its content. Artist records, like sound recording media in general, do not reproduce. We are compelled to use and perform them; to create their reality as media-music.

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