Viewpoint

Music and Musicking in the Digital Age

Steen Kaargaard Nielsen

Writing sound and music as binary code (digital phonography) has already been with us for more than half a century, but it wasn't until the 1980s with the successful introduction of the Compact Disc and CD player that the beginnings of a digital revolution within music production and consumption took off. If the successful commercial exploitation of the analog technology of audio recording and reproduction primarily in synergy with mass media like radio, sound film and TV, may be viewed as the single most crucial factor behind fundamental changes in 20th century music culture, the as yet early explorations of the seemingly endless possibilities opened up by digital technology and media have started off the 21st century on another dizzying rollercoaster ride that rocks the very foundations on which music culture 'as we have come to know it' rests. Faced with and perhaps challenged by the ever escalating effects of the digital revolution on our musico-cultural habits, we readily engage in wild speculations as to where this ride is going to take us.

To the dystopian it will lead to the end of the musical world: Reducing music to a binary code as if it was no more than ordinary information is the final straw in its ongoing defilement. Raped by lousy sampling rates (who cares about sound quality?) and trapped within its new abode, the 'immaterial' mp3 file, music is simply consumed by technology, robbed of its aura and transcendental powers in a culture that no longer listens but only hears. Music as a precious phenomenon that we used to burn with love for is now something that you simply burn, after having downloaded it for free from an illegal p2p (pear-to-pear) site. Thus digital technology in an unholy alliance with the computer industry is not only ruining an illustrious recording industry, that has served us well for more than a century, but, even worse, is morally corrupting our youth by turning them into a bunch of freeloading habitual criminals without respect for key cultural values such as copyright. Instead cheap software is teaching them to believe only in their own instantaneous music making abilities as hard disk recordists, who fill the internet with 'my music' and thus give rise to a music culture that is no more than a fool's paradise of worthless amateurs. Indeed, with the youngest generations now a lost cause, the musical world *is* coming to an end.

In contrast, to the utopian a musical world worth celebrating is finally waiting just around the corner: With the global dissemination of PCs and (almost) free software and access to the new public domain (cyberspace) musicking is finally freed from the iron grip of an exploitative and standardizing Western music industry and

will become a truly democratic phenomenon driven by music lovers world-wide, willing to share freely what should have remained a common good in the first place. And with the hyper-mobility of digitized music (any mp3 anywhere anytime!) that promise is easily fulfilled. Just as important, digital technology has opened up music as sound material to unlimited creative engagement, bypassing the restraints of formal education. It invites every one of us to cultivate our natural creative potential as media literate music makers and thus contribute to the realization of a radically democratic music culture in which the positive and healing powers of music will spread good vibrations in a wounded and conflict-ridden world. Yes, the future *will* be brightened by the sounds of 'our music'.

If history (as we choose to write it) teaches us anything, one of the recurring lessons seems to be that in hindsight both the moral panics caused by cultural appropriations of new technology and the golden promises with which such technologies are likewise heralded are usually rather exaggerated. Whenever new technology is introduced and integrated into various social, cultural, commercial, political (you name it) economies, networks and practices, being put to use, given meaning and causing effects, circumstances and contexts are always much too complex to predict an exact outcome. And even major changes recognized by all will be read and evaluated differently reflecting a constellation of always conflicting interests. The digitization of music and musicking is hardly a special case in this regard.

Personally, I find that my own constellation of hopes and concerns (and even fears) keeps shifting in the face of the still unfolding digitally coded re-mapping of familiar musico-cultural landscapes, made up, as it is, of the often contradictory viewpoints held by the roles that constitute my professional and private lives. Thus what follows is a sample of the rational, emotional, contradictory, naive, cynical, wild and lame observations and reflections that my living the digital revolution provokes.

As a researcher I value the immediate accessibility of so much music and music information and I confess to sometimes also reaping the benefits of the anarchic situation that still is a key internet characteristic. As a historian presently preoccupied with early phonography, source material for my research would often be out of reach but for on-line availability of old (now public domain) recordings that have been taken out of commercial circulation as they no longer represent any commercial value to the recording industry that once produced them. The currently raging international cultural political debate on digitization and accessibility of (national) cultural heritage, partly provoked by Google's controversial and very comprehensive digitization projects in states like United Kingdom, Germany and Spain, will be crucial to the conditions under which future generations will be able to produce cultural history. And though my view may come across as rather puritanical at a time when art and commerce are no longer as strange bedfellows as they were made out to be throughout the 20th century, I strongly oppose the prospects of public domain cultural heritage being digitally (re-)appropriated by multi-national conglomerates in commercial enterprises because state politicians are not willing to

grant necessary funding for research libraries and other state heritage institutions to secure a digital 'after-life' for what is otherwise condemned to cultural death.

As a teacher, I consider the digital revolution a somewhat mixed blessing. The fact is that today's students grow up in an on-line youth culture. Searching material and information for various assignments begins and usually ends on-line, and convincing them that making cumbersome searches in vast electronic databases accessible only through library sites is a 'detour' that does pay off (instead of just 'googling'), has become a major didactic challenge. Literature and music not immediately available in a digital full-text or mp3 version are no doubt going the way of the dinosaurs. All the more reason why free access to relevant digital resources must be secured. And while banning the use of Wikipedia for all first year students is quite an alluring thought, critical embrace of (and contributions to) on-line encyclopaedias as legitimate academic resources is probably a more productive way forward. Also YouTube availability of almost any scrap of music (the quality debate aside) can be viewed and used as a major advantage to both students and teachers. Perhaps the indiscriminate presence of so much music of all kinds is even facilitating a growing tolerance towards cultures of many musics and various forms of cross-fertilization ('mashup' comes to mind). Others will no doubt read this tendency as evidence of the slipping cultural standards of a historically challenged generation fatigued by bad information overload. However, compared to the genre specific blinkers warn by students of my generation, I find the musical open-mindedness of today's students liberating.

However, as a middle-aged music lover and record collector, I do find the promised immateriality of a digital music future rather bleak. Simply streaming music is no inviting alternative to a fetishist who 'inherently' values the work enhancing effects of the material, graphic and discursive design of the discrete unit that used to be the commercial phonogram. The cover art of the LP and even the CD, elaborate sleeve notes or the lavish box set (cobbled with the exclusivity of numbered limited editions to satisfy the collector), are all part of the multi-facetted music experience of the *aficionado*. My fierce gut reaction when recently confronted with Deutsche Gramophone's 'offending' policy of releasing a few of its latest catalogue items only as downloads stays with me almost as an experience of betrayal. No matter how alluring the idea of having every piece of music ever recorded only one click away, the nostalgia for an admittedly somewhat cumbersome, space-robbing and time-consuming material culture of music appreciation still wins my day. But not without a keen sense that the cultural prestige once inherent in cultivating a separate, contemplative listening practice conceptualizing music as works to be explored 'on their own terms' is waning. (And yet, in its very exposure as an eccentric sub-cultural activity may lie an untapped potential for its revitalization as a cult phenomenon in a hip experience economic context.) Perhaps the abandon and speed with which the younger generations engage in a hyper-mobile iPod culture should be read simply as the latest cultural scenario of an ongoing instrumentalization of the phenomenon of music as a therapeutic technology-of-self in everyday living, as

Tia DeNora has argued. In many ways no different from the popular embrace of the transistor radio in the 1960s, the cassette player in the early 1970s or the Walkman a decade later. By preferring mobile playback devices like the iPod, and the almost equally mobile docking speakers, over traditional stereo racks and mp3 files over CDs, young people just exploit whatever technological means they have of letting music serve them in as many and varied ways as need be. To a music lover taught to be served by music primarily by buying into the aesthetic notion of serving *it* (the *l'art pour l'art* illusion) appreciating these 'omnipresent', 'casual', and 'self-serving' ways of musicking may be quite a challenge. But who's to say that the survival of Mozart's music for more than 200 years does not come down to the fact that we still buy into *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* as an efficient mood-enhancer rather than as a beautiful work construction?

And finally, as a music consumer in the global supermarket the utopian promise of free and boundless music exchange that p2p networks are doing their best to disseminate – and quite successfully according to the recording industry – may appeal to me, but creating truly viable alternatives to the present industrial constellation of a few multi-national recording companies and download stores is no easy challenge. The overall profitability of the current profusion of independent on-line musicians' sites is probably questionable as availability without actual visibility makes for lousy business. It may seem that the entry fee to the world's largest stage (cyberspace) is small, but without an audience guarantee so are your chances of been heard 'out there' by more than a few passers-by. Yet, our preteen century is still young, and although various forces are fighting to put the reigns back on a commercial music culture that has almost jumped the fence by way of the possibilities unleashed by the digital revolution, there is no guarantee that they will be able to tame the beast as successfully as they have in the past.

In view of the ride ahead it would be difficult not to conclude that we do indeed live in exiting musical times. If in doubt, just ask your students. Assignment topics related to the digital music revolution never fail to engage them in trying to come to grips with a reality of their own making. And maybe, for once, occupying a back seat just suits me fine.